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The Experience of Being an Older Online Graduate Student

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Shirley A. Losiewicz

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2020

Abstract

The Experience of Being an Older Online Graduate Student

by

Shirley A. Losiewicz

MA, Capella University, 2010

BS, Columbia College, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

August 2020

Abstract

The number of older adult online students (over age 30) has continued to grow over the past 10 years, but their perceptions of how the online experience affects their family and friendship relationships were unknown. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of 6 graduate students over the age of 30 years enrolled in an online program, using the lens of Bowen's family systems theory and Elder's life course theory. The research questions focused on the experiences of being an older online graduate student, including motivation, factors that helped or hindered adjustment, perceived stress, social supports, and coping skills. Data were collected using in-depth semistructured interviews and were analyzed based on Moustakas's method. Results indicated that older online graduate students chose to be online students for convenience; however, they tended to feel isolated, and their supportive friendships tended to be exclusively online. Their motivation was primarily to earn a degree, and they believed that online graduate school was more stressful than brick-and-mortar programs. The majority of participants saw social support as instrumental in achieving their academic goals and cited this as their primary coping mechanism. The results of this study may be used by instructors and administrators to better understand the experiences of older online graduate students, and to develop ways to enhance social support for these students.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my mother who is my rock and my father who did not live to see me complete this program. I love you both. Thank you for your encouragement and support throughout my life.

Acknowledgments

I want to take this time to thank everyone for their support during this process.

I want to thank my husband for his continued support, sacrificing outings, and eating leftovers. I could not have done this without you. I love you.

To my mother, who listened for hours on the phone about my progress without understanding what I was talking about. I love you.

To my daughters and my son, who encouraged me every step of the way, who were always there when I needed them. I love you to the moon and back.

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To Dr. Bigatti, thank you for your encouragement and recommendations for changes in my paper. The changes were precisely what were needed. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Correspondence learning schools have existed since 1852 (Casey, 2008), whereby material was sent to students and the student would do the assignments and mail them back to their instructors for grading, which took some time but was an effective way to learn and led the way to online learning (Stadtlander, Giles, & Sickel, 2013). Computers have become common in most households, making distance online learning more convenient, and online learning has become more popular since the year 2000 (Li & Irby, 2008). Learning institutions across the United States are offering three primary types of classes including, in class learning, online learning, and a combination hybrid learning, to better meet the needs of their students (McLaughlin, & Yan, 2017). In 2010, over 6.1 million students were taking at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2011), by 2013 this number had increased to 6.7 million students who were taking at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The United States Department of Education (2016) reported in 2013 that 23.3% of graduate students were only taking online classes.

The objective of this qualitative study was to examine the facets of stress experienced by online graduate students, as adult learners, and the relationships between their stress and family relationships. Because there are few studies exploring online graduate students' experiences in the literature, a phenomenological study devoted to understanding online graduate students' lived experiences, stress, family relationships, and coping is best suited to examining this question. This study has identified how perceived stress of online graduate students' impacts family relationships to enable future

researchers and educators to focus on ways students can reduce stress and improve family relationships.

Background

Online learning is currently described as a virtual classroom where students and instructors do not meet face-to-face. Students and instructors can be in any location within the United States or internationally (Stadtlander et al., 2013). Course materials may be delivered through audio, video, or computer technology (Huda et al, 2018). There is no need for a physical classroom with distance learning, so there is no pressure to be at a specific time and place, which saves on travel time; however, there are set times for posts, responses, and assignments.

Many higher education students are considered nontraditional adult learners, defined as over the age of 24 years, and have taken on adult roles and responsibilities (Schroeder & Terras, 2015; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Most adults enroll in college based on personal life transitions or the stage the individual is at in their personal life, primarily due to environmental forces, life changes, or external life-transitions (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). The main influences for adult learners who take online classes include concepts such as family/work balance, finances, juggling multiple roles, working in isolation, and social support (Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Reeses, 2012). Graduate school is experienced by most students as a time of increased demands, expectations, and stress (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Being an older online graduate student can be taxing with many responsibilities; the student must find a balance between graduate program work, and their professional and personal life (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). In many cases personal life

receives little or no attention because there is no time left after other responsibilities, relationships between graduate students and others can be affected by the lack of attention due to academic schedules and responsibilities.

Adult learners may experience stress in different forms over the course of their learning. Stress is defined as demands being greater than what the individual is able to accomplish (Lazarus, 1993). When stress increases, so does the likelihood of other risks such as feeling unwell and, in some cases, mental health becomes an issue (El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012; Hannigan, Edwards, & Burnard, 2004; Lavecque et al., 2017). Stress and how it is perceived has been a significant concept for graduate students and is directly related to their success (Myers et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2001).

Perceived stress is unique to each individual. Where the stress comes from can determine how it is dealt with. The most common causes of stress include role demands, financial stressors, stress from interpersonal relationships, identity development stress, or stress from lack of social support (Myers et al., 2012; Steptoe & Ayers, 2004). How the individual perceives the stress may be influenced by past experiences, the personality of the individual, how the situation presents itself, and in many cases, culture (Myers et al., 2012; Steptoe & Ayers, 1990). Even though the source of the stress is important, it is of equal importance how the individual experiences the stress. Perceived stress may be only measured by self-report as it is impossible for a third party to observe.

Intrapersonal concepts are unique to each individual in the areas of behaviors, emotion regulation, self-esteem, and cognitions (Tatnell, Kelada, Hasking & Martin, 2014). Perceived stress depends on the intrapersonal state of the individual, these

internal states have been referred to as the "Big Five" traits of personality including neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1997). Of Costa and McCrae's (1997) five personality traits, the most important ones for the success of students include openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion (Marcela, 2015). The opposite of intrapersonal is interpersonal, which refers to concepts that are external rather than internal, or not within an individual (Hofmann, 2014; Whisman, 1997). The most common interpersonal concept is communication between two people, usually between partners or close friends (Hofmann, 2014; Whisman, 1997). Despite differences, communication is an effective way for people with different personalities to exchange ideas and form close relationships (Nguyen, Williamson, Karney, & Bradbury, 2017).

Adults usually have relationships that fall into one of four common categories: professional, romantic, friendship, and dating friendship (Rawlins, 2017). Other relationships may include parent/child relationships, relationships with family members, acquaintances, and friendship after divorce (Rawlins, 2017). Relationships may change over time resulting in the members becoming closer or more distant depending on obstacles and stresses throughout the relationship (McGoldrick, Preto, & Carter, 2015). McGoldrick et al. (2015) also point out that many families face occupational and economic stress, which may prompt older adults to return to formal education to reduce this stress. The choice to return to formal education means that families must rebalance, redefine, and realign their relationships in order to avoid a negative lasting effect on the marriage or graduate studies (McGoldrick et al., 2015).

The primary difference between family relationships and friend relationships is that family relationships are required, and friendships are voluntary (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995). Even though friendships are voluntary, they are based on mutual affection, respect, interests, and loyalty (Rawlins, 2017). In addition, Rawlins (2017) added that friendships are those with no romantic attachment. The five types of friendship listed by Rawlins (2017) are voluntary, personal, affective, mutual, and equal. These friendships can be found anywhere from within a family, a work peer, academic advisor, through hobbies, volunteer work, through children, pets, social media, or even vacationing. It is important for online students to have peers, friends, and family they can talk to while going through the transformation of changing roles in society through being a graduate student. This is their social support and helps students develop coping skills that are useful while working in isolation.

Coping does not have a clear definition, it can be either interpersonal, intrapersonal, or both, and may be dependent on personality traits and experiences of the individual (Zvauya, Oyebode, Day, Thomas, & Jones, 2017). Triggers can come from one person to another person, or they can be an outside event that causes stress for the individual (Tatnell et al., 2014). There is no one method of coping that work for every situation, coping is dependent on the situation and on the individual, who is experiencing the stress (Thoits, 1995; Zyauya et al., 2017). Coping for older online graduate students can mean finding the balance between work, family, and education to reduce stress and increase the ability to cope with situations possibly with the assistance of others who provide social support for the student (Monteiro, Balogun, & Oratile, 2014).

Social support is rooted in human attachment where support and resources are exchanged between peers in the same or similar circumstances (Antonucci, Ajrouch, & Manalel, 2017). Social support is defined as information that is helpful to the individual and makes him or her believe that he or she is cared for and loved and is a valued member of the group, and prevents feelings of isolation (Antonucci et al., 2017; Cobb, 1976). Social support can also be defined as the degree to which the social needs of an individual are met through interaction with others (Antonucci et al., 2017; Thoits, 1995). Female graduate students have reported more stress than their male counterparts (Zvauya et al., 2017). Female graduate students also reported more negative life changes and had more challenges managing multiple roles than male graduate students (Zvauya et al., 2017), so they required more social support.

Graduate programs require a lot of time and effort on top of other daily responsibilities such as professional and personal responsibilities. Older graduate students are often married or in a committed relationship while attending graduate school and find themselves trying to balance work, family, and school obligations (Marinak, 2012). In gaining an understanding of the experiences of online graduate students, it may be possible to determine the stressors and supports among older online graduate students and the affect the graduate student experience has on their family relationships. Without social support, family support, and stress management, graduate studies can be detrimental for those students in a marriage or committed relationship (Abel, Abel, & Smith, 2012).

Although previous research exists on coping in a traditional graduate program, there are gaps in the literature as to the experiences of older online graduate students and how the experiences relate to the conflicting needs of their family and other commitments. Previous quantitative studies have focused on older students, online students, relationships, or the concepts that affect students (Myers et al., 2012; Rubin et al., 2018; Zvauya et al, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative study was to focus on the experiences of older online graduate students who are attending a large online university to better understand the common themes among stressors and the coping mechanisms that have improved marital/relationship quality. The results of this study contributed to online graduate programs by providing instructors, peers, and students a better understanding of the experiences of older online graduate students.

Problem Statement

Stress; perceived stress; interpersonal, intrapersonal, and family relationships; friend relationships; coping; and social supports are some of the concepts that have been identified as elements that have affected the experiences of graduate students (Steptoe & Ayers, 2004; Tatnell et al., 2014; Whisman, 1997). In the present study, I explored these concepts further in older students taking online classes. Research related to the experiences of older online graduate students is limited primarily to graduate students attending brick and mortar universities. Graduate students taking at least one online class represent 33.5% of the overall graduate student population (Allen & Seaman, 2014). An examination of the experiences of older online graduate students attending a large online university, is needed to increase understanding of the phenomenon of being an older

online graduate student, how the abovementioned concepts relate to each individual, how the overall experience of being an online graduate student affects relationships, and how this can all be applied to future learning by providing valuable information for institutions and students in order for positive social change to take place.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the present study was to identify and explore concepts, including stress; perceived stress; interpersonal, intrapersonal, and family relationships; friend relationships; coping; and social supports that influence the experiences of being an older online graduate student. This study further assessed the effects that being an older online graduate student has on both family and friendship relationships. The central question was as follows: What are the experiences of being an older online graduate student, an education choice that does not have face-to-face interaction with other students or instructors? Because there are few studies exploring online graduate students' experiences in the literature, an exploratory qualitative study devoted to understanding online graduate students' lived experiences, stress, relationships, coping, and supports is best suited to examining this question. Gaining a better understanding the experiences of older online graduate students provided valuable information for instructors, peers, and students.

Research Questions

Several research questions guided this qualitative study. Participants were asked general interview questions and then encouraged to offer more details to further explain and clarify their positions. Five general guiding questions are listed below:

- Research Question 1: What is the experience of being an older online graduate student?

- Research Question 2: What motivates older students to attend online graduate programs?

- Research Question 3: What intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment?

- Research Question 4: How does the perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends?

- Research Question 5: What social supports or coping skills have helped students attending online graduate school?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This research study was founded on Bowen's (1954) family systems theory and Elder's (1996) life course theory. Family systems theory includes eight foundational concepts: (1) differentiation of self, (2) triangles, (3) nuclear family emotional system, (4) family projection process, (5) emotional cut-off, (6) multigenerational transmission process, (7) sibling position, and (8) societal regression (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Newman & Newman, 2015), surrounding patterns of relationships. This study focused on differentiation of self and emotional cut-off as these are the two concepts that may apply to the greatest number on older online graduate students. A closer look at both differentiation of self and emotional cut-off can be used to explore the following points.

Family System Theory

Differentiation of self. Differentiation of self is the ability to be part of the family yet have separate thoughts and feelings (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Newman & Newman, 2015). An older online graduate student already has family and work responsibilities and has a balance between the two. Individuals who are undifferentiated are unable to separate themselves from family, which makes them less flexible and more emotionally dependent on other members of the family. They require acceptance and approval from others in their thinking, acting, and speaking (Kerr & Bowen). Being an older online graduate student includes balancing family, work, and graduate studies. An individual who is well differentiated can acknowledge the importance of both family and social connections while being able to deal with conflict, rejection, and criticism on their own; this is most often seen in adolescents, but can also be seen in adults (Broderick, 1993; Simpson, Vannucci, & Ohannessian, 2018). These individuals can be separate themselves emotionally and intellectually from the family as a unit in order to achieve personal goals as well as achieve family goals.

Emotional cut-off. Bowen (1978) described emotional cut-off as family members being unable to manage their unresolved emotional issues with other family members; as a result, the individual totally cut off emotional contact by moving away or rarely going home. The unresolved emotional issues usually stem from unresolved attachment and differentiation of self (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Newman & Newman, 2015). Older online graduate students are often faced with a lack of social support within the family unit which in turn leads to the student withdrawing from members of the family

that do not provide support or understanding what is needed for the success of the student.

Bowen's family system theory is of benefit to this study to be able to better understand how older online graduate students achieve academic goals while interacting with family and friends. Bowen's theory (1978) predicted that while the students grow and change their place in society, a differentiation in self will take place that will also affect their relationships. Emotional cut-off through distancing one individual from another may also take place between graduate students and family, or graduate students and friends in cases where support is not positive, or there are differences that cannot be reconciled.

Life Course Theory

Elder's (1996) life course theory places emphasis on social change and new ways to think about the topic, including life pathways and individual development. Elder's view of life pathways referred to the social courses of education, work and family that are followed by individuals. The multiple pathways of individuals are included in life course theory, but development is dependent on interconnection of multiple roles and the impact life experiences during these roles had on the individual (Newman & Newman, 2015).

Human development. Development takes place in historical time and place (Newman & Newman, 2015). This suggests that development and historical time are directly linked; not all individuals have the same development at the same historical time (Elder, 1996). Older online graduate students may be at different stages of their lives with family, careers, and future goals depending on their age and life experiences.

Operate as agents. Humans choose among the opportunities that are available in their time and society (Newman & Newman, 2015). Individuals make choices that are the building blocks of their life course (Elder, 1996). The choices older online graduate students have made throughout their lives may determine current and future choices. Operating as agents will also be dependent on the age coupled with the choices of the older online student. Older students may have grown children and possibly grandchildren by the time they become graduate students, whereas students who are in their 30s may not be married or have any children at all. Operating as an agent will also have a bearing of differentiation of self. Some students may have others who are dependent on them while others will not.

Timing of life. Social time is the entry and exit from age-related social roles, the sequence of roles, and the social and cultural meaning or expectations associated with these roles (Newman & Newman 2015). Neugarten and Neugarten (1986) coined the term "social clock," which refers to age norms and age expectations where parameters are set as to what part of society an individual should be in at a given time in their life. The idea of a social clock can push individuals to attempt tasks they are not ready to take on or deter them from making choices that they are ready to make (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1986). The age of the online graduate student will have an influence on timing of life. The social clock for a student who is 30 may not be the same as the social clock for another student who is 40 or 50. Each student will be at a different stage of their lives depending on their social roles.

Lives are linked. Lives are linked through social relationships and influenced by the social regulation, social support, and patterning that occur through these relationships (Newman & Newman, 2015). This principle explains the importance of life events that happen as adults and how these events affect their children (Elder, 1996). It is important for older online graduate students to have social support. Online graduate students work in isolation and need to be linked to others. Strained relationships may result in emotional cut-off.

Trajectories and transitions. Life course theory emphasizes the age-linked changes in occupational and family careers over time. One can map the merging of transitions across the occupational and family trajectories over time identifying the importance of periods of accord and struggle between the difficulties in the two trajectories (Newman & Newman, 2015). Many older online graduate students go back to school in later years to advance in their chosen career, or even switch careers, often due to a need for more income. A trajectory is the long-term path of life experiences of the individual in the areas of work and family (Newman & Newman, 2015). This trajectory turns into a life transition where students change their place in society and move to a higher position. As students change their place in society, their differentiation of self also evolves and emotional cut-off from family and friends is also more likely.

Elder's life course theory predicts the life choices of each individual has a bearing on the development of the individual. Choosing to further their education provides graduate students experiences that they would not otherwise have. Students may form new lasting relationships, which may affect older relationships with family and friends.

Individual development can be used to understand how making the choice to be a graduate student enables the individual to grow and change their position in society which may affect relationships with family and friends.

Nature of Study

The current study was qualitative in nature; it employed a phenomenological approach. This phenomenological inquiry used lived experience of graduate students taking online courses. This study was designed to examine the different facets of stress among online graduate students and how this stress impacts family relationships to enable students to be become better equipped to avoiding stress which may lead to difficulties in differentiation of self and emotional cut-off, along with their current position in lifespan development. In this study, I explored the experiences of older online graduate students, what motivates students, how perceived stress affects relationships, and which social supports or coping skills have helped.

According to Moustakas (1994), in a phenomenological study the researcher should produce a description of the lived experience of the participants through merging a textural/structural description. For phenomenological research, textural themes are to be identified so as to elucidate the structural themes. The structural themes include time, space, relationship to self and others, bodily concerns, and causal or intentional structures (Moustakas, 1994, p. 181). For the purpose of analyzing perceived stress in online graduate students and how it affected family relationships, I employed epoche, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation strategies. Phenomenological

methods aim to provide an inclusive, intense, and essential illustration of a human experience derived from the results found in this study.

Through purposeful sampling, I selected participants who were volunteers from my personal network of online graduate students. The number of participants was six because saturation was reached after this number (see Creswell, 2014). This qualitative analysis provides a clear view of perceived stress in online graduate students and how family relationships were affected. Demographic information was collected, including the participants' gender, age, program, marital status, age and number of children the student is caring for, and any elderly or special needs members of the family the student is caring for. This study was approved by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was conducted in compliance with the code of ethics of the American Psychological Association (2017).

Definitions

Coping: Ability to manage stress through thoughts and actions (Lazarus, 1993).

Graduate students: Students who are currently enrolled in graduate studies within a masters or doctoral degree program. (Caruth, 2014; Rawlins, 2017).

Family relationship: Those contacts where individuals are connected through blood, marriage, or adoption, which creates a kinship (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Friend relationship: Those that are voluntary, based on mutual affection, respect, interests, and loyalty (Rawlins, 2017).

Intrapersonal: Factors that are most often thought to be within the individual, such as mood states, sexual satisfaction, and love styles (Hofmann, 2014; Whisman 1997).

Interpersonal: Communication that takes place between two people such as partners or friends; this is external (Hofmann, 2014; Whisman, 1997).

Older graduate student: Any individual who is in a graduate program and over the age of 24 (Schroeder, & Terras, 2015; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012).

Perceived stress: The way an individual experiences a demanding event (Fuenfhausen & Cashwell, 2013).

Social support: A broad area where relationships might be perceived to support health and well-being (Cohen, 2004; Feeney, & Collins, 2015).

Stress: Demands being greater than what the individual is able to accomplish (Lazarus, 1993).

Assumptions

For this study, it was assumed that the conceptual framework of family systems theory and life course theory is applicable to students of all ages. Both of these theories have been applied to life pathways, individual development, and family situations. However, the two theories have not been combined to discuss the experiences of older online graduate students and the effects perceived stress has on relationships. It was assumed that the information participants provided through interviews would be correct and true. It was assumed that participants were willing to participate in the study and provided accurate information about their experiences as graduate students, their

perceived stress, and how this perceived stress affects their relationships. Research questions were used to gain knowledge that was required for this study.

Scope and Delimitations

The present study was designed to examine older online graduate students attending Walden University. To be considered for inclusion, the students needed to be currently enrolled in a graduate program at Walden University. In addition, participants had to be able to communicate in English over the telephone or in person. My primary language is English, so in order to relay information, only participants who spoke English were considered for participation. Because of Walden University's unique teaching styles and diverse population of online learning students, transferring information found to another University may not be possible.

In terms of delimitation, all participants had to be (a) currently enrolled in a graduate program at Walden University, (b) taking at least one class, and (c) over the age of 30. Students who were taking a break from school may have a different opinion of their personal experiences.

Limitations

Qualitative research cannot be globalized to other populations in other cultures or timeframes (Creswell, 2014). The findings of this phenomenological research represented the experiences of the six participants who took part in this study and may not be generalizable to the experiences of other older online graduate students in any other location or level of learning. The participants who volunteered were only from graduate students attending Walden University, which limited the scope of this study. I

am currently an older student at Walden University and did have some of the same experiences as the participants. To ensure researcher bias was limited, I kept a journal of my thoughts and feelings during data collection and data analysis, so I was better able to identify any issues. I also communicated with my committee chair on my thoughts and feelings towards the data so I was better able to view the data without bias.

Significance

Many online graduate students are adult learners who have been out of high school or college for a number of years. These same students typically have multiple roles such as being parents, caregivers, spouses, employees, volunteers, and students (Marinak, 2012). In gaining an understanding of the experience of online graduate students at Walden University, it was possible to determine the perceived causes of stress among online graduate students, the effects stress has on family relationships, and how the stress can be reduced or avoided. There were gaps in the literature in the area of perceived stress in online graduate students and how the stress relates to the conflicting needs of family and other commitments. For many working adults, online graduate education is the only option for pursuing an advanced degree. This study identified how perceived stress of online graduate students impacts family relationships to enable future researchers and educators to focus on ways students can reduce stress and improve family relationships.

Summary

Older online students are often referred to as nontraditional students, re-entry students, or returning students (Lin, 2016). Online learning is accessible and provides

many opportunities to learners who chose to continue their education (Li & Irby, 2008).

Online courses often require more time and effort than traditional classroom learning in

the way of technology and becoming comfortable with it. Online learning offers students

who are working full-time, who have a family, or are unable to travel to and from school

every day a way to achieve a higher education (Lin, 2016). The experiences of these

students are quite different from those of their younger counterparts or those attending a

brick-and-mortar institution (Lin, 2016). It is important to understand how different their

experiences are, how perceived stress can impact relationships, and what social supports

promote positive coping skills for these students in order for them to be successful in

their online learning.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on older online students and related

theories, and concepts. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and the strategy used to

conduct research on this topic. Chapter 4 includes discussion of data collection and data

analysis. Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of the findings and recommendations for

future studies and suggestions for social change.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Graduate school is challenging for students (Hunter-Johnson, 2017), and it may be even more challenging for graduate students who chose to take courses online (Martinak, 2012). Many higher education students are considered nontraditional adult learners, defined as students over the age of 24 years who have taken on adult roles and responsibilities (Schroeder, & Terras, 2015; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Adult students face barriers such as a lack of peer socialization, juggling multiple roles, and shortage of support (Fairchild, 2003). They often miss out on the academic advising and mentoring needed to succeed (Kasworm, 2008). Adult students taking online classes have a different set of strengths and needs in comparison to their younger counterparts at brick-and-mortar institutions.

Allen and Seaman (2011) reported in fall of 2010 over 6.1 million students were taking at least one online class which was an increase of 10.1% from 2010. In 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2014) there were over 6.7 million students who taking at least one online class, which is an increase of 9.3% from 2011. In the fall of 2013, Allen and Seaman (2014) reported about 74% of university students were taking at least one online class. The United States Department of Education (2016) reported in 2013 that 23.3% of learners who were at the masters or doctoral level were taking only online classes; of the 2,900,954 students enrolled in a masters or doctoral program, 676,761 were taking only online classes (Allum, 2014).

Many graduate students who choose to take online classes are adults considerably beyond the traditional age of graduate students. Such individuals often have full-time jobs, and their responsibilities may include being caregivers for children and relatives who need assistance; they are community leaders and volunteer workers (Fairchild, 2003; Marinak, 2012). This is confirmed in that Walden University's online student population is considerably older than the traditional graduate student is (e.g., in 2015, ages of psychology doctoral students were as follows: 5.6% age 18-29, 31.2% age 30-39, 32.5% age 40-49, 21.9% age 50-59, 7.2% age 60-69, and 0.4% age 70 +; L. Stadtlander, personal communication, November 18, 2016). The older age groups deal with a different set of developmental challenges as opposed to students of traditional age; that are listed above. For this reason, there is a need to further research the experience of being an online graduate student, as well as how taking online classes and balancing the responsibilities of older adult learners affects relationships. Since school is at home and home is school, it is important to further study the experience of older online graduate students in order to recognize ways to help this population in the future.

With the rapid increase in online learning, there was a need to further investigate the experience of being an older online graduate student. The current qualitative study explored this gap in the literature. Research questions in this study addressed what students' stresses and motivations are, how the experience affects their friend and family relationships, and what students have found to be their supports.

The objective of this qualitative study was to examine the experience of being an older online graduate student and the relationships between the students' experience,

stress, supports, motivation, and family relationships. Because there are few studies

exploring online graduate students' experiences in the literature, an exploratory

qualitative study devoted to understanding online graduate students' lived experiences,

stress, family relationships, and supports was best suited to examining this question.

Search Strategies

Key words used to search for literature to the relevant present study included the

following: *stress, perceived stress, emotions, attachment, family systems theory, life-course theory relationships, friend relationships family unit, older graduate students, online college students, education, higher learning, online learning, distance education, electronic, coping,* and *psychology.* The databases used for searches included ERIC,

PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, SAGE, Education Source, and EBSCO

Theoretical Foundation

Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory was pioneered by Bowen in 1954 (Bowen, 1978).

Bowen's research started in Menninger clinic in Topeka, Kansas where the focus was on

patients with schizophrenia and their mothers (Bowen, 1978). Bowen moved his research

to the National Institute of Mental Health where entire families lived on a ward with the

patient. During this study, Bowen found a common pattern in relationships in families

where schizophrenia was present. Bowen's research showed that treating the family as a

whole was much more effective than treating the individual (Broderick, 1993).

Bowen took this theory one step further by studying families where no emotional

illness was present but noted there were still patterns or concepts within the families.

Bowen, like all scientists, started off with an idea, which was to study schizophrenia and how it affected the family as a whole. Bowen moved from this single idea to how the family could be treated as a unit while observing other family members and identifying concerns about each member and how these concerns affected the individual with schizophrenia (Broderick, 1993).

Bowen's transgenerational approach stated that family patterns and problems most often repeat themselves over generations (Bowen, 1978). Within each family an emotional system exists, where ways to reduce stress and maintain stability are present. In Bowen's studies of his own family, eight concepts emerged, and he successfully formed family systems theory. Using this theory, he also provided a method of treatment for the family as a whole. The eight concepts of family systems theory came to be of utmost importance while attending to the needs of each family member as an individual to enable them to function as a family unit (Broderick, 1993). Broderick (1993) confirmed Bowen's theory on attending to all family members so they are able to function as a whole by adding Aristotle's quote, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts", and a quote from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

Family systems theory provides a way to assess the dynamics of the family as a unit, by identifying patterns in members and how they reduce stress and maintain stability within the family unit. The eight concepts of Bowen's family systems theory include (a) differentiation of self, (b) triangles, (c) nuclear family emotional system, (d) family projection process, (e) emotional cut-off, (f) multigenerational transmission process, (g)

sibling position, and (h) societal regression (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). These concepts are interconnecting states that exist in the emotional system of a family unit. The levels of states can be observed to assess the emotional stability of each individual and the family as a unit. Families are in a never-ending quest to find ways to reduce stress and maintain stability within the unit, if a balance cannot be found, chronic anxiety will most likely be the source of family dysfunctions (Haefner, 2014).

Family dysfunction can be reduced by eliminating stress through family therapy and other activities that may be completed as a family. Many activities can be as simple as spending time as a family, choosing an activity that all members are able to take part in (Bowen, 1978). The balance between individuality and spending time as a family is an ongoing process.

Because adult learners have responsibilities to family and school, online learning is even more of a challenge because school is in the home. Assignments and deadlines will not be extended because the family wanted to go for a picnic or to a movie, so it is important for online adult learners to plan ahead and manage time wisely so that individual tasks can be completed and the family does not feel like they are second to school.

Family systems theory's eight concepts. Differentiation of self is defined as the ability to be part of the family yet have separate thought and feelings (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Triangles are defined as when one relationship becomes intertwined with another, strengthening the resilience in the relationships system, at the same time being a risk for one person to be left out of the relationship (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The

nuclear family emotional system concept includes four relationship patterns that

determine where most problems in the family develop, which include marital conflict,

dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of one or more children, and emotional distance

(Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The family projection process is a primary process

where children inherit strengths and problems from their parents (Bowen, 1978; Haefner,

2014). Emotional cut-off is described as family members being unable to manage their

unresolved emotional issues with other family members, which usually stem from

unresolved attachment and differences (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The

multigenerational transmission process is defined as the shaping of children that is

projected by family through generations where children learn the patterns of emotional

process that parallel the ones of their parents with small differences (Bowen, 1978;

Haefner, 2014). Sibling position refers to the sibling position in a functioning family,

where the oldest siblings usually take a leader position while the youngest sibling will

often take the follower position (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Societal

regression happens when society experiences chronic stress in cases where population

increases rapidly, there are shrinking natural resources, and pollution to the environment

(Bowen, 1987). This negatively affects families by causing more chronic and constant

anxiety, which causes the family to lapse to a lower level of functioning (Bowen, 1978;

Haefner, 2014).

  Present study. For the present study, I focused on two of Bowen's eight

concepts, which were differentiation of self and emotional cut-off. Because this study

was on the experience of being an older online graduate student, the other six concepts

may be included as the experiences of participants unfold. Gilbert (2006) pointed out

that the higher the differentiation of self, the lower they symptoms of stress will be.

Under severe circumstances, those who have a high differentiation of self will still

experience stress, but those who have a low differentiation of self will display symptoms

of stress with day-to-day activities. Individuals with lower differentiation of self will

often fuse with others and be unable to have a real self (Gilbert, 2006).

The greatest fusion of intensity a person can share with another is emotional

interdependency, which occurs in marriage and often in close friendships. Emotional cut-

off is usually between a child and parent or parents, but this may not always be the case,

older online graduate students may find that emotional cut-off is the easiest way to make

the necessary sacrifices needed to earn a graduate degree. This would reduce the guilt

that graduate students feel when they are unable to spend as much time as they should

with family members and friends. Kerr and Bowen (1988) explained emotional cut-off

moving away or avoiding conflict with family members. Moving away in most cases for

older online graduate students is not an option, but removing themselves emotionally

from conflict is an option.

Differentiation of Self

Social groups and families affect how people think, feel, and act, but individuals

vary in their vulnerability to subscribing to the thoughts of others, even though some

groups utilize strict tactics for members to follow. The differences between individuals

and between groups reflect differences in individual's levels of differentiation of self.

The basic self is something individuals are born with, but family relationships determine

how much self the individual will develop in early years (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The less

developed an individual's self is, the more others can impact their functioning (Kerr &

Bowen, 1988). The more functioning is impacted, the greater the need for control is in

the individual in both active and passive areas (Bowen, 1978). Once the level of self is

established, it is unlikely to change unless the individual makes a long-term effort to

change it.

Those with poor differentiation of self will depend on the acceptance and

approval of others (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). They will adjust their thinking to please

others or they will attempt to change the thinking of others to fit their thinking. Bullies

are individuals who seem to be superior to others and often control others through abuse

and fear. Bullies depend on the approval and acceptance of others just as much as

chameleons who would be considered pleasant and non-threatening, or those who blend

in well with others (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Even though it would seem that bullies and

chameleons are at the opposite ends of the spectrum, this is not true; they both display the

need for approval and acceptance, and both have poor differentiation of self, and in some

cases, the two are one in the same depending on who is observing them (Kerr & Bowen,

1988).

Those with a strong differentiation of self will recognize the dependence on

others, but they are able to stay calm and clear headed when faced with conflict,

criticism, and rejection (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). They are able to separate thinking that is

based on facts and thinking that is clouded by emotions. A person with a strong

differentiation of self makes a rational decision and what is said matches the actions of

the person (Bowen, 1978). In many cases, the person with a strong differentiation of self is able to act selflessly taking into consideration what is best for the group, but the choice is thoughtful, and it is not a response to relationship pressures. With this confident thinking, individuals are able to agree with another person's view without becoming a follower or disagree with the person's view without judgement (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). A person with a strong differentiation of self is able to express ideas without being assertive and deal with pressure without losing strength.

In every society, there are those who have poor differentiation of self and those who have a strong differentiation of self, there are also many levels in between. Families and groups that form society also vary in emotional interdependence depending on the differentiation of self of the members (Broderick, 1993). The greater the interdependence, the less able the group is to adapt to stressful events without an increase in anxiety (Bowen, 1978). All people are subjected to stress at work and at home, but those with a lower level of differentiation of self are more vulnerable to periods of higher chronic anxiety which makes them more susceptible to more serious problems within the home and society (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Graduate students are under a great deal of stress and online adult learners who have added responsibilities are under greater stress than their counterparts who are younger and do not have the added responsibilities of a career, raising a family, or the process of aging. Lower levels of differentiation of self could lead to relationship problems in older online graduate students over time.

Emotional Cutoff

Emotional cutoff describes the concept of how individuals manage unresolved emotional issues with parents, siblings, and other family members by reducing or completely cutting off emotional contact with them (Kerry & Bowen, 1988). It is common for individuals with unresolved emotional issues to move away from their families of origin and rarely going home, or contact can be reduced by people staying in physical contact but avoid sensitive issues. This does not resolve the issues it does however make them manageable.

Individuals with tension within the family often reduce interactions by cutting off or removing themselves, but may also be in danger of making new relationships with too much importance (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). As person who is cut off from their family of origin may look towards a spouse and children to meet the expectations of the individual or be too accommodating with their families fearing the relationship will not be a success (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). New relationships are usually smooth at first, but the patterns people are trying to avoid will soon surface and create tension. People who are cut off may create substitute families in other areas such as at work and in social relationships.

Unresolved attachment is common in the family of origin causing many levels of differentiation of self, but well differentiated individuals have more perseverance than less differentiated individuals (Bowen, 1978). Unresolved attachment usually takes on one of three forms which include, a person feeling more childlike when he or she is in his or her parents' home and looks to parents for decision making (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). A person may feel guilty when he or she is with parents and feels he or she must solve their

struggles and sufferings, or a person may feel anger towards his or her parents because he or she feels that they do not understand or approve of him or her (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Unresolved attachment is due to the immaturity of both parents and adult children, but individuals usually blame themselves or others for the situation.

People in these situations are usually optimistic that positive change will take place only to realize that old patterns usually repeat themselves unless both parties are aware of the situation and make an effort to change. The scenario usually goes one of two ways, there is harmony on the surface with emotional undercurrents, or it may turn into confrontations (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Both the individual and the rest of the family are exhausted after a short time. It may be easier in some cases to keep a distance as this lessens the anxiety and outbursts when they are together (Titelman, 2014). Siblings of the highly cut off member often become angry when he or she is home and blame him or her for upsetting the family. Individuals do not plan to be this way, but unresolved issues within the family prevent comfortable contact.

Bowen's family systems theory suggests that there is a direct connection between the level of anxiety and the level of eight concepts that form the family unit (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This phenomenon is observed on biological, psychological, and sociological level and are interrelated (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In the present study it was theorized that the role of being an online graduate student had an influence on the psychological state of the student and on the student's family relationships; in turn the family relationships and the psychological state of the members had an impact on the activity of the student.

Previous Applications of Family Systems Theory

Bowen's family systems theory has been applied to college students in the past to assess the family relationship and how college student develop a differentiation of self as they progress through their college classes, Kelly's 1998 study (as cited in Titelman, 2014). Family systems theory has been used to assess stress and anxiety by using college students as a population. Acute anxiety is a response to family disasters, fire, automobile accidents, sudden illness, and immediate emergencies (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). College students usually deal with acute anxiety fairly well and move on after a short period of time. In the cases where chronic anxiety was identified it is a bit different, this is where students react to imagined threats and do not see that there is a light at the end of the tunnel (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). College years are stressful, older online graduate students have even more stress with having the responsibilities of family, careers, and other obligations (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Older online graduate students with more life experience may have developed better coping skills as opposed to younger college students with less life experience and fewer obligations.

Another aspect of Bowen's differentiation of self occurs when college students begin taking classes and finding they can be both an interactive part of the family unit while functioning away from the family with peers and studies (Titelman, 2014). The thought of defining a self to the world and particularly to important others in a relationship is often appealing to students (Titelman, 2014). Students are also interested in their level of maturity and how they communicate with others specifically in the field in which they would like to pursue a career (Titelman, 2014). In cases where family and

friends are not supportive, the older online student may separate themselves from those who do not support the changes they are making in the areas of education and differentiation of self. This may lead to a different emotional cut-off where the student removes themselves from those that do not support them rather than the original thoughts of children removing themselves from family where there are unresolved emotional issues (Titelman, 2014).

Rationale for Family Systems Theory

Bowen's family systems theory may be able to provide answers as to how the growth of older online graduate students parallel that of their younger counterparts in the area of differentiation of self and how this affects relationships in the areas of family and friendships. Being an older online graduate student is also unique in that students are taking classes from their home where other family responsibilities can sometimes become overwhelming for family. This requires the older online graduate student to become a master in the areas of time management, dividing attention between family and school, and taking on several responsibilities within a short period of time.

The graduate degree process is stressful, it is a time where students transition from taking classes to writing their capstone or dissertation to finding a career within their field or being promoted in their current career (Newman & Newman, 2015). This transformation is also a relocation of the individual's position in society. They are becoming a scientist while developing a higher level of differentiation of self as they move from student to professional. This would mean there is a different set of behaviors, feelings and expectation that go with individuals new title or position (Newman &

Newman, 2015). When family and friends do not understand that there is a transformation taking place it is difficult for them to see the student in a different light, performing at a different level, and taking on different roles in society. The student may not have a clear understanding of what is taking place either. As the student progresses, family and friend who deter the student from growing or who do not support the new level of differentiation of self of the student will experience a shift in the role they play in the student's life (Newman & Newman, 2015). This lesser role may cause unresolved issues between the student and family, or the student and friends, which in turn can lead to a level of emotional cut-off.

Family Systems Theory Related to Present Study

Bowen's family system theory relates to the present study in the way that older online graduate students live in their homes and go to school from their homes. Students are a unique group who are taking positive steps towards emotional independence while preserving family relationships (Titelman, 2014). Students are dependent on family for support while attempting to be independent in earning their degree and shifting their position in society, this also means defining a self, or differentiation of self-increases (Titelman, 2014). If the family as a unit does not adjust to the level of differentiation of self the student is at, unresolved differences may cause emotional cut-off which leads to less communication and interaction between the student and family members (Titlelman, 2014)

Often older online graduate students have careers where they work outside of the home, they also have responsibilities and obligations that may revolve around friends and

not family or school (Lin, 2016). Friends are people who the student knows and has a bond of mutual affection that is special and is separate from family relationships. Bowen (1978) describes cut-off as undifferentiated from parents. Gilbert (2006) on the other hand describes cut-off as a way to resolve relationship tension which stems from unresolved differences. In cases where older online graduate students do not have the same relationship with friends as they did before they progressed to the graduate level of learning, may also experience emotional cut-off.

The primary research question, what is the experience of being an older online graduate student, was answered by students who attend Walden University. Students relayed how being an older adult online graduate student has affected relationships between themselves and family members, also between themselves and friends. Research question 2 is, what motivates older students to attend online graduate programs, was not answered by family systems theory, but was answered by Elder's (1996) life course theory using trajectory and transition theme in Elder's theory as outlined by Newman and Newman (2015). Research Question 3, what intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment, was not answered by family systems theory, but it was discussed using Elder's life course theory using trajectory and transition as outlined by Newman and Newman. Research question 4, how does perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends was answered by family systems theory by using the two concepts of differentiation of self and emotional cut-off. As students move through their graduate journey changes take place and relationships may be altered. Students and friends may be separated for a variety of

different reasons including changing careers, moving to a different city, or not having the same amount of time to spend together because of other obligations. Research question 5, what if any social supports or coping skills have helped students attending online graduate school was answered by both Elder's life course theory using trajectory and transition and Bowen's family system theory using differentiation of self and emotional cut-off. While students are transitioning through their courses, they often go through changes such as working in isolation and depending on peers rather than friends for academic support.

Life Course Theory

Life course theory is also referred to as life cycle, life history, or life span, and is defined as a sequence of socially defined events and roles that impacts the individual during their lives. Elder's life course theory places emphasis on social change and new ways to think about the topic, including life pathways, and individual development (Elder, 1996). Elder's view of life pathways referred to the social courses of education, work and family that are followed by individuals. The multiple pathways of individuals are included in life course theory, but development is dependent on the interconnection of multiple roles and the impact these roles have on life experiences (Newman & Newman, 2015).

Two central themes of Elder's (1996) life course theory include trajectories and transitions (Newman & Newman, 2015). A trajectory is the long-term path of life experiences of the individual in the areas of work and family (Newman & Newman, 2015). An example of the family trajectory may include a sequence that includes

marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood, and even widowhood. A transition is a section within the trajectory than defines a beginning or end of an event or role in a relationship (Newman & Newman, 2015). An example of an individual's work trajectory may include a transition of getting a job, being laid off or making a decision to quit their job, and in turn going back to school to earn an advance degree in order to start a career in the same or a completely different field. Transitions are the events in the life of the individual that make up a lifelong trajectory (Newman & Newman, 2015). Elder's life course theory examines the impact of social change on the lives of individuals by observing the changes in trajectories and transitions that are associated with periods of past change (Newman & Newman, 2015).

The four major principles that Elder (1996) suggested are central to life course theory are: the life stage principle, interdependent lives, the control cycle, situational imperative, and the accentuation principle. Newman and Newman (2015) expanded on these principles.

The first principle that is mentioned is human development takes place in historical time and place (Newman & Newman, 2015). Life course theory emphasizes that life choices of each individual distinguishes the developmental trajectories of relationships between the individual and family, and the individual and friends. Development takes place at each historical stage of life. This suggests that development and historical time are directly linked, not all individuals have the same development at the same historical time (Elder, 1996). There are many reasons individuals develop at different rates, some reasons include culture, society, or personal choices (Elder, 1996).

The second principle mentioned is how people operate as agents on their own behalf choosing among the opportunities that are available in their time and society (Newman & Newman, 2015). Individuals make choices that are the building blocks of their life course (Elder, 1996). This may vary from one generation to another, to illustrate this idea, consider changes in the female role over time. A female born in 1930, got married at 17 years of age, had children, never went to college, had a few jobs in her life time, but never a career, and regretted not furthering her education, is cared for by adult children in later years until time of death. On the other hand, a female born in 1960, got married at 20 years of age, had children, decided to divorce, went back to college as an older adult after her children were adults, earned her PhD, and started a career later in life, is not able to retire until age 75. A female born in 1990 who went to college, earned her master's degree, started a career in the field she had chosen, got married at 30 years of age, had children, and continued with her chosen career until she was able to open a practice for herself and retires at age 55. These examples show how over generations society has changed. What was considered acceptable in 1930 has been modified in present day.

The third principle is the timing of life, particularly social time and the social meaning of age gives structure to the life course. Social time is the entry and exit from age related social roles, the sequence of roles, and the social and cultural meaning or expectations associated with these roles (Newman & Newman 2015). Neugarten and Neugarten (1986) coined the term social clock which refers to age norms and age expectations where parameters are set as to what part of society an individual should be

in at a given time in their life. The idea of a social clock can push individuals to attempt

tasks they are not ready to take on or deter them from making choices that they are ready

to make (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1986). An example of this varies depending on the

social class of the individual as to when life events such as marriage, having children, and

retirement occur. Pushing an individual to take on a specific role at an expected age is

common in most cultures.

The fourth principle is divided into two parts:

- Lives are linked through social relationships and influenced by the social

  regulation, social support, and patterning that occur through these

  relationships (Newman & Newman, 2015). This principle explains the

  importance of life events that happen as adults and how it affects their

  children (Elder, 1996). Examples include an adult child's feeling of

  responsibility to care for aging parents and the interference of friendships and

  support systems as a result of divorce (Newman & Newman, 2015).

- Within an individual life course, the trajectories and transitions within

  trajectories are linked and influence one another (Newman & Newman, 2015).

  Life course theory emphasis the age-linked changes in occupational and

  family careers over time. One can map the merging of transitions across the

  occupational and family trajectories over time identifying the importance of

  periods of accord and struggle between the difficulties in the two trajectories

  (Newman & Newman, 2015).

Life course theory also incorporates five mechanisms to understand the links between the historical level of change and the individual level (Cairns, & Elder, 2001). The first is the life stage principle is the influence a specific event has on an individual depends on what stage of life a person is in when the event is experienced (Cairns, & Elder, 2001). Not all life events are experienced by individuals in the same way. This principle suggests that experiences are processed depending on the person's developmental stage (Newman & Newman, 2015). The second mechanism is, the principle of interdependent lives, which stresses the interlocking of lives. Development is heavily dependent on relationships that provide support (Newman & Newman, 2015). Effective networking of relationships is where individuals no matter what stage of life or age have a feeling of being valued (Elder, 1996). The third mechanism is, the principle of the control cycle, when an individual sense they are losing control, or when personal freedoms are in jeopardy, there is usually an attempt to preserve or regain control (Newman & Newman, 2015). The fourth mechanism is, the principle of the situational imperative, where every situation has a set of demands or requirements (Newman & Newman, 2015). If the situation changes the behavior of the individual must also change (Cairns, & Elder, 2001). The fifth mechanism is, the accentuation principle, where under conditions of stress or crisis the personality characteristics and coping skills of an individual will become apparent (Newman & Newman, 2015). By remaining as consistent as possible with their prior sense of self individuals use resources what are essentially well-learned habits when under stress (Elder, 1996).

Previous Applications of Life Course Theory

Life course approach is also known as life course perspective or life course theory. Elder (1996) developed this theory in the 1960s in the hopes of analyzing the lives of people within structural, social, and cultural situations. Life course theory was initially applied to children of the Great Depression in Elder's study in 1974. Life course theory was used in the study to compare children whose families were hit hard by the depression to those in families who were less affected by the depression. Elder (1974) was able to show the stage of development of the child at the time of a major dislocation social experience was an important factor in determining the effects of the experience. It was determined that there were individual differences in the experience of the depression and the affects it had on the participants both at the time of the experience and later in their lives. More recently, Elder (1986) Explored the impact of World War II experience in the military for men in later stages of life course. Elder (1986) was able to identify the effects of military experiences in both young and older males. Other studies done in the 1940s and 1950s that were similar to Elder's (1986) study were in relationship to social event, stress, and short-term mental health issues.

Researchers have also used life course theory in finding the coping styles and personalities of women, domestic abuse in the lives of low income women (Elder & Giele, 2009), finding a link between development and social change and how work and stress has an influence on health and family relationships (Carr, 2002). Other studies have used life course theory to explain the relationship between human lives and changing society (Elder, 1994), how the stresses of life transitions cause problems in

daily lives (Almeida & Wong, 2009), and how the identities of young adult influences their paths in life (Benson & Elder, 2011; Benson, Johnson, & Elder, 2012).

Life Course Theory Applied to Current Study

Life course theory often focuses primarily on women, for this study the focus was on females. Life course has also been used in the past to identify change which in the current study would be graduate school and assess how this experience effects other aspects of the individual's life. Older students often have jobs, families, and other obligations. As graduate students change roles in society life course theory helped to explain how this had an influence on both family and friend relationships. Life course theory also helped to explain how transitions cause stress and identified the coping skills that older online graduate students should learn to be successful. Life course was able to help identify the stage that each participant was at in their lives, why they made the choice to go to graduate school, and how their past experiences help them to follow through with their graduate program.

Life course theory has emerged over the past 30 years as a research an example of how several themes that include the relationship between human lives, a changing society, and the timing of lives are linked to how human lives are mutually dependent on one another. Life course theory has also explained how social change alters the lives of people. Providing an awareness of the link between human lives and their historical time in relationship to environmental change and choice of pathways that each participant has chosen will attempt to explain how the multiple pathways is reflected in their synchrony or asynchrony in their relationships with both family members and friends.

Age differentiation may be considered in chronological age which would be separated by a number that serves as a rough index of the stage of life of the individual (Elder, 1975). A high school student should be between the ages of 12-18 depending on the Country and progression of the individual. College or University students have a wider range in ages from age 17-80 depending on the trajectory and the transition of the individual (Elder, 1975; e.g., in 2015, ages of psychology doctoral students attending Walden University were as follows: 5.6% age 18-29; 31.2% age 30-39; 32.5% age 40-49; 21.9% age 50-59; 7.2% age 60-69 and 0.4% age 70 +; Lee Stadtlander, personal communication, November 13, 2017). In many cases, especially in later years, the chronological age does not express the sequence of roles and events, and social transitions that mark the turning points in the individual's life (Elder, 1975). In addition, individuals with long-term intact marriage indicated one continuous marriage throughout adulthood are less likely to be career focused, but rather become content with their social position (Crosnoe, & Elder, 2002). This study examined the experience of older online graduate students attending a graduate program at Walden University.

Life course theory related to the present study of the experiences of older online graduate students in the way that participants were at different stages of their lives, and have different obligation. The reason for participants returning to school or continuing on to a graduate program also varied from one participant to another. Life course theory was able to explain some of the interpersonal and intrapersonal concepts that participants encounter that influence their adjustment to graduate school using the principle of social timing. In using the linked lives principle that life course theory provides social

relationships between participants and family, and participants and friends will be examined in relationship to the social world of the individual.

Concepts

History of Online Learning

The first schools to open was the Boston Latin School in 1635, it is the first public school in the United States and oldest existing school America (Dexter, 1919). Other schools were also opening in the United States around the same time, New England in the 13 colonies was opening schools for Puritans to attend (Dexter, 1919). Virginia was also opening schools to educate the natives, but this was unsuccessful for the most part (Dexter, 1919). When schools were built, girls were not allowed to attend, it was only boys who were able to receive and educations. It was not until the early 1800s that girls and women were allowed to attend schools, Universities, and earn degrees (Dexter, 1919). It was the mid-1800s when African Americans were allowed to attend school and earn degrees (Dexter, 1919). From the opening of the first school to present the progression has been steadily working towards educating everyone who was willing to learn, and those who were able to afford an education. Now there are brick-and-mortar schools that offer a variety of diploma and degree programs, in class, online, and a hybrid classes where both in class and online are combined. Distance learning is described as a virtual classroom where students and instructors do not meet face-to-face, both students and instructors can be in any location in the country or the world (Stadtlander et al., 2013).

The availability of online learning starts for most learners as soon as they are enrolled in school and carries on through graduate school (McLaughlin, & Yan, 2017; Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007). Learning institutions across the United States are offering three primary types of classes which include in class learning, online learning, and hybrid learning where students go to class as well and doing homeworking and assignments online (McLaughlin, & Yan, 2017). This change has taken place to better meet the needs of learners (McLaughlin, & Yan, 2017).

In 2012 there were 7.1 million online students taking at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The increase of students who are taking online classes has been steadily on the rise for since the year 2000. There is now evidence of a future plateau where the increase of online students has not increase as much as in past years and there may be smaller increases for years to come, but so far, the plateau is still in the future (Allen & Seaman, 2014). According to the census bureau report (2017) the number of adults from the ages of 20-69 makes up 28.6 percent of the population in the United States. Median age has also increase across the United State which could mean a forecasted plateau may be further in the future than some may think. With the increase in median age it is possible that there will be a great number of older online graduate students in the future.

Benefits of online learning. Online learning is accessible and offers many opportunities to learners who chose to continue their education (Li & Irby, 2008). Even though online courses may require more time than traditional classroom learning in the way of learning new technology and becoming comfortable with it, students believe the

effort is well worth the end result (Li & Irby, 2008). Online learning offers students who are working full-time, who have a family, or are unable to travel to and from school every day a different avenue to achieve a higher education (Lin, 2016). Students are able to work full-time and share in family activities while completing assignments around their busy schedules (Li & Irby, 2008; Lin, 2016). Online students are able to communicate with Professors and other learners by using resources that are provided to them such as, blackboard, chats, bulletin boards, e-mail, forums (Panacci, 2017), group applications on phones, and live groups meetings.

The learning styles of students have an influence in how each individual learns. There are three primary styles of learning which are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Visual learners will do best with pictures, images, and spatial understanding, auditory learners will do best with using sound and music, while kinesthetic learners will do best with using their bodies, hands and sense of touch (Blevins, 2014). Online learning has evolved to encompass many tools that are used to help students interact in ways that might appeal to those with different learning styles (Panacci, 2017). Parts that may contribute to the feat of the online learning experience may include, learning methods, knowledge of technology, and the characteristics of students, course content, and student support (Panacci, 2017). Older online students have different life experiences which in turn would make their readiness to become a successful online student more difficult (Newman & Newman, 2015).

Students who do not feel that they are able to sit in a classroom, or that they do not have time to travel to and from school now have an opportunity to further their

education by taking online classes. The largest part of online learning does not take place in the course room, but rather by a number of outside resources such as textbook readings, library research assigned articles, and private interactions with other students (Kilgore & Rice, 2003). Online learning requires self-directed learning from students in order for them to be successful (Lin, 2016). Life span development including the chosen path of and individual and individual development (Elder, 1996) of each student will also play a role in how successful the individual will be with online learning. Older adult online students may be new to self-directed learning. Often the life experiences of older online students have taught them how to use their acquired skills more effectively (Lin, 2016), but still not have the confidence to re-enter graduate education.

Students take part in weekly discussion posts and respond to the posts of others in their class. Students also have limited access to instructors in an online learning environment. It is up to the student to learn how to use the Internet and do research on their own, this makes each student responsible for their own learning (Robinson & Doverspike, 2006). It is the sole responsibility of the student to learn about assigned weekly topics and be able to share what they have learned and discus each topic with their peers. Self-directed learning is key to the success of older online graduate students. Online courses are less structured that tradition brick and mortar classes and self-motivation is just as important as self-directed learning to being successful (Panacci, 2017; Robinson & Doverspike, 2006). In many cases students sign up for one online class to find that they it suites their learning needs before they sign up for more classes the next semester, being self-motivated and happy with the outcome creates a positive

phenomenon for online learning experiences (Panacci, 2017; Robinson & Doverspike, 2006).

      Challenges of online learning. Students find online learning to pose more challenges than traditional brick and mortar schools. Online learning involves students in their own learning by having students be responsible for their own research, reading, and listening to online lectures which are provided in course rooms. Being self-motivated is sometimes difficult when other obligations seem to be more pressing than completing weekly assignments (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2012).

      Having a professor at the front of the class explaining each concept step by step and answering any questions along the way is much different than a professor that students have never seen, or heard, and can be teaching a course from many miles away, or even in a different country (Li & Irby, 2006). Online students have to organize their own work along with being committed, if students are unable to organized their time and make their own decisions without the assistance of others, they may not be as successful. Time management is one other area that online students have to be aware they need to take control of (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2014). There are only so many hours in one day to accomplish all of the tasks that need to be done. Discussion posts are due during the week, responses to other learners are also due during the week, if there are questions or comments to the student's initial post they should also respond to those. If there is an assignment this is usually due at the end of the week but waiting until the end of the week to try to do an assignment can lead to incomplete work, disorganized writing, or feelings of frustration depending on the scope of the assignment.

Online learners may also face other challenges such as how to balance family, work, school, and any other obligations that they have (Knowles et al., 2012). Work has an influence on the online student in the way that some careers may be more demanding at different times of the year (Knowles, 1990; Knowles et al., 2012). School is year-round, so during busy times at work, the obligations to school does not change. Family has an influence on students in the way that if there are children that are still at home, they will need help with homework, outside activities and extra care. Other obligations can include volunteer work or taking care of an elderly family member (usually with older online students), both of these can be taxing on the student.

Older Online Graduate Students

Graduate school is experienced as a time of increased demands, expectations, and stress (Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Nelson, Dell'Oliver, Koch, & Buckler, 2001). It may be even more challenging for older online graduate students, even though projected that age will no longer predict learning behaviors for the reason that taking online classes for older adult may be less stressful than having to sit in class in a brick and mortar environment (Martinak, 2012). For older students, taking online classes also allows them to work full-time and be at home with their families when they are needed. Many higher education students are considered nontraditional adult learners, defined as over the age of 24 years and have taken on adult roles and responsibilities (Schroeder, & Terras, 2015; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Adult students face barriers such as a lack of peer socialization, juggling multiple roles, isolation, and shortage of support (Pifer & Baker, 2016). Another barrier adult students may face is multiple identities and commitments

(Pifer & Baker, 2016). Older online graduate students may have a professional identity, a personal identity, and a relational identity, which makes it difficult for students to find the balance in these identities, for the reason these identities are often overlapping, often students require different strategies at different stages of their graduate program (Pifer & Baker, 2016), a good number of adult learners lead busy lives, as they juggle careers and family roles (Reese, 2012).

Adult students usually have higher incomes than other American households, most adult learners have a higher level of education before they return to University (Reese, 2012). Many adults chose to enroll in college following key life switches and changes that raise new understandings or perceptions in individuals or present conditions in which college is viewed as necessary (Kasworm, 2008). Most adults enroll in college based on personal life transitions or the stage that the individual is at in their personal life, primarily due to environmental forces, life changes, or external life-transition events (Reese 2012).

The idea of adult learning has not been focused on as much as children's learning, but adult learning is not a new idea. Educating adults has been a focus of both educators and learners for a very long time (Knowles, 1990; Knowles et al., 2014). Great teachers of ancient times such as Confucius in China, Aristotle, Socrates, Plato in Greece, Cicero, and Euclid in Rome were all teachers of adults (Knowles et al., 2014). These teachers were able to develop techniques that were effective in teaching older adults using mental inquiry, not passive reception (Knowles et al., 2014). Other researchers would expand on this thinking by referring to the brain's plasticity as the reason that older students are

successful by being able to relearn topics that they have already learned and by adding to this by learning a large variety of new topics (Montgomery, 2013).

Adult students taking online classes are eager to earn their degrees, they want academic recognition in order to further their careers (Reese, 2012). Approximately one third of adult learners take full-time classes, while holding a full-time job (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Adult learners often choose to study fields where there is a high demand for jobs, such as business, education or health. Adult learners have complex lives. Even though they are busy with work and family, they still take part in their communities in the way of culture, religion, and sports (Lin, 2016). Adult learners work hard to have ties to their profession, they find time to volunteer in their communities, and take every advantage to make the best of their computer time (Reese, 2012). Adult learners view earning a degree as a means in which they will be able to move from one career to another or move from one position in society to a different position (Newman & Newman, 2015; Shi, 2017).

Adult learners continue to take online classes to be better qualified to get the jobs that they want, to be able to provide for their families, to keep up on technology, and to gain a different position in society (Newman & Newman, 2015). Many universities offer graduate degree programs with online support services, electronic libraries, and virtual counseling that is available to all online learners. With 7.1 million online learners in 2014 (Allen & Seaman, 2014), online learning options are still attracting learners who want to keep their current positions in the job place and in their families. While time management and organization are important the motivation for online learners comes

from themselves. Age is not a factor in learning behaviors as it has been in past years, education is an opportunity that is available in the individual's time and society (Newman & Newman, 2015). Learners can take classes while they work and raise their families.

Age differentiation may be considered in chronological age which would be separated by a number that serves as a rough index of the stage of life of the individual (Elder, 1975). A high school student should be between the ages of 12-18 depending on the Country and progression of the individual. College or University students have a wider range in ages from age 17-80 depending on the trajectory and the transition of the individual (Elder, 1975). In many cases, especially in later years, the chronological age does not express the sequence of roles and events, and social transitions that mark the turning points in the individual's life (Elder, 1975). In addition, individuals with long-term intact marriage indicated one continuous marriage throughout adult-hood are less likely to be career focused, but rather become contents with their social position (Crosnoe, & Elder, 2002). This study examined the experience of older online graduate students attending a graduate program at Walden University.

In the field of higher learning adult life experiences influence the individual and their learning (Knowles et al., 2014). Understanding adult learner have a different set of expectations and needs than younger learners is important. Adult learners have specific characteristics which are unique and include various roles of adult learners outside of the classroom including obligations to work, family, and community (Reese, 2012). Adult learners bring years of experience with them into the classroom, and their purpose of returning to school is to learn and apply skills, make shifts in their careers, and make their

lives better (Shi, 2017). Being self-directed and autonomous are two characteristics of adult learners enable them to take responsibility to accept their own learning approaches and assessment methods (Knowles et al., 2014). Adult learners who are self-regulated, motivated, and confident can easily achieve their goals by making adjustments to schedules and learning to achieve their set goals (Shi, 2017). Being a self-directed learner means having a strategy, having self-awareness, and being motivated to achieve goals (Yin, 2016).

Five characteristics of adult learners described by Knowles et al. (2014) include (a) adult learners want to know why they are learning a topic before they begin to learn it, (b) learners' have to possess the self-concept that they are responsible for their own learning and goals, (c) learner's life experience, (d) the student has to be ready to learn, and (e) students' orientation to learning. Adult learners want to know why they are learning a topic in order for them to easily relate the topic to their life and past experience (Sogunro, 2014). Learning topics that motivate adult student increases their self-concept, which in turn increases their willingness to take responsibility for their own learning.

Adult learners have more life experience than their younger counter parts. These life experiences are both a good and bad influence on how adult learners view topics (Sogunro, 2014). Because of the mix of both good and bad experiences adult learners are more apt to be open for discussions both in and out of the course room. They may also have better communication skills than those with less life experience (Sogunro, 2014). If students are not able to succeed with self-directed learning, they may become frustrated which may account for a high dropout rate (Knowles, 1990), this happens more often in

females with full-time employment (Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, & Stürmer, 2015). Frustration that comes from other sources such as family situations, financial trouble, or isolation may also contribute to a higher dropout rate in adult learners (Stoessel et al., 2015).

Isolation is a problem for many graduate students. Isolation is defined by McInnerney and Roberts (2004) as the feeling of aloneness that many students may feel not only because of distance from other learners and instructors, but because they feel overwhelmed at the thought of having to spend many uninterrupted hours reading and writing, without interaction from others. Isolation is particularly prevalent in older online graduate students and can be the cause of a high dropout rate (Stoessel et al., 2015). Residencies and dissertation retreats can alleviate some of the feelings of frustration and stress caused by isolation. Communication with other graduate students and committee chairs on a regular basis can also help graduate students to eliminate feelings of social isolation.

Stress

Stress has been defined in a variety of disciplines, such as sociology, engineering, medicine, psychology, and physiology (Steptoe & Ayers, 2004). Due to the wide range of fields that have studied the occurrence of stress, there have also been many definitions of stress. Stress was initially referred to as any external force in physics that caused strain on objects (Steptoe & Ayers, 2004). This description of stress is still included as the primary definition. In other definitions, such as in psychology, stress is defined as demands being greater than what the individual is able to accomplish (Lazarus, 1993;

Wethington, Glanz, & Schwartz, 2015). When an individual does not have the means to meet demands, there is an imbalance that is stressful. Lazarus explained that, in a relationship, stress is defined as when the resources are less than the demands put on the individual. Stress can be maximized or minimized depending on the individual. Stress can be one event that is short-term and intense, or a series of events that are long-term and less intense (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983; Wethington et al., 2015). In cases where stress is long-term it may be considered chronic stress that may have a negative effect on the health of the individual and relationships.

Stress can affect individuals psychologically and physically. When stress increases, there is a higher risk of students feeling unwell (Cohen, 1983; Feeney, & Collins, 2015; Hannigan et al., 2004). Chronic stress can contribute to other diseases such as alcoholism, eating disorders, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other major health problems (Steptoe & Ayers, 1990; Wethington et al., 2015). Stress may increase individual productivity without over taxing the resources of the individual with no observable negative outcomes for a short amount of time (Doron et al., 2015). Both the duration and intensity level of the stress often dictates the symptoms and the severity of the symptoms in many individuals.

Perceived stress is something that is unique to each individual depending on experiences, attitudes, and characteristics of the individual (Steptoe & Ayers, 2004). Stress can result in negative effects where relationships suffer and student become distant with those who they would usually spend time with (Kerr & Bowen, 2002). In many cases individuals make choices to be in stressful environments which in turn causes

internal stress. In these cases, students create their own stress. An example could be a decision to have a high stress job with many responsibilities while trying to be a successful online graduate student. Over time individual with high stress and high productivity may show signs of demands exceeding what they are able to accomplish. Whether the stress in external or internal the symptoms are usually the same and can include being inattentive to other, short tempered, and in some cases, depression can play a role, which adds more stress to the individual.

Perceived Stress

Research on stress has led to a variety of groups of stress and how it is defined. In the 1940s stress was thought to be bad and connected to negative thoughts (Lazarus, 1993). These thoughts would link psychological stress and physiological stress to the same demand overload. During research in years after 1970 physiological stress was thought to be a result of environment in combination with psychological assessment of stress by the individual (Doron et al.2015; Lazarus, 1993). The same stress can be experienced by different individuals and perceived in different ways (Fuenfhausen & Cashwell, 2013). Steptoe and Ayers (1990) claimed that perceived stress may be due to several factors such as past experiences, personality of the individual, how the situation is presented, or culture (Wethington et al., 2015). An example of perceived stress can be seen when graduate students from different backgrounds receive feedback on assignments. Some may perceive the feedback as constructive, others become overwhelmed and frustrated at the thought of doing corrections, and this is primarily dependent on the unique processing of stressful events that individuals possess.

Stress can come from a variety of different causes, such as role demands, financial stressors, stressors from interpersonal relationships, stressors from identity development, and stress from lack of social support (Doron et al., 2015; Steptoe & Ayers, 2004). Even though the source of the stress is important it is of more importance how the individual experiences the event.

Without self-report there is no real way for others to accurately assess if an event was stressful to an individual, or the degree of stress the individual experienced as a result of the event. Self-reports may not be an entirely accurate way of evaluating stress as some individuals may underestimate or minimize the normal aspects of stress, and others may exaggerate a small stressor. It is understood the amount of perceived stress may be unique to each individual and impossible to observe from a third party. Self-report was useful to evaluate if an individual perceives an event as stressful or not and to what degree the perceived stress is.

The primary focus of this study was directed towards older online graduate students' perception of their stress and to what degree stress has an impact on their daily life and family relationships and how perceived relationship stress effects education. This study was not able to determine true stress levels of graduate students, or even the truthfulness of the self-report, but rather to measure the perceived stress that was based on self-reports of online graduate students at Walden University. A qualitative self-report over the phone was used to gather data from participants, Skype or Zoom where offered for all interviews, but participants preferred to do interviews over the phone.

Depending on the personality of the individual participant perceived stress levels were reported anywhere from very high to very low.

Interpersonal Concepts

Interpersonal concepts are those that take place externally not within the person but more often between two or more people (Whisman, 1997). The Satisfaction of Life Scale can be helpful with determining how each individual perceives their own life (Whisman & Judd, 2016). The most common interpersonal concept is communication between two people usually between partners or close friends, where one person has an influence on the other's emotions (Hofmann, 2014; Whisman, 1997). Communication is a way people with personality differences can share ideas. Effective communication is the ability to relate to others despite differences (Nguyen et al., 2017), which in turn can result in the quality of a close relationship (Nguyen et al., 2017). Better communications skills lead to better marital satisfaction and those couples with communication problems had more dissatisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 2016). This holds true for communication in couples that are not distressed, but communication did not improve marital satisfaction in couple who were distressed (Karney & Bradbury, 2016). Since communication between distressed and non-distressed couples was minimal, the explanation for satisfaction would be the type of communication. In distressed couples the communication turned from positive to negative with ill intention for either one or both individuals, which is not a reflection of communication skills (Karney & Bradbury, 2016). Even though communication is thought to be most important, what is more important is that communication is positive (Karney & Bradbury, 2016). The study of

Nyuyen et al. (2017) shared that even though communication is important, commitment to the relationship is even more important.

Personality traits could play a role in relationship satisfaction along with the how the individual perceives their partner (Ault & Lee, 2016). Attachment styles often come into play in relationships. There is a connection between attachment, interpersonal behavior, and well-established relationships (Ault & Lee, 2016; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1992). When there is a conflict in perceived partner-evoked behavior and the interpersonal style on relationship satisfaction of the individual this can lead to different levels of satisfaction within the relationship (Ault & Lee, 2016). The difference in liking or loving, partner impact, interpersonal behaviors, and dominance/submissiveness all have either positive or negative impacts on relationships (Ault & Lee, 2016).

Another piece of the interpersonal concept that is a big part of marital satisfaction is perceived social support (Fuenfhausen & Cashwell, 2013). Lack of perceived support from spouse, family, and friends often leads to depressive symptoms in individuals in comparison to those who perceive that support is present who do not display depressive symptoms (Yedirir & Hamarata, 2015). The support individuals receive from spouse and family members should surpass the support they receive from social networks (Yedirir & Hamarata, 2015). In addition, those with higher social support reported a higher level of marital satisfaction (Yedirir & Hamarta, 2015). The final piece to interpersonal concept is partner equity, which refers to each partner being responsible and doing their share of household tasks, family tasks and financial tasks (Fuenfhausen & Cashwell, 2013).

Sharing in responsibilities makes a couple a true partnership which in turn has a positive

impact on relationship satisfaction (Fuenfhausen & Cashwell, 2013).

Intrapersonal Concepts

Intrapersonal concepts include factors that are most often thought to be within the

individual, such as mood states, sexual satisfaction, and love styles, where the person

internalizes emotions and in many cases the individual becomes self-absorbed (Hofmann,

2014; Whisman 1997). In addition, Tatnell et al. (2014) added behaviors, emotion

regulation, self-esteem, and cognitions as concepts. Internal states of an individual may

stem from the "Big Five" traits which include neuroticism, extraversion, openness,

agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Of the big five

personality traits listed by Costa and McCrae the three that were most important for a

student's success in completing their chosen program were openness, conscientiousness,

and extraversion (Marcela, 2015). Agreeableness was as asset for fact retention.

Neuroticism lead to internal difficulties in several areas and was not a trait that was as

asset for academic success (Marcela, 2015). In the study of Barford and Smillie (2016),

the big five traits were used to take a closer look at positive and negative emotions, and

how individual differences were the cause of mixed emotions. Emotional instability and

negative moods have been related to depression and anxiety which in turn has a negative

influence on relationships, and cognitions (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1992; Tatnell et

al., 2014). Personality traits differ greatly from one individual to the next (Barford &

Smillie, 2016), we can also see this in older online graduate students where personality

traits vary greatly from one student to another. The task of being an older online

graduate student is both stressful and rewarding, depending on the disposition of the

individual mixed emotions may occur.

Another notion that Whisman (1997) mentions on the concept of intrapersonal is

love. There are many types of love that are experienced that include many different

aspects (Proyer, 2014). Love can take many different forms like, possessive/dependent,

altruistic, friendship, passionate, and game playing (Proyer, 2014). In a successful

marriage there has to be layers of love also which consist of friendship love, altruistic

love, and passionate love, all of which are positively connected to marital satisfaction for

both spouses (Honari, & Saremi, 2015). The last part of the intrapersonal concept that

Whisman (1997) mentions is commitment to the marriage. Commitment is important in

the relationship between sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction (Honari, & Saremi,

2015). Love and other emotions play a role in all relationships whether it is a marriage or

a friendship.

Environmental Concepts

Environmental concepts described by Whisman (1997) are those that are

unavoidable such as illness, work related stress, and other concepts that would possibly

have a negative impact on the individual and their relationships in a variety of ways

(Barling & MacEwen, 1992; Ee, Teoh, & Yen, 2017). Job insecurity, role ambiguity,

role conflict, and job satisfaction all play a role in relationships (Barling & MacEwen,

1992; Carleton, Barling, Barnes, & Wagner, 2016). Work-related stressors that cause the

individual to worry had a negative effect on concentration, just as being an online

graduate student may influence concentration. Other researchers reported the presence of

any type of stress over a long period of time will lower martial stability and satisfaction (Carleton et al., 2016; Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2016; Mauno, Ruokolainen, & Kinnunen, 2015).

Relationships

Relationships have been described in a variety of different ways as there are a number of types of relationship. The four most common relationships in adults are professional, romantic, friendship, and dating friendship (Rawlins, 2017). Other relationships include those with children, relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, and friendship after divorce (Rawlins, 2017). Relationships have different components that make them personal to the individual, and the roles in relationship may differ depending on the personality of the individuals in the relationship (Dickens, Ebrahim, & Herlihy, 2016). Roles in the same relationship may change over a number of years creating more harmony or tension between the two people who are involved in the relationship. In addition, Antonucci and Akiyama (1995) pointed out the primary difference between family and friend relationship is, family relationships are required and friendship relationships are voluntary. Older adults are unable to terminate a stressful family relationship, but they are able to end a stressful friendship (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995). For the purpose of the present study family relationships and friendship relationships were examined more closely.

Family Relationships

Adult learners are defined as over the age of 24 years and have taken on adult roles and responsibilities (Schroeder & Terras, 2015; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). The

definition of family relationships may vary for those learners who are 24 from those learners who are 50. More adults are waiting longer to commit to marriage until their late twenties or even early thirties (Santrock, 2015). Due to changing public attitudes of being older and single, or alternative to marriage couples are cohabitating before marriage and waiting longer to get married, marriage is thought to be a lifestyle by some, rather than a lifelong commitment (Wang, 2015). Female college graduates with at least a bachelor's degree have a marriage success rate of 78% in their first marriage, this number varies by race and ethnicity (Wang, 2015). Couples that cohabitated before marriage are less likely to stay married compared to those who did not cohabitate before marriage (Wang, 2015).

There is a constant change in the family as a unit, many couples find there are unpredictable roadblocks and stresses throughout the relationship Mee et al., 2015). Due to financial demands both partners may have careers. To be able to advance in their careers, to reduce occupational stress, and the family's economic health and security it may be of benefit to return to a formal education (Mee et al., 2015). The choice to attend graduate school means rebalancing, redefining, and realigning family relationships (McGoldrick et al., 2015). Married students in graduate studies experienced martial strain that could have a lasting effect on marriage, graduate studies or both (Mee et al., 2015). In the study of Brannok, Litten, and Smith (2000), graduate students were more likely to have marital problems, but in cases where both partners were graduate students' marital satisfaction was found to be higher. Attachment styles of both partners may play a

role in forming a relationship that is lasting (Birditt et al., 2012), while relationship stability comes primarily from commitment (Birditt et al., 2012).

Adult learners who are 24 may not be married, they may still be living at home with their family of origin or cohabitating with a partner, while adult learners who are older may be married or divorced, have children, and may also have grandchildren. Situations may differ from one learner to another, their definition of family may also differ, and the adult learner would play a different role in each situation depending on individual development (Elder, 1996). The differentiation of self will impact how individual processes interaction in close relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Emotional cut-off may occur in close relationships due to unresolved conflicts, a change in position in society of the older online learner, or lack of social support in close relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Family relationships can be romantic, parent and child, relatives, or grandparent and grandchild, depending the adult online learner.

Friend Relationships

Friendship relationships are those that are voluntary based on mutual affection, respect, interests, and loyalty (Rawlins, 2017). Friendships are those of equality where both friends see each other on the same playing field, where there is no romantic attachment (Rawlins. 2017). The basis for a friendship is communication and an interest in the well-being of the other person. The second aspect of friendship is that both friends have a common goal that does not usually involve the needs of one individual or the other (Rawlins, 2017). There are five types of friendship: voluntary, personal, affective, mutual, and equal (Rawlins, 2017). Friendship can be found almost everywhere such as,

within a family, at work, peers, academic advisors, through hobbies, through volunteer work, through children or pets, or through social media. The definition of friendship is unclear as it may vary from one person to another, friends can be referred to as best friends, best guy friends, best girlfriends, closest friends, inner circle, crew, family, true friends, real friends, close friends, closer friends, good friends, or really good friends, others who are not really friends can be referred to as acquaintances, associates, kind of friends, other friends, Facebook friends, or cool people (McCabe, 2016).

Older online graduate students often experience loneliness and isolation while achieving their goals. While networking helps with both loneliness and isolation it is up to the student themselves to have the social skills to interact with others (McCabe, 2016). The type of networking a student seeks will depend on their personality, some students will have a few close friends, and others will have a large network of friends (McCabe, 2016). Some students will place themselves on an academic social scale, the two most common social scales are assessed by social network type or GPA (McCabe, 2016). On average most students have 18 people who they call their friends, this number was reduced to an average of eight once family members were removed, but this number can vary depending on the individual student and these friends are most likely to stay friends long-term (McCabe, 2016). Both men and women have a greater number of women in their social networks (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1991; McCabe, 2016). Women often have a greater number of people in their networks than men, and women provide more support to a wider variety of people than men (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1991; McCabe, 2016), this is particularly true in older women. Men depend more on spousal support than women

(Antonucci & Akiyama, 1991; McCabe, 2016). Students stay in touch with these friends primarily by text messages or Facebook, rather than by e-mail or telephone calls (McCabe, 2016).

Even though older online graduate students form networks with other peers, have friends outside of school, and family that they can talk to there is a transformation while going through the graduate program where students change their position in society, their life experience grows through knowledge, and differentiation of self also changes so students process friend relationships in a different light. Emotional cut-off may also occur not so much as there is unresolved conflicts, but interests change so relationships change. Being that friendship are voluntary the student may choose not to volunteer to be part of the friendship as they change their position in society.

Coping

The ability to be able to cope effectively may be contributed to life experiences, and family support (Tatnell et al., 2014). Triggers that may related to maladaptive coping can be both interpersonal and intrapersonal, between one person and another, or due to an event that creates stress for the individual (Tatnell et al., 2014). Coping has no one clear definition, researchers such as Cohen and Lazarus (1973) and Fleishman (1984) claimed once an experience has been deemed as stressful by the individual the coping process will be activated through thoughts and actions (Lazarus, 1993). In addition, Lazarus (1993) explained that individuals have finite inner resources to cope with stress. Coping is also described as something and individual does to avoid being harmed by life experiences (Blaxton, & Bergeman, 2017). Coping resources will determine how effectively the

individual copes with stress, individuals with less coping resources may react the same ineffective way to stress every time, while those with more coping resource are more likely to have a decreased stress reaction (Blaxton, & Bergeman, 2017). There is no one coping method that will work for every situation, coping is dependent on the situation and the individual (Thoits, 1995).

Adapting is sometimes a way of coping when an individual has set goals but is not able to achieve them (Shin et al., 2014). In some cases, making adjustments to goals is an option for coping (Shin et al., 2014). In a study by Matud (2004), it was noted that women reported having more daily stress, with more frustration, conflicts, chronic problems and daily demands than men who noted a different set of stressful events. The number of life events that both men and women listed were equal in number and frequency (Matud, 2004; Anderson et al., 2012). The primary difference in coping in men and women is that men tend to use active and instrumental coping, while women use passive and emotional coping (Blaxton, & Bergeman, 2017; Nelson et al., 2001 Anderson et al.,2012; Thoits, 1995).

Even though earning a degree as a graduate student can be rewarding there are many stresses and strains, such as a disturbance of normal developmental adulthood progression, academic demands, and limited finances (Gordon, Rose, & Kasworm, 2016; Anderson et al., 2012). Graduate students have a different set of responsibilities such as family and other commitments, academic challenges are greater in number requiring more time to complete (Reese, 2012). Graduate students experience a change their position in society, which creates social obstacles (Elder, 1996). The combined stress of

academic challenges and social obstacles can lead to changes in individual characteristics and daily routines (Gordon, Rose, & Kasworm, 2016). In a study by El-Ghoroury et al. (2012), it was confirmed that depression and anxiety were common among graduate students, but psychological distress, burnout, and personal and professional difficulties also play a large part in stress and effective coping skills.

To cope with the stresses of being an online student, advisors play an important role in providing direction, positive appraisal, and assurance to students (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016; Peluso, Carleton, & Asmondson, 2011). Both internal and external demands must be managed, and social support is important to the individual's ability to cope effectively (Nelson, et al., 2001). Regular exercise and hobbies will help graduate students to overcome stress and increase effective coping (El-Ghoroury, et al., 2012). Understanding stress, stress management, and self-care will give graduate students and understanding of how each are related to one another and how to overcome any negative effects (Myers et al., 2012). Finding a balance that is the best fit for the individual student is key to completing graduate studies and emotional well-being. Mindfulness can be helpful when dealing with any stressful situation, where the individual feels uncomfortable. Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental, present moment awareness and engagement (Shin et al., 2014), that helped student to become aware of stress, accept the stress and reduces emotional distress increasing positive well-being (Anderson et al., 2012)

Social Support

Social support has been a concept that many researchers in various disciplines have explored over the years. The phenomena of social support are based on human attachment where systems of support and resources are traded among those in the same or similar circumstances (Anderson et al., 2012). Social support is a broad area where relationships might be perceived to support health and well-being (Cohen, 2004; Feeney, & Collins, 2015). There is no real definition of social support that has been accepted by all disciplines, but Cobb (1976) defines social support as information that leads an individual to believe that he is cared for and loved and is a valued member of the group. In addition, social support is thought to reduce the effects of life stress and reduce negative psychological states (Cobb, 1976; Anderson et al., 2012). Cobb's definition is supported by a number of other researchers such as Feeney and Collins (2015), who defined social support as shielding individuals from the negative of stress and helping them to be productive regardless of the circumstances. Social support has also been defined as both verbal and nonverbal communication between one individual and another where uncertainty about a situation is reduced and enhances a perception of personal control in one's life experience (Anderson et al., 2012). A social support definition by Thoits (1995) is the degree to which an individual's basic social needs are gratified through the interaction with others.

Social support includes family support in the way of affection, esteem or approval, belonging, identity, and security (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Thoits, 1995). Social support comes in the form of socioemotional aid or instrumental aid,

socioemotional aid comes in the form of affection, sympathy and understanding, acceptance, and esteem, while instrumental aid comes in the form of offering advice or information, helping with family or work responsibilities and financial aid (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Thoits, 1995). When social support is not in place or is defective it may create a social strain and possibly result in failure (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Lack of social support from either friends or family can have negative effects on individuals in the way of physical and mental health.

In close relationships such as in a marriage, where social support is healthy, the effects on physical health and mental health were found to be positive with improved responses to physical illness from colds to cancer, fewer chronically ill individuals, and fewer psychiatric aliments (Feeney & Collins, 2015). The same holds true in friendship relationships where social support is key to being healthy physically and emotionally. Even though family members are responsible for over half of the social support for older adults, friends provide support that is equally important in having a thriving relationship (Feeney & Collins, 2015; O'Connor, 1995). The ability to provide and receive support is important in older adults (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Being supportive and being supported go together in order to have a successful relationship.

Graduate Students and Social Support

Women graduate students reported considerably more stress, anxiety and difficulties with spouses that male graduate students (Brauss, Lin, & Baker, 2015). Women also reported more negative life changes and had a more difficult time managing their many roles than men (Segrin, McNelis, & Swiatkowski, 2016), women also needed

more social support than males. In addition, Segrin et al. (2016) pointed out that graduate students with good social skills were happier and had a better quality of life, possibly due to their ability to communicate with others and have the social support needed to be healthy. Social support is assessed by both levels and quality (Grady et al., 2014) to have a critical impact on both health and psychological status of first year graduate students. Life changes (Grady et al., 2014) and changing their position in society (Elder, 1996) caused health and psychological distress.

Many older online graduate students may not have the social support that they need from peers. Peer support is important even if online students have not met each other in person they can still be supportive of the process of being an online graduate student. Online graduate students spend many hours of their time in a virtual classroom where reading, writing, and research is done in isolation. By using blogs and other social networks communication is increased which gives online students a sense of community (Lee & Bonk, 2016). Family and friends can also provide social support to online graduate student without fully understanding the details of the process of being an online graduate student. Depending on the personality of the online student other social supports can come from social networking sites like Facebook (Tang, Chen, Yang, Chung, & Lee 2016) and twitter to stay in contact with family and friends when there is not enough time to be with them. Time management should be considered when using social networking so online students do not become addicted to these sites (Tang et al., 2016).

Summary and Conclusion

The literature review established there was a great deal of literature in regards to online learning, graduate students, and older students. The literature related to online learning is vast with many areas that affect graduate students and online student. The literature review examined how graduate students work primarily in isolation, this is even more true in online graduate students. The literature review included characteristics of online students, returning to higher education later in life, stress, causes of stress and effects the stress has on online graduate students. The literature review also reviewed how stress and perceived stress impacts relationships and varies between genders, the importance of social support, and coping. While the literature review focuses on older online graduate students, it does not answer the question of what motivates older online graduate students, or how the experience of being an older online graduate student affects their friends and family relationships, or what students have found to be their supports. The present study filled this gap by answering these questions and will extend this knowledge on this area of research with instructors, peers, and other researchers.

The present study discovered the lived experiences of Walden graduate students. As the population of older online students increase bringing with them more life experience and an interest in continuing education there are issues that students are both able to control and those which are beyond their control. Having a solid social support network while attending graduate school is key to each individual's ability to complete graduate studies, and to cope with both internal and external stress. The purpose of this study was to attempt to provide and understanding of the experience of online graduate

students at Walden University, it was possible to determine the stressors and supports among older online graduate students and how the experiences relate to the conflicting needs of their family and other commitments. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the research design and methodology that was used in the present study, role of the researcher, data collection, data analysis plan, ethics, and research questions that was used to conduct the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The objective of the present qualitative study was to examine the experience of being an older online graduate student and the relationships between the students' experience, stress, supports, motivation, and family relationships. Because there are few studies exploring online graduate students' experiences in the literature, an exploratory qualitative study devoted to understanding online graduate students' lived experiences, stress, family relationships, and supports was best suited to examining this question. Better understanding the experiences of older online graduate students has provided valuable information for instructors, peers, and students.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I provided an overview of theories and concepts of challenges older online graduate students may face. Chapter 3 further describes the qualitative method for this study. This chapter includes discussion of the recruiting methods, data collection methods, data analysis, and verification process. Lastly, I address ethical concerns and confidentiality concerns that could have affected this study.

Research Design and Rationale

Central question: What is the experience of being an older online graduate student at Walden University?

Questions:

- What motivates older students to attend online graduate programs?

- What intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment?

- How does the perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends?

- How has attending an online university affected friendship relationship?

I wrote the research questions in order to understand the shared experiences of the participants of this study, who were older graduate students in an online environment. The number of older online graduate students has increased over the past 10 years (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Older students are returning to higher education for a variety of reasons, such as key life changes (Kasworm, 2008), environment forces, or life-transition events (Reese 2012). Taking online classes is new for older online learners, where technology is progressing at a rapid pace, and face-to-face interaction with instructors and peers does not exist. These are new concepts for older learners. In previous learning experiences, brick-and-mortar schools provided hands-on experiences and daily interaction with other learners and instructors. Not having the computer skills and completing course work in isolation may leave older online learners frustrated. Older adults have acquired many life skills through experiences. Elder's life course theory relays the importance of individual development, finding new life pathways, and social change (1996). This study has helped to understand how older adult learners perceive stress of being online graduate students, how being an online graduate student affects relationships, and how internal and external factors play a part in adjustment.

I conducted this study using a phenomenological research approach to explore the experiences of 6 participants to understand their common lived experiences as older online graduate students (see Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological research uses face-to-

face interviews to collect data (Creswell, 2014). Interviews allowed me to reveal the experiences participants share. Other approaches may not lead to a deep understanding of common lived experiences. The objective of the present research was to find new meaning in the experiences of older online graduate students to help administrators and instructors better meet the needs of this population, and for this population to recognize challenges as they arise in hopes that education will lead to the ability to cope better.

Role of the Researcher

I was solely responsible for collecting, interpreting, and analyzing the data, along with distributing the findings. Initial approval was granted from the Walden University IRB, and permission to recruit participants was granted by Walden University to use their participant pool. I did not have had any personal or professional relationships with the participants. I attempted to create a comfortable environment over the phone that allowed open discussion for the participants' experiences while being an online graduate student and how it affects their relationships.

Like the participants, I am an older online graduate student. Moustakas (1994) stated that credibility can be maintained if the researcher does a self-analysis acknowledging any biases or preconceptions. Giorgi (2009) agreed with Moustakas and expanded on the importance of the researcher to be educated on biases and convey and voice any assumptions that would affect the phenomena being studied. I recognized that I may have preconceived ideas about the experiences of the participants based on my personal experiences with being an older online graduate student. I needed to take measures to recognize these biases and eliminate them in order to understand the

phenomenon that I planned to study. I kept a journal of my feelings and thoughts in order to prevent and bias, I also talked to Dr. Lee Stadtlander about my journal to prevent bias.

Participants were from the Walden participant pool and my social network using purposeful sampling. Because all participants were online students, there was little chance that I had met them face-to-face. To reinforce my role as a researcher I conducted a pilot study to ensure that the established questions address the phenomenon of the study, that the questions are without bias, and that the questions could be answered in the allotted 60-minute timeframe for the interviews.

Methodology

The present study was qualitative phenomenological research describing the experiences of older online graduate students and how these experiences effect relationships. Keeping with the norm for qualitative studies of this type, it is suggested that 7-12 participants should provide enough data to explore the experiences of older online graduate students (Creswell, 2014). In this case, saturation was reached at six participants. Interviews were continued until data reached saturation (Creswell, 2014). In the phenomenological method, Moustakas (1994) suggested longer interviews be used for data collection on the phenomenon being studied. The verbal abilities of both participants and researcher are paramount for qualitative research (Giorgi, 2009). The procedure for phenomenological research includes (a) identifying the phenomenon to be studied, (b) collecting data using open ended questions during interviews, (c) bracketing the researcher's experience, (d) analyzing the data, and (e) identifying the essence of the experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 2009; Moutakas, 1994).

The study and data collection began after approval by Walden University's IRB. Recruitment of participants began with posting an invitation to the current study to Walden's participant pool, in addition I posted an invitation to this study on my personal Facebook page and my personal social network to ensure that there were enough participants.

The selection process was conducted based on the following criteria: (a) participants had to be over the age of 30, this is above the age of 24 that is considered an adult learner (Schroeder, & Terras, 2015; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012); (b) participants had to be currently enrolled in a graduate degree program; and (c) participants had to be taking online classes at Walden University. Each participant was interviewed by telephone and the interviews were digitally recorded. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The duration of the interviews varied depending on the responses from each participant to the interview questions. I kept field notes to document information that I deemed useful for study purposes.

Participant Selection

The phenomenological approach was used in this study. Purposeful sampling was chosen because it best suited this study; the purpose of this sampling strategy was to include only participants that meet the same criteria (Creswell, 2014). This research was conducted by interviewing six older online graduate students who were currently attending Walden University. This guaranteed that there would be enough data for a rich analysis as saturation was met.

Each participant first answered demographic questions. Each participant was given an informed consent document that discussed the nature of the study. After each interview, participants were debriefed on how individual experiences are important for this study and how the study was chosen. Each participant was identified by a number 1-6 to ensure confidentiality.

Instrumentation

I used in-depth, semistructured interviews as the data collection tool in this study. The interview questions were developed as a result of the literature review. The interview questions were polished further during the pilot study. The questions resulted in the participants providing enough information on their experiences as graduate students to saturate data. The interview questions were in sections that were designed to address different areas explored during this study. The interview questions were open ended, which allowed participants to expand on their shared experiences. I conducted the interviews over the phone as this was the preference of the participants. Skype, Zoom, and in-person interviews were also an option.

Phone conversations limited nonverbal cues that may have occurred (Creswell, 2014); however, I paid close attention to the inflection and pauses in the voices of the participants as they answer the questions. Skype and Zoom would have been limited to only facial expressions, and in-person interviews (i.e., face-to-face) would be have been ideal to gather the maximum amount of data using a combination of voice and body language as a guide (Patton, 2015).

For Researcher-Developed Instruments

Interview questions were developed from the literature review about older online graduate students. I started with 22 interview questions, including the concepts of older students, online classes, stress, relationships, social supports, coping, interpersonal, intrapersonal. The questions ranged from basic questions such as, what does stress mean to you, to more difficult questions about motivation, relationships, and how thoughts and feelings influence adjustment. The interview questions were used to focus on the one main question and four additional questions in the research study (Creswell, 2014).

No published data collection instruments were used in this study. The interview questions began with basic information to better understanding participants. Additional questions were added regarding the participant's experience of being an older online graduate student. These questions helped to address participants transition from one role in society to another and how this has an effect on both family and friend relationships. The literature review revealed issues that older online students may have with their stage of life and how, as participants grow, they become more distant from those from whom they were once close (Elder, 1996).

The research questions in this study also addressed the older student's perception of stress being a graduate student. The literature review also discussed social support and the importance of having a network of people who understand and support the online graduate student (Newman & Newman, 2015). Interview questions were asked that related to the challenges that older students encounter and how they cope with these challenges. Finally, several interview questions were asked to inform administrators,

professors, and future older online graduate students about avenues that may need more focus to help older online students be successful in their graduate programs. The interview questions were grouped based on the five questions and were designed to understand the experiences of older online graduate students (see dissertation questions in this chapter).

Procedures for Pilot Studies

The pilot study helped to refine and clarify the interview questions and data collection plans. The pilot study also determined how the participants may react to the questions being asked and the length of the interview needed to collect data.

The participants for the pilot study were selected by convenience from volunteer members of my social network who responded to an email request. I emailed the participants the informed consent document in advance of the interview. They were allowed enough time to read the informed consent document and ask questions if they had any. I obtained the individuals' consent to participate by asking them at the beginning of our recorded interview if they agreed to participate; when they answer "yes," the interview began.

The interviews were done by phone and were digitally recorded. While conducting the interviews, I kept field notes about relevant information, which helped to expand and refine the interview questions and practice the proposed procedure for the interviews. One goal of the pilot study was to ensure that the order of the interview questions flowed smoothly. I was also be able to practice creating an environment where participants feel comfortable speaking honestly and talking about their experiences

openly. The purpose of the pilot study was to learn what needs to be added or subtracted from the study in order to make participants comfortable, while still being able to collect the data needed to complete the study. After the study was over, I asked participants about the interview questions—if any made them uncomfortable, if they had anything to add, or if they had any questions.

Procedure for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The data collection was from Walden University graduate students. I posted an invitation to my study on the Walden University participant pool page, and I also posted an invitation to my study on my Facebook page, and my social network discussion area. Walden has a large number of graduate students in many different programs, I only needed six participants to reach saturation. I was the only person who collected data for the study. The data was digitally recorded for phone interviews. Each participant was interviewed once for approximately 60-90 minutes. At the end of each interview participants had time to talk about the interview and to ask any questions about the study. No follow up interviews were needed. To save time on the part of the participants I avoided giving the transcripts back to the participant to have them read it and verify if my interpretations are correct. I instead clarified after each question by saying, I heard you say, then verified my interpretation of what was said to ensure it was correct. If they agreed we carried on, if not I got the clarification I need as the interview was in progress.

Data Analysis Plan

Giorgi (2009) uses a descriptive phenomenological method that is modified from Husserl's original phenomenological method, Giorgi's method uses three interlocking

steps which include reduction, description, and search for essences. Moustaka's (1994)

transcendental phenomenology which is rooted in Husserl's ideas (2012) was used as the

method of data analysis. Epoche was the first step, to be able to gather data by interviews

without bias (Moustaka, 1994). The process of data analysis was documented in a

journal until all data has been analyzed.

Matrixes were created, and all applicable terminologies were grouped.

Terminologies that were not related to the study and those that were repetitive or

overlapping experiences were eliminated from the matrixes. From the matrixes, each

interview question and response were written on index cards, another matrix were then

created where all of the common ideas were grouped together for each question.

Common ideas and shared experiences of older online graduate students were grouped,

allowing themes based on common shared experiences to become clear. Saldaña's

(2015) book was used in order to ensure coding is done correctly.

Any documents related to the study including informed consent forms and

protection of the participants were addressed in the IRB application. Walden

University's consent to allow postings to both the participant pool and to my personal

social network pages was included to the Walden University IRB. I made sure that all

information related to the study was kept confidential. All data when not in use was

locked in a waterproof safe.

To protect the confidentiality of the participants, each transcript was assigned a

number, as identifiers of the participants in the study. The interviews were transcribed to

a laptop computer and then stored on a fingerprint/password flash drive that is stored in a

waterproof safe when not in use. Index cards that were used to develop themes from the matrix are also stored in the same waterproof locked safe. Only the approved reviewer assigned by the IRB and I have access to the data. All records will be stored for five years and then destroyed as outlined by the IRB.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is considered the quality of the findings of the study. It is important that those who read the study are convinced that the researcher used sound methodology that are in line with the best practices. To ensure credibility I took my time doing interviews to ensure the most data is collected from participants. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, during this time the primary focus was on the experiences of the participants. After each interview I discussed the interview with the reviewer to ensure there were no distortions of participants experiences by me. I kept field notes during the interviews and highlight important statements to review later. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, the transcriptions were not provided to the participants as verification of information was obtained during the interviews. The present study included six participants, at this point it was clear that saturation had been reached.

To ensure validity this study was supervised and approved by my chair, Dr. Leann Stadtlander. I kept notes on the research actions, interviews, transcripts, coding, and the development of codes and categories that came from the codes within the parameters.

Ethical Procedures

The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2017) has clearly outlined ethical procedures in the code of conduct section when participants are being used in research. There are many issues that can be avoided by attaining knowledge and following the code of conduct.

Approval from Walden University's IRB was obtained before any data was collected. Items included in the application were the potential risks or benefits and confidentiality issues, such as how participants would be protected. The information regarding the informed consent form has also be included. It was be my responsibility to protect the confidentiality of all participants and to minimize possible harm to both participants and researcher. Each participant was asked to read or have the consent form read to them that explained the study in language they are easily able to understand.

Participant provided private information during this study that has remain private throughout the study and after the study is completed. The names of the participant and the information is confidential. The interviews were transcribed and each interview was be assigned a number so that the identity of each participant was protected. The participants were informed that data will be kept for 5 years, on a fingerprint/password protected flash drive. The data will be erased according to Walden University practices after the allotted five years. Informed consent forms were provided. The participants were made aware that they are able to exit the research project at any time without pressure. The researcher chose the participants who best fit the study according to their relationship to the phenomena and their specific age group.

Approval from Walden University's IRB took place before any data is collected. An invitation to this study was posted on the Walden University participant pool site, my personal Facebook page, and other personal social network discussions. The posts included the nature of the study which is, the experience of older online graduate students. Lastly the post included the researcher's information and how to contact me, so I was able to provide more information about the study and provide a consent form to those who expressed interest in participating in this study. The consent form included that there will not be any incentive to the participants in this study.

After the participants responded to me by e-mail a time for an interview was decided upon. Before the interview, the participants were debriefed about the study. If any of the participants wished to quit the study at any time, there would have been no consequences. All of the personal information was kept confidential. The participants had the opportunity to ask additional questions about the study. All of the data was kept confidential, only me and Dr. Leann Stadtlander had access to the information from the participants. All data was stored in a locked safe. Included in the safe there is transcribed interviews, matrixes used for coding data, and index cards that were used to develop the matrixes. The data is also stored on a fingerprint/password flash drive which is stored in the safe after data analysis was completed. After a period of five years the confidential data, will be destroyed by me in accordance with Walden University procedures in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and the study.

Summary

In this chapter, I this defined the research methodology and described the study,

the sample size, why other qualitative research methods were not used, the justification of

qualitative research methods, and the recruiting methods that was used. In this chapter, I

review the research questions that guided this study, the ethical concerns, and the

strategies that the research used to maintain confidentiality were examined in Chapter 3.

Any issues surrounding trustworthiness were also discussed. Ethical procedures that

were used to gain participants, and the treatment of participants are included. The IRB

approval for the study was also included.

In this chapter I addressed the ethical concerns about participants who might have

left the study, treatment of data, how confidentiality was achieved, how the data was

distributed and when the data will be destroyed. In Chapters 4 and 5 the results of the

study will be discussed, the interpretation of the findings will be discussed, any probable

social change suggestions will be included, and suggestions for future research. The

conclusion will provide an overview of the study coupled with my reflection about the

study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to increase understanding about the experiences of older (over the age of 30) online graduate students. There were five research questions for this study:

1. What is the experience of being an older online graduate student?

2. What motivates older students to attend online graduate programs?

3. What intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment?

4. How does the perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends?

5. What if any social supports or coping skills have helped students attending online graduate school?

To understand the shared experience of older graduate students in an online environment were, I created 25 interview questions. The interview questions were designed to learn more about how older adult learners perceive the stress of being online graduate students, how being an online graduate student affects relationship, how internal and external factors play a part in adjustment, and what social supports and coping skills have been of benefit. This chapter describes the pilot study and the participants, provides an overview of the design and procedures, and summarizes the results of the analyses.

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted with two people from my social network to assess the length of interviews and the clarity of the questions. The pilot study interviews also

assisted me in becoming more comfortable with the interview procedure. Both interviews were completed over the telephone. In completing the pilot interviews, it became clear that the interviews would take 60-90 minutes and that the questions were appropriate; therefore, no changes were made to the interview questions.

Setting

A large online university, more specifically Walden University was the site of the study. The phone was used for all interviews.

Demographics

As shown in Table 1, all the participants were female and between the ages of 35 and 70. All of the participants were full-time students and currently in the dissertation process. Table 1 offers the gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, number of children, roles outside of the house, income, program, and greatest stressor for those who participated in this study. Names of the participants have been excluded to maintain their confidentiality. Information in the table represents general demographics from the demographic form filled out by participants prior to being interviewed. The mean age of the participants was 51.5 years.

Table 1

Demographics

	Participant #					
Characteristic	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	70	38	53	60	53	35
Ethnicity	Caucasian	African American	African American	Caucasian	African American	African American/ Latin
Marital status	Single	Married	Separated	Married	Divorced	Married
Number of children	2	3	1	4	0	3
Roles outside of school	Paid part-time	Paid part-time work, Volunteer, Children's school activities, Small business	Practicum Student	Paid full-time, Paid part-time, Community involvement	None	Children school involvement
Full-time student	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dissertation process	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Income	$40,000-60,000	Over $100,000		$80,000-100,000	Under $10,000	$80,000-100,000
Program	Health Psychology	Health Psychology	Psychology	PhD Psychology	Health Psychology	Counselor Education, and Supervisor
Greatest stressor	Dissertation	Juggling responsibilities	Finishing Dissertation	Finishing Dissertation	Finding a job, Pain, Finishing Dissertation	Finishing Dissertation

Data Collection - Main Study

The purpose of this study was to increase the understanding of the experiences of older online graduate students. To participate in the study, participants had to be over the age of 30, currently enrolled in a graduate program at Walden university, and be able to speak English. Interviews were conducted so that participants could reflect on their experiences of being an older online graduate student. One main interview question guided the research with four subquestions focusing on the experiences of older (over the

age of 30) online graduate students, what motivated them, what interpersonal and intrapersonal factors helped or hindered their progress, perceived stress on attending an online graduate school, and how this affected relationships between both family and friends, and what social supports or coping skills helped students.

Prior to collecting data, I received approval from Walden university's IRB (Approval # 12-18-18-0511584). I posted and invitation to my study in the university's participant pool and on my social media to recruit possible participants. I also received help from several friends who shared the invitation to participate in my study on their personal social media. Purposeful sampling was used, as it was important that participants had experience with this phenomenon. Participants had to be over the age of 30 and be enrolled in a graduate program at an online university. Several peers volunteered to participate in this study. Once participants agreed to participate in the research project, a demographic questionnaire was sent to them. All participants returned the demographic forms. At the beginning of each interview, verbal consent was obtained to audio record the interview, informed consents were read to each participant, and a verbal agreement was obtained for each interview. None of the participants asked to end their participation early in the study.

I conducted six semistructured interviews over a period of 4 months for the main study. After six interviews, it was determined that saturation was attained. All six interviews are included in the analysis. Interviews were conducted over the telephone using an iPad as a voice recorder, which was able to pick up both voices during the interview and allowed for easy transfer of the recording to my computer. Open-ended

questions were used to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences in a comfortable manner. There were no unusual circumstances encountered during the data collection and no variations from the plan presented in Chapter 3. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes: some interviews varied depending on responses the participants.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The data was transferred from my iPad to my computer and then deleted from my iPad, it was then stored on an external hard drive in my home. A fingerprint-protected flash drive was used while working on transcribing the interviews; this was placed in a water- and fireproof locked case when not in use. All documents were also stored on my password/fingerprint-protected computer. My dissertation committee chair and I were the only ones who had access to the data, drafts, and working files connected with this research project.

There were five research questions and 25 interview questions. The participants' responses to the initial questions did not prompt any additional questions to be added to the interview to form a complete understanding of the experience of being an older online graduate student. The initial questions provided a good understanding about the students' experiences and how these experiences influenced their stress, perceived stress, interpersonal factors, intrapersonal factors, environmental factors, friend relationships, family relationship, coping, and social support. During interviews, all participants answered the questions that were developed. As the participants answered these questions, additional follow-up questions were asked for clarification.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in the style of qualitative research outlined by Creswell (2014; Moustakas, 1994). The analysis was done by developing matrixes to find the similarities and differences in the experiences of older online graduate students. I was aware of phenomenological research epoche during data analysis, which required me to block biases and assumptions in order to fully understand and explain the experiences of the participants. As an older online graduate student myself, it was important for me to set aside my preconceive notions and my personal experiences in order to use a new way of looking at this phenomenon.

As each interview was conducted and digitally recorded, they were transcribed. All the recordings were then stored separately from the documents in order to maintain privacy and confidentiality. After listening to the interviews repeatedly, I was able to begin to appreciate the similarities of each participant's comments concerning each question asked in the interview. I went through the responses to each question and highlighted the comments of importance. There were many comments by the participants that were interesting even though they were not related to the research questions, and these comments were not included.

The next step was to create a matrix in a table using Microsoft Word 2010. Each question that was asked and the primary answers to each question were included in the matrix. This was done with each of the six participants' answers. The main ideas were then highlighted in each participant's interview. A second matrix was created where like ideas were grouped together. New codes were added to the document as they appeared.

This helped in the organization of codes, as well as data comparison and analysis. The experiences were coded to find common themes and subthemes in the experiences.

Once the invariant constituents were identified, themes were extracted (see Moustakas, 1994). The invariant constituents were the codes, which were then grouped, and the themes emerged. When 65% or more of responses from participants were similar, I considered it a theme of the study. When within the theme there were 50% or more of the participants with the same or similar response, it was then a subtheme. The themes, subthemes, and codes were checked against the interview transcriptions to ensure that the findings were valid.

Once the answers to the interview questions were in the matrix, these answers were then coded by the main thought that came from the participants' comments. An example of this would be this statement: "I became an online student because I knew that I wanted to get my PhD." Each of the main ideas were placed in a matrix and then grouped according to the same or similar responses.

Themes began to emerge as I compared codes. Themes and subthemes were identified, and any other statements that were made but not relevant were eliminated. Relevant comments and any quotes that were directly related to the main idea of the experiences of all participants were highlighted for future mention. In order to protect confidentiality, all participants were identified with the letter *P*, along with a number (e.g., P-1).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is how the researcher determines that there is value in the findings of the study. There are several different ways to determine credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research. The most important is that the researcher is believable in describing and understanding the phenomenon from the interviews of the participants and that the findings are credible when they are related to reality (Korstjen & Moser, 2018). Transferability is the degree to which the results can be transferred to other settings (Korstjen & Moser, 2018). Dependability in qualitative research is the equal to reliability in quantitative research, where if the study were to be repeated the results would be the same. Confirmability is the degree to which others would confirm the results of this study (Korstjen & Moser, 2018). This study was completed as outlined in Chapter 3. Even though there are many obstacles in completing an online graduate degree, participants were motivated by both internal and external factors to be successful. All participants included in the study met the criteria outlined for participants. Being that the number of participants was only six, this study would not be transferable to other populations.

Throughout this study, I did consider my own thoughts and feelings about being an older online graduate student and discussed these with my committee chair and peers, as a way to set aside any preconceived bias about older online graduate students. To ensure credibility of this study, I evaluated my thoughts on the information that participants had given to me during the interviews. I also kept field notes while interviewing each participant and highlighted any statements made that I wanted to

review after the interview to determine whether I needed to add follow-up questions for clarification. No follow-up questions were needed.

Direct quotes were used from participants to provide support for the themes and subthemes that represent the participants' experiences. According to Creswell (2014) it is important to provide dense textual descriptions making it possible for readers to understand the experiences of participants.

To ensure validity, this study consisted of numerous phones calls with my committee chair about steps to take, formatting, concepts, theories, barriers, solutions to problems, and my well-being. I kept notes regarding the research activities, interviews, transcriptions, coding, along with the development of the codes and categories that came from the coding within the matrixes. I reviewed the data several times to make sure there were no biases because of being an older online graduate student myself.

Results

This study was designed to examine the experiences of older online graduate students, their perceptions of perceived stress and how this influences relationships. The participants were asked questions related to their experiences of being an older online graduate student, what motivated them to be online students, what interpersonal and intrapersonal factors helped or hindered adjustment, how their perceived stress influenced their relationships, and what social supports and coping skills have helped.

There were 25 interview questions; no additional questions were required to clarify my understanding of the participants' experiences. All of the participants explained their experiences of being an older online graduate student, what motivated

them to be an online student, what interpersonal and intrapersonal factors helped or

hindered their adjustment as online learners, how perceived stress influenced both family

and friend relationships, and what social supports and coping skills have helped them.

The participants were all female and between the ages of 35-70 years old, so it was

possible to gain information on a wide range of ages. The following were the themes that

emerged as a result of the data analysis process and research questions.

Research Question 1

RQ 1: What is the experience of being an older online graduate student? Research

Question 1 was designed to learn about how participants felt about being an older online

graduate student, and why they chose to be an online student.

Theme 1: Older online graduate student had specific feelings about being an

online student, the reason they chose to be online students was for the convenience.

All participants in this study were doctoral students at Walden University. All

participants had positive feelings about being an online graduate student. The first theme

that emerges that was relevant to their experience was they had specific reasons for

returning to school. Students had three main reasons that they chose to be online students

(a) online learning is convenient, (b) online learning fit their lifestyles, and (c) the student

wanted to continue education without commuting. It is evident in this study that all of

the participants had a combination of reason for becoming an online graduate student, the

primary reason being convenience. Of the six participants, one was a caregiver for her

aging mother, two had small children, or were expecting a child, three were working and

liked that they could continue working and complete an online program. Even though

reasons for taking online classes differed, all participants were serious about completing their programs. They all wanted to succeed and were very motivated. For example, Participants 2 and 6 stated,

- I made a decision based off of that I knew that I wanted to continue my graduate education, and eventually raising children, and the area that I live in. I knew that I would need an online program to kind of balance everything, that I wouldn't have to commute. So that was a very large reason why I wanted to do an online program (P2)

- It fit into my lifestyle at the time. I was pregnant with my third child when I began the program, two months after I started the doctoral program, I gave birth to her and I have been a stay at home mom slash student the entire time, and I also have two other children. Definitely more convenient, than having to go to a traditional brick and mortar setting (P6)

Research Question 2

RQ2: What motivates older students to attend online graduate programs? Research Question 2 was designed to learn about what motivates participants as they progress through an online graduate program.

It was agreed by all participant that earning a PhD is motivation to complete the program even though the reasons for earning a PhD varied. As participants discussed their experiences, the second and third theme emerged that specified how the experience of being an online student differs from being a brick and mortar student.

Theme 2: All participants agreed that earning a PhD was motivation to complete the program. Students considered what being an online student entailed.

All participants looked at the positive gains of earning a PhD, they knew it would take time and were committed to allotting this time to engage in learning. All participants had a goal of achieving the highest degree possible to enable them to move forward in their careers, or to start a new career. Participants reported the same goal of moving forward, participants were not concerned about completing course work, and meeting deadlines, rather they embraced this and considered it motivating. The majority of the participants had adult children or no children, so they felt it was their time to go back to school and earn a graduate degree.

- A lot of it is a promise that I made to my mother before she passed away. Umm, so that gets me though some of the hard times, that I would go as far as I could go and get the highest degree that I could get. (P2)

- At first with the classes I felt like I was a student. There were so many deadlines, I think for me that was motivation enough, I knew I had to complete the deadlines. And now doing the study, for me this is the best question on how to stay motivated to get that last step done. (P4)

- Very motivated because this is one of my dreams. As a health professional, I would have better knowledge in what I needed to do (P5)

Theme 3: The majority of participants agreed that their experiences differed from brick and mortar students. particularly in the areas of communication and isolation.

Participants felt that face-to-face interactions with instructors was something that they were missing while taking online classes. This different style of communication would be primarily through e-mails, they had to wait for responses, and felt they were working in isolation for the majority of their online program. Most participants knew that taking an online program would be challenging but did not expect to feel so disconnected from others. Another face-to-face issue that was identified by participants was the lack of interaction with peers, other than in-person residencies there was no face-to-face contact with peers. Some participants voiced that flexibility, not having to travel to and from classes, and not having to sit in class were some of the reasons they chose to take online classes.

- The styles are totally different, being able to walk and actually talk to somebody and be in the same room, and share, you know can you look at this can you help me, instant gratification. Instead of sending an e-mail or something and wondering if they got it, or what's going on. What is a good word, you feel ostracized, but like you are kind of out there in the wind, and there is nobody close by you can go and sit, or wait at their office and get confirmation. Something, this virtual stuff is hard, but I guess it works out. I don't have to travel, I don't have to try to park, I do miss the actual person (P1).

- Me: So, the feeling you are talking about, would that be isolation?

- Yes, that is the perfect word. There is no set of people in this area, you would think there would be, but in this area that talk this language. It is isolation I am talking about (P1)

- I… probably going through an experience where you felt like you wish you could go and talk to somebody right now. Umm, and not only just talk, but have them right there to show you something. Rather than just having a conference call. I feel like there have been times where I wish I could have met with someone, or walked down the hall and talked with someone, and had more of a face-to face contact. I just miss the visual. (P4)

Research Question 3

RQ 3: What intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment? Research Question 3 was designed understand the experiences of participants in regard to self and others and how this related to their adjustment as an online student in both positive and negative ways.

As the participants conveyed their experiences, one more theme emerged (Theme 4), and one sub-theme. Most participants agreed that family and friends were supportive of them earning their degree, but at the same time they did not understand the process, or why it took so long to complete. Most participants planned to do further research after completing their graduate degree, how this goal was decided upon varied for each participant. The personality trait that participants found to be most helpful in completing their graduate degree was different for each participant, they included such traits as being resilient, staying positive, and not being a quitter.

Theme 4: The majority of participants communicated that family and friends were supportive and motivating throughout their journey.

Some participants felt that family supported them more than friends, and others felt that this had no influence because they were single and did not have any children. Two participants communicated they did not have many friends, or the friends that they did have they were not able to see them as often as the student would like because they were determined to achieve their goals. One participant voiced that she loved having family around but they did have an influence on her progress.

- I am a mom of three young children, I am busy, I am in a demanding role that I am in right now. It plays a huge factor in whether I am able to get writing done, or getting assignments done. They motivate me, so it is kind of like a double-edged sword, I love having them around, but it does make getting things done difficult at times (P2).

- My family is all very supportive, in the sense that they all want me to do well and want me to succeed. But they don't really understand the dynamic of what I am doing, they think that I am a stay at home mom (P6)

Subtheme 1: Half of the participants said they want to do more research after completing their graduate degree. Two participants voiced they would like to open their own business after completion of their programs, two participants communicated they would like to write a book or articles, one participant would like to give presentations, and two participants would like to teach.

- For me, my goals are to continue to do research in my area of expertise. At first, I didn't know what that was, but now that I have a pretty decent handle on it, I want to continue to do research in that area (P2)

- I taught for a little bit at the university level, but I am not sure that I want to return to that. I would like to continue researching, I love writing. So, continue researching and possibly finding grants for support in the community (P3)

- My goal is to get another job, and to be an expert in the field of psychology. That is another reason why, hence the reason for PhD I would also like to write articles (P5)

Research Question 4

RQ 4: How does the perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends? Research Question 4 was designed to learn more about the perceived stress that older online graduate students had and how this affects their friend and family relationships.

As the participants communicated their experiences six more themes emerged. All participants agreed that there was more stress being an online graduate student. All participants agreed that not having face-to-face contact with instructors and peers caused more stress than those students who attended brick and mortar universities. All participants also agreed that support is important for their success. The majority of participants agreed that working in isolation was difficult and caused stress. The majority of participants communicated although family and friends were supportive, they did not

understand the process of earning a graduate degree. Family and friends would question why the process was taking so long. The majority of participants relayed that they did not have many friends. The majority of participants communicated that lack of time caused them stress. Two participants communicated that money caused them stress. Two participants voiced that relationships between husbands were stressed but grew stronger throughout the degree process.

Theme 5: The majority of the participants communicated that they felt being an online student was more stressful than their brick and mortar counterparts. One participant felt that age was a factor in the overall stress of completing a graduate program.

- I would say that it is maybe a little bit more. I feel like there is a certain level of additional stress because we are not in a brick and mortar program (P2)

- I think the only area that would be more stress related would be not being able to go to the classroom and clear something up. I think that we have a little more stress than brick and mortar because of that (P4)

Theme 6: All participants agreed that they missed face-to-face interactions with instructors and peers, while attending an online university.

- The primary difference is presence, that is the primary difference, many of my friends are online because we are all kind of dispersed throughout the country. But it is so valuable to have someone who you can reach out and touch, and that has probably been one of my biggest, holes that I have, the

chink in my armor, so to say. I don't have a lot of in person friends that I

can be just like, I need a hug, I need to see you, I just need to cry on your

shoulder (P2)

- I prefer to have friends that I can see. You might want to see your friends

  and go out for tea or meet them at a restaurant. Online friends maybe you

  can improvise and have lunch at the same time in a technological way. I

  like the face-to-face kind of meeting (P5)

Theme 7*:* The majority of participants communicated that working in isolation

while doing an online graduate degree was difficult.

- You know I have doing this isolation stuff for a least probably 15 years,

  now it is closer to 20 (P1)

- No I think the only area that would be more stress related would be not

  being able to go to the classroom and clear something up. I think that we

  have a little more stress than brick and mortar because of that (P4).

- Me: Would it be working in isolation is the difference?

- Yes, most definitely, I think so (P4)

Theme 8: The majority of participants communicated although family and friends

were supportive, they did not understand the process of earning a graduate degree.

Family and friends would question why the process was taking so long. One participant

communicated not understanding caused problems in her marriage for a period of time.

- I am the only one that has graduate degrees. So, the only challenge is

  when I talked about things that I have to do, that they don't always

understand, for them it is seems like, well this is what you wanted to do (P2)

- I think family is supportive, I think it is challenging sometimes where there is not a level of understanding. I am not even understanding why a PhD is so hard, you know a PhD is so hard. I guess it is because you are becoming an expert of what you are studying, or you have been through what you are studying, you are writing what you are studying, and it being published about what you are studying. Whereas a family member is going to say, you are not finished yet, why are you not finished yet (P3)

Theme 9: As participants communicated the majority revealed they did not have many friends. Two participants said they had a lot of online friends, but not very many face-to-face friends, which is similar to the response found in theme four. Most of the participants divided friends into two groups, online friends and face-to-face friends. Their online friends provided more academic support and their face-to-face friends provided social support.

- I have girlfriends who I have had since eighth grade, and we catch up here and there, that is plenty. I am not a big socializer kind of person. People just can't relate to what we are going through, and what it does. You know, friends are friends, catch up when you catch up (P1)

- I don't really have a lot of friends, my colleagues at work are my friends, but we are just on a "there" basis, I don't really hang out with them after hours (P4)

Theme 10: The majority of participants relayed that time was an issue, balancing work, family, school, and other obligations were difficult because of not having enough time. Two participant communicated relationships with their families were strained because of lack of time.

- My husband has a job outside of the home, but my job is inside of the home, but we are both grasping for time. You know we are both kind of, we both need the time, but it is hard because we have a family and we have a home, but we both have these huge, degrees that we are working on. So, we are both grappling for time and space and a chance to move forward. Finding that balance is very difficult sometimes (P2)

- Not having enough time to do things together. Before school I am sure there was time to do those things, oh yes, we can go here, or we can go there, and have fun. Now the fun is kind of limited, because you are on a schedule to finish and a time span to finish, we only have a few years to finish. The time that you have to finish is taking away time from family members. It is a balancing act that you have to go through (P3)

- My husband was used to the one on one relationship. I found myself saying I don't have time right now; I don't have time right now. You know, let's do this, I can't. We have worked through it, but I think it was rough for a while (P4)

Research Question 5

RQ 5: What if any social supports or coping skills have helped students attending online graduate school? Research question 5 was designed to understand what social support and coping skills participants had and how this affected their success as an online graduate student.

As participants revealed their experiences two more themes emerged, and one sub-theme emerged. All participants communicated that both social and academic support was instrumental in achieving their goals. The majority of participants identified family and friends as their main support. Two participants communicated that co-workers provided both social and academic support for them. Half of the participants recognize that they currently have more online friends than in person friends. Coping strategies among participants varied, as did the benefits of coping strategies. Two participants said that praying was helpful in coping. One participant relayed her therapist was beneficial in helping her to cope.

Theme 11. As interviews progressed the majority of participants relayed that the support they received from family and friend was instrumental in their success.

- You have general supporters; you have your family and your friends. Then you have other people who walk the journey and know exactly what you are going through. That kind of support is invaluable (P2)

- There are a lot of reasons why. I don't have a lot of online friends. I am a social person I am family orientated. I have so much going on. I spend a lot of time with friends and family and the grandkids (P4)

Theme 12. All participants spoke of support at least once during the interview. The majority of participants saw social support as instrumental in achieving their academic goals.

- It helps me learn more probably when I am having an issue with goals, because especially in our group because everybody has gone through some of the stuff at some time or another. So, it helps to feel like you are not totally isolated and you are not the only one going through that (P1)

- I think that having cheerleaders, it really does help you get over those humps, to push you over to let you know that you can make it. I wish it was more in person support, but you have to take what you can get. So, yea, it absolutely has helped me. I feel that if I didn't have the social support that I have I would have quit a long time ago (P2)

- If you have social support, if you have someone cheering you on. They don't have to be cheering you on every day. I am so proud of you for finishing chapter one. Hey I am so proud of you hearing the compliments and the positive instead of always the negative in encourages you to keep going and finishing (P3)

Sub-theme 2: At least half of the participants communicated that they currently have more online friends than in person friends who gave them academic support and encouraged them to complete their program.

- I am a pretty avid social media user. The majority of my online friends were already there before I started really engaging with my colleagues, my

academic social support group. Being an online graduate student has not impacted that at all. I mean if anything it has grown my support group because I have welcomed my academic friends into my online groups (P2)

- I probably have more online acquaintances with the friends in the classroom here currently, rather than in person friends (P3).

Summary

The findings in the present study were offered in this chapter. There were 6 in-depth interviews conducted with older online graduate students 35 to 70 years old who were attending an international online university. After doing six interviews it was determined that saturation had been reached.

RQ 1. What is the experience of being an older online graduate student? One theme emerged. Older online graduate students had specific feeling about being an online graduate student, the reason they chose to be online students was for the convenience. Even though feelings varied for each participant all participants were enrolled in an online graduate program at Walden University, and all participants had positive feelings about being online graduate students.

RQ 2. What motivates older students to attend online graduate programs? Two themes emerged. All participants agreed that earning a graduate degree was motivation to complete the program. Participants considered what being an online student entailed before beginning the program. All participants also looked at the positive gains from earning a graduate degree, and how they would be able to move forward after earning their degree.

The majority of participants agreed that their experiences differed from brick and mortar students, particularly in the areas of communication and isolation. Participants 1,2,4, and 6 felt that communication was different taking online classes compared to brick and mortar students. Participants 1,3,4, and 6 felt that isolation was an issue taking online classes. Participants 1, 4, and 6 felt that both communication and isolation were things they had to learn to deal with throughout their journeys.

RQ 3. What intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment? One theme emerged, and one sub-theme. The majority of participants agreed that family and friends were supportive and motivating throughout their journey. Participant 1 felt that friends were unsupportive and did not promote progress. Participant 5 did not feel that family and friends had an influence on progress.

Half of the participants said they wanted to do more research after completing their graduate degrees. Participants 4 and 6 stated they wanted to teach either in a classroom, or online classes. Participant 1 wants to open a business when she finishes her degree. Participant 3 would like to do more writing, participant 5 would like to write articles, participant 1 would also like to write self-help books. Even though three participants would like to do more writing it is in different areas, so it was not included as a sub-theme.

RQ 4. How does the perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends? Six themes emerged. The majority of participants communicated that they felt being an online student was more stress than their brick and mortar counterparts. The reasons participants felt there was more stress being an online

student varied. Participant 3 felt there was no difference in the stress of being an online student compared to a brick and mortar student.

The majority of participants agreed that the lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors and peers caused more stress while attending an online university. The majority of participants also believed that the primary difference in close friends and family and online friends was the face-to-face interaction. Participants distinguished between type of support where friends and family were social support and online friends were more academic support. Participant 4 did not find a difference between social and academic support.

The majority of participants communicated that working in isolation while doing an online graduate degree was difficult. At some point during the interviews five out the six participants mentioned that working in isolation. Participant 1 relayed that caring for her aging mother was partially the reason for isolation, the other part was she was writing her dissertation. Participant 5 indicated that isolation was partly due to feeling guilty about going out because of deadlines and being determined to finish her degree.

The majority of participants communicated although family and friends were supportive, they did not understand the process of earning a graduate degree. Participant 2 communicated that family and friends did not understand why she was working so hard to earn her graduate degree. Participant 4 relayed her husband did not understand why she was not available for the family. Participant 1 was neutral on the understanding of other towards her earning her graduate degree.

The majority of participants revealed they did not have many friends. Participants 1,3,4, and 5 stated they did not have many friends. Participants 2 and 6 communicated they had many online friends, but not many face-to-face friends.

The majority of participants relayed that time was an issue, balancing work, family, school, and other obligation were difficult because of not having enough time. Participant 5 was the only one that did not see time as being a major issue, but rather having a balance is the issue.

RQ 5. What if any social supports or coping skills have helped students attending online graduate school? Two themes and one sub-theme emerged. The majority of participants communicated that the support they received from family and friend was instrumental in their success. Participants 2 and 4 communicated that support was important but did not specifically relate it to their success. All participants spoke of support at least once during the interview. Participants broke support into two groups, 1) social support, 2) academic support. The majority of participants saw social support as instrumental in achieving their overall academic goals. Participant 2 distinguished between social support being over all support and mostly face-to-face, and academic support being related only to school and mostly online.

At least half of participants communicated that they had more online friends than in person friends who gave them academic support and encouraged them to complete their program. Participants 1, 4, and 6 relayed they did not have more online friends than in person friends.

In reviewing the 12 themes and two sub-themes it became clear that older online graduate students chose online learning because of convenience. Participants were self-motivated to reach their goal of earning a graduate degree, despite the lack of face-to-face with instructors and other students. The majority of participants did not have many friends and worked on earning their degree in isolation. While the majority of participants agreed that support from friends and family was instrumental in their overall success, and their academic success, it was clear that family and friends did not understand the process of earning a graduate degree. Participants divided support into two groups which included social support and academic support, those providing social support were mostly face-to-face friends and family, while those who provided academic support where mostly online friends and peers. Experiencing more perceived stress than their brick and mortar counterparts and working closely with time management skill, the majority of participants were still motivated to earn their graduate degree and continue with more research after graduation. Chapter 5 will discuss the interpretation of findings, the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The present study examined the experiences of older online graduate students. This study was designed to better understand the perspective of older adult students who are learning in an online environment, and how being an online graduate student has affected both family and friend relationships. This study also addressed how older students perceived stress, whether external or internal factors were more likely to contribute to stress, and what social support and coping skills students found to be of most value to them. The results of this study may be used by institutions and students to offer ideas for positive social change, in the areas of social support, communication, and interacting with peers.

The present study revealed that older online graduate students take online programs for a variety of reasons, including (a) career advancement, (b) the need for career changes, and (c) self-fulfillment. The interviews provided a description of older adult students, and their experiences in regard to the stress of being an older online student and how this affects relationships, and which internal and external factors are key in their success.

Five research questions were used to understand the phenomenon of older online graduate students and how being an older online student has influenced relationships:

1. What is the experience of being an older online graduate student?

2. What motivates older students to attend online graduate programs?

3. What intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment?

4. How does the perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends?

5. What if any social supports or coping skills have helped students attending online graduate school?

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who met the criteria of being over the age of 30 and were currently enrolled in a graduate program at Walden University, which is an online university. Six older online graduate students were interviewed in this study, at which point it was determined that saturation had been reached. Semistructured interviews included questions on participants' experiences of being an older online graduate student, what motivated them, how relationships help or hinder progress, how being an online student affected relationships, and what social supports and coping skills have helped them. This study also examined perceived stress and whether it had an impact on progress as an older online graduate student. The present study did find that participants felt that being an older online graduate student was more stressful than being at a brick-and-mortar school as there is no face-to-face interaction with instructors or peers. Previous literature agrees that the experience attending graduate school is a time of increased demand, expectations, and stress (Hunter-Johnson, 2017)

Twelve themes emerged as a result of the data analysis. Older online graduate students had specific feelings about being online graduate students. The primary reason they chose to be online students was for the convenience. All participants agreed that earning a PhD was motivation to complete the program, even though is some cases other

sources of motivation were present such as having their work published, opening their own business, or continuing on their current path with a different position. The majority of participants also agreed that friends and family were both supportive and motivating even though they did not fully understand the process of being an online graduate student and the amount of time it takes to complete the process.

The majority of participants communicated that they felt being an online student was more stressful than being a student at a brick-and-mortar institution. The ways in which participants agreed that their experiences differed the most from those of brick-and-mortar students were in the areas of communication and isolation. Face-to-face interaction was something that all participants felt was an important part of being a student, but online students are not able to have the face-to face contact with instructors and peers like their brick-and-mortar counterparts can. Participants communicated that working in isolation was difficult and there was no real way to avoid this. Time management was also stressful for participants, as they had to balance work, family, school, and other obligation

All participants spoke of support at least one time during the interview, relaying that support was instrumental in achieving their academic goals and overall success. This support came from family and friends. At least half of the participants communicated that they had more online friends than in-person friends who provided academic support for them in completing their program. Even though most participants relayed that they did not have many friends, the friends they did have were instrumental in their success.

In this chapter, these themes and subthemes will be interpreted in the context of the conceptual framework of Bowen's (1978) family systems theory and Elder's (1996) life course theory, as discussed in Chapter 2, and how the themes and subthemes relate to the current literature on older adult students and their experiences with being graduate students. The findings and their effect on social change and recommendation for action for future studies are also addressed in this chapter. Older online graduate students over the age of 30 relayed that they are happy with their choice to be online students because this eliminates travel time and sitting in classes, but at the same time, it is more stressful because of working in isolation and missing the face-to-face interaction with instructors and peers. Participants relayed that family and friends were supportive even though they did not understand the process and the length of time it would take to earn a graduate degree. Participants divided support into social support and academic support, the difference between the two were social support was more face-to-face and academic support came from peers that were virtual.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings in this section are organized by the research questions. The themes that emerged through the participants' responses will be discussed.

Findings Related to Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What is the experience of being an older online graduate student?

Theme 1: Older online graduate students had specific feeling about being an online graduate student, the reason they chose to be online students was for the convenience.

All participants in this study were enrolled in an online graduate program at Walden University. All participants had positive feelings about being an online graduate student. Kasworm (2008) shared, many adults chose to enroll in college following key life changes and choices that raise new understandings or perceptions in individuals or present conditions in which college is viewed as necessary. Most adults enroll in college based on personal life transitions or the stage that the individual is at in their personal life, primarily due to environmental forces, life changes, or external life-transition events (Reese 2012), which is consistent with findings in this study

Of the six participants, one was a caregiver for her aging mother, two had small children, or were expecting a child, three were working and liked that they could continue working and complete an online program. Even though reasons for taking online classes differed, all participants were serious about completing their programs and found that taking online classes was convenient for them. They all wanted to succeed and were motivated. This is consistent with Elder's (1996) life course theory where trajectory turns into transition, which means that with life choices come changes in position in society.

Findings Related to Research Question 2

Research Question 2: What motivates older students to attend online graduate programs?

Theme 2: All participants agreed that earning a PhD was motivation to complete the program. Students considered what being an online student entailed.

Older online students are often referred to as nontraditional students, re-entry students, or returning students (Lin, 2016). Online learning is accessible and provides many opportunities to learners who chose to continue their education (Li & Irby, 2008). Online courses often require more time and effort than traditional classroom learning in the way of technology and becoming comfortable with it. Online learning offers students who are working full-time, have a family, or are unable to travel to and from school every day a way to achieve a higher education (Lin, 2016). All participants looked at the positive gains of earning a PhD; they knew it would take time and were committed to allotting this time to engage in learning. Consistent with previous literature, three out of the six participants had jobs and two participants had small children to care for; therefore, participants found online classes to be accessible and convenient for them. All participants had a goal of achieving the highest degree possible to enable them to move forward in their careers, or to start a new career, this is also consistent with Elder's (1996) life course theory, where goals lead to new opportunities. Having the shared goal of moving forward, participants were not concerned about completing course work and meeting deadlines; rather they embraced this and considered it motivating.

Theme 3: The majority of participants agreed that their experiences differed the most from those of brick-and-mortar students in the areas of communication and isolation.

The main influences for adult learners who take online classes include family/work balance, finances, juggling multiple roles, working in isolation, and social support (Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Reeses, 2012). Graduate school is experienced by most students as a time of increased demands, expectations, and stress (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Being an older online graduate student can be taxing with many responsibilities; the student must find a balance between graduate program work and their professional and personal life (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Most participants in the current study knew that taking an online program would be challenging but did not expect to feel so disconnected from others. Another face-to-face issue that was identified by participants was the lack of interaction with peers. Other than residencies, there was no face-to-face contact with peers. In finding a balance between school, work, and personal life, participants chose to focus on school, work, and family, which left interaction with friends at a minimum.

Even though communication was not discussed in the literature review, four out of the six participants felt that communication was different taking online classes compared to in-person classes. Four out of the six participants relayed that isolation was an issue taking online classes. Three out of the six participants relayed that both communication and isolation were areas they had to learn to deal with throughout their journeys.

The lack of face-to-face interaction may cause students to feel disconnected from others, which in turn could lead to more stress. The reasoning behind this idea is that there is a relationship between communication and social support, so if there is a lack of communication or an alternative style of communication, social support may also be

perceived as altered. When there is less face-to-face communication, this does not mean that communication does not exist, but rather it takes on a different form. The lack of face-to-face interaction may cause feelings of isolation in older online graduate students. Isolation is particularly prevalent in older online graduate students and can be the cause of a high dropout rate (Stoessel et al., 2015). Networking helps with both loneliness and isolation, but it is up to the student themselves to have the social skills to interact with others (McCabe, 2016).

Findings Related to Research Question 3

Research Question 3: What intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment?

Theme 4: The majority of participants communicated that family and friends were supportive and motivating throughout their journey.

Social support is rooted in human attachment where support and resources are exchanged between peers in the same or similar circumstances (Antonucci et al., 2017). Social support is defined as information that is helpful to the individual and makes him or her believe that he or she is cared for and loved and is a valued member of the group, and prevents feelings of isolation (Antonucci et al., 2017; Cobb, 1976). Social support can also be defined as the degree to which the social needs of an individual are met through interaction with others (Antonucci et al., 2017; Thoits, 1995). Without social support, family support, and stress management, graduate studies can be detrimental for those students in a marriage or committed relationship (Abel et al., 2012). In the current study, some participants felt that their family supported them more than friends, and others

reported that this had no influence because they were single and did not have any children. Two participants communicated that they did not have many friends or that they were not able to see their friends as often as they would like because they were determined to achieve their goals.

Often, family and friends were supportive, but at the same time did not share the same goals as the students. Support is difficult when there is a differentiation of self as the participants went through changes where they were securing a different position in society, but still part of the family (Newman & Newman, 2015). Participants in this study were over the age of 30 and had different life circumstances. Participants were able to separate themselves emotionally and intellectually from family and friends in order to achieve personal goals while still being part of the family as a unit. This is supported by both Bowen's (1978) theory and Titelman's (2014) work, where it is relayed that students are interested in their level of maturity and how they communicate with others specifically in the field in which they would like to pursue a career.

Subtheme 1: Half of the participants said they want to do more research after completing their graduate degree.

Internal states of an individual may stem from the "Big Five" traits which include neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Of the big five personality traits listed by Costa and McCrae (1992), the three that were most important for a student's success in completing their chosen program were openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion (Marcela, 2015), openness and conscientiousness were found in this study which were consistent with the findings

of Marcela (2015), but were not directly measured in this study. The personality of the student is important to take into consideration as to their completion of goals and being successful and when measuring perceived stress. Older online graduate students have the same or similar goals to their counter parts who attend brick and mortar universities (Lin, 2016). Two participants voiced they would like to open their own business after completion of their programs, two participants communicated they would like to write a book or articles, one participant would like to give presentations, and two participants would like to teach. The issue of goals of older online students have not been previously reported. Goals are the end result of the efforts of an individual, or the intention of where an individual would like to be after the current goal is accomplished (Yin, 2016). Doing more research, becoming published, giving presentations, or teaching are all goals that participants reported will make the dissertation journey worthwhile to students.

Findings Related to Research Question 4

Research Question 4: How does the perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends?

Theme 5: The majority of the participants communicated that they felt being an online student was more stressful than for their brick and mortar counterparts.

Adult learners view earning a degree as a means in which they will be able to move from one career to another or move from one position in society to a different position (Newman & Newman, 2015; Shi, 2017). With 6.3 million online learners in 2016 (Allen & Seaman, 2018) online learning options are still attracting learners who want to keep their current positions in the job place and in their families. While time

management and organization are important the motivation for online learners comes from themselves. Age is not a factor in learning behaviors, in past years there was not a need to be as competitive in the workplace, and people were able to retire between the ages of 60-65, (Newman & Newman, 2015). Being self-directed and autonomous are two characteristics of adult learners enable them to take responsibility to accept their own learning approaches and assessment methods (Knowles et al., 2014).

One of the six participants relayed that she thought age was a factor in stress in the overall stress of completing a graduate degree. Elder's (1975) life course theory does not support this thought. Rather the place that the individual at in his/her life would dictate the obstacles that one needs to be aware of, not the chronological age of the individual (Elder, 1975). It may be that external demands on individual vary at any age such as obligations and commitments, or internal demands are increased due to health issues.

Theme 6: All participants agreed that they missed face-to-face interactions with instructors and peers, while attending an online university.

Distance learning is described as a virtual classroom where students and instructors do not meet face-to-face, both students and instructors can be in any location in the country or the world (Stadtlander et al., 2013). Elder's life course theory relays the importance of individual development, finding new life pathways, and social change (1996). Finding new and different ways to communicate for older online students can be a challenge. Participants in the current study communicated the lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors and peers was one of the primary pieces that was missing

during their online graduate experiences. Not being able to walk down the hall and into an office, or sitting beside a peer during class, going for coffee, or having the face-to-face support was difficult at times. Through individual development each participant has found a way to communicate by other means and complete their degrees.

Theme 7: The majority of participants communicated that working in isolation while doing an online graduate degree was difficult.

Older online graduate students often experience loneliness and isolation while achieving their goals. While networking helps with both loneliness and isolation it is up to the student themselves to have the social skills to interact with others (McCabe, 2016). The type of networking a student seeks will depend on their personality, some students will have a few close friends, and others will have a large network of friends (McCabe, 2016). Women often have a greater number of people in their networks than men, and women provide more support to a wider variety of people than men (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1991; McCabe, 2016), this is particularly true in older women. Men depend more on spousal support than women (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1991; McCabe, 2016). At some point in the interviews five out of six participants mentioned that working in isolation had a negative impact on them in that they did not feel they had time or felt guilty going out with friends, or they put school deadlines ahead of family or community obligations. Even though isolation was not one of the concepts discussed in the literature review it was mentioned by most participants and it is an issue that older online graduate students perceive as stressful at times. The lack of interaction with others may even make older students feel disconnected from others, or emotionally cut off. Bowen's

family system theory focus' on emotional cut-off within the family unit (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), but it is possible for emotional cut-off to occur between friends also when they become distant and grow in different ways.

Theme 8: The majority of participants communicated although family and friends were supportive, they did not understand the process of earning a graduate degree.

Individuals make choices that are the building blocks of their life course (Elder, 1996). Social time is the entry and exit from age related social roles, the sequence of roles, and the social and cultural meaning or expectations associated with these roles (Newman & Newman, 2015). Acting as an agent each older online graduate student in the present study made life choices that were best for themselves. Individuals make choices that are the building blocks of their life course (Elder, 1996). Even though each participant was at a specific time in their lives, they did share the motivation to move forward with their education for their own personal reasons. Having family members and friends that do not understand the dissertation process or the length of time it takes to earn a degree it is difficult at times for older online students to work around the needs of others to fulfill their own goals.

Theme 9: The majority revealed they did not have many friends.

The primary difference between family relationships and friend relationships is that family relationships are required, and friendships are voluntary (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995). Friendships are those of equality where both friends see each other on the same playing field, where there is no romantic attachment (Rawlins. 2017). The basis for a friendship is communication and an interest in the well-being of the other person.

The second aspect of friendship is that both friends have a common goal that does not usually involve the needs of one individual or the other (Rawlins, 2017). In the current study, two participants said they had a lot of online friends, but not very many face-to-face friends. Most of the participants divided friends into two groups: online friends and face-to-face friends. Their online friends provided more academic support and their face-to-face friends provided social support. For many older online graduate students having a lot of friends is not a priority, participants divided support into two groups, one was social support, the other was academic support. Most peers were virtual friends that participant had not met who provided academic support and face-to face friend provided social support. It might be that older online graduate students do not have many friends due to lack of time, or because there is not a common goal between graduate students and friends, which would lead to emotional cut-off described in Bowen's family system theory (Kerr& Bowen, 1988). Since friendships are voluntary friends may come and go as they are separated by distance, goals, commitments, interests, and positions in society.

Theme 10: The majority of participants relayed that time was an issue, balancing work, family, school, and other obligations were difficult because of not having enough time.

Older graduate students are often married or in a committed relationship while attending graduate school and find themselves trying to balance work, family, and school obligations (Marinak, 2012). College years are stressful, older online graduate students have even more stress with having the responsibilities of family, careers, and other obligations (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Often older online graduate students have

careers in which they work outside of the home, they also have responsibilities and obligations that may revolve around friends and not family or school (Lin, 2016). Being self-motivated is sometimes difficult when other obligations seem to be more pressing than completing weekly assignments on time (Knowles et al., 2012). Two participant communicated relationships with their families were strained because of lack of time. Not having enough time can cause stress is graduate students, it is often difficult to choose between obligations, commitments and meeting a deadline for school. Bowen's (1978) family system theory. Being part of the family, but also having separate thoughts and goals aside from family ones is often difficult for other members of the family to understand, this could lead to emotional cut-off in some instances because lack of understanding could be seen as lack of much needed support (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Couples may not be at the same development in life, so goals could differ between individuals. This could mean that within the couple one person may be comfortable where they are in their life and the other person has set goals to further their education to secure their position at work, earn a raise, or move from one career to another for a different position in society (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Not being committed to the success of a spouse can lead to problems in the relationship in some cases.

Findings Related to Research Question 5

Research Question 5: What if any social supports or coping skills have helped students attending online graduate school?

Theme 11: The majority of participants relayed that the support they received from family and friend was instrumental in their success.

Lives are linked through social relationships and influenced by the social regulation, social support, and patterning that occur through these relationships (Newman & Newman, 2015). Development is heavily dependent on relationships that provide support (Newman & Newman, 2015). Effective networking of relationships is where individuals no matter what stage of life or age have a feeling of being valued (Elder, 1996). Participants in the current study relayed that having support from family, friends, and peers are different. Family and friends provide social support through spending time, sharing thoughts, and making memories. Peers are those who are there for them, who know what they are going through, and who are on the journey right along with them. Peers provide academic support throughout a graduate program; this support is invaluable.

Elder's (1975) life course theory tells us that lives are linked through social relationships, with positive social relationships success is more likely (Elder, 1996). When individuals feel valued through the support of others success is also more likely. The importance of the support of family, friends, and peers is important for all graduate students. It may even be true that the more support and positive feedback and individual receives the less stress they will experience.

Theme 12: All participants spoke of support at least once during the interview. The majority of participants saw social support as instrumental in achieving their academic goals.

Social support is rooted in human attachment where support and resources are exchanged between peers in the same or similar circumstances (Antonucci et al., 2017).

Social support is defined as information that is helpful to the individual and makes him or her believe that he or she is cared for and loved and is a valued member of the group, and prevents feelings of isolation (Antonucci et al., 2017; Cobb, 1976). Social support can also be defined as the degree to which the social needs of an individual are met through interaction with others (Antonucci et al., 2017; Thoits, 1995). Participants in the present study spoke of others who support them as their cheerleaders, they voiced that if others had not been supportive, they would have quit the program, and makes them feel like they are not alone on their journey. When students feel valued by family, friends, and peers they are most likely to achieve their goals. Positive feedback and encouragement are key in the success of graduate students. By having support, it may be that graduate students would be able to stay positive and may more likely to offer support to others who are going through the journey. In addition, increased social support reduces the likelihood of emotional cut-off according to Bowen's family systems theory (1978).

Subtheme 2: At least half of the participants communicated that they had more online friends than in person friends who gave them academic support and encouraged them to complete their program.

The phenomenon of social support is based on human attachment where systems of support and resources are traded among those in the same or similar circumstances (Anderson et al., 2012). Social support is a broad area where relationships might be perceived to support health and well-being (Cohen, 2004; Feeney, & Collins, 2015). Participants in the present study communicated that online friends were primarily graduate students as well, most of which were in their dissertation group. Their online

friends knew what they were experiencing and were walking right beside them in their journey. Sharing thoughts, experiences, and exchanging information online was seen to be helpful and encouraged them to complete their programs.

This study did not separate social support from academic support. Referring back to theme 12 and the importance of support is extremely important in the well-being and success of graduate students.

Limitations of Study

The present study was designed to explore the experiences of older online graduate students. Unfortunately, there was only one participant from the participant pool who was enrolled in the counselor education and supervision program, so the majority of the participants came from my personal network. This study mainly represented the experiences of PhD psychology students, no participants were earning their master's or a professional degree. Also, this study may not represent the majority of older online graduate students attending other universities being that the participants were all attending programs at Walden University. This study did not include students from all programs that Walden University has to offer. Overall, this study did provide a greater understanding of the experiences of older online graduate students and the relationship between being an older online student and how this effected relationships. Additional research is needed to understand the dynamics of older online students attending programs other than psychology.

Recommendations

This study has provided approaches for future research, it was designed to learn more about the experiences of being an older online graduate student. Unfortunately, there were a few concepts that were not included in the literature and were not expected to be themes after the interviews. The concepts that were not discussed in chapter two included communication, and isolation was under the topic of older online graduate students but was not included as a concept. In addition, social support was included in the literature review, but participants also mentioned academic support as a form of social support with the specific purpose where peers, instructors, and mentors supported them throughout their coursework and dissertation process. The findings provided new information and are adding to the literature regarding the experiences of older online graduate students, such as in the area of academic support through peers; and those who provided social support not understanding the process of being an online graduate student. Overall, this study did provide a greater understanding of the experiences of older (over the age of 30) online graduate students.

Additional research is needed to understand the relationship between positive support, stress, and success in older graduate students. The findings in this study indicated that participants were often frustrated with the dissertation process, the length of time it took to receive replies, and how they struggled with financial aid These were not discussed in chapter 4 as they did not emerge as a themes and were not directly related to the to the research questions of this study. At least two participants talked to academic advising about their frustrations. Participants also talked to financial aid about

grad plus loans so there were able to complete their programs. Other participants talked to peers about what steps were needed to be taken in order to speed up the process, or to lessen the time it took to get replies to e-mails. Older online graduate students possess life experiences that allow them to look for answers to their questions through different avenues when they are not satisfied with the first answer to their questions. Older students are willing to share academic experiences so others do not experience frustration or setbacks. Comments from the participants indicate a need for further research in understanding these concerns.

Implications

The growth in the number of online learners has created a need for both students and educators to understand the experiences of older online graduate students who are returning or continuing their education for career advancement, or self-fulfillment and who are different from the traditional age students. Research indicates the number of students taking only online classes has decreased over the past five years year; but the percentage of graduate students taking only online classes has increased. The purpose of the present study was to identify and explore concepts, including stress, perceived stress, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and family relationships, friend relationships, coping, and social supports that influence the experiences of being an older online graduate student. As a result, the findings can be applied to future learning by providing valuable information for institutions, and students in order for positive social change to take place. This study informs instructors about older online graduate students and their experiences as they complete their journey to their PhD This study informs students about some of

the obstacles that they may encounter during their journey and how being an older online graduate student effects both family and friend relationships. Having this knowledge about the experiences of older online graduate students, instructors will be better prepared to mentor students successfully.

This study promoted social change for the participants in this study. The present study allowed participants to reflect on their own experiences and how this has affected relationships. The participants were willing to share their experiences, because it may encourage others to also reflect on their experiences.

This study may help instructors to plan introduction classes for graduate programs so students are better prepared for areas that they may find stressful. This will help mentors better understand the difficulties older online students may encounter. Building skills that will meet the needs of older online students, faculty may be better equipped to deal with this population that has different qualities than their younger counterparts, or those who attend brick and mortar universities. This study provides a rich understanding of older students attending an online university. Inexperienced online instructors might learn more about older online students and be more understanding to the needs of this population. Older online students will be more comfortable taking classes, with the tools required to achieve their goals.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to focus on the experiences of older online graduate students who are attending a large online university to better understand the common themes among stressors and the coping mechanisms that have improved

marital/relationship quality. This research will be distributed in publication form to educators, students, and other interested parties. The findings of this study suggest that older online graduate students have chosen to take online classes for the flexibility and convenience of not having to travel to and from school or sit in a classroom in order to fulfill their other obligations at home, at work, and in the community. Through life experiences older online graduate students are more equipped to deal with perceived stress, interpersonal and intrapersonal issues that could cause setbacks in their younger brick and mortar counterparts. In addition, older online graduate students do not report the need to have face-to-face interaction with friends on a daily basis which resulted in participants having fewer friends. Although participants reported having fewer friends, they were positive about completing their graduate programs.

This study had two theories, Bowen's family system theory (1978) and Elder's life course theory (1996). Both of which applied to older online graduate students in the way that each student was transitioning through trajectory in the areas of work, family, and education to change their place in society. This in turn lead to a differentiation of self where participants were part of the family but were able to have separate thoughts and feelings outside of the family (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Newman & Newman, 2015). Emotional cut-off could be seen when participants reported working in isolation, not having many in person friends, and more online friends, or not being able to go to as many family or community functions as they would like to (Bowen, 1978). As a result, it is important for new instructors, or instructors with little experience who work with older online graduate students understand how both Bowen's theory (1978) and Elder's theory

(1996) can be applied to this population. Older online graduate students will also benefit from this study in order to reflect on their own personal experiences.

Being an older online graduate student myself, I am connected to this topic. This study has provided a new understanding of older online graduate students' experiences and how it affects both family relationships and friend relationships.

Older online graduate students in the present study were motivated to complete their graduate programs, they have the personality traits to be successful, and their life experiences have made them determined to complete the highest degree they can. There is not one factor or concept that can be identified as the key to success, it takes assessing all concepts like interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental factors, stress, perceived stress, social support, family relationships, friend relationships, and coping to gain insight on the balance that is needed to succeed. There was one more factor that five out of six participants communicated was important for them, and that was the academic support they received from their dissertation group. The positive guidance and excitement for others in the group motivated participants when they were feeling overwhelmed or were feeling unsure of themselves.

I gained insight into each of the participants' lives as to how being an older online graduate student has had an effect of relationships. Four of the six participants felt that family and friends were supportive. One participant felt that friends were not supportive, and one participant felt that family and friends did not have an influence on her progress. Four of the six participants relayed there did not have many friends, and two of the participants communicated they had more online friends than in person friends. After

listening to these comments, I realized that I do not have many friends either, I have stopped volunteering at parks and recreation, and I really do not go out much.

The present qualitative study was designed to understand the experiences of older online graduate students attending a large online university, is needed to increase understanding of the phenomena of being an older online graduate student, how the above mentioned concepts relate to each individual, how the overall experience of being an online graduate student affects relationships, and how this can all be applied to future learning by providing valuable information for institutions, and students in order for positive social change to take place. Interviews were conducted with six older online graduate students who were over the age of 30 and in the dissertation process. The students who participated in this study are motivated to complete their PhD in spite of any barriers that come between them and succeeding such as communication or isolation. Older online students are self-motivated, and they are responsible for their own success.

Continued study of older online graduate students and their experiences will provide educators with information on how to assist this population and give students an opportunity to do a self-assessment on what their own experiences are and in what areas they need assistance.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The Experience of Being an Older Online Graduate Student

Research questions	Interview questions
What motivates older students to attend online graduate programs?	How do you feel you stay motivated to complete your graduate program?
	How do you feel your experience differs from brick and mortar graduate students?
What intrapersonal and interpersonal factors help or hinder adjustment?	How do personal relationships between family influence your progress?
	How do personal relationships between friends influence your progress?
	What are your goals as a graduate student?
	How did you arrive at that goal?
	What aspects of your personality has helped you in graduate school?
How does the perceived stress of attending online graduate school affect relationships with family and friends?	What does stress mean to you?
	How much stress do you feel you have in comparison to brick and mortar students?
	What types of stress do you have?
	How do you feel your family relationships have changed since you have been attending graduate school?
	What made the relationships change?
	What relationships changed the most and how did they change? (eg: spouse, children, siblings, parents)
	How do you feel family relationships effect your overall progress as a graduate student?

What is the main cause of stress within the family relationships?

How do family relationships provide social support for you?

How has attending an online University effected friend relationship, both in person friendships and online friendships?

What do you see as the primary difference in having online friends and in person friends?

What if any social supports or coping skills have helped students attending online graduate school?

What social supports do you have in place?

Do you feel having social support has helped you achieve your academic goals? How?

What type of coping strategies do you subscribe to?

How does your main coping strategy benefit you the most?

Do you find that you have more online friends being an online student, if so how have these relationships been affected by being a graduate student?

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age_____

2. Sex: Female_____ Male_____

3. Ethnicity:

    _____African American

    _____Native American

    _____Asian American

    _____Latina

    _____Caucasian

    _____International

    _____Other (please specify) _____

4. Are you a _____full-time graduate student or _____part-time graduate student?

5. How many credits are you enrolled in for this semester (Spring 2017)? _____

6. What program are you enrolled in? _____

7. What country/state do you live in? _____

8. Are you in the dissertation process?

    _____Yes

    _____No

9. Marital status:

    _____Single

    _____Married

    _____Separated

_____Divorced

_____Widowed

10. Do you have children?

_____Yes

_____No

If yes, how many children do you have? _____

If yes, what are the ages of your children? _____

If yes, what are the ages of the children who live with you at least half time?

_____

Do you care for other children that are not your own?

_____Yes

_____No

If yes, how many other children do you care for? _____

If yes, how many hours a week do you can for other children? _____

11. Do you provide care for elderly or special needs family members?

_____Yes

_____No

If yes, do they live with you? _____

If yes, how many hours a week do you spend taking care of this family member?

_____

If no, how many hours a week do you spend traveling to and from this family

members residence? _____

If no, how many hours a week do you spend taking care of this family member?

_____

12. Involvement in roles other than classroom related (please check all that apply):

_____ Paid work that is full-time

_____Paid work that is part-time

_____Volunteer work

_____Practicum student

_____Community involvement (eg: involved with HOA)

_____Children's school involvement (eg: parent-teacher association)

_____Other roles (eg: dance instructor, small business owner)

13. Check the category that includes the total combined annual income:

_____ Under $10,000

_____ $10,001 - $25,000

_____ $25,001 - $40,000

_____ $40,001 - $60,000

_____ $60,001 - $80,000

_____ $80,001 - $100,000

_____ Over $100,000

14. What is your greatest current stressor(s)?