The Challenges and Barriers Facing Mature Women Entering Higher Education

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Abstract

The Challenges and Barriers Facing Mature Women Entering Higher Education

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When adult learners decide to return to higher education, whether to seek career opportunities or for personal growth, they often experience challenges. Since the 1970s, mature women who have decided to return to post-secondary education have faced more pronounced obstacles due to the multiplicity of women's roles, a lack of social support, and the challenges of assimilating into an environment designed for younger, traditional students. This dissertation explores the barriers mature 21st-century women face when returning to post-secondary education. It contributes to the otherwise sparse research on the undervaluing of mature women, providing updated findings on today's mature female students. The data in this research includes narrative interviews grounded on specific themes and driven by personal conversations with the participants. Due to the recurrent themes described by the participants, a general inductive method was used through a narrative analysis framework. The findings were structured around three main pillars: situational barriers, dispositional barriers, and institutional barriers. The exploration of the situational barriers considered the personal obstacles related to domestic relationships and family obligations. The second pillar's investigation of the dispositional barriers explicitly focused on the participants' attitudes and perceptions regarding gender, age, socioeconomic levels, and prior educational experiences. Finally, the consideration of institutional barriers examined the lack of visibility and equity provided by institutions of higher learning to non-traditional, mature female students.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

From the 1970s to the early 1980s, mature women returned to higher education to complete their education or upgrade their skills for re-entry into the workforce. The demand for higher education increased rapidly and institutions of higher education were not prepared for the arrival of non-traditional students, specifically mature women. The term "non-traditional students" refers to students aged 25 or older, but it has also been used to define a student's background characteristics or risk factors. According to Horn & Carroll (1996), "non-traditional mature students has several descriptive characteristics: (a) delayed enrollment into post-secondary education; (b) part-time attendance; (c) financial independence; (d) in full-time employment; (e) have dependents other than a spouse; (f) are single parents; and/or (g) did not obtain a standard high-school diploma" (p.5).

Non-traditional mature students are not a homogeneous group of learners and have been found to have more diverse motivations, needs, expectations, and experiences than younger, traditional learners (Britton & Baxter, 1994). Notably, although mature women make up the majority of adult learners, women's experiences continue to be marginalized and devalued in the academic sphere (Gouthro, 2002). In addition, mature female students face unique challenges as they juggle their academic and domestic responsibilities (O'Brien & Whitmore, 1989). However, there is limited research into the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers that 21st-century mature women in higher education face as well as the accomplishments they acquire. Chong et al. (2015) state "while more research that explicitly explores and acknowledges

strengths in non-traditional students is scarce, it is implied in the literature that many non-traditional students are highly resilient and have fulfilled their potential despite reported challenges" (p.78).

Furthermore, more research must be conducted on how these barriers affect students' self-confidence, academic ability, and motivation. Due to the absence of current research on how these barriers impact mature women who are completing their degrees, this study demonstrates the lived experiences of ten mature females between the ages of 35 and 55 who are currently in the process of or have graduated from higher education. This study examines the journey and intersections the participants experienced through sequence analysis. It also explores the role of returning to higher education and the impact this has on women's self-identity, self-fulfillment, and self-discovery. To analyze the data based on personal stories and lived experiences, Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) narrative inquiry framework is used as a general procedural guide and is further discussed in the results section.

Background

Studies of non-traditional mature female students have often shown the profound effect returning to school has on these individuals (Edwards, 1993; McClaren, 1985). Returning to school allows mature women to re-examine their multiple (and sometimes conflicting) roles and recenter identities around their role as students. Thus, in these cases, education provides women a chance to change their lives (Pascall and Cox, 1993, as cited in Merrill, 1999, p. 14). Education is seen as a tool for empowerment, in that it opens opportunities and facilitates the evolution of the self (Baxter & Britton, 2001). According to Pascall and Cox (1993), women often return to higher education to escape their environment of domesticity, increase the opportunity for paid

work, gain independence from traditional family structures, and/or pursue new domestic roles and identities. positive effects, and risks may accompany opportunities. On the topic of mature female students, Baxter and Britton (2001) state that "education is used to shape their biographies and identities. They have self-consciously made decisions about the future course of their lives. These decisions involve a major change from or break with their past lives and identities" (pp. 88–89).

Several studies have examined higher education risks for mature women, such as the threat to family relationships. Baxter and Britton's (2001) study of non-traditional mature female students who have returned to higher education demonstrates in its findings that family relationships are disrupted differently depending on who in the relationship has returned to higher education. The authors noted that family dynamics differed for a man or woman in the relationship when returning to higher education. Baxter and Britton (2001) state that, based on their accounts, resolutions appeared to be more favorable for men because of their traditional roles as primary earners and "breadwinners". McNay (2000, as cited in Stone & O'Shea, 2013) observed the changing relations between men and women in contemporary societies and noted that "gendered expectations place a different value on 'men's time' and 'women's time,' with women's time being given up to the demands and needs of others while men's time is regarded as more valuable and productive" (p. 100).

Women's accounts of their educational experiences describe how they have find ways to manage and juggle their multiple roles and thereby ensure their new role/identity as students would not infringe on the family relationships. According to Baxter & Britton (2001), "even though some women describe their partners as supportive, the women were somewhat aware of

subtle changes in the relationship. Combining the academic and domestic responsibilities of women who have chosen to return to higher education is a challenging task that often creates stress and requires the allocation of time and energy" (p. 93).

For many women, higher education plays a significant role in their newly found identity. Willans & Seary (2011) state that identity development processes and associated strategies require significant consideration by women returning to higher education. Like most adult learners, many mature female students face significant individual changes during their re-entry into education. Merrill (2011) explains "a transition infers a change and movement from one identity, self, and situation to another. It implies having to let go of part or all of a person's 'old identity' to assume a new and modified one" (p. 9).

Other barriers, according to Webb et al. (2017), include students from minority, marginalized, or disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds and the acute challenges, particularly those concerning intersectionality, the complex interplay between gender, class, race, and disability, and other identity-based categories relating to social inequality in higher education. For many mature female students, intersectionality can become an additional barrier when they decide to return to higher education, where they can quickly become identified (or choose to identify) as part of the out-group.

With the obstacles, challenges, and uncertainty many adult learners encounter when they decide to return to higher education, the lack of research on how mature female students are immediately confronted out-group discrimination needs to be examined. Full-time faculty members see programs geared toward non-traditional students as inferior to their college's regular offerings (Selingo, 2006). As in other systems, higher education privileges traditional

students. Buglione (2012) indicates that higher education policies have excluded or focused on groups of students. Higher education focuses on traditional students' access to enrollment and financial aid, faculty support, and successful academic retention and completion outcomes. This system, by its design, defines non-traditional students as having out-group status in higher education .

Problem Statement

The landscape for non-traditional mature women returning to higher education has changed over the past 50 years. However, they still have not received recognition after all this time.

Fenwick (2004) has criticised the new economy for framing structural barriers as individual ones and thereby obscuring the social constructions it creates and supports and framing inequities as individual barriers to overcome. She states "work-family conflict is portrayed as harmful to family income, and therefore to children's skill development. Structural barriers such as gendered work conditions and gendered determinations of skill are easily masked amidst ideals of self-reliance and illusions of unlimited choice" (p. 170). Gouthro (2000) notes that the traditional role of wife and mother has not altered as rapidly as have women's roles as workers, resulting in considerable role-juggling and conflict for women. This concept of conflicting roles and responsibilities, or as Hart (2002) calls it, the poverty of life-affirming work, has been well-developed by Gouthro (2005) and Hart (2002). The stigma of being judged as having too many responsibilities or being too old must be deconstructed and challenged. With labels such as mature, non-traditional, and older, and in recognition of women's advancements within higher education, these labels and stereotypes should be non-existent. In a transparent and inclusive society, all women want to be treated equally; therefore, mature women who return to education

should not incur further obstacles such as discriminatory labels.

Purpose of Study

This research increases awareness of the experiences of non-traditional mature female students by inquiring about their journey, moving through the decisions they have made to the completion of their academic studies. It also examines the barriers mature female students face when returning to post-secondary education. For many of these women, these barriers have often interfered with the realities of academic success and personal fulfillment. In particular, the dichotomy of academic success juxtaposed against personal setbacks has often encumbered mature females' continuance of their studies. Acknowledging the constraints placed on them by the multiplicity of the roles these women experience and the pressures society places on them to be primary caregivers, this research explores the impact of higher education on identity formation (old and new) and a sense of worth, empowerment, and fulfillment.

This research explores the three barriers mature women encounter (situational, dispositional, and institutional). It probes and assesses each barrier, discusses the causes of challenges and obstacles, and considers how the women sought solutions to these. Interviewing mature women who have returned to higher education, this research discusses central themes derived from participants' responses to the barriers they have experienced. This study also recommends ways in which to accommodate mature women who have decided to return to higher education, detailing the positive outcomes that can follow a return to school. The value of returning to post-secondary education outweighs the fears and doubts many mature women face. Moreover, with a tech-savvy aging population and a knowledge-based marketplace, the impact of returning to school factors not only into professional development and career advancement but also into

identity development and personal self-discovery.

Research Questions

The research questions were established following a literature review that demonstrated the lack of research on the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers that mature female students face when they return to higher education.

The following general research question and sub-questions guided this study. The general question is as follows:

How do situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers impede non-traditional mature women's return to higher education?

The related sub-questions, which address specific barriers, are as follows:

(a) How do situational and personal barriers affect domestic relationships and the family dynamic?

(b) How do mature female students perceive themselves compared to their younger peers?

(c) Do institutions of higher learning provide a welcoming community culture for mature female students?

Significance of Study

Much research has been conducted on adult education and adult learners and the challenges and obstacles they face when returning to higher education. However, the effects of these barriers are rarely discussed and investigated insofar as they apply specifically to non-traditional mature female students. This study explores the impact of returning to higher education on non-traditional, mature female students and the barriers and challenges that await them. It also

investigates the relationship between non-traditional female students and their educators and educational environments and the impact these two elements have on academic success. Finally, this research helps adult educators and institutions of higher learning to provide better support systems for all non-traditional adult learners and to create a space where mature female students can be valued, respected, and visible.

Definition of Terms

This research study provides insight into and an understanding of the challenges, barriers, and obstacles mature female students encounter when deciding to return to higher education.

The following terms are discussed.

Situational Barriers

Cross (1981) defines situational barriers as "deterrents that arise as adults attempt to balance multiple roles such as personal and family situations, such as time pressures and financial constraints" (p. 98). They also refer to the conflict women experience when juggling multiple roles such as full-time paid work, childcare, and caregiving responsibilities (Sorella, 2022).

Dispositional Barriers

McGivney (1993) defines disposition barriers as "obstacles linked to learners' attitudes, perceptions, and motivations that need to be addressed by tutors or mentors" (p. 10). These barriers take the form of individual characteristics, including fear of failure, attitude toward intellectual activity, and perception of the ability to succeed. Institutional and situational barriers can create a context whereby mature students question whether they belong at university because they do not "look" the part of a student (Sorella, 2022).

Institutional Barriers

The term "institutional barriers" refers to those of an educational institutions' policies, practices, or structural constraints that hinder adult learners' access, participation, and/or success (Fairchild, 2003). When adult students pursue higher education, they may encounter a university culture dominated by younger students and find that their own ways of participating in the academic environment are stigmatized (Sorella, 2022).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

When I started interviewing mature women to ascertain their views on the challenges and barriers they were facing, I believed that their goals were better career opportunities or personal growth and that the participants would be reluctant to discuss their challenges and obstacles. In the literature review, many scholarly texts and reviews stated that the three main barriers mature women experience are situational, dispositional, and institutional. As this dissertation will explain, past assumptions may differ from existing assumptions found in this research study. This research's findings indicate that existing assumptions may be dramatically incorrect and that further research on this topic is required.

The limitation of this research was the number of participants (ten) I recruited. Because I implemented a narrative inquiry approach, the sample size was small; a larger sample size might have provided more profound findings about the various barriers.

The scope of the research is an examination of the lived experiences of ten mature female students (between the ages of 35 and 55) who have returned to higher education. In a study based on a narrative inquiry approach, these women partook in a one-hour online interview session on the Zoom platform. The research questions were divided into past, current, and future

experiences and expectations. Each participant was asked to describe the journey involved in returning or deciding to return to education.

Researcher's Perspective

My interest in this research topic stems from my experience as a mature female student returning to higher education. I hope, for personal and professional reasons, to encourage other mature female students who have thought about returning to school but need encouragement to do so.

The reasons why I decided to undertake this research were to advance the notion of positive personal change and develop a robust self-identity, both personally and professionally. On the academic side, returning to school allows the acquisition of knowledge or skills through experience. Ambrose et al. (2010) define learning as "a process which occurs as a result of experience and increases the potential for change, improved performance, and future learning" (p. 3). From my perspective, the opportunity to learn and change and be a part of the process was motivating yet worrisome at the same time. Like the participants in this research study, I have encountered situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers during my return to study. As a full-time teacher at a private, professional college and a student with a full workload, the process of ending my day at the college and then going to attend activities and meetings with other graduate students was complicated. Many graduate students could not understand my situation nor the challenges I faced due to the duality of the roles I juggled by virtue of being both a teacher and a student. When speaking with other non-traditional mature students from different backgrounds, the common denominator we shared was that we were part of the out-group. This factor, through osmosis, created our own in-group. We were proud to share our lived experiences

in class discussions; however, the younger, traditional students were uninterested in our stories.

The final obstacles I endured were institutional barriers, such as professors considering mature students inadequate and invisible. This inequity was the tipping point in deciding my research topic. I decided to use my invisible voice and conduct research to see if others encountered the same issues. Not to my surprise, I determined that many mature students, specifically mature females, faced the same barriers as I did. Thus, I became an advocate for adult learners, specifically mature female students. The remarkable outcome of this journey was how my return to education changed my perspective on lifelong learning, gave me a voice, and increased the clarity of my ideas about who I am.

My goal for this research was to provide mature women with the strength to return to school, to face situational and dispositional barriers, and to embrace academic and personal growth. Society is changing, and marginalized individuals must stand up to make their voices heard. It is time for mature women to stop being subservient and stand up for their rights. Regarding the institutional barriers, this research has provided administrators and faculty members with insight into the expectations and needs of mature female students and has supported these invisible individuals' rights to the same resources and respect allocated to younger, traditional students.

Dissertation Format

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters and includes the following elements and pages.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction chapter has introduced the research and includes the background to the problem, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the main and sub-research

questions. It has defined the terms used in and the assumptions, limitations, and scope of this study, as well as providing the researcher's perspective.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review chapter explores the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers mature women encounter when deciding to return to post-secondary education, reviewing both past and current empirical studies to answer the main and sub-questions. In addition, it provides the search description and reviews the research, organizing it into different themes.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This chapter discusses the structure supporting Mezirow's (1978a,1978b,1991) theory of transformative learning and its continuous development. It also discusses the concept of gendered ageism as it affects mature women and the theory of intersectionality.

Chapter 4: Methods

This chapter describes the research design, research questions, setting and instruments, and participants and recruitment methods. It outlines the approach to data collection and analysis and provides a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Presentation of Research (Results)

This chapter presents the findings, organized according to the research questions, and offers a conclusion.

Chapter 6: Summary, Implications, and Outcomes (Discussion)

This chapter reviews the meaning and relevance of the research results and how these results fit with existing research and theory. It summarizes the study's key findings, answers the research questions, addresses the research aims, and informs the study's main contributions by

providing recommendations for future research.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This final chapter provides insight into the lives of mature women who have decided to return to higher education and discusses the role of education and its effect on mature women. Due to the transformation change a return to education can have, it argues that all mature women should be allowed to partake in this second-chance endeavor.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review for this research study focuses on empirical studies about non-traditional, mature female students and their experiences when deciding to return to higher education. The rapid increase of mature women returning to higher education and the integration of non-traditional students into regular degree programs has caused concern regarding the diversity of the roles mature female students have to accommodate and how this affects their academic experience. This literature review seeks to explore and analyze the main situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers mature women face when deciding to return to higher education, examining the multifaceted relationship between these barriers and academic achievement.

The increasing prevalence of mature women returning to higher education over the past 30 years has redefined the educational system and the definition of the adult learner. By critically examining past and current empirical studies, this review aims to dissect the various dimensions of the multifaceted relationship between academic achievement and the barriers that impede mature women's return to higher education.

Moreover, this review delves into the factors that contribute to the challenges and barriers mature women face, such as accounting for family and childcare responsibilities; balancing work and school obligations; dealing with a lack of time and of self-confidence; and addressing the educational barriers, ageism, inflexibility, and inequity colleges and universities show non-traditional mature female students. By synthesizing the existing research findings, this review

attempts to clarify the complexities inherent in this relationship and identify potential areas for future investigation.

This review is structured as an overview of the existing literature followed by an exploration of the key themes and diverging perspectives. It then presents a synthesis of past and current findings and highlights any gaps in the research.

Method

Literature Search

To explore the barriers mature women encounter when they return to higher education, this study conducted a systematic search of the literature using Concordia University's library databases: the EBSCOhost platform, ERIC on ProQuest, and Education Source.

The first search used the following search string:

"adult education" OR "andragogy" OR "facilitation learning" OR "continuing education" OR "formal learning" OR "post-secondary education" OR "women's education" OR "lifelong learning" combined with: "adult learner" OR "non-traditional student" OR "mature student" OR "mature female student" OR "female adult learner" OR "mature-age female students" OR "returners" OR "mature women students" "barriers" OR "situational barriers" OR "dispositional barriers" OR "institutional barriers" combined with "educational barriers" OR "family responsibilities" OR "domesticity" OR "childcare" OR "caregivers" OR "role conflict" OR "self-identity" OR "life experiences" OR "ageism" OR "gendered ageism" OR "marginalized adult female learners" OR "mature female student discrimination" OR "institutional funding" OR "government grants" OR "financial aid" OR "faculty members."

Search limiters were used to narrow the focus of the literature search to the values selected. The results were thereby limited to publications and books dating from 1970 to 2022. The first search retrieved 147 articles and four books.

A second search looked for articles covering key themes related to situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to mature women's further education. The search string was as follows: "guilt" OR "time management" OR "financial constraints" combined with: "isolation" OR "anxiety" OR "insecurity" OR "lack of confidence OR "low self-esteem" OR "motivation" OR "perseverance" OR "determination" combined with: "pride" OR "self-fulfillment OR "empowerment." As in the first search, search limiters were used to restrict the results to publications and books published between 1970 and 2022. The second search retrieved 45 articles and six books.

Exclusion Criteria

The 192 articles and ten books selected for this research's literature review did not adequately represent the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers facing non-traditional mature female students when re-entering higher education. Some articles were removed because they were not relevant to the research questions; for example, some articles dealt with mature student retention and attrition, which was neither central to nor indicative of the goal of this research study, nor representative of the research questions. Ultimately, 173 articles and eight books were retained.

Analysis

The chosen articles were coded according to the following research questions:

Main research question: How do situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers impede

non-traditional mature women's return to higher education?

Related sub-questions:

(a) How do situational barriers affect domestic relationships and impact the family dynamic?

(b) How do mature female students perceive themselves compared to their peers?

(c) Do institutions of higher learning provide a culture of community for all students?

The main research question was mostly addressed by past empirical studies. These studies provided a basis for an examination of how the barriers and challenges facing mature women have impeded their decisions to return to higher education. Current studies provided an insight into the more specific research sub-questions.

Findings

The findings section describes and discusses the emerging themes.

Situational Barriers

When mature women decide to return to higher education, situational barriers are the ones they confront most often. Cross (1981) defined situational barriers as deterrents that arise as adults attempt to balance multiple roles arising from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints (p. 98). Kerka (1989) listed the following situational barriers common to adult learners: role conflicts, time management issues, family and work problems, economics, and logistics. Situational barriers may also take the form of a lack of financial support that prevents an adult student from entering or remaining enrolled at college or university. Eifler and Potthoff (1998) found that finances are a crucial concern for older students. Reviewing women's participation in post-secondary education, Ekstrom (1972) classified

situational barriers as family life, finances, health, transportation, and work conflicts (Ekstrom, 1972, as cited in Hostetler et al., 2007). Unsurprisingly, the main situational barriers specific to mature women that emerged from the literature were family (which included caregiver responsibilities, childcare, partners/spouses) and a lack of support.

Family

Family can be a complex situational barrier for mature women when they return to higher education. Mature female students tend to occupy multiple roles through their responsibilities, particularly those related to family. The additional responsibilities introduce various challenges that influence mature students' academic experiences. The literature repeatedly described the non-traditional mature female student as a primary caregiver.

Caregiving Responsibilities

The literature highlighted the considerable structural challenges carers face as they navigate access to opportunities that fall outside their caring responsibilities at home. Clements (2013) observed that caring is gendered because women undertake most caregiving responsibilities for their families. Women often bear the burden of caregiving within families, including care for children, elderly parents, or other dependents. Juggling such responsibilities alongside educational pursuits can be challenging. These responsibilities can include time constraints due to caregiving, which demands significant time and attention and leaves limited time for studying.

The literature also researched the identity of carers, discussing why women undertake caring roles. These roles include caring as a kinship obligation, as an emotion, and as a dependency.

Childcare

Childcare is a situational barrier that affects mature women when they return to higher

education. Many mature women who have decided to return to higher education often hesitate to do so due to their multiplicity of roles. Being a mother plays a particular part in their decision to return to learning or (should they do so) to abandon the idea later.

Partnered Status

Returning to education is often challenging, specifically with family commitments such as domestic responsibilities, childcare, caregiving obligations, and spousal relationships. A spouse's approval or disapproval can considerably encourage or impede a return to education. In their studies on mature women, Edwards (1993), Leonard (1994), and McLaren (1985) discussed the impact studying in higher education has on women's relationships. Leonard (1994) attributed a husband's discontent to the fear that the traditional roles within the family may be eroded: "Disapproval can be particularly acute if participation is seen to threaten gender roles. Married men, in particular, fear that their partners' educational endeavours will affect the relationship and that household obligations will be traded against university obligations" (pp. 169–170).

Merrill (1999) has gone further than Leonard (1994) by arguing that the issues are not only related to the division of tasks and roles within the family but also to power and male hegemony within the home. She stated that some husbands fear that the knowledge, education, and possible future employment gained by their partners would give them the power to challenge male hegemony within the family. In Merrill's (1999) study of mature working-class women who have returned to education, she noted that some women she interviewed attempted to explain and justify their partners' behaviour. One interviewee, Pamela, said, "My husband is trying very hard to support me but he felt very threatened, and that has been difficult" (p. 161). Sue, another participant in Merrill's study, stated:

> At home, ideally, there is support, but often, there is not. When you get support, this causes strains. Both of us feel that in the long run, if anything has to give, it has to be mine. I feel that I am getting into a state of anger because I do not have time to do what I want. (p. 161)

Similarly, McLaren (1985) observed in her study that "what was striking was the enormous odds against which some had to struggle to maintain their roles as students" (p. 144).

Lack of Support

In some cases, family members might not fully support a mature woman's decision to pursue her education due to traditional roles or expectations, which can create additional emotional or psychological barriers. Emotional support can act as a barrier to a mature woman's return to education. A lack of encouragement or support from friends, family, or peers can lead to self-doubt and hinder a woman's confidence to pursue her educational goals. Prevailing societal norms or cultural expectations may not favour a woman's return to education, resulting in insufficient encouragement or acceptance. Negative attitudes about education held by family, friends, or partners are associated with lower participation and completion rates (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Terry, 2007).

According to McGivney (2004), family support has a significant effect on adult female learners' academic experiences. In other words, a lack of support from spouses/partners and other family members impedes mature female students' educational progress (see, e.g., Jacobs & King, 2002; Kasworm, 2003; McGivney, 2004). Plageman and Sabina (2010) have examined the relationship between family members and adult female students. They found that, among their family of origin, mothers played the most significant supportive roles in allowing adult female students to attend and persist in their pursuit of higher education, as well as having the most

significant effect on their future achievements.

Some women see their pursuit of higher education as benefiting both them and their families (Coker, 2003). Similarly, Lin and Wang's (2015) study found that adult female students re-entered schooling because they hoped to become better role models for their children. In such cases, family support motivated and encouraged adult female students to pursue further education. Quantifying the term "support," Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) divided it into two spheres: emotional and instrumental. Emotional support involves acceptance, encouragement, and praise, which may include being available to listen to, talk to, care about, support, and empathize with the student. In contrast, instrumental support is hands-on help with finances, childcare, and household responsibilities.

Research by Jacobs and King (2002) found that 82% of adult female undergraduate students returned to education rather than gaining access as new students. Plageman and Sabina's (2010) study found that 84% of their sample identified themselves as returning students.

Financial Constraints

Family commitments can lead to financial constraints, where educational resources must be diverted for family needs such as childcare, household expenses, or medical costs. According to Fairchild (2003), finances play a significant role in adult learners' ability to achieve their academic goals. In addition to tuition and other related expenses, parents with young children may have to pay for childcare while they are at work or in class. Financial constraints often include tuition fees, a loss of income due to working fewer hours or leaving a job temporarily, childcare costs, and other educational expenses such as costs for study materials or specialized educational equipment.

Money is a widespread problem. Bryant's (1995) study on the financial difficulties faced by mature students revealed that over two-thirds of the students surveyed experienced financial difficulties; women with childcare responsibilities were disproportionately represented in this segment. In McGivney's (1993) research, financial constraints were the second most frequently cited problem (after a lack of childcare) for women wishing to enter education or training.

Time Management

Balancing family obligations and academic commitments can be demanding, leaving limited time for studying, attending classes, or engaging in educational activities. Juggling responsibilities such as work, caregiving, household responsibilities, and educational pursuits can be overwhelming.

The findings of Stone and O'Shea's (2013) study on the influence of gender on home, family, and work responsibilities revealed differences between the women and men in the surveyed group. Gendered expectations place women's time as spent providing for the needs of others, with men's time being regarded as more valuable and more worth protecting (Hughes, 2002; McNay, 2000). One of the major challenges for the women was finding enough time for the family, particularly time to spend with their children, along with finding time for their studies. One of the study's participants, Mandy, described how she had to work to meet her study needs and childcare responsibilities: "I was trying to do assignments, and I would have sick kids … have the kids home and sick, and the plans would go out the door" (p.101). Another participant, Ingrid, stated that she had to organize outside childcare: "I had to get babysitters … I used to drop them off at a friend's place in the morning, and she would take them to school" (p.102).

Morrison (1996) pointed out that linear time schedules, often encouraged as effective time

management strategies for students, are not necessarily appropriate for those who have caring and domestic roles (p. 212). Her study of mature women in adult education courses reveals how time management was “a complex web” of tasks (p. 223). Indeed, the participants in her research had found ways to manage their time that were based on something other than traditional linear models of time planning. Carol described her studying strategy as follows: “I did have to learn when my best time was to study and stick to it. I get the course outline; I see when things are due, and I try to write them all in somewhere and then just knock them off one at a time” (p. 224).

Work and School

When mature women decide to return to higher education, balancing the demands of being a student and working can pose challenges such as time management, potential schedule conflicts, increased stress levels, and difficulties maintaining a healthy work–life–study balance. These individuals may also experience a shift in priorities as they navigate the demands of work and academic commitments while juggling other life responsibilities. Graham’s (2015) findings, in her study on the experiences of a group of mature students re-engaging with education after several years, indicated the level of time commitments expected of mature students due to the requirements to attend lectures, prepare assignments, and study for exams. Many adult learners work full time and have family obligations. A learner’s external commitments mean less time spent on college work; this lack of time (resulting from the demands of family and work) causes stress.

Andrade and Matias (2017) examined the work, family, and study experiences of professional women at two different stages of their career: early career and mid-career. Their findings

recognize that the women had experienced school, work, and family conflicts during their studies. One student, Vania, stated that:

> I felt I needed to enroll in the master's degree to get the expertise I need for the challenges I am facing at the workplace. I cannot escape being updated, otherwise, my job could be at stake. My family knows how important this master's degree is to secure my job. But, yes, they complain a lot. I feel sorry about that. I often think that I am missing something at home. That is what bothers me. (p.154)

Another participant, Rita, remarked:

> I am always in a rush. Work, kids, and now, evening and weekend classes, assignments, and all that is required for the program. I feel busy all the time. And, I must say that sometimes I have trouble accomplishing all the work that I have to do. I cannot spend the evenings and weekends with professional tasks, anymore. Now, if I have time to do them during the workday, it is ok, otherwise, I have to do it the next day. Working at home now is only for the assignments and readings for the program. And the time left during the weekends is for my family. The master's degree is costing me a lot of time and energy but my only choice, for now, is to be more focused at work. And to be honest, I feel that now I am less productive at my work than I was before. (p.152)

Another finding from this study is the need for more workplace support. Workplace support for personal and familial issues is often scarce, and its requirement is usually perceived as having a veiled repercussion on women's careers.

Dispositional Barriers

Mature women returning to education often encounter dispositional barriers such as a

lack of confidence in their academic abilities, ageist attitudes, or doubt as the validity of their prior educational experiences. McGivney (1993) defined dispositional barriers as "obstacles linked to learners' attitudes, perceptions, and motivations that need to be addressed by tutors or mentors" (p. 10). Bell (2012, as cited in Shelton, 2021) stated, "Dispositional barriers refer to students' perceptions of the ability to access and complete learning activities and due to their age, older students have negative perceptions of their ability to learn" (pp. 31–32). After a significant review of the literature related to adult learning, Cross (1981) found there is "enough consistency in the findings to what people say deters them from participating on adult learning activities" (p. 98). She described dispositional barriers as "related to attitudes and self-image about oneself as a learner" (p. 98). Dispositional barriers also include concerns about cognitive ability, the presence of emotional challenges, and a lack of support from family (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Scott et al., 1996; van Rhijn, 2012; Willans & Seary, 2011). Although barriers to non-traditional students are not necessarily deliberately erected (Baker et al., 2006), there is little existing support that meets the unique needs of adult learners.

Lack of Confidence in Academic Abilities

The most prominent of the dispositional barriers was the lack of confidence mature women had in themselves. Several studies have linked academic achievement with increased confidence, particularly among mature learners (McGivney, 2006; Scott et al., 1993). A similar link emerged from the stories of 18 women in O'Shea and Stone's (2011) study on the reflections of mature female students, describing their triumphs, achievements, and self-discoveries while undertaking their studies. One participant (Rachel, 47, third year of study) stated, "I've gained confidence,

and to me, that was a big thing because I wasn't a confident person", while another (Sheila, 31, first year of study) remarked that "after getting all my assignments back and getting high distinctions and that … I never thought that I could ever do that I was just shocked to think I had been out of school for so long and could do so well" (p.11).

Shepard and Nelson's (2012) study on mature female students returning to higher education revealed dispositional barriers such as insecurity and a lack of confidence. One of the participants in the study, Charla, described her insecurities as follows: "My insecurities caused me to consider dropping out of the program. I remember a couple of times when I would come home from school and I was shopping for U-Hauls [chuckling] to get us out of there" (p.14). Shepard and Nelson (2012) stated that Charla was able to develop relationships with a couple of her classmates with whom she could discuss her fears and insecurity. She said these relationships were pivotal to overcoming the dispositional barrier of her declining confidence. She elaborated on this idea, saying:

> The biggest key to my success there was developing relationships with my cohort of students and realizing that we had this shared experience … we got to the point where we could reveal these insecurities which was not something that happened in my department. So, forming those relationships with other students who were going through the same thing was a big help for me because it helped me to get some of my confidence back. (p. 14)

A study by Knightly et al. (2006) on mature women's return to higher education explained how the experience of returning to education can increase confidence levels. According to Knightly et.al. (2006),"the quantitative data suggest that most participants showed increases in their self-esteem over the duration of the study" (p. 9). Throughout he interviews the women

spontaneously suggested reasons for changes in their self-esteem, attributing these changes to their participation in higher education. Some of the participants described their experiences of returning to higher education. Clare stated that "studying with the OU [Open University] has given me so much; it has just opened everything up," while Trish revealed that "a year ago, I would not have thought that the course would have done much other than give me some knowledge … it is because of the OU it has given me so much, this change of attitude inside you" (p. 11).

McGivney's (1994) study on mature women returning to education sought to identify the factors that assist or impede their access, participation, and progression within education and training. She stated:

> If education and training are to have successful outcomes for women, their negative self-image needs, as a priority, to be reversed. In many schemes, this aim is subsumed within the all-embracing phrase building of confidence. The negative feelings toward education (such as being too old, not clever enough, etc.) are often the most vital and relevant obstacles to participation in education and training. (p. 28)

In a study examining the differences in math anxiety, concept, and self-efficacy between adult learners and traditional college students, Jameson and Fusco (2014) found that "adult learners had significantly lower levels of math efficacy, but not differing anxiety or concept, than traditional students. The lower efficacy for the 'academic' tasks may also stem from a lack of experience with these tasks"(p.8). These findings can be explained in part by Kasworm (2008, as cited in Jameson & Fusco,2014)) that "adult learners have lower self-confidence about their abilities because they perceive themselves as less competent and more inexperienced in an

academic environment (pp.8-9). Bye et al. (1997) explored the motivation and interests of traditional and non-traditional undergraduate students, paying specific attention to those of older students, and found that older students report a greater intrinsic motivation to learn than younger, traditional students. However, this may not equate to increased confidence in the classroom, as indicated in Jameson and Fusco's (2014) study.

In McLaren's (1985) study on mature women returning to higher education, many participants found the initial experiences overwhelming. McLaren explained this issue, saying:

> Anyone entering a new educational institution worries about their academic abilities and the likelihood of staying in the program. For these adult students, the level of concern and anxiety was exceptionally high. Right from the start, the women voiced many of their concerns in conversation with one another. (p. 114)

Lack of Prior Educational Skills

Adult learners are often asked why they left school and did not finish their degrees. When reviewing the literature, Choy (2012) described factors such as personal circumstances, financial challenges, lack of interest in academics, pursuance of alternative education paths, or difficulties such as bullying or health issues. Cross (1981) defined educational barriers as "obstacles or challenges that can impede a person's access to, progress in, or completion of education," and stated that, "these obstacles are internal or external factors hindering learning or educational attainment" (p. 98). Many mature students want to return to higher education but lack study skills. Pierce's (2017) study of older adults explored the learning experiences of six mature students who started their studies after the age of 40. His findings revealed that the education barriers these adult learners faced were related to the use of technology: mainly, how the older

students felt that they struggled to adopt new practices. One of the participants, Brenda, said that "when it comes to me on my own, sitting at home trying to do it, I can't and I give up in the end and that is how I feel about technology, it's not second nature to me" (p. 52).

Murphy and Fleming's (2000) study on the issue of access for mature students when returning to higher education provided insight into the main difficulties students encountered. Their findings suggested that the learning process was a significant barrier to achieving a degree::

> What we found intriguing was how mature students attempted to meet their own learning needs and the requirements of the college. What exists between the individual mature student, with their experiential knowledge, and the college, with its highly structured, abstract theoretical knowledge, is a latent conflict that manifests itself in various ways. In particular, the conflict arises in the process of writing essays and examinations. (p. 82)

One of the participants, Margaret (a mature student), had to go through a steep learning curve to produce an essay that was considered adequate by her department. She said:

> I think especially with writing essays at the beginning too, you don't know what is required, you kill yourself doing it, but you mightn't be on the point. And it must be a learning process. I suppose you don't always get it right anyway, the first time around or anything, subsequent times, but maybe by the second year you have a better idea about how to go about it. (p. 83)

Murphy and Fleming (2000) concluded:

> The process of learning skills is a manifestation of the underlying latent conflict between mature students and the learned of the college. The process through which mature students go in attaining these skills is one of constant compromise with the demands of the college,

> of giving in an authority that will not accept their experiential knowledge" (p. 18). It is important to point out in this instance that the college rarely compromises. The students themselves are frequently on the losing end, and the process of playing the game is, for many students, the only realistic way of losing less. (pp. 85–86)

Institutional Barriers

According to Saunders (2019), mature students have been motivated to return to higher education for job promotions or new careers and to continue seeking post-secondary education. Adult learners have found that, while gaining admission into a higher education institution is an accomplishment, obtaining academic success has been challenging (Sogunro, 2015). Institutional barriers encompass procedures and policies enshrined within universities, impeding adult learners from participating in many educational activities (Cross, 1981; Flynn et al., 2011). These policies and practices have been seen as limiting mature adults' participation in academic settings and include a lack of evening and online classes, the (un)availability of faculty (Hardin, 2008), and difficulties in reaching out for academic support from faculty (Compton et al., 2006; Kasworm, 2010).

When reviewing the literature on adult learners and institutional barriers, three main factors were discovered: mature students and classroom experiences in higher education; (a lack of) academic support from faculty members; and the role played by social isolation.

Non-Traditional Students and Classroom Experiences

In much of the empirical studies and research on non-traditional students, a major focus has been on the classroom experiences, comparing the needs and expectations of non-traditional and traditional students.

Panacci's (2015) research on the needs of non-traditional learners when they enter higher education identified factors that affected their on-campus experiences. His findings indicated "because the student–institution interaction often occurs primarily in the classroom for adults who have other major responsibilities and roles, the classroom often has a central role in their on-campus experience and development" (p.7). For many non-traditional students, these classrooms often provide educational environments that foster discussions between traditional, non-traditional, and faculty members. Unfortunately, for most non-traditional students, their voices are silenced".

Deshler and Grundens-Schuck (2000, as cited in Sissel et al. 2001) state that the silence and invisibility of adult learners to the politics of knowledge construction needs to be changed. The silence and invisibility of adult learners in higher education is so pervasive that, with rare expectations (Schlossberg et al., 1989, as cited in Kerka, 1989), higher education administrators and student affairs professionals do not include information on adults as learners as part of their professional preparations. According to Sissel and Kasworm (2001):

> The needs of adult learners are typically reinterpreted to fit into policies, programs, and practices designed for traditional students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. The voice and image of non-traditional students are not integrated into the ethos of the campus. Most collegiate institutions do not view their student population as older, married, and working. (p. 20)

Sissel et al. (2001) described adult learners as "invisible and less critical to the traditional core student group. In policies, programs, attitudes, classroom environments, and funding support, adult learners face institutional neglect, prejudice, and a denial of opportunities. To create a

privileged space for non-traditional students, institutions need to promote leadership for all students. As more campuses are experiencing growth in non-traditional student populations, there are concerns about how to integrate the "older" student into the traditional learning environment (Kimbrough & Weaver, 1999).

Lack of Academic Support From Faculty Members

Faculty members are a significant challenge for non-traditional students because most need to differentiate the learning styles, prior knowledge, and experience of non-traditional students from those of traditional students. In the matter of mature students, specifically mature women, this challenge includes a lack of support from faculty members, invisibility, and a lack of equity with traditional students.

Many non-traditional students complain about the lack of time that their professors provide to complete assignments. For many non-traditional students, isolation and a lack of support by their professors impact their academic experiences and grades. In a study by Kasworm (2010), an older student commented: "The student's responsibility is to be prepared and not expect that much from your professor because sometimes, you are not going to get it [support, guidance, and content expertise]" (p. 151).

Many professors have taught non-traditional students in their classrooms, and the disconnect between non-traditional and traditional students is evident here. Non-traditional students enter classrooms filled with traditional students who are more at ease with their professors. Many non-traditional students sense the inequity of their treatment by their professors in terms of their fairness and objectivity.

Goncalves and Trunk's (2014) study was designed to give a voice to non-traditional students

via personal interviews and to capture their perspectives on the primary obstacles to academic success and suggestions for possible solutions to these problems. Their findings regarding the non-traditional students' interactions with their professors were positive. One participant remarked, "I feel comfortable going to them … I think because of the age thing. I do not stop myself from going to them if I need help or have to talk to someone" (p. 166). Another participant said, "If [age] has everything to do with my professors, I think that the traditional student is more afraid of talking with their professors" (p. 166). Yet another participant commented, "I feel that, as a non-traditional student, I have more interactions with my professors than traditional students, but I'm also older so I find that I have a different relationship with my professors, more out of respect for them" (p. 167).

Citing prior research, Zacharakis et al. (2011) noted that interactions with professors produce a more enriched experience that leads to positive life changes. Although most of the participants were satisfied with their faculty interactions, one student was not, stating that their professors were "a strange bunch" (p. 86). The results from this study suggest that many non-traditional students are experiencing collaborative endeavours with their professors.

Contrary to Goncalves and Trunk's (2014) study, in Merrill's (1999) study on mature women returning to higher education participants were asked about their attitudes toward lectures and seminars and whether they felt such teaching approaches aided their learning. Attitudes were mixed. However, a critical factor that affected whether a student preferred lectures or seminars hinged on the teaching skills of the lecturer, which the students often felt were lacking.

In line with this, Merrill's (1999) findings stated that several students were critical of some of their lecturers' teaching abilities. Critiquing their lecturers' styles, they outline their views on

what constitutes good pedagogy for mature students. Paula pointed out that "some lecturers seem more competent than others. They know their subject but some are better at putting it across than others. Some make it more interesting and accessible" (p. 135). Adrienne stressed that:

> With lecturers, they sometimes concentrate too much on getting something across and forget about the presentation. Half the time you can sit there and a lecture just goes over the top because the way it's presented is so incoherent, so I think lecturers just miss the mark. (p. 135)

Sally elaborated on this idea: "It depends on who the lecturer is. Some are very helpful. Some are completely hopeless. It amazes me that lecturers never acquire any teaching skills" (p. 135).

Social Isolation

Many mature students returning to education feel alone and disconnected from student life. Nicholson (2012) defined social isolation as "a state in which an individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimum number of social contacts, and is deficient in fulfilling quality relationships" (p. 137). Sutton (2016) explains " while isolation is not just a problem faced by mature students, the time it takes to adapt and for isolation to subside may be significant here. For many students, feelings of isolation subside as they quickly adapt to their learning environment and become familiar with their peers and the wider student community" (p. 278). However, with a gap in their educational career and differing layers of responsibilities, mature students may feel this fear more acutely than their younger peers, placing more importance on their need to feel that they belong (Read et al., 2003; Reay, 2004). Adaptation can also be affected by factors relating to students' background (Bourdieu, 1986, as

cited in Reay, 2004), the practicalities and challenges of attending class (Elliot & Brna, 2009, as cited in Twigg-Flesner, 2018), and the risks they have taken in returning to education. According to Ryan & Glenn (2004), "difficulties in adapting and being isolated as a learner are primarily viewed in the literature as having a negative impact" (p. 10).

Sutton's (2016) study on mature students and social isolation was designed to assess how age affected experiences in higher education. Its findings suggested that older students were more likely to fear and experience social isolation at their universities. Mature students, particularly those over 40, were shown to feel more worried about fitting in than their traditional-aged peers. Age appeared to be a key factor in whether this isolation dissipated, continued, or was magnified in the student's first year of university. Some of the mature students suggested that they chose to isolate themselves from other students. For one 35-year-old female mature student who had caring responsibilities for young children, isolating herself from other students socially was necessary to cope with competing demands:

> I am here primarily to learn and not to socialize … my focus is, once I have finished my lectures, to get back home to my family. It is difficult enough trying to schedule enough reading time and revision without anything else, like going out and being able to do the workload anyway. (p. 14)

Even those without caring responsibilities felt that they needed to isolate themselves from their peers so that they could make the best use of their time at university. One 28-year-old male mature student stated, "I just want to focus. I need more time to process things. That just means I have to sacrifice going out and stuff a little bit more." (p. 14)

It was evident from the study's findings that the exclusion felt by these mature students came

not only from peers but also from institutional sources. Age-related reminders made them feel invisible and like they did not belong in the student body.

Conclusion

The findings in the literature validate the need for more updated research based on the new challenges and obstacles 21st-century women encounter. Many previous studies have expressed the need for more research on how situational, dispositional, and institutional impacts have impeded mature women's return to higher education. After an initial spate of interest in the 1990s, very little research has been conducted on mature women and the extended multiplicity of roles they juggle. The existing research does not mention single-parenting or divorced couples in the literature, nor does it consider the limitations of time and finances affecting these mature women's return to higher education.

The key points in this literature review suggest that the barriers to mature women returning to higher education are significant. As mentioned in the literature, situational barriers concern the roles of caregiver and student. In addition, the dispositional barriers and the effects of a lack of confidence and prior educational academic skills often discourage many mature female students from returning to post-secondary education. According to Shelton's (2021) study, "All these barriers are intertwined, as a lot of the aspects of the barriers overlapped, and those challenges that were prevalent in one category of the barrier were visible in another category of barrier" (p. 30).

Once they decide to return to higher education, these mature female students form an overlooked population that is shunned and considered as old and invisible against an environment filled with younger adults. More research must be undertaken to understand and

find 21st-century solutions to the issues faced by mature women following their decision to return to higher education.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

The literature review suggests a gap in current research on non-traditional mature female students and their experiences when deciding to return to higher education. With a 25-year gap between past and present research, sourcing scholarly research relevant to the question of mature women and the challenges they face when deciding to return to higher education is challenging. The theoretical framework in this study begins with Mezirow's (1978a,1978b) theory of transformative learning and examines the concept of gendered ageism and the theory of intersectionality.

This study's theoretical framework links existing theories and provides a toolset with which to analyze the discrimination and oppression of women, particularly mature women, and their struggles for equality and agency. This research will expand on Mezirow's (1978a) early study on American women returning to higher education, broadening the scope of Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory by investigating how its psycho-cultural assumptions relate to the 21st-century mature female student.

Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Adult Education

Many critical theories on adult learning and education have discussed the transformational changes adults encounter when returning to higher education. The roles played by experience, expectations, and self-reflection have also been thoroughly discussed. One such theory that has helped to guide this research study is Mezirow's (1981) transformation learning theory, a critical theory that:

> Seeks to elucidate universal conditions and rules implicit in linguistic competence or human development. Specifically, it seeks to explain how adult learning is structured and determined by what processes the frames of reference through which we view and interpret our experiences (meaning perspectives) are changed and transformed. (Mezirow, 1991, p. xiii)

Theoretical Background

Jack Mezirow introduced the theory of transformative learning in adult education in a 1978 article titled "Perspective transformation" (Mezirow, 1978a). The article identified a critical dimension of learning in adulthood, urging the recognition and reassessment of the structure of assumptions and expectations that frame an adult learner's thoughts, feelings, and actions. These structures of meaning constitute a "meaning perspective," or frame of reference. According to Mezirow (1991):

> Meaning perspectives determine the essential conditions for construing meaning from an experience. Meaning perspectives provide us with criteria for judgment or evaluating right and wrong, bad and good, beautiful and ugly, true and false, appropriate and inappropriate. For example, the basic suspicions of others different than oneself, such as specific negative racial and sexual stereotypes, prepare us for particular actions, such as shunning someone of a certain race or sex. (p. 44)

In the early development of his transformative learning theory and to address the needs of those American women who were resuming their education or considering employment after an extended period, Mezirow (1978a) and his research team conducted a qualitative study on American mature women returning to higher education or the workplace, aiming to "identify

factors that characteristically impede or facilitate" (p. 6) women's progress in re-entry programs. It became apparent, according to Mezirow (1981), that "movement through the existential challenges of adulthood involves a process of negotiating an irregular succession of transformation in meaning perspective—the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experiences" (p. 6). For many of the women studied, such psycho-cultural assumptions involved the traditional +stereotypical view of women's "proper" roles and the intense feelings internalized in defense of their roles (Mezirow, 1981).

Mezirow (1978a, 1978b) and his research team concluded that some participants had experienced a "personal transformation" and identified eleven phases that they might experience (Table 1) during this transformation. Transformation may be epochal, which involves sudden major reorientations in habits of mind and is often associated with significant life crises; or it may be cumulative, involving a progressive sequence of insights resulting in a changed point of view and leading to a transformation in habits of mind. Most transformative learning takes place outside of awareness, and intuition substitutes for critical reflection on assumptions. Mezirow (2006) stated that transformations often accompany the phases listed in Table 1 before becoming clarified.

Table 1

Mezirow's (1978a, 1978b, 1991) Eleven Phases of Transformative Learning

Phase 1	A disoriented dilemma
Phase 2	Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
Phase 3	A critical assessment of assumption
Phase 4	Recognizing one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6	Planning a course of action
Phase 7	Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
Phase 8	Provisionally trying out new roles
Phase 9	Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new ones
Phase 10	Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Phase 11	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

Transformative Learning Phases According to Mezirow

Phase 1 of Mezirow's (1978a) perspective transformation is a disoriented dilemma. He defined such dilemmas as internal or external personal crises: indefinite periods during which individuals search for something missing (Clark, 1991, 1993). For example, many mature women return to education to access better career opportunities or when they decide to change

their career or life choices. Often, the pressure of ageism in the workplace and a lack of educational experience are the motivations behind mature women's return to education. They may be dissuaded from the idea of returning to education by the multiplicity of the roles juggle. However, they may act to resolve this conflict by recognizing that their current experience does not match their past knowledge.

As mature women try to resolve the conflict between the multiplicity of their roles and their desire to return to education, they contemplate their options or lack of options; in doing so, they enter Phase 2 through the self-examination of their existing beliefs and values, recognizing how they relate to their current dilemma. The women think about their past experiences and how they connect to their disoriented dilemma. Since many mature women were taught that their primary role is that of a caregiver, they feel guilty for changing their assumptions of this role. Because they have assumed the role of caregiver, they have never thought about doing something solely for themselves, such as returning to education. Through self-awareness, mature women address their guilt and doubt by resolving these contradictions and acknowledging the multiplicity of the roles in their lives, which include being a student and developing the necessary skills to resolve their current dilemma.

Working through a new self-awareness, Phase 3 involves a critical assessment of assumptions. Individuals in this phase of transformative learning can take a critical, comprehensive look at their past assumptions and review them. They can accept that some of their past assumptions were wrong and are more open to new information and thoughts. Mezirow (1991) explained this phrase as follows: "Reflective learning involves assessing and reassessing assumptions. Reflective learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions are found to be

distorted, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid" (p. 6). For example, many mature women are taught to believe that women's roles and the expectations others have of them are not to be challenged. Mature women who want to change their career or life trajectories following certain life events often feel as though they are alone and going against the social norms that have been established for them. However, through this sense of alienation, mature women realize that other mature women have had similar experiences and question their past assumptions. Mezirow (1991) stated that transformative learning begins when individuals reflect critically upon their assumptions of what they perceive to be accurate, true, or correct (Mezirow,1991, as cited in Nerstrom, 2014.).

In his discussion of Phase 4 ("Recognizing one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and others have negotiated a similar change"), Mezirow (1978b) emphasized that:

> Adults are capable of being consciously critical or critically reflective in effecting these relationships. New commitments become mediated by a critical sense of "agency" and personal responsibility. Rather than a simple transfer of identification to a new reference group, a new set of criteria comes to govern one's relationships and represent conditions governing commitments. (p. 9)

For example, as mature women go through the transformative process and become fully aware of their past experiences and how distorted the recollection of these experiences are, they separate themselves from old relationships and join new relationships on an equal basis. Mezirow (1978) stated that "the insistence upon reciprocity and equality often represents a positive movement toward greater autonomy and self-determination" (p. 9). Due to past assumptions about women's roles, many mature women do not often find themselves in relationships of power, equality, and

strength. Through critical reflection, mature women are aware of independent thought and capable of independent thought and decision making.

As learners progress through the transformative process, they establish a sense of self-awareness and critical reflection. During this phase, they begin to understand and embrace the sense of change. Mezirow (1991) described Phase 5 ("Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions") as an integral and indispensable component of transformative learning. Actions during the transformative learning process allow for the exploration of new roles, development of new relationships, and identification of changes. Mezirow (1991) defined perspective transformation as:

> A social process often involving points of view expressed by others. The social process perspective transformation further involves testing our new perspectives on friends, peers, and mentors. We also must work out the changed relationships with others resulting from our new perspective. (p. 184)

Gould (1978) stated:

> All people change with age because new priorities in the life cycle require new attitudes and new behaviour. New attitudes and behaviour can be straightforward responses to new facts where there is no internal conflict among the agencies of the self. The reality of facts (or roles or responsibilities) dominates the response of action or attitudes. (p. 136)

For example, when mature women return to education, their past assumptions are often embedded as truths. When returning to education, through self-awareness and critical reflection, these past assumptions become questionable. With the social circle of new friends and relationships, past unjustifiable assumptions are discarded and new meaningful perspectives are

accepted.

Phase 6 (“Planning a course of action”) and Phase 7 (“Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan”) complement and work in conjunction with each other. As mature students progress through the process of transformative learning, adult education enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners. According to Mezirow (1978a,1978b):

> We, as educators, must attempt to provide the specialized educational resource adult learners seek when they choose to use an adult educator; we must respond to the learner’s educational need in a way to improve the quality of self-directedness as a learner. (p. 21)

At this stage of the transformative process, the adult learner has become a self-directed learner. The adult learner and the educator work together to develop a course of action perpetuated by the adult learner, guided by the educator, and based on the skills and knowledge the learner wants to attain. A self-directed learner is one who is aware of the constraints on their efforts to learn, including psycho-assumptions involving reified power relationships embedded in institutionalized ideologies that influence a person’s habits of perception, thought, and behaviour as they attempt to learn (Mezirow, 1978b). For example, if a mature woman wants to continue a trajectory of lifelong learning, the educator can offer advice and recommendations on how to proceed. However, the final decision needs to be made by the adult learner.

In his discussion of Phase 8 (“Provisionally trying out new roles”), Mezirow (1981) expressed the following belief:

> To help a learner become aware of alternative meaning perspectives relevant to his situation, to become acquainted with them, to become open to them and to make the use of them more clearly understand does not prescribe the correction to be taken. The meaning

> perspective does not tell the learner what to do; it presents a set of rules, tactics, and criteria for judging. The decision to assume a new meaning perspective clearly implies action, but the behaviour that results will depend upon situational factors, the knowledge, and skills for taking effective action, and personality variables. (p. 20)

Mezirow (1981) suggested that adult educators are facilitators for adult learners; that is, their role is to guide the learner rather than to enforce or influence a specific action. Adult learners go through the process of transformative learning and gain self-directiveness. As Mezirow (1981) stated, "Enhancing the learner's ability for self-direction in learning as a foundation for a distinctive philosophy of adult education has breadth and power. It represents adulthood's mode learning characteristic" (p. 21). For example, mature women who have embarked on the process of change must strengthen their ability for change. By applying theory to practice, most mature female students can incorporate their prior experiences and discover and adapt their new perspectives to real-world situations. The educator's role is to encourage the learner to gain independence through a student-centered environment and social interaction with others.

In his review of Phase 9 ("Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new ones"), Mezirow (1981) continued his interpretation of Phase 4. He noted, however, that the adult learner adds new rules, such as equality in the conditions of the relationship. Mezirow (1978b) defined this commitment as follows:

> Commitments are made with implicit mutual agreement among equals (in the sense of agency) concerning the conditions of the relationship, including periodic review and renegotiation with the option of terminating the relationship. Such insistence upon reciprocity and equality often represents a positive movement towards greater autonomy

and self-determination. (p. 9)

Once the mature female student has changed and gone through the process of a perspective transformation, returning to the old ways of close-mindedness is no longer acceptable, and neither are the individuals who still have these beliefs and values. For example, some mature women have been taught that women's primary role is to be caregivers and that education is a waste of time. Once these women return to education, they begin to question the validity of these meaning perspectives and realize that they can be students as well as caregivers and progress through transformation and change and meet other individuals who think like them.

Phase 10 ("Building competence and self-confidence in new roles") describes the continuous practice of the transformative cycle. According to Mezirow (1978):

> If adults are to learn to take the role of others, develop empathy, and develop confidence and competence in such aspects of human relations as resolving conflicts, participating in discussions and dialogue, participating and leading learning groups, listening, expressing oneself, asking questions, philosophizing, differentiating "in order to" motives from "because" motives and theorizing about symbolic interaction, it is the task of the educator to enhance understanding of and sensitivity to the way other participate, perceive, think and feel while involved with the learner in joint endeavours. (p. 18)

For many mature female students, guidance from educators enhances and encourages the transformative process. The role of the educator and the type of educational approaches implemented are vital to the learner's progression to self-directed learning and increased self-confidence. For example, many mature women who return to education are unfamiliar with a student-centered learning approach that changes the focus of instruction from the teacher to the

student. As discussed by Mezirow (1978), the educator should provide suitable activities and define the advantages of this learning approach. In their new role as students, many mature women need to be shown how this approach is implemented and its advantageous effect on the development of their competencies and confidence, allowing them to begin planning their own course of action.

The final phase of the transformative learning theory, Phase 11, discusses the reintegration into one's life on the basis of the conditions dictated by one's new perspective. In this final phase, Mezirow (1978) described the reintegration of the adult learner:

> A self-directed learner has access to alternative perspectives for understanding his or her situation and for giving meaning and direction to his or her life, has acquired sensitivity and competence in social interaction, and has the skills and competencies required to master the productive tasks associated with controlling and manipulating the environment. (p. 21)

In this final phase, the mature women have undergone a perspective transformation and can change their previously held ideas and make changes in their lives. As described by Mezirow (1978a) above, individuals can change their perspectives from past experiences and, through education and personal growth, can control their lives based on new perspectives. Many women find it hard to accept ageist attitudes to mature women returning to higher education, but the self-directed learner is able to integrate this social fact and, if she so chooses, fight back against it.

Transformative learning provides a learner with the understanding that others are going through the same process and have decided to leave their prior beliefs and preconceived notions behind. For example, the mature women recognize that they are not alone when they think of

their past assumptions about returning to education to experience career- or life-related changes. They meet other (female) mature students who do not accept the societal norms of being too old or that domestic obligations are their main responsibility. Through critical reflection, they are aware of their choices and share these experiences with others who have gone through the same setbacks. The transformation process they share with individuals who hold similar beliefs begins new ways of thinking and acting for these individuals: a journey made up of new trajectories.

Making Meaning: The Dynamics of Learning

> As adult learners, we are caught in our own histories. However good we are at making sense of our experiences, we all have to start with what we have been given and operate within horizons set by ways of seeing and understanding that we have acquired through prior learning understanding. (Mezirow, 1981, p. 1)

Meaning Schemes and Meaning Perspectives

Another key aspect of Mezirow's theory is the idea of meaning structures. Mezirow (1981) described the learning process to make meaning as focused, shaped, and delimited by our frames of reference (a set of assumptions that structure how we interpret our experiences). These meaning structures are two-dimensional. The first, more specific dimension of our frames of reference is our meaning scheme: the beliefs, judgments, and feelings that shape a particular interpretation. Mezirow (1991) stated, "Meaning schemes are specific manifestations of our meaning perspectives. They are a set of related and habitual expectations governing cause and effect, category relationships, and event sequences. They are habitual, implicit rules for interpreting" (p. 2). Mezirow (1991) provided an example of ethnocentrism as a meaning scheme:

> The basic suspicions of others' differences from oneself or one's group, which is central to the formation of sociolinguistic meaning perspectives, specific negative sex stereotypes, such as in the case of women, can be recognized as meaning schemes that prepare us for particular actions such as shunning someone of a certain sex. (p. 44)

An example in the context of this research study is that mature women returning to higher education have often been dismissed and considered as too old to learn.

According to Mezirow (1994), the second dimension involves meaning perspectives, broad sets of predispositions resulting from the psycho-cultural assumptions that determine the horizons of our expectations. Meaning perspectives are comprised of higher-order schemata, theories, propositions, goal orientations, evaluations, and what linguists call "networks of arguments." They refer to the structure of assumptions that state that "new experience is assimilated and transformed by a person's past experience during the process of interpretation and involves the application of habits of expectation to objects or events to form an interpretation" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 2). Mezirow (1990) provided an example of a meaning perspective from the women's movement: that, within a few years, "hundreds of thousands of women whose personal identity, self-concept, and values had been derived from social norms derived from sex-stereotypical roles challenged these assumptions and redefined their lives" (p. 3).

Mezirow (1991) asserted that our meaning schemas and perspectives profoundly influence what we do and do not perceive, comprehend, and remember. We trade off perception and cognition for relief from a concern generated when the experience does not comfortably fit these meaning structures (Goleman, 1985). When an experience is too strange or threatening to our

thinking or learning, we block it out or resort to psychological defense mechanisms to provide a more compatible interpretation.

Based on his research on mature women re-entering higher education, Mezirow (1978a) and others have shown that although the transformation of meaning schemes through reflection is an everyday recurrence, it does not necessarily involve self-reflection. Mezirow stated:

> We often merely correct our interpretations. On the other hand, the transformation of *meaning perspectives*, which often occurs less frequently, is more likely to involve our sense of self and always involves critical reflection upon the distorted premises sustaining our structure of expectations. (p. 167)

Mezirow (1991) also described the transformation of meaning perspectives:

> Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

"If critical self-reflection is central to the nature of adult learning in modern cultures, other characteristics are discernible to guide educators" (Bower, 1977, as cited in Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (1985) referred to a meaning perspective (frame of reference) as "the structure of culture and psychological assumptions within which our past experience assimilates and transforms new experiences" (p. 21). From Mezirow's (1995) point of view, "what we do and do not perceive, comprehend, learn, feel, and remember is determined by meaning perspectives" (p. 142).

There are three overlapping categories of meaning perspectives. The first is epistemic, which involves (among other things) developmental stage perspectives; cognitive, learning, and intelligence styles; sensory learning preferences; reification; the frequency of an event required to identify a pattern; narrowness or expansiveness awareness; external and/or internal evaluation criteria; and concrete or abstract thought.

The second is psychic, involving parental prohibitions resulting from a traumatic childhood encounter that has become submerged within an individual's consciousness yet continues to influence their adult behavior through feelings of intense anxiety, resulting in inhibitive behaviours, psychological defenses, and dysfunctional psychic needs. The third, sociolinguistics, involves social ideologies, norms, and roles; cultural and language codes; secondary socialization; prototypes; scripts; and intentionally learned philosophies and theories. Meaning perspectives selectively order and delimit the perception and comprehension of new data and recollection of prior learning. Mezirow (1995) noted:

> In perception, we tend to trade off diminished attention to avoid anxiety attendant upon encountering events which do not comfortably fit our habits of expectation. This often leads to self-deception and shared illusions. Uncritically assimilating meaning perspectives acquired in childhood often become unreliable and distorting in adulthood (p. 143)

Perspective Transformation

Perspective transformation fills the vital gap in critical adult learning theory by acknowledging the central role of critical reflectivity. This function provides an awareness of why individuals, especially in their roles and relationships, attach the meanings they do to reality. Broughton (1977) stated that only in adulthood can individuals acquire a "theoretical

self-consciousness" capable of recognizing paradigmatic assumptions in their thinking:

> What emerges as adolescence is not self-consciousness but theoretical self-consciousness, an intellectual competence that enables us to articulate and communicate systematic justifications for the felt necessities of our ideas. Such legitimizing activities require epistemological reasoning about how we know, about how the self knows reality. (p. 95)

As indicated earlier, transformative theory suggests a form of developmental progression in adulthood that does not follow clearly defined stages or steps. In an essential point made in many studies, Mezirow (1991) stated:

> Transformation can lead developmentally toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective and that, insofar as it is possible, we can naturally move toward such an orientation. A strong case can be made for calling perspective transformation the central process of adult development. (p. 155)

Mezirow's (1978a) initial transformative learning theory became more developed as he expanded the view of perspective transformation by relating Habermas's (1971) emancipatory process to self-directed learning to form three revised types of learning.

Mezirow's Theory as Framework and Inspiration

The central process of Mezirow's transformative learning theory is a perspective transformation where individuals can change their beliefs, values, and attitudes by altering the structure of their habitual expectations and making new choices based on a new understanding.

When Mezirow (1978a -as cited in Kitchenham, 2009)) decided to study mature women returning to education, he and his team wanted to "identify factors that characteristically impede or facilitate" (p. 105) women's progress in their re-entry into educational programs. The main

research question of the present study ("How do situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers impede non-traditional mature women's return to higher education?") has obvious and clear similarities to Mezirow's (1978a) study, which is why Mezirow's work is a good building block for this research's theoretical framework.

Mezirow's (1978a) study identified the factors that could impede or facilitate a return to education. The mature women interviewed in the current study were very vocal about the reasons behind their willingness to return; however, like Mezirow's 1978a) participants, they understood the challenges presented by domestic and childcare responsibilities. Since many of the participants were working full time, they questioned how they could juggle the multiplicity of their roles and still have time to be students. Many of the empirical studies evaluated in the literature review mentioned situational domestic obligations and the multiplicity of roles mature women encounter as two of the main reasons why mature women do not return to education. However, many decided to take a leap of faith and return to education. Like those in Mezirow's study, returning to school provided these women with a sense of independence. Some of the participants in this research study started to reflect on how this sense of independence was changing them.

When expanding the search for factors that might impede mature women's return to education, Mezirow's 1978a) transformative learning theory was an inspiration because it examined and explained why mature women might want to return to higher education, how they did so, and how the return to education transformed their meaning perspectives via a perspective transformation. For example, consider the example of a life crisis (a disoriented dilemma) such as divorce or the loss of a spouse or of employment. Mezirow's (1978a) theory's phases begin to

enhance the understanding of and make predictions about the meaning of reflection and self-directiveness as the learner experiences or endures the complicated tasks assigned to each phase. These phases describe how reflection and critical awareness are part of the learner's ethos.

An additional insight from Mezirow 1978a) tells us that not all participants will have a critical orientation. Mezirow (1981) described how he and his team encountered women who simply transferred their identification from one reference group to another. These women lacked the critical self-consciousness that characterized a perspective transformation. Based on the findings that emerged from Mezirow's (1978a) study of mature students, not all individuals can be self-directed or able to be critically reflective and change their "taken-for-granted" frames of reference.

There are many similarities between Mezirow's (1978a) study on mature women returning to education and the current study; for example, both investigate the factors that may impede mature women's return to higher education. However, there are also dissimilarities—this study featured a heterogeneous group of mature women, from different personal and professional backgrounds, who returned to education for different reasons than those reported by Mezirow's participants. The participants in this research study were motivated by the possibility of better career options, for the opportunity to be immersed in a new or returned-to educational environment, and/or for personal growth.

This research study's findings are similar to those of Mezirow's (1978a) in some ways. For example, some of the women may have experienced perspective transformations and critical reflection, while others have not changed their meaning perspectives. The group of mature women interviewed in the current study differs from Mezirow's group of mature women because

of their significantly different lived experiences. Some are single mothers with no support systems, others are individuals who have immigrated from communist countries in search of better lives, and others are older mature women who are on a lifelong learning journey. It is hoped that the outcomes of this research study will show how some mature women change their meaning perspectives and discover the opportunity for perspective transformation, while others take longer to begin to critically self-reflect.

Critiques of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Since the original research by Jack Mezirow (1978) over 40 years ago that studied women returning to school after a long hiatus, numerous investigations and theoretical critiques have been undertaken to explore transformative learning in relationship to community and social transformation, power, intercultural learning, critical reflection, whole-person learning, and career change, to mention a few. As early as 1989, in the Forum section of AEQ (Adult Education Quarterly), Collard & Law argued that Mezirow (1989) failed to emphasize the importance of collective social action as a goal (Collard & Law, 1989). Mezirow responded in the same year by pointing out that "There are significant mediating factors which impede taking collective social action because of a transformed viewpoints":

> Transformative learning emphasizes the role of meaning schemes and perspective habits of expectation which serve as culturally assimilated categories of classification for perception and cognition. These may involve assumptions which are distorted in content, process, and premise. They may be transformed by validity testing through critically reflective dialogue. Because distortions and assumptions may be epistemic and psychic as well as socio-cultural, the nature of transformation

and appropriate action varies. Learning transformations and social action both can take several forms.

A few years later Clark & Wilson also submitted an article to AEQ entitled "Context and rationality in Mezirow's theory of transformational learning" (Clark & Wilson, 1991). They argued that a significant flaw in Mezirow's theory was that it fails to account for context. They saw the need for "a contextualized view of rationality which maintains the essential link between meaning and experience."

Although transformative learning was called a "theory in progress" in 2000 (Mezirow & Associates, 2000), recent discussions state that 'much of the research is redundant, with a strong deterministic emphasis of capturing transformative learning experiences and replicating transformative learning in various settings, while overlooking the need for more in-depth theoretical analysis' (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 12).

Other authors have argued that new approaches to the theory are not adequately integrated with previous

approaches (as would be implied by a "theory in progress") (Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

It has come to the point where scholars are questioning whether transformative learning is a valuable concept (Newman, 2012).

Taylor & Cranton (2013) suggest that to rejuvenate the field of transformative learning, rather than watch its demise, scholars must think in new ways and figure out new directions they can move in. For example, they note that in the various descriptions of how people engage in transformative learning, there is a gap between a disorienting event and revising a perspective or

perhaps between engaging in critical reflection and revising a perspective. The assumption is generally made that individuals cannot be forced to transform, but rather that people need to be willing and able to engage in activities that have the potential to lead them to shifts in perspectives. Mezirow (2012) is careful to distinguish between indoctrination, for example, and transformative learning. The idea that there needs to be a desire to learn or a willingness to learn raises several interesting issues for theory, practice, and research related to transformative learning. Although the assumption is generally made that transformative learning is voluntary and individuals need to be open and willing to engage in the process, this is not clearly addressed in the theoretical descriptions of transformative learning. Mezirow (2012) says that the goal of adult education is to "help adults realize their potential for A theory in progress? [41] becoming more liberated, socially responsible and autonomous learners" (p. 92) and that adult educators "actively strive to extend and equalize the opportunities for them to do so" (p. 92).

A concept that is most central to transformative learning and adult learning in general is experience. It is experience, particularly prior experience (that happened in one's past), that is the primary medium of a transformation, and it is the revision of the meaning of experience that is the essence of learning. "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). It is also experience that forms the basis for habitual expectations (ideologies, beliefs, values), creating the lens from which learners perceive, interpret and make meaning of their world (Mezirow, 1991). As the core substance of a transformation, in concert with dialogue (self and with others) and self-reflection, experience, 'constitutes a starting point for discourse leading to critical examination of normative

assumptions underpinning the learner's … value judgments or normative expectations' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 31). Despite the centrality of experience to transformative learning theory, as a construct it is rarely defined or critically examined in research about transformative learning.

Gendered Ageism

When adults consider a return to higher education, they often evaluate the benefits of doing so and quickly realize the challenges and barriers that await them. The marginalization of mature women, based on age and gender, often reinforces societal stereotypes. Society seems to have a different perspective on the definition of "age" than these women might hope for. This section of the theoretical framework will review the concept of gendered ageism and the double standards mature women have to endure. It will also touch upon the theory of intersectionality, expanding on the multiple types of discrimination mature women experience based on their age, race, and gender.

The concept of ageism has developed over time. The term was first defined by Butler (1969), one of the pioneers of ageing research, as "a form of bigotry we tend to overlook: age discrimination or ageism, prejudice by one age group against another age group" (p. 243). Butler (1969) described ageism as follows:

> The subjective experience is implied in a popular notion of the generation gap. Prejudice of the middle-aged against the old in this instance, and against the young in others, is a serious national problem. Ageism reflects a deep-seated uneasiness in the young and middle-aged personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability, and fear of powerlessness, uselessness, and death. (p. 243)

Butler (1969) compared the effects of ageism to the adverse effects of racism, discrimination, or

discrimination based on social class, discussing the intersection of age and other forms of discrimination and disempowerment (p. 243). In a later work, Butler (1980) continued to compare ageism to sexism and racism, arguing that ageism is manifested as "[the] attitudes, behaviours, and institutional practices and policies towards older adults," and that "ageism can be either positive or negative, yet it carries negative consequences by creating self-fulfilling prophecies" (p. 8).

Butler's (1969) concept of ageism has evolved to recognize the attitudes and values that have been embedded in society for many years. According to Torstam (2006), ageism occurs both at the individual level, through personal interactions, and at the institutional level, through social exclusion from and by both professors and younger, traditional students. Gulette (2018) stated that "universities undervalue experience and undermine tenure and the concept of 'life-course progress' in colleges and universities" (p. 10).

One of the first categories used to refine the understanding of ageism is gender. The term "gendered ageism" was introduced by Itzin and Phillipson (1993, 1995) in their study of age barriers at work, with a focus on gender in the private and public sectors. Since then, gendered ageism has been defined in many ways. Itzin and Phillipson (2003) expanded on their earlier definition, describing gendered ageism as "the double jeopardy of age and gender where two interacting power systems lead to an increased vulnerability" (p. 39). The double jeopardy perspective emphasizes the dominance of patriarchal norms combined with a preoccupation with youth; the combination results in the faster deterioration of the status of mature women compared to that of men (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016). For many mature women who have decided to re-enter higher education, gendered ageism often occurs once they enter these

institutions: they are surrounded by younger students and quickly realize they are part of the out-group.

Hatch (2005) stated that the double standards of men and women, seen in the ageing process, are referred to so frequently that their existence seems a truism. Women's social worth is often linked more closely to their physical appearance than is the case for men; in addition, such social valuations decline more markedly with age for women than for men (Hurd, 2000). Furthermore, looking "old" is viewed more harshly by women across diverse cultures and different sexual orientations, extending beyond heterosexual bias (Harris, 1994). Mercer and Garner (2012) stated, "Women lose their social value simply by growing old. Men are more likely to be evaluated and rewarded for what they do" (p. 4). Ageism takes different forms for women and men, with broad-ranging implications related to self-identity (Hatch, 2005). Thompson (2004) averred that research has focused on the confluence of ageism and sexism for women and has neglected to consider how older men's identities can also be profoundly influenced by ageism.

When considering discrimination against women, age may be entangled with physical attractiveness, given that attractive people have been found to experience greater career success and higher earnings (Umberson & Hughes, 1987). Women are more likely to report age discrimination involving negative attitudes than men; such discrimination was "frequently associated with women's appearance or sexuality" (Duncan & Loreto, 2004, p. 110). Itzin and Phillipson (1993) collected anecdotal evidence from women who felt that men prefer more "young attractive" female employees and "dolly-bird secretaries" (pp. 44–45), thereby implying a preferential need for both youth and attractiveness. Thus, a "triple jeopardy" may exist for women: sexism, ageism, and appearance (i.e. "lookism").

More research is needed to clarify this issue. For example, Itzin and Phillipson's (1993) study is 30 years old; it may be that the situation facing women in local authorities or organizations has improved, although the results of Duncan and Loretto's (2004) research did not look encouraging. It is also unclear whether commonly held ageist stereotypes differ according to occupational types or milieux, such as academic versus non-academic settings.

Gendered ageism remains a significantly under-researched area with increasing relevance to managers in this era of demographic and legislative change (Granleese & Sayer, 2006, p. 503). Much of the literature on this topic focuses on discrimination against older women in the workplace, with less emphasis on discrimination against their presence in institutions of higher learning.

Theory of Intersectionality

As we see, the term "gendered ageism" has expanded from Butler's (1969) definition of ageism—"prejudice by one age group against another age group," (p. 243)—to Itzin and Phillipson's (1993) definition of gendered ageism as "double jeopardy," whereby two interacting power systems lead to an increased vulnerability (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016; Handy & Davy, 2007; Walker, 1998) and then to a "triple jeopardy" of ageism, sexism, and "lookism." This phenomenon of interlocking oppressions has been described by the term "intersectionality," which can be defined as follows:

> Intersectionality promotes understanding human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (race/ethnicity, Indigeneity, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, and religion). These interactions are within a context of connected systems and structures of power (laws, policies, governments, other political and

> economic unions, religious and educational institutions, and media). Through such processes, interdependent forms of privilege and oppression shaped by colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and patriarchy are created. (Hankivsky, 2014, p. 2)

Intersectionality has increasingly been adopted as an element of theoretical frameworks within the study of higher education. Studies that use intersectionality as a theoretical framework are often concerned with identifying, discussing, and addressing how systems of inequality, including sexism, racism, and class bias, intersect to produce complex relations between power and (dis)advantage (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). The theory of intersectionality stems from critical race theory; for example, Crenshaw (1991), a feminist legal race scholar, researched why Black women's experiences and circumstances were not adequately accounted for in legal judgments. Crenshaw (1989) argued that neither sexism nor racism was sufficient to account for the nature of the compound inequalities she identified. According to Crenshaw (1989), the act of analyzing disadvantages that involve only one of these vectors (something she termed "single axis analysis") distorts the experiences of those who have been impacted by more than one system of discrimination (p. 140). To explain the workings of multi-dimensional discrimination, she applied a metaphor:

> Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may be in one direction, and it may flow into another. If an accident happens in an intersection and is caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could cause result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149)

Crenshaw (1991) believed that race, class, and gender (and other ascribed statuses) are not distinct categories of experience but are lived conjointly. Intersectionality concerns the intersection between gender, race, and other identity categories.

Since its earliest adoption in higher education, intersectionality has been driven by an ethical view that higher education's purpose is to promote the evolution of equitable societies; thus, it demands that inequalities be actively challenged. Jaggar (1996), for instance, applied an intersectional lens to argue against admissions guidelines adopted by the University of California that made no explicit reference to social class, race, gender, or ethnicity. Jagger (1999) claimed that a "rhetoric of diversity" (p. 165) concealed the impacts of ongoing discriminatory practices, compounding inequality for entrants with more than one disadvantaged category.

As intersectionality has become increasingly popular as a frame for analysis, discussions have focused on critical questions and dilemmas. One of these is "how to conceptualize the interactions so that bringing the agency of the disadvantage into focus does not leave the powerful out of sight" (Walby et al., 2012, p. 6). According to Bhaskar (1977, as cited in Walby et al., 2012), "to understand the relationships between inequalities it is necessary to understand the nature, or ontology of the social relations through which it is constituted" (p. 8).

Conclusion

When mature women decide to re-enter higher education, they often realize the barriers they will encounter and contemplate whether the return is worthwhile. For most of these women, the opportunities and benefits of returning to higher education and their journeys toward critical self-reflection. Once mature women intrinsically recognize the need for change, Mezirow's (1981) analysis is useful as a way to think about and track the change process for these women.

When discussing the concept of gendered ageism and the theory of intersectionality, it is important to understand where a mature woman positions herself. When reviewing the concept of gendered ageism, has the 21st-century mature woman recognized the inequalities she encounters because she is an older woman? Moreover, which of the two categories, gender or age, is the true discriminator? Societal norms and attitudes about older women have been a constant reminder that older women are devalued and seen as insignificant. Stereotypes and biases toward individuals who are different, specifically older women, will only change once society recognizes the existence of these marginalized individuals and the multiplicity of the roles they accept, carry, and endure.

The theory of intersectionality describes the multi-dimensional aspects of discrimination. When mature women strive for change by returning to education, does society embrace and encourage this change, or do they see an older woman trying to recapture her youth by returning to school? Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory allows individuals to change their frames of reference when they realize that the stereotypes they learned and believed in are unrealistic or untrue. Perhaps the discrimination and inequalities found in society will change when people are able to question and reflect on the causes of their biases and assumptions and question the truth behind these assumptions.

Chapter 4: Methods

Introduction

The literature review and opening chapter discussed the need for more research on the challenges and barriers mature women encounter when deciding to return to higher education, and specifically the need for more research conducted in the 21st century. To address the gap in the literature, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

Main research question: How do situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers impede non-traditional mature women's return to higher education?

Sub-research questions:

a) How do situational and personal barriers affect domestic relationships and impact the family dynamic?

(b) How do mature female students perceive themselves compared to their peers?

(c) Do institutions of higher learning provide a welcoming community culture for all students?

Many data sources were discussed in the literature and web searches. However, these sources now need to be updated to recognize societal changes over the past 50 years. The literature needs more current research on the challenges and barriers facing 21st-century mature women who are returning to higher education.

Past research studies on the topic of mature women returning to higher education were reviewed and examined to identify if similar patterns, themes, and results were consistent with this research study's findings. Mezirow's (1978a) transformative theory provided a solid

foundation upon which to critically evaluate the assumptions related to critical reflection and the process of gaining self-awareness and a deeper level of self-understanding need to be repurposed to help identify whether they are still viable and can still indicate what 21st-century mature women should expect upon returning to higher education.

This research aims to discover whether the 21st-century mature woman encounters different challenges and barriers to those of her predecessors. Taking into account cyclic changes, progress, and the expansion of the demands placed on mature women, this research study questions and examines the expectations mature women anticipate encountering upon their return to higher education.

Methodology

The following section describes the research design, data collection methods, and instruments used to collect the data. It also discusses the data analysis methods and procedures used and details the factors employed to ensure trustworthiness and reflexivity.

Research Design

This study was designed as a qualitative narrative inquiry. It explores the impact of situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers on mature female students entering or re-entering higher education, using the lived experiences mature women encounter to answer the main and sub-research questions. The study intends to understand the viewpoint of these mature female students and the biases they face as a marginalized population returning to higher education. According to Creswell (2016), a qualitative research design is appropriate when investigating significant occurrences, collecting oral data from participants, and developing

themes that characterize the analyzed data.

Narrative Inquiry

This study delves into the lived experiences of mature women who have returned to higher education. A narrative inquiry approach was selected as the best approach to hearing the participants' stories and experiences and to answer the main and sub-research questions. According to Clandinin (2022), a narrative inquiry examines human lives through a narrative lens, honoring lived experiences as a source of essential knowledge and understanding. Patton (2015) defined stories as follows:

> Stories organize and shape our experiences and tell others about our lives, relationships, journeys, decisions, successes, and failures. Researchers and evaluators collect stories about formal education and planned program experiences and outcomes, as well as informal experiences of daily life, critical events, and life's many surprises as they unfold in particular situations, contexts, and circumstances. (p. 128)

Since this research study explores the lived experiences of mature women, a narrative inquiry method has been used to "view the human experiences in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). People shape their daily lives with stories of who they and others are, and they interpret their past in terms of these stories. The story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world; through this portal, their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry is the study of experience as a story and is, first and foremost, a way of thinking about experience.

Narrative inquiry, as a methodology, entails constructing a view of the phenomenon. To use a

narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of an experience as a phenomenon under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). It was used because it is a methodology that allows the participant to use storytelling to make sense of their lived experience. While other forms of interviewing provide a vehicle whereby participants can share their lived experiences (for example, through semi-structured interviews), a narrative inquiry is more appropriate in this instance because it puts the participant at the center of the sensemaking process.

Given the interpretive stance of this study, "the individual claims [are] less important than [their] emotional truth and where the content of what is narrated is less important than how it is expressed" (Jedlowski, 2001, pp. 31–32). While stories are, in essence, recollections and reconstructions of the past (which may or may not be exactly equal to what objectively happened), the use of narrative inquiry allows the interviewer to step into the participant's memories as they reconstruct their past. It is, therefore, an efficient approach in this instance, given that the objective of this study is to build on the lived experiences of mature female students.

Data Collection

This qualitative study used a general interview guide (Appendix C) based on Patton's (2015) "matrix of question options" (p. 445). According to Patton (2015):

> By combining the time frame of questions with the different types of questions, we can construct a matrix that generates 18 types of questions. For example, the researcher can inquire about present, past, and future attitudes and what they have done in the past, what they are doing now, and what they plan to do in the future. (pp. 445–445)

Gail et al. (2003) stated that a general interview guide is more structured than an informal

conversational interview, noting that its composition still offers significant flexibility. Their suggestions included using open-ended questions that were broad enough to allow participants to provide detailed stories, asking questions worded in such a way as to elicit narratives, and including a minimum number of broad primary questions that were complemented by probing questions.

Participants

The participants for this narrative inquiry study consisted of ten mature female students aged 35–55 and studying various disciplines in different institutions of higher learning. Participants were recruited through the researcher's network. Creswell (2003) recommended using 8–12 participants when implementing a narrative inquiry method (see Appendix A). Since this study aims to explore how the challenges and barriers mature women face have impeded their return to education, the researcher used a purposeful sampling technique based on the participants' specific characteristics.

The student base in this research study was varied but included a limited selection of students and consequently should not be regarded as strictly representative. The participants in this research study were a diverse set of individuals with a multitude of different backgrounds from different cultures, who spoke different languages, and many of whom were second and third generation immigrants. Some participants had Middle Eastern, Eastern European, or Southern European backgrounds, while other participants were Canadian.

Three of the participants were in PhD programs and were between the ages of 35-40 years old. These participants had been senior accountants for over ten years and were also university professors teaching in undergraduate and master's programs. These participants

returned to attain a PhD in Accounting so they could teach in high-level accounting and business courses.

Two participants, both in their early forties, had immigrated to Canada for better lives. One of these participants was a daycare teacher. She took this employment because her prior education and degrees were not equivalent to Canadian standards. She had to return to higher education to be recognized for the competencies she had acquired in her prior degrees. The other participant left her country and moved to England to find work in the fashion industry. Because she had not received a high-school diploma, she found a technical job where she worked and decided to expand her technical knowledge by moved to Montreal, Canada to enter in a Fashion Design program.

Turning now to the other five participants, four were active full-time teachers in the CEGEP system and one was retired. They were between the ages of 45-55 years old and had Master's in Education degrees. They had attained their Master's degrees after years of teaching in the CEGEP systems.

The participants were selected based on three criteria: they had to be between the ages of 35 and 55; they had to be registered in a post-secondary degree program; and they had to have recently completed their degrees or have been in the process of doing so. The age bracket was designed to ensure that the participants only included women who had been away from school for a considerable time. These women were also likely to hold many roles and would be able to speak about the reality of being a mature student. To help ensure that the participants had all experienced a similar institutional environment, they were limited to those in a post-secondary environment. Only students enrolled in post-secondary education were chosen because the

challenges faced by women returning to secondary school at an older age differ from those faced by mature women returning to post-secondary education.

Finally, because of the emphasis on storytelling and recollection, only women currently taking a course or those who had recently graduated were chosen as participants. The study asked women to recall their experiences; this involved recalling and reordering facts from memory. It is not an objective process, and recollections become increasingly blurry over time (Jedlowski, 2001); therefore, participants who could draw on more recent memories were chosen so that there would be less need for the reconstruction of older memories.

The ethical considerations for the participants were addressed using Concordia University's information and consent form (Appendix B). This form follows the guidelines laid out by the Concordia University's research ethics committee.

Instruments

The main instrument used in this study was the in-depth, semi-structured interview. This instrument's objective is to ensure that all the research questions are answered in a way that is based on storytelling. The fluidity in storytelling, moving from the past to the present or into the future, is what Dewey (1938) considered, as part of his three-dimensional space narrative structure, to be continuity. Reflecting a concept further developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the participants in this study were able to look back at remembered experiences, feelings, and stories. They could also look at current experiences, feelings, and stories related to actions during an event and look forward to implied and possible experiences. Because of the flexibility and structure of this type of instrument, the pre-determined interview questions developed by the researcher still provided spontaneous, free-flowing conversation. In contrast, semi-structured

interviews, for example, are more directed in their approach and are not intended to leave room for the respondent to veer into unrelated topics (Patton, 2015).

An interview guide (Appendix C) was developed. The process started with basic icebreaker questions followed by a few guiding questions that focused on specific elements related to the study. In practice, however, the interview questions were only used as a guide, offering methodological flexibility and allowing me to probe for further information and determine when it would be appropriate to explore certain subjects in greater depth or even to pose questions about new areas of inquiry not initially anticipated in the interview instruments' development (Patton, 2015, pp. 441–442). In addition, because of the narrative inquiry approach, "opinion" and "values" interview questions were developed on the spot according to how the interviews went, provoking more detailed and informative answers from the interviewees on their experiences and issues. Patton (2015) defines this type of question strategy as "questions aimed at comprehending the cognitive and interpretive processes of people about opinions, judgments, and values—'head stuff' as opposed to actions and behaviours" (p. 444).

For the interviewees to be open to discussing possible barriers (such as family, concept of self, educational experiences, and lack of support), the researcher began the interview with general topics that encouraged interviewees to elaborate upon their answers. Beaudry and Miller (2016) stated that "a good qualitative interview is one in which the actor does most of the talking; an interviewer says little, listens actively and interjects only to paraphrase, summarize, or promote the actor for further elaboration or explanation" (p. 43). I endeavoured to take this approach throughout the interview process.

Interviews

Before the interviews began, each participant was emailed a list of dates and times to select from. The information and consent form was also attached to the email. The interviews were conducted on my personal Zoom platform and later transcribed and used for data analysis.

Following Flick's (2021) recommendations, the interview began with an initial question focused on the story to be told ("What made you decide to return to school?"**)**. Participants were interviewed individually, with each interview consisting of a one-hour discussion. My objective was to have the participants answer all questions from the interview guide. I completed the interview by requesting clarification and/or asking follow-up questions about any unanswered issues.

Data Analysis

Since the research questions explored the barriers and challenges mature women encounter when they return to higher education, a grounded theory qualitative method was applied to collect and analyze real-world data. This inductive approach was implemented to start the first coding cycle method. As the data was being reviewed, emerging themes appeared, and inductive codes were developed based on the results of the interviews.

The collected data was divided into two stages based on Saldana's (2016) sorting method and assigning codes. The following section analytically documents the coding procedures and data analysis. It also discusses conceptual codes (consisting of emergent and literature-based concepts) and structural codes (when participants express hypothetical social expectations). It then constructs a framework that illustrates five inter-related constructs: classifying the term "support;" redefining the mature female student; describing the institutional culture; illustrating inner change; and labelling emotions.

Presentation of Results

First Cycle Coding

To focus on the richness of the discussions and capture the essence of the participants' stories, the software In Vivo was used to transcribe the interviews from audio to text. As suggested by Saldana (2021):

> The data should be reviewed three to five times because not everything in the database has to be coded—just those units that relate directly to answering the research questions of interest, and those units that merit a place in the condensed empirical materials for their emergent importance in the study. (p. 64)

The process of reviewing this data involved assigning data to codes, or categories, over three to five rounds. As explained by Saldana (2016), a code is a "researcher-generated word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 362). The first cycle coding in this study focused on the research questions using data collected from the interviews. Open coding codes were created, and data was extracted based on these codes. The first cycle coding (Table 2) was comprised of 16 open-code groups and 120 In Vivo codes (exact words or phrases) from the first cycle's data corpus. The open coding codes were then assigned to data units to detect any patterns. From these patterns, similar codes were clustered together to create smaller categories (Saldana, 2021).

Because of the nature of this research study and its exploration of the challenges and barriers mature women face, separate coding approaches were also verified.

Table 2

First Cycle Coding Categories

Code #	**Open Coding "Codes"**	**In Vivo Codes**
1	"Awareness"	"have to realize the challenges" "set objectives" "prior experiences help with reaching goals" "advantage over younger students" "appreciate what I am learning" "positive" "feel discriminated against by prof and students" "be yourself" "have the confidence to speak up"
2	"Background education"	"incomplete degrees" "part-time student" "poor quality of programs" "negative experience" "what am I getting into"

		“need a safe space” “frustration”
3	“Career opportunities”	“more money” “status” “required to get a better position”
4	“Childcare”	“permanent reliable childcare” “guilt” “caregiver” “various family members” “support and backup plan” “flexibility” “multiple roles”
5	“Current education”	“part-time student” “more self-confidence” “less insecurity” “better student” “good grades”

		“focused on a goal” “role model” “experiences”
6	“Dispositional barriers”	“looked old to others in the classroom” “students thought I was the teacher” “professor did not take me seriously” “I do not fit in” “intimidated by a younger professor” “embarrassed” “lack of confidence” “do not measure up” “had my chance—do not deserve to be here” “pity” “lack of privileges”
7	“Educational barriers”	“lack prior knowledge”

		“do not adapt as quickly” “take my time to review” “professor has no time to see me” “do not appreciate the constant noise and lack of structure” “want a professor who understands me”
8	“Family and friends”	“sacrifices” “encouraged” “felt like I was too old to go back to school” “what are you going to do with a degree, you are too old” “jealous” “happy for me” “support” “tired of hearing me talk about school”
9	“Financial”	“anxiety” “money not an issue”

		“lack of funding for adult learners” “I am a saver” “financial support from family members”
10	“Future goals”	“life-long learning” “starting another degree” “give back and mentor a student”
11	“Identity”	“I am capable and smart” “a better student” “I found myself” “the process makes you learn a lot about yourself” “surrender my old identity and become someone new” “carving out a distinct and unique path for myself” “grown as a professional”
12	“Institutional barriers”	“institutions are not open to mature students” “forced to be full time”

		“was told your personal life is not my problem” “I was blocked from receiving funding because I did not fit the profile” “funding is very discriminating when it comes to non-traditional students” “no room for flexibility” “I really did not belong” “I did not know the unwritten rules of how things worked” “starts with the admissions, recognizing different profiles regarding potential suitability”. “took double the time to apply” “extra time to retrieve documents”. “just want to be treated equally”. “don’t want people with grit” “the system doesn’t allow for success”
13	“Mature woman”	“institutional culture” “think older women should be retired”

		“male professors like younger girls” “find someone who’s in the same life stage as you” “part of the outgroup” “never was so concerned about my age” “irony that going to school keeps you young” “co-exist”
14	“Reflection”	“I underestimated my capacity to learn” “life-long learning in other skills” “energy, discipline, and determination” “I am proud of myself” “take life one day at a time and you will reach where you are going”
15	“Solitary”	“fatigue caused by overextending” “heavy workload” “people don’t understand the life you had before” “you’re just another mom”

		“sometimes limited to women” “need to pay for extra resources” “caregiver to my mom” “have to deal with my schedule, working schedule, my kids, and my personal life”
16	“Spouse”	“he bore no physical or emotional support” “no support to help complete education” “he stepped up to take care of children and household” “my husband was behind me always” “very supportive” “he is part of why I am so determined” “believes in me” “need a strong relationship to be able to survive”

Second Cycle Coding

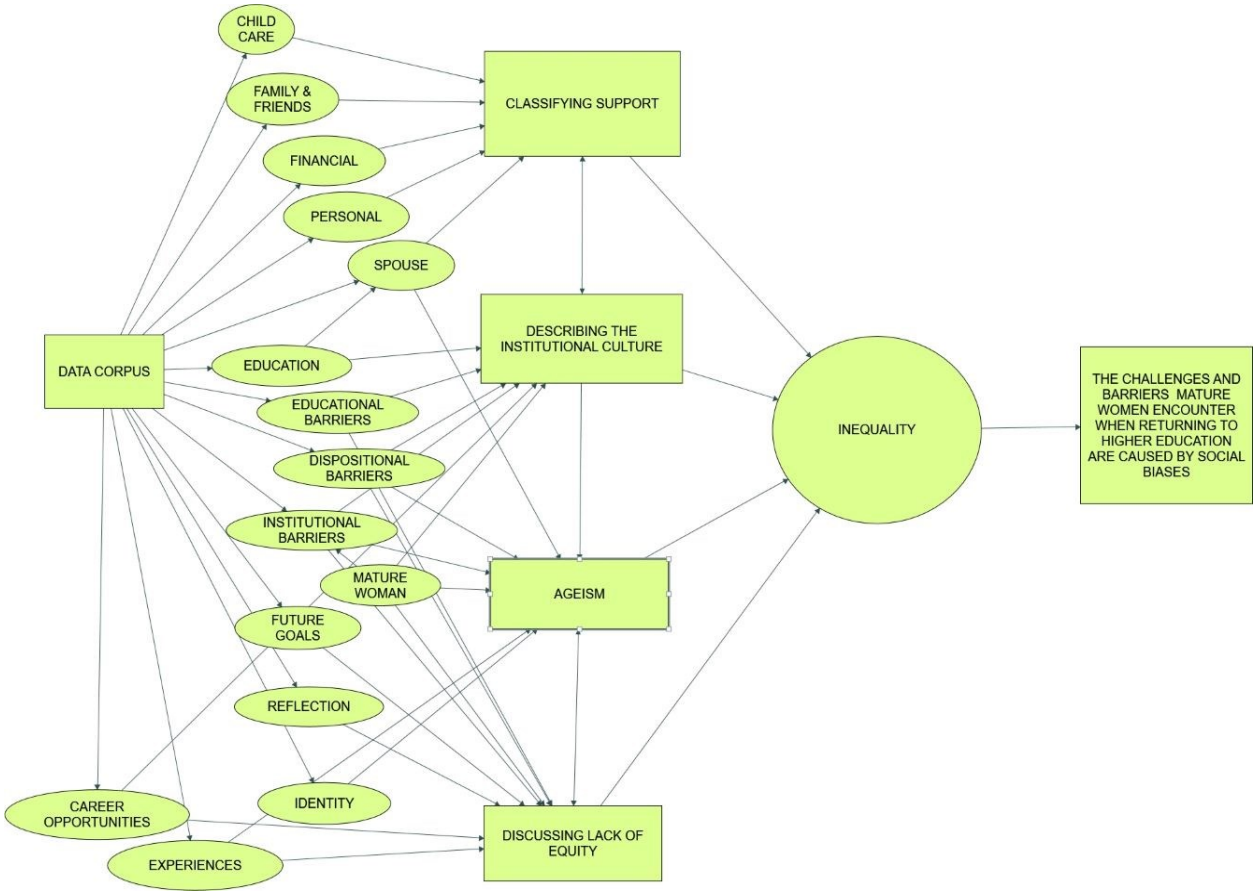
The transition from first to second cycle coding was smooth and seamless. The 16 open code groups and 120 In Vivo codes were reviewed, reorganized, and reanalyzed to develop a smaller,

more selective collection of broader categories. According to Morse (1994), “second cycle coding methods require linking seemingly unrelated facts logically and fitting categories one with another to develop a coherent synthesis of the data corpus” (p. 25).

Saldana (2021) stated that “the primary goal of second cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and or theoretical organization of an array of first cycle codes” (p. 297). He recommended reorganizing and reconfiguring the first cycle codes to develop a smaller collection of broader themes. Reflecting the similarities recorded during the second cycle coding, the four main themes that emerged from the first cycle coding were: classifying support; describing the institutional culture; labeling ageism; and discussing the lack of equity. The collective meaning of these four main themes became significant components of this research study. The relationship between the four main themes led me to assert that the challenges and barriers mature women encounter when returning to higher education are caused by societal biases. Figure 1 shows the codes that were transformed into categories and used to form the four main themes and my research assertion, which was based on Saldana’s (2015) “streamlined coded-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry” (p. 298).

Figure 1

A Streamlined Coded-to-Theory Model for Qualitative Inquiry



Synthesis

When transitioning from first to second cycle coding, I reviewed the data analysis and establishment of open coding categories to answer the main and sub-research questions. The first cycle coding was derived from the past research studies examined in the literature review. When transitioning to second cycle coding, I reorganized and reconfigured the original 16 first cycle open-coded "codes" to develop a smaller and more precise list of categories. According to Saldana (2015), "the goal is not necessarily to develop a perfectly hierarchical bullet-pointed

outline or a list of fixed coding labels during and after this cycle of analysis" (p. 291).

The results chapter expands on the findings and provides examples from the participants' responses in the form of vignettes. The discussion section gives a brief recap and analysis of the key results before interpreting the results and providing recommendations for future studies on this topic.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

This qualitative narrative inquiry was performed through a storytelling technique. Because of the nature of this research design, it has often been noted that trustworthiness issues in narrative studies fall under certain criteria. To evaluate and establish quality in this narrative study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria (credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability) were used. Pilot and Beck (2014) define trustworthiness as the degree of confidence in the data, in the interpretation of the findings, and in the methods used to ensure the quality of the study.

Credibility

The credibility of the study, or the confidence in the truth of the study and, therefore, the findings, is the most important criterion (Pilot & Beck, 2014). Peer debriefing and reflective journaling were used in this study, and the interview questions were shared with an experienced qualitative researcher. The peer debriefer reviewed the questions and data collection methodology. They also acted as a sounding board and devil's advocate during the data analysis process, challenging and extending my opinion of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Due to ethical constraints, I did not share the primary data or analysis with the peer debriefer but instead discussed the findings and interpretation in general terms to obtain timely feedback. Since I took

notes during and after the interviews, reflective journaling was an essential tool, as it helped me expand on my observations and descriptions of the participants' discussions.

Transferability

The second factor affecting trustworthiness is transferability. Transfer is possible when an in-depth description provides a detailed portrayal of the circumstances, allowing the findings to be applied to others' situations (Stahl & King, 2020). Transferred applications rely on the researcher's descriptions, which could include contextual information about fieldwork.

During the data collection period, I gathered robust data from the interviews. The participants shared their experiences and stories, and each interview flowed, with the participants providing both personal comments and details of their life experiences. According to Stahl and King (2000):

> The method and timeframe for the collection of data in the original study must be completely described as well as the duration of the field study. These factors influence the degree to which the completed research may apply to an additional site or context. (p. 27)

This research study follows the transferability criteria because the data collected and the completed study can be used in similar studies.

Dependability

A third perspective on trustworthiness is dependability (trust in trustworthiness). Dependability is linked to reliability and measures the extent to which a research study can be repeated by a separate researcher, who then produces the same findings. This criterion is all about the thoroughness of the research process: a detailed discussion guide or a set of tasks for respondents to complete to ensure focused data collection; open-ended questions to elicit

spontaneous and unbiased answers; digital recordings; a rigorous transcript analysis; and extensive notetaking.

This research study is replicable because it followed the criteria expected from the research process. Interview questions were open-ended, providing a spontaneous experience for the participants. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed so that the data could be reassessed and reproduced. Since the researcher used reflective journaling as a notetaking tool, all observations and comments were written down and kept in a safe place to maintain the confidentiality of the participants' data.

Confirmability

Confirmability relies on the researcher collecting and reporting the participants' views without injecting any subjective or biased viewpoints. I paid particular attention to my review of the data after all the interviews were completed. To ensure objective readings of the data collected, I wanted to avoid having a predisposed opinion of the participants. In addition, I developed a clear coding schema that I rechecked and refined through multiple iterations of the analysis. Thus, the patterns identified in the data and reported in this study are easily verifiable.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research because this field is heavily dependent upon the information that participants provide. Since questionnaires, discussions, and interviews are all researcher-led, the information gathered during qualitative studies may be influenced by the researcher's underlying beliefs. The primary goal of reflexivity—often referred to as bracketing—is to be aware of researcher biases and how they influence the outcome of the study. In some research approaches, it may be necessary to reduce bias, whereas in others, researcher

bias may be used as a tool for deriving knowledge.

Chapter 5: Results

Introduction

As outlined in the methods chapter, ten mature women aged between 35 and 55 participated in this study. During the interview process, these participants were currently undertaking or had recently completed post-secondary degrees. To understand the challenges and barriers these women encountered, each participant partook in an hour-long interview and shared their experiences. The interview transcripts were then analyzed, reviewed, and compared. A jotting method, noting comments I made during the fieldwork and data analysis, was used to strengthen the coding by pointing to deeper or underlying issues that deserved analytical attention and to confirm that the coding was relevant to the research questions (Saldana, 2015, p. 87).

The results chapter displays the data collected, weaving the participants' responses through vignettes to authenticate their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes when asked about the challenges and barriers they encountered when returning to higher education. The last section added to the results chapter is "Reflections and Future Goals." This final section discusses the participants' reflections on returning to higher education, the transformation they experienced, and any future goals.

This study explored and answered the main research and sub-research questions, with the findings separated into three sections: situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. The answers to the sub-research questions strengthened the validity of the findings.

Situational, Dispositional, and Institutional Barriers

Situational Barriers

Cross (1981) defined situational barriers as deterrents that arise as adults attempt to balance multiple roles arising from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints (p. 98). The participants in this research study recognized that the situational barriers were the most challenging for them.

When analysing the results, three main themes emerged for the interviews: childcare; spouse; and finances. Most participants stated that reliable childcare and support from their spouses were essential to their return to higher education. Others said that financial sacrifices had to be made to allow them to continue their studies.

Childcare

When deciding to return to higher education, the participants contemplated the different issues they would face. When asked, they acknowledged that situational barriers were the hardest to confront. What emerged from the responses was the guilt they felt leaving their children. Before considering a return to higher education, some participants had decided to work part time so that they could be available for their children. Returning to education was a hard decision for the participants; it required finding reliable childcare, as most of the participants were the primary caregivers in their respective families.

As a mother to teenage daughters, Linda decided she did not want to travel for work and needed to be available for her children, since her husband provided no help. To do this, she had to return to school to upgrade her skills and find a different type of career. Even though she had no support, she registered to start a certificate program in web design. She recalled the anguish of

leaving her children to go to night school:

> When my girls were playing soccer, and because my courses were at night, I had to ask friends to bring them to soccer, and I would pick them up after class. I was constantly stressed to make sure to get home on time.

Ella did not want to change her family dynamic because of her studies. She commented:

> I had my regular teaching schedule, and the time allocated for my studies was at the top of my schedule. I never wanted my family to be sacrificed for my studies. So, I studied late at night and in the early morning. My children never asked what I was doing. I kept my role as a full-time mom.

Lily realized that she could only cope with the challenges of an excessive workload if she was organized. She stated:

> Because I have children, I have to be structured. I was always on top of my work, and being a mature woman made me [stay] up to date. The first two years of the Ph.D. were hard, but the rest flowed. It works if you are 25 years old, love going to school, and have less money. However, when you are mature and have kids, life is different.

Emma did not have children but was the primary caregiver for her mother. She associated her situation with that of the other participants with children:

> I stress when I go to school because I worry about who is taking care of my mom when I am not there and how she is doing. I wish there would be funding for caregivers when they are the sole caregivers for their parents.

Unlike the other participants, Sue had a young baby. She described her situation as follows:

> My son was not even one year old when I started the Ph.D. He wasn't in daycare. The first

year was challenging, and maybe that is why it was doubly difficult that I was working with various family members because my son was not ready for daycare. He was always sick. In the second year, I had reliable childcare. Childcare is number one; it is just that you can be present physically and intellectually because you cannot write a paper with a baby on your lap.

Financial

The participants also discussed their financial situation; most disclosed that they were financially stable. Since many of them had continued working part time and had spousal support, they were financially secure. The few who felt insecurities were open to stating that the anxiety of stopping work resulted in higher stress levels than it would have done for those who were financially stable.

When asked about financial issues, Mia quickly said that knowledge and learning were more important:

> Money was never an issue; even if it was, we are not getting that much out of it anyway. It's not about the money. It's more about what we get from it when we return to school. What I say about learning more is knowing more. This is priceless.

Financial issues were very stressful for Emma. She explained: "I have more financial anxiety about returning to school and not having a job. The most financial anxiety is paying my tuition. I wish there was more funding access and a system for adult learners."

Sue was a new mother who decided to return to school full time. She stated:

> I did not worry about money when I was pursuing my Ph.D. I went from having an income to having no income. I got all kinds of scholarships and research assistantships, and at the

end of the day, it would have been a lot different if I hadn't gotten that.

Evelyn stated that she had always been a saver. She continued:

> I am a saver, and over the years, I'm always saving for something terrible to happen in the future. I didn't know what it was, but I looked at my account and said if I take this money to go to college, I still have some left. So, if something happens, going back to college gave me a big motivation that I would have a backup. Because of my husband's help, I can spend this money on school without [needing to] work and still have a backup plan if something happens.

Spouse/Partnered Status

As with the stress of childcare, many participants considered the effect of returning to school and its impact on the family structure. When discussing the "spouse" theme, the participants were divided into two groups. Of the ten participants, eight, had full support from their spouses, which included taking care of the children and domestic duties. The other two stated they had no physical or emotional support from their spouses. The group with support told the researcher they felt relieved and were able to attend school guilt-free. The two with no support experienced high anxiety, as not only did they have to be the primary caregivers to their children, but they also had to worry about how this lack of support affected their relationships. I quickly became aware of the spouse theme and asked the other participants about their spousal relationships. Many discussed the idea that they were worried about the strain on their relationships. For most of them, having their spouses support them and building a support system for themselves and their children was essential. In some cases, a closer relationship between the couples emerged.

When discussing the topic of her spouse, Linda quickly described what type of spouse she

had:

> I worked from home for a company in New York as a trends analyst for 14 years because I had children and wanted to be a full-time mother. My husband was working and travelling and was not involved in raising our daughters, physically or emotionally. Everything was on my shoulders. My husband would always insult me by degrading my work and [being] condescending [about] my job. When I told him I was returning to school, he told me this was my problem, and I did not expect any support from him.

Ella realized that her schedule was a barrier; however, she stated that without her husband, she could not have completed her degree:

> I wouldn't have been able to do it. Because studying at midnight, without him, would have been hard. He would knock on my door and ask if I wanted a coffee. Would you like a sandwich? He would tell me not to study too hard. He was such a help.

Sophie said, "You have to have a solid relationship to survive." As with the majority of participants, Lily disclosed:

> My husband was behind me, going to school full time, and he knew he had to step up to take care of the children and household. It is good this way because you have all the support you need.

Emma was very open to saying:

> My partner was very supportive when I decided to return to school. We took in a tenant to help with finances; my friends and family were very supportive. My father, however, was not supportive. He did not believe in education. I am proud to be a first-generation graduate.

Sue realized that a spouse's support is an important factor in successfully completing a degree. She explained:

> One thing we need as mature students is the support of a spouse. The spouse needs to understand that, once in a while, the student needs to go to a conference because it's part of the academic game to present research. I recognize my position as a privileged person—like, my husband is a doctor who gives me much support.

As soon as the researcher discussed the topic of spouses, Ava articulated that:

> The support of my family, especially my husband, is what allowed me to return to school. He kept telling me we were okay. He said I could work and study part time and encouraged me to continue. He told me not to worry about the house or the kids and [he] would take care of that. He told me that when I was happy, the kids were happy, and the house was happy. Everybody is happy, and you have the right to live a happy life.

Because of her willingness to return to higher education, Evelyn described how the relationship with her husband flourished, as he was her coach and strongest supporter:

> I bought a book, the basics of high school topics, to learn, and I studied that book page by page. I had to pass an English test at the college as an exit exam, since I did not go to high school before they would look at my admissions documents. My husband sat with me, showing me math. He is good at math. So, he was showing me what to do. He took me … through the book and I was doing math but the writing was hard, since English was not my first language. When I took the test, I got a call that I had passed the test above average. I was so proud. My husband was proud and told me I would help him. Our relationship had changed because before he did his things and I did mine. Now I ask for help, which is part

of the change in our relationship.

Dispositional Barriers

Cross (1981) described dispositional barriers as attitudes and perceptions about oneself as a learner. For example, individuals may feel that they are too old to learn, lack interest in learning, or lack the ability to learn.

For the participants in this research study, the main dispositional barriers were educational history, academic backgrounds, and the stigma of returning to education at an older age. Like many adult learners, their focus was on earning their degrees. The participants were concerned with their past and current educational experiences. When they re-entered classes with younger students, they realized that they looked considerably older than those students. Not only did they look older than the younger students, but they often also looked older than the professors.

A few participants were ambivalent about the age gap, stating that they had real-life work experiences that superseded those of the inexperienced professors. The participants realized that, while they were a part of who they were, their experiences could not replace the professor's knowledge nor a working dynamic with the younger students.

I became aware of the validation a few participants needed when they discussed their work experiences and stated that they were experts in their domain. Some participants believed that the younger students needed to acknowledge that the information provided by younger professors was not based on experience, and a few took on the role of teacher to help the younger students. For example, Lily stated that:

I might be older than the others, but I have more experience, which made me a better student. I wear two hats: student and professor. I have the same challenges as my younger

colleagues. The students ask me to help them because I have work experience.

The participants' overconfidence was a negative factor in some instances. They took on the role of teacher rather than that of student, which could have confused the younger students.

Educational Barriers

Educational barriers are defined as obstacles or challenges that can impede a person's access to, progress in, or completion of an education. Cross (1981) referred to these barriers as internal or external factors hindering learning or educational attainment. For example, a lack of access to quality education or the presence of discrimination and/or language barriers make it difficult for individuals to pursue or succeed in their educational goals.

When Sophie decided to do her Ph.D., her supervisor advised her to write it in English rather than in French. She described her reaction:

> When I decided to do a Ph.D., I spoke with my professor to discuss my options. He said I should do the Ph.D. in English, as it would be more beneficial. I always studied in French, and it would be a challenge for me [to write in English]. I asked myself if I should switch to English. I realized everything would be in English, but at the end of the day, I knew studying in English was the right thing to do.

As a retired teacher, Alice had started a Master's in Education but had to stop because of her heavy teaching workload and other commitments. Once she retired, she returned to university and completed her degree. She observed:

> I had a basic teaching degree like all the others when I started teaching. It was important for me to complete a master's degree, and even though I waited until I retired, the benefits of being with a group of other teachers made me feel good about doing it.

Emma reminisced about her life as a younger student and her regrets:

> As a younger student, I was too busy enjoying the university experience and had less time to study. I have a ten-year spread between my completed master's degree and my Ph.D., which I am starting . I wish I would have known better. I am a better student now.

Sue's story was different. She had multiple graduate degrees and decided she wanted to be a professor. She enrolled in the Ph.D. program and was accepted. The issue was that, as she stated:

> From the list of courses I had to take, I realized I needed to gain prior knowledge to continue in the program. When I asked my supervisor if I could take different elective sources, he said no. This was a rude awakening for me, and it was much scrambling, but I made it work.

Evelyn quickly realized she could not be admitted to college as a mature student without a high school diploma. Her fear and disappointment, which were evident as she recounted her experience, brought her to tears. She stated: "As an immigrant coming to this country, I realize I am branded without a high school diploma. I am considered as not worthy of anything. I also don't speak French—so many hurdles."

Previous Academic Backgrounds

Academic background refers to an individual's educational history and qualifications. The concept encompasses the schools, colleges, and universities attended; degrees awarded; courses taken; and academic achievements earned. Based on the participants' responses to their educational barriers, I decided to delve into the participants' academic backgrounds to examine whether their educational barriers influenced or limited their future opportunities and choices.

When I asked the participants about their backgrounds, many shared their experiences and the

types of degrees they held. However, they also stated that their degrees needed to be more recently awarded, while some wished they had focused more on their studies when they were younger. Others were embarrassed to state that they had not finished school and were motivated to return and have a second chance at further education. One attribute they all had in common was that they were receiving better grades in their current studies than when they first attended high school or post-secondary education. They stated that they were now more determined to succeed, working harder, and more motivated to complete their new degrees.

Ava described her background education negatively:

> My experience was not positive. As an adult immigrating from a communist country, I was taught that my voice was shut down, that I was not allowed to express myself, and that everyone had to conform to a one-size-fits-all standard. Finally, when I came to this country, where everybody was allowed to do pretty much anything they wanted, unfortunately for me, my past education was not recognized, which hurt my ego, self-esteem, and everything about me.

Ella stated that, when she first attended university in France, she was less studious:

> When I was in my early twenties, I got a double master's degree. I had no responsibilities and was privileged to go to university. Today, I am a super dedicated student, and I love learning and acquiring new knowledge. I think that, when I first attended university, I was [not as aware] of the need for education as I am today.

Gendered Ageism

In the results of this study, the participants made a strong distinction between age discrimination and gender discrimination. In their narratives, they put a stronger emphasis on

ageism. Yet despite this finding, the concept of gendered ageism, which combines these two aspects, may still be helpful for understanding some of the phenomena the participants were experiencing. According to Marcus's (2021) research study, her findings described that if ageism is undoubtably problematic for older workers' identity process, ageism and gender-stereotypes represent a double-risk for women over 50 in the workplace. Policies about hiring, firing, promotions, or compensation reveal the underlying biases such older women endure more employment rejections than older men (Higgins-Dunn, 2019).

When Butler introduced the concept of ageism in 1969, it primarily aimed to highlight forms of marginalization and discrimination that older people were exposed to. Rooted in social movements, the debate revolved around identity politics with an ambition to expose unique forms of discrimination faced by diverse social groups that were, however, approached from the perspective of a homogeneous collective (Addelson and Potter 1991; Mirza 1997).

Age has steadily become recognized as a producer of social division, with a role as a social and identity marker, but also underlining its power in defining social relations, giving rise to institutions and creating inequalities of the first categories used to complicate the understanding of ageism was gender.

The term "gendered ageism" was introduced by Itzin and Phillipson (1993, 1995) in their study of age barriers at work where they focused particularly on gender in both the private and public sector. Since then, gendered ageism has been defined in a range of ways. One recurrent definition describes it as a double jeopardy,

where two interacting power systems lead to an increased vulnerability (Barrett and Naiman-Sessions 2016; Handy and Davy 2007; Walker 1998). In gendered ageism, the perspective of double jeopardy emphasizes the dominance of patriarchal norms combined with a preoccupation with youth that results in a faster deterioration of older women's status compared to that of men (Barrett and Naiman-Sessions, 2016). Gendered ageism is a complex issue in today's society. The discrimination embedded in social institutions-laws, social norms, and practices is a key driver of this inequality, perpetrating gender gaps in education, employment and health, and hindering the process towards rights-based social transformation.

When Linda entered the classroom, she was surprised by the reaction she received from professors and younger students: "The younger professors were very nice, but I felt awkward with the younger students and older professors, especially when the younger students thought I was the teacher." Lily remarked:

> Today's universities do not see anything but traditional students. Anyone else is an outlier. We do not follow the same golden path as the traditional students. We do not take everything that the professor says at face value. Many older women who return to school with experiences question what the professor regurgitates to the traditional students.

Similarly, Sue stated:

> If I am being honest, the institutions do not want non-traditional students. It is not fair that non-traditional students are excluded from student leadership roles. If they are allowed to join, it is usually because the university has to represent a mixed student population so as to not to look like they discriminate. I felt intimidated by the professors because I had twenty years of work experience and the younger teachers had no experience and did not

> have the correct information when they taught the class; they just said anything even though it was wrong. I realized at this point that I had to be diplomatic if I wanted to continue. The students spoke with me for information and not the younger teachers. My clash was with the professors and not the students.

She went on to illustrate the stereotype of adult learners entering the classroom:

> The stereotype for adult learners is that if you're coming in as an adult, you will not be taken seriously and will not measure up. At first, surrounded by all these younger students, I felt that they had all the time in the world to do research, and they were holding me back with their lack of experience. I think these younger students did not succeed because they had never experienced failure.

Ella revealed that she had been out of school for twenty years, and the idea of returning was exciting yet intimidating. She reflected on age as a barrier and continued by saying:

> I worry that I will be the oldest in the classroom and think about how I was when I was a young student, 23–24 years old, and did not realize the privilege I had of being able to go to university. Now, it is different: I have a full-time job and am a part-time student. I also have a family.

Since it took Sophie two years before she was ready to start her Ph.D., she noticed that the traditional students had a different mindset to hers. She explained:

> I have professional experience and am talking with people who are just studying and have never been in the job market. These are the ones who do the whole school thing and need to understand that they are not the only ones in the classroom.

Sue was conscious of the fact that the traditional students and her supervisor never let her be part

of the inner circle. She disclosed that:

> Being different was very important to me, and it would not have worked if I followed the path my supervisor had laid out for me. I had to become entrepreneurial and set out another path for myself. So, for example, I wanted a placement at an elite school when I completed my Ph.D., but as a non-traditional student coming in, forget it, it would have never happened. I finished my Ph.D.in three years and nine months because I said to my new supervisor that I had a life to return to. I was so motivated to leave there that I graduated before all those traditional jokers. After[ward,] they had the nerve to come to me to help them look for jobs.

Institutional Barriers

In adult education, the term institutional barriers refers to those of an educational institutions' policies, practices, or structural constraints that hinder adult learners' access, participation, and/or success (Fairchild, 2003). These barriers may impede the pursuit of a higher education, skill development, and lifelong learning for individuals returning to education as adults.

When this study's participants decided to return to higher education, they did not realize the setbacks they would encounter. For many of the participants, the biases and marginalization they experienced (coming from admissions offices, faculty members, and younger traditional students) meant that the experience of returning to school was not what they thought it would be. The lack of equity was indicated by, for example, being blocked from funding because of their student profiles; a lack of flexibility on the part of faculty members; and the unmistakable fact that institutions of higher learning do not acknowledge mature students (specifically mature female students) as part of their student population. The participants stressed that the subtle

nature of educators' and younger students' non-acceptance was an unwritten rule of how things worked. Since many of these participants were eager to learn and complete their degrees, the existing institutional culture was unacceptable and discriminatory.

The participants discussed the many institutional barriers they experienced, such as inflexible class schedules, a lack of recognition of prior learning, limited support services with admissions offices (specifically, the inadequate transfer of credits), and age-related discrimination. Although the participants were frustrated with this list of institutional barriers, the main themes that emerged as barriers were the roles played by their supervisors and the lack of recognition and support the participants received. Many recalled a time during their studies when, due to a lack of support, working in constant isolation took its toll. Feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety harmed their mental health. Social isolation seemed to pivot back and forth, moving from an institutional barrier to a dispositional one.

Supervisors

Institutions of higher learning often emphasize how education changes people's lives. Although many universities promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), the participants in this study did not believe that their institutions accepted and valued mature students as required by the DEI value system they promoted. Since mature female students pay the same tuition fees as traditional students, they expect the same quality of instruction. Many of the participants in this study believed that their most negative experience was with their professors, specifically with their supervisors. The sense of isolation and abandonment was significant for all the participants. Those participants who had past experiences with dismissive supervisors reported that they had quickly decided to change supervisors to eliminate the risk of wasted time and

energy.

The participants felt that taking on one more stress factor, such as their supervisors' lack of awareness of their specific needs and challenges, would not be part of their return to higher learning, as they had endured the issue of problematic supervisors as younger, traditional students. Many discussed the implicit biases their supervisors would impose on them, such as the assumption that they lacked the time to fulfil their commitments to their studies due to all the barriers they had in their lives. The participants felt that part of being a non-traditional student was the need to work in isolation because their supervisors did not make the time to meet with them.

When Ella decided to start her master's degree, she asked the director of studies at her college if she would want to be her supervisor. The director accepted, and Ella started the process of establishing her course schedule. Once everything was set up, her supervisor told her she was taking sick leave. Ella explained the dilemma she found herself in:

> After the sick leave, my supervisor told me she was going on maturity leave. I had waited two years for her, so I asked her, "Are you still willing to be my supervisor?" After two years of nothing, I had finished all my core classes, and she had first told me she was coming back, and then she sent me an email saying to find someone else. I had to start back at zero because I had finished my essay writing. A new supervisor meant new ideas, context, and numbers; everything changed in two years.

After she had completed her master's degree, Sophie decided that she wanted to continue teaching and decided to start her Ph.D. When I asked about her supervisor, she declared:

> I had a terrible experience with my supervisor. My first supervisor for my master's was a

woman. She was a real mean person. The stuff she said to me was things I could not have imagined, like I was the worst student she ever had. Not something you say to a student. She was a really awful person, and it took me an extra two years to finish my master's, and then I took a three-year pause. When I decided to do the Ph.D., I chose as a supervisor a professor I had worked with in the past. He accepted, and he is a really nice person. I think the way you choose the person to be your supervisor is really important. You need a person who will never say mean things about you and support you. Sometimes, I would write stuff, and I wasn't very good, and he would tell me that writing does not define me.

Mia had selected a supervisor without any prior experience. She recalled her experience:

He was very helpful, but the only thing, and I knew this, was that it was his first time as a supervisor. I got all the help I needed. I could have asked someone with more experience, so I kind of navigated on my own. I had heard that most supervisors are hard to work with. My supervisor was easy to work with, but he did not have the experience I needed.

Lily quickly decided to change her supervisor. She recounted her story:

I changed my supervisor immediately. Perhaps I would have stayed with the same supervisor if I had been younger. The reason I changed my supervisor is that I am a very organized and independent person. I wanted a supervisor who would [reply to] my questions in a decent time frame. My supervisor never took the time to answer my emails even for simple things like funding. I was worried that this would stop my advancement, and I am happy I changed to someone else. My new supervisor allows me to do what I want and has confidence in me. It is going very well.

Sue described her experience with her first supervisor as a constant battle of wits. Because

Sue was a professional in her industry, the new role of student was not easy. She explained:

> All of your time, energy, and passion are going to be surrendered to your supervisor. I was a professional before I went into the Ph.D., and I would have people working for me. We had all kinds of fights because I told him "You don't understand, I have all these other commitments, and you expect me to drop everything and come to be at your discretion." This was a problem I quickly became aware of, so it worked better when I found a supervisor who was more aligned, in terms of lifestyle, with me. My first supervisor knew I was a professional with experience, and he told me that no one cared about my experience. I think that the first barrier is you are willing to give up … being ready to deconstruct and reconstruct yourself. And I think, coupled with that, is finding the institution that is willing to take a chance on you because they don't see you as a sure thing ... Because people don't understand that you had a life before your life now as a student. I think the people who have a good experience are those fully immersed in their Ph.D. and have nothing else to do. I got extra coaching that I paid for myself because my supervisor was not going to waste his time with me.

Social Isolation

Social isolation has been defined as a state in which an individual lacks a sense of social connectedness, which leads to feelings of loneliness, exclusion or disconnection from others (Sutton, 2016, p. 278). Many of the participants felt they had no social interaction with their professors or classmates because of their work and family obligations. Working during the day on projects was hard because the mature women had different schedules to the traditional students and because their supervisors kept arranging meeting times during the day. The

participants worked alone and felt that the lack of communication with others was an impediment that affected their university experiences. Ava recalled her experience when trying to find a classmate to work with for an assignment: “I asked the student if she was alone, and she said yes. When I asked her when we could meet, she said she would contact me … She never did. I ended up doing the project myself.” Sue discussed the isolation she faced when doing work in the late evening after she had put her baby to sleep:

> I work alone because I want to get my work done. I think about the stress I am under, but the lack of conversation with people working on the same things as me is causing me lots of stress. What a paradox of wanting to work alone and being alone to work.

Ella described the isolation she felt as she was doing her degree online: “Doing my classes online helps me balance my schedule; however, I am all alone. My new supervisor does not contact me; the other students have their own lives.”

Reflections

The participants’ experiences were discussed using a storytelling method, thereby providing advice through examples of the issues encountered and recommendations for future mature women who decide to return to higher education. When telling stories of how they overcame their fears and took control of their lives, the participants’ demeanors altered, and they spoke of change instead of barriers.

Retrospection

When I asked Sophie what she would advise other mature women to consider when deciding whether to return to higher education, she said:

> The first piece of advice would be to have support or psychological support when you're doing a Ph.D. It's not because you are not strong. It's because sometimes stuff happens, and it affects our confidence. Bring yourself back to reality and remember you are good at something and get back to that.

Mia stated that the courage and strength of mature women who decide to return to school are different to those of traditional students:

> I define a non-traditional student as somebody who can find [the] discipline [to] follow courses, find motivation, and do the work. Energy, determination, discipline, and no matter what you know, it's not easy. Most people define the non-traditional student as being out of the system for a while and then going back. It is very hard to adapt, but it happens.

Alice believed that a community where mature women could gather should be established: "a safe space for mature women to discuss and share thoughts; a place that provides empathy amongst mature women." Evelyn added to the question of what advice she would share with other mature women: "Even though you are stressed and don't have confidence in yourself, the confidence will come. Don't take things so seriously. We put too much pressure on ourselves."

Transformation

I noted that the element of change became apparent as the participants shared their thoughts and reflections on their experiences of returning to higher education. Feelings of confidence, self-esteem, and empowerment emerged from the discussions. Mia described her experience of returning to school as a life-changing experience:

> Going back to school as a student is always a good thing. We remember what it is to be a student and forget how to be a teacher. Returning to school gave me confidence, tools,

options, and even flexibility because I can manage independently.

Alice discussed change in the following way: “Personal growth comes naturally. Transformation or change is one of the best unexpected events when mature women return to school.” Ava declared:

> I believe in possibilities and what you tell yourself about true values. I value myself for who I am and should be able to navigate the world. I don’t know if it is psychological, but it has to do with your past experiences because that is who you are today. Maybe this brought me to education, keeping that model in my head all the time. Like you change yourself, and while you change yourself, you change your environment and everybody around you. Everybody has an experience, and everybody has baggage. It’s how you transform yourself to be better. Education allowed me to explore the unknown and opened my mind without realizing it. I believe education empowers people. I learned so much about myself.

Future Goals

Many of the participants first decided to return to higher education to access better career opportunities and strengthen their skill sets and knowledge. As they started their courses and continued in their degree programs, the participants realized that they enjoyed learning. When I asked them about their future goals, they unanimously said that they wished to continue learning. The continuous stream of lifelong learning will now always be part of them.

Ella was very determined to return to start a Ph.D. after she finished her master’s. She stated:

> I want to do something that crosses all of my experiences. I built my career on management. I want to optimize the business side I get from my father and the writing side

> I get from my mother. I want to study in a Ph.D. program, writing about business and maybe writing about how to teach business. I would promote performance and lifelong learning.

Emma observed:

> Returning to university as an older student was something I wanted to do. Many of my old family habits stayed in my head about what I [would] do with a degree … lifelong learning in other skills, such as a musical instrument. My academic future is to go to conferences, learn more about my topic, and be part of long conversations with academics.

Conclusion

The three main barriers mature women encounter when returning to higher education and the themes that emerged from the responses are explored further in the following discussion chapter. Applying past and current empirical findings from the literature review to the results, theoretical frameworks will be used to authenticate and highlight the mature women's experiences.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

The results chapter presented the main categories of research questions; the questions dealt with the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers mature women have faced upon their return to higher education. Each main category was divided into sub-categories, representing the specific barriers these mature women encountered. This study has sought to explore the challenges and barriers mature women face when returning to higher education and to address the problem statement of why mature women have yet to receive recognition and equity as part of the mainstream educational system. The following discussion recounts the major themes that emerged during the participants' interviews. Through an in-depth data analysis and a careful deconstruction of the interview transcripts, the responses provide substantial data that answers the research questions.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this study addresses the 50-year gap between previous research on the mature female students of the 1970s and recent studies of 21st-century mature women who return to education. Unsurprisingly, some of the current studies' findings are similar to those of the 20th-century studies. They include data such as the responsibilities mature women continue to have in familial and domestic affairs, the stigma of being judged as being too old to return to learning, and the institutional focus assigned to traditional students and the disregard for non-traditional students with out-group status in higher education. Bauer and Mott (1990) stated that non-traditional female students experience the competing pressure of childcare, financial, and school-related responsibilities. The additional responsibilities introduce

a variety of barriers and challenges that impact mature women's academic experiences.

The first part of the discussion chapter outlines the barriers and challenges mature women have faced upon their return to higher education and the different types of marginalization they have experienced. This discussion summarizes the key findings from the research, linking these findings to the main research question: "How do situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers impede non-traditional mature women's return to higher education?" The results are divided into sections related to each specific barrier, and previous research is reviewed to answer the following sub-questions:

a) How do situational barriers affect domestic relationships and impact the family dynamic?

b) How do mature female students perceive themselves compared to their peers?

c) Do institutions of higher learning provide a culture of community for all students?

The participants' candor and straightforwardness on the subject of childcare, prior education, work, institutional biases, and the lack of support offered provide an insight into the many positive and negative experiences these mature women have faced. Like McLaren's (1985) study on mature women returning to higher education, this study corroborates the overwhelming experiences the participants have endured, such as levels of concern and anxiety regarding their age and integration with other students.

Ageism and inequity in the treatment of mature female students are the two major findings of this study. Surprisingly, ageism is a concept the participants confronted only once they had entered their chosen post-secondary institution. They were surprised to see how 21st-century educational institutions reinforce the discriminatory ideals of their faculty members, especially given that the institutions themselves proudly promote equality, diversity, and inclusion for all

their students.

Building on its findings of ageism, this study diverges from the existing literature on gendered ageism and the role played by gender and age. The participants stated that the ageist attitudes they have been confronted with (from both faculty members and traditional students) have no interconnection with their gender and age. This is because they see gender bias and ageism as a workplace risk; these types of discrimination should not be found in an educational environment, which is supposed to be a safe space. One participant stated, "Age is part of life, and gender has nothing to do with it because getting old is not gender specific."

The participants wanted to be treated fairly and recognized as students, without the labels of "non-traditional" or "mature." They stated that putting labels on individuals is another form of discrimination. According to Kasworm (1993), adult students are often labeled with special words, such as "non-traditional," "commuter," or "re-entry." These labels define them in the college environment as other, marginal, and needy. Sissel et al. (2001) stated that "some observers may dismiss labels as mere descriptors, but in fact, such language is political, not only because of the lack of privilege it may signify but because labels affect expectations and influence the actions of educators" (pp. 19–20).

When discussing inequity as a key finding, the participants stated that universities are designed for traditional students. The participants believed that traditional students have greater advantages offered them and more opportunities than non-traditional students in areas such as funding and easier access to faculty members. Faculty members' implicit biases about mature students, such as their assumptions (based on age) about the students' abilities and motivations, lead to unequal treatment and/or lowered expectations. Sissel et al. (2001) validated the

participants' remarks by affirming that colleges and universities often assume that they will be interacting with youths who are transitioning to adulthood; thus, the attitudes and behaviours of administrators, support staff, and faculty, as well as these institutions' policies and procedures, are frequently condescending to mature students and do not account for adult lifestyles and the complexities found therein. In the interviews, the participants reiterated several times that they were a part of their university's out-group.

The second part of this discussion chapter is organized as a series of recommendations based on future research, policy, and practice. Because of the multiplicity of issues and setbacks the mature female students have encountered, the key findings provide recommendations for policy and practice. The aim is to help policymakers and institutions forge new policy changes based on this study's findings about the needs of mature students. These recommendations are supported throughout the existing literature—specifically, by Kasworm (1993), Kasworm et al. (2000), and Schlossberg et al. (1993), who all stated that the experiences of adult learners in higher education and their needs, interests, and styles have been largely neglected. The recommendations for future research include advice on how future researchers can expand on this study's coverage of the needs and experience of mature female students.

Situational, Dispositional, and Institutional Barriers

When reviewing this study's findings on situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers, the results were found to support both the older and more recent literature on the topic. These findings include a desire to change career path—often described as the "encore career" (Banks, 2007; Freedman, 2007; Wofford, 2008)—economic reasons such as maintaining their marketability and competitiveness within the workforce (Go, 2008), or other life changes. Many

of the participants felt that their past lives had held them back from attaining their goals and creating the necessary aspirations to pursue them. A return to education required that they take responsibility for and ownership of their learning, thereby providing themselves with a second chance to finish their studies and complete a degree. The second chances they hoped for (for example, to complete their degrees and improve their lifestyles) also generated an inner change in them.

Freire (1974) stated that "emancipation through education is possible, it involves the active participation and critical forces of the oppressed themselves, an 'education of equals' based on 'an active, dialogical, critical and criticism-stimulating method'" (p. 45). McClaren (1985) discussed this further in her study:

> My interest in these women stemmed from my concern with the larger problem of how women struggle to make something of their lives … They shared a strong belief that education was a viable route by which to reach their objectives … They hoped that a return to education would improve their status, income, conditions of employment, knowledge autonomy, and sense of well-being. (p. 149)

Like McClaren's participants, the participants in this research study were not a homogeneous group of middle-aged women. They are mature women who have struggled, in their own ways, to be full-time employees, students, and caregivers. Some of the participants are individuals who immigrated to Canada in search of a better life; they quickly realized that their prior educational experiences were invalid in Canada and had to adapt to a new educational system. Others are mature women who wanted to advance in their careers but still carried the responsibilities of primary caregivers.

The 21st-century mature women in this research study have different lives, needs, and expectations that prompted their return to higher education. This study analyzes these contributing factors, finding that while the participants have dissimilar backgrounds and needs, they all had high expectations of their return to education. For many, this education was a way to upgrade their skill sets, create better career opportunities, and prove to themselves that they could separate themselves from their domestic obligations and roles as primary caregivers. The literature has highlighted the considerable structural challenges that caregivers face as they navigate access to opportunities outside their caring responsibilities in the home. Clements (2013) stated:

> Women often bear the burden of caregiving within families, including care for children, elderly parents, or other dependents. Juggling these responsibilities alongside educational pursuits can be challenging. These responsibilities can include time constraints due to the caregiving demands significant time and attention, leaving limited time for studying. (pp. 107–117)

The study's findings support prior research, such as Pascall and Cox's (1993) study on mature women, and expands on the additional responsibilities and roles the 21st-century mature student must accept. Pascall and Cox's (1993) study found that women had high expectations of their education: they wanted it to move them out of domesticity and unfulfilling paid work. More importantly, Pascall and Cox (1993) found that the women's education provided them with an opportunity to change their lives and undermine the gender oppression that they had experienced in society. According to Mezirow (1978a):

> At first, women in the academic programs may not be ready for an extended process of

> self-development. Nevertheless, they inevitably find themselves caught up in pressures for change—from the new awareness of increased options, gains in their sense of competence and self-confidence, group support, an ethos reinforcing the ideology of personal responsibility, and continued contact with concerned staff. (p. 10)

Responsibility is thereby placed on the individual to take control over their learning, working toward the promise of self-fulfillment and emancipation (Collins, 1996, p. 112).

Situational Barriers

Situational barriers are "deterrents that occur as adults attempt to balance multiple roles arising from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints" (Cross, 1981, p. 98). When returning to higher education, mature female students tend to occupy multiple roles, each with their respective responsibilities. These roles are particularly family oriented. The literature defines "family" as a complex situational barrier because of the additional responsibilities that introduce a variety of obstacles and challenges. Clements (2013) pointed out that caring is engendered because many women undertake the most caring responsibilities for their families. Women often bear the burden of caregiving within families; this may include taking responsibility for the care of children, elderly parents, and/or other dependents.

Throughout the literature review and in this study's key results, the situational barriers the participants encountered were obstacles that encompassed childcare, domestic relationships, job obligations, and financial and school-related responsibilities. The constant juggling of these multiple roles often led the participants to prioritize things that were necessary to the family structure, putting these ahead of their own needs. Parker et al. (1993) stated that cultural norms

and expectations create the guilt these carers often experience should they not step up and undertake their assigned caring role.

Childcare-Related

For many women, Cross's (1981) definition of situational barriers has proved to be a harsh reality; the multiple roles, lack of time, and guilt of contemplating a return to education have manifested due to society's expectations that women's main priorities are their family and children. The mature women in this research study carefully considered the need for flexible and reliable childcare and realized that they could not continue their studies without help. They felt that a lack of support often made them question whether they had decided to return to education too quickly. According to McGivney (2004), family support is significant in adult female learners' academic experiences. In other words, a lack of support from family members impedes mature female students' educational progress (Jacobs & King, 2002; Kasworm, 2003; Levitt, 1989; McGivney, 2004).

Financial

Family commitments can lead to financial constraints in that educational resources must be used for family needs, such as childcare, household expenses, or medical costs. The participants in this study were transparent when discussing their financial situations. Even though most of the participants stated they were financially stable because of their full- or part-time jobs, a few stated that they depended on their spouses for financial support. Throughout the interviews, those who did not work and were financially dependent often mentioned that returning to education would be easier if they were to have access to the grants and scholarships the traditional students are offered so they could be financially independent and not have to worry that they might need

to leave school. The literature has shown that finances play an important role in completing academic goals. According to Fairchild (2003), finances play a significant role in the ability of non-traditional female students to complete their academic goals. In McGivney's (1993) research, finance is the second most frequently cited problem (after the lack of childcare) for women wishing to enter education or training.

Spousal

Unlike the question of childcare (where the role of the mother was given core emphasis by all participants), surprisingly, the question on spouses received different responses. Two of the participants were single mothers who were raising their children alone. One of the participants said she and her ex-partner shared parental duties and were always available to help each other if needed. The shared parental support enabled the participant to continue her studies and not worry about her children.

In comparison, the other single mother was disappointed and contemptuous when the discussion turned to her ex-spouse. She quickly stated that her ex-husband never shared in any child-raising activities nor helped with anything else in the household. The emotions emanating from the participant were anger and hurt. She added that there was no physical or emotional support by her ex-spouse for her or her children. The other participants stated they were surprised and often shocked by their spouses' willing adoption of supportive roles. A key phrase surfaced: "He believes in me." Another notable finding is that the participants described how their relationships with their spouses became closer. This discovery illustrates a pattern of spousal support, the strengthening of the spousal relationship, and the power of the family unit.

The findings on the topic of "spouse" seem to diverge to some extent from those of past

empirical studies, which were more negative on this point. In their studies on mature women, Edwards (1993), Leonard (1994), and McLaren (1985) discussed impacts on the relationships of women studying in higher education. Leonard (1994) attributed a husband's discontent with their partner to the fear that traditional roles within the family may be eroded: "Disapproval can be particularly acute if participation is seen to threaten gender roles. Married men, in particular, fear that their partners' educational endeavours will affect the relationship and that household obligations will be traded against university obligations" (pp. 169–170).

Merrill (1999) went further than Leonard (1994) by arguing that the issues were not only concerned with tasks and roles within the family but also with power and male hegemony within the home. She stated that "some husbands feared that knowledge, education, and possible future employment gained by their partners would give them the power to challenge male hegemony within the family" (p.160). In Merrill's (1999) study regarding mature working-class women returning to education, she noted that some women in the study attempted to explain and justify their partners' behaviour.

However, a study by van Rhijn et al. (2018) on the intimate relationships of partnered mature students in post-secondary education produced results that showed a greater similarity with this research study's findings. In van Rhijn et al. (2018), the authors findings concluded there is bidirectional influences between intimate relationships and post-secondary study, noting that "the transition to post-secondary education can have negative consequences for intimate partnered relationships. Nevertheless, the mature students also reported the positive impacts on intimate relationships such as increase in self-esteem, appreciating their partner's support, and having new opportunities to bond with their partner" (p.18). Negative consequences can include

psychological distance between the couple, social isolation (Gilbert, 1982), conflict, arguments, and being unable to resolve problems (Gold, 2006). The negative impacts on mature students' intimate relationships include not having enough time to spend with their partner, decreased desire and time for intimacy, and conflicts with new roles or expectations.

Although this research study's participants were more likely to identify the negative impacts that attending post-secondary had on their relationships, they noted some positive impacts, such as increased self-confidence due to a sense of purpose and the formation of new bonds, connections, and experiences due to the ability to have open conversations. Most of the participants in this research study had positive results because they "shared" their return-to-education experience with their spouse.

In summary, the findings on and emerging themes from the category of situational barriers support those of the earlier empirical studies in terms of the multiplicity of mature female students' roles (such as their domestic obligations and the role of caregiver). However, the present study also widened its search to discover how its participants' lives and experiences differ from those of mature women as reported in past studies. The mature women in the past studies were a homogeneous group who returned to education for many different reasons, such as starting a degree, pursuing lifelong learning, or seeking personal growth. The participants in this study are a diverse group of mature women who are assertive, focused, and committed to completing their degrees. Despite all the obstacles they have faced (such as childcare issues, rigid employers, and temperamental spousal support), these participants have accomplished the goal of completing their degrees.

The sub-research question on situational barriers asked, "How do situational barriers affect

domestic relationships and the impact on family dynamics?" The findings support those of past empirical studies in relation to childcare, the need for support, the role of the caregiver, the abundance of time spent caring for children and elderly parents, and the limited free time. However, what differs from past studies is that most of the participants have supportive spouses and better financial situations because they are full- or part-time working professionals; this pre-existing spousal and familial support alleviated stress and meant that their return to education did not affect the family dynamic.

This research study has contributed to the literature on the topic by expanding on the situational barriers and exploring how a supportive home base can allow mature women to return to education. Contrasting with some past studies, the findings provide new insights into the participants' home lives, the role of the 21st-century family, and the link between these findings and student success.

Dispositional Barriers

Cross (1981) described dispositional barriers as attitudes and perceptions about oneself as a learner. For example, individuals may feel that they are too old to learn, lack interest in learning, or lack the ability to learn. McGivney (1993) defined dispositional barriers as "obstacles linked with the learners' attitudes, perceptions, and motivations that need to be addressed by tutors or mentors" (p. 10). Bell (2012) stated that "dispositional barriers refer to students' perceptions of the ability to access and complete learning activities, and due to their age, older students have negative perceptions of their ability related to learning" (as cited in Shelton, 2021, pp. 31–32). Throughout the interviews, the findings on dispositional barriers overlapped with those on institutional barriers. The participants realized how feeling self-conscious about one's past (in

terms of where they went to school, their educational barriers, and experience of ageist attitudes) made them simultaneously frustrated and vulnerable.

The main dispositional barriers from this study were ageist attitudes, a lack of prior educational experiences, and previous academic backgrounds. For a few participants, the role of the student was humbling; as senior managers or full-time teachers, they found it difficult to reconcile their dual roles of authority figure and novice student.

Even though the participants were studying in different programs and were from different academic backgrounds, they shared similar emotions (such as anxiety) when discussing their experiences of joining a classroom filled with traditional students. As mentioned in Jameson and Fusco's (2014) study examining higher education, adult learners experience negative self-perceptions that serve as additional barriers to their learning, and anxiety increases with age. In McLaren's (1985) study on mature women returning to higher education, many participants found the initial experiences overwhelming:

> Entering a new educational institution often worries students about their academic abilities and the likelihood of staying in the program. For these students, the level of concern and anxiety was exceptionally high. Right from the start, the women voiced many of their concerns in conversation with one another. (p. 114)

Contrary to some of the literature on the effects of anxiety on older learners, some of the participants in this research study, who had attended post-secondary institutions in the past, were confident of their academic abilities and were high achievers. Conversely, anxiety was a deterrent for those participants who had been away from education for a substantial time and for those who had never attended a post-secondary institution.

When the topic of anxiety was discussed, the participants were more likely to explain how ageist attitudes and being part of the out-group accelerated their distrust of younger, traditional students than their academic abilities.

Ageist Attitudes

The existing literature defined gendered ageism as a "double jeopardy of age and gender when two interacting power systems lead to an increased vulnerability" (Itzin & Phillipson, 1993, p. 39). In the literature, for many mature women who decide to re-enter higher education, gendered ageism often occurs once they enter these institutions, are surrounded by younger students, and quickly realize they are part of the out-group. However, for the participants of the present study, the "gendered" aspect was not very strong. When discussing ageism, specifically gendered ageism, the participants did not see themselves as being discriminated against because they were female. Instead, they saw themselves as being discriminated against because they were perceived as old—a new concept for them. The ripple effect of being considered "old" and being segregated from the group was unacceptable.

Ageism is a major factor. For many of the participants, before returning to education, the idea of being seen as old was not something they thought about. The participants in their 30s still saw themselves as young; those in their 40s were not concerned about whether others thought of them as old; and those in their 50s remarked that ageism was not something they thought about. The harsh reality of being seen as physically older than the traditional students was unexpected. For many participants, it was only when friends and family reacted with comments such as "You are too old to go back to school" that they began to reflect on whether they were doing the right thing by returning to education.

The findings on gendered ageism and the participants' responses were unexpected. The participants did not perceive their gender as the cause of their out-group status. For them, the cause was societal norms affecting the perception of older individuals and the belief that they are less valuable or of no interest to society. The participants described how the prior and current knowledge they brought to the classroom, along with their life experiences, often frustrated the younger students and caused tension within the class dynamic. They believed that the traditional students did not see them as classmates but simply as older individuals who wanted a second chance. One of the participants, Ava, stated:

> I am my own person, so if you want to provide me with a community and a safe environment, allow me to be able to be part of the community of Concordia, and allow me to pick, maybe I want to be part of a community with all types of students.

Lack of Recent Educational Experiences

Since many of the participants had been out of the educational system for several years, they noticed a need to upgrade their skills. Because most of the participants had post-secondary degrees, their technical and writing skills were up to date with the requirements for higher education. However, they quickly understood that they needed new competencies or background knowledge to immerse themselves smoothly into the courses in some of the programs they entered. A few participants believed they had learning difficulties because they needed help understanding the material well. Others stated they had difficulties adapting to a new learning environment where they had to re-learn themselves and did not know what was expected from them.

Murphy and Fleming's (2000) study explored the experience of mature students returning to

university. The findings indicated that questions of equality and disadvantage in universities relate to the access to and accessibility of services by mature students when they arrive in college. Similar to this study's findings, some participants experienced significant problems due to their past educational barriers, such as the ability to write essays or undertake examinations. Much of the anxiety mature students experienced was as a result of not knowing what was expected from them.

The existing literature recognized that mature students could face a range of challenges (both academically and personally) when returning to education (Crogan, 1995; Heslop, 1996; Lynch, 1997; McGivney, 1990; Mulcahy et al., 2001; Rogers, 2002; Squires, 1994; Woodbyrne & Young, 1998). These challenges can include poor coping skills, unrecognized learning difficulties, and less confidence in their ability to learn alongside mainstream students. Snyder and Swann (1978) and Wlodkowski (1998) suspected that adult learners return to education with a fixed notion of what learning is, what education is, what intelligence is, and where they rate themselves on this elusive ladder. In Kelly's (2004) study on mature students returning to education, she stated that her respondents assumed that the mature student's prior knowledge and experience, which may have been gained through previous study, work, or general life experience, could affect the learning process. This finding encompasses the group dynamic between the mature and the mainstream student, the mature student's difficulty in applying practice to theory, their higher emotional investment in knowledge, and the presence of negative transfer learning. Kelly (2004) continued to reveal that mature students can experience alienation, anxiety, and insecurity, which (ironically) can masquerade as overconfidence or arrogance.

The participants in the present study realized that they had to adapt and understood that the transition would be arduous but worthwhile.

Previous Academic Backgrounds

For many participants, returning to higher education was a challenging activity. Many of the participants in the current study are in Ph.D. programs and are changing their career paths; their previous roles include senior manager in a prestigious accounting firm and university professor. Some of these participants started their education as traditional students years ago, setting themselves on the trajectory of industry professionals. Other participants are CEGEP professors who want to attain graduate degrees to increase their knowledge base and income. Others want to return to a new educational system to obtain a degree and thereby satisfy the competencies and skill-set requirements to allow them to work in Canada.

The participants discussed their experiences when first entering higher education as traditional students. Their dissatisfaction with their prior experiences affected their attitude to their current academic endeavours, as they were determined to take a much less passive attitude. They described how they would not tolerate the maltreatment offered by past supervisors and quickly changed their unsatisfactory supervisors when they returned to higher education. The participants' past experiences changed their behaviours, turning them from passive traditional students to assertive mature students. The participants stated that they were more aware of what they wanted to accomplish and wished they had worked harder when they were traditional students. They asserted that they have transformed into independent and autonomous students. As self-regulated students, they are conscious of the work they have to do and are goal-driven to succeed.

The existing literature provided a great deal of research on the self-regulatory aspects of learning: namely, students' awareness of themselves as learners and the strategies they select to complete their work (Pintrich et al., 1993; Winne, 1995; Zimmerman et al., 1988). According to Archer et al. (1999), effective learners possess and use their knowledge about the learning process, allowing them to organize, plan, and monitor their learning.

Dispositional and institutional barriers overlap in discussions about faculty members, specifically supervisors, and feelings of low motivation and self-doubt. According to Falasca (2011), dispositional barriers include psychological issues that cause low motivation, low self-esteem, embarrassment, and fear of failure. These dispositional barriers are derived from the mental or emotional attitudes experienced by adult learners in their learning environment. A lack of interest and faculty biases often discourage mature students from continuing and cause them to leave their programs.

Institutional Barriers

In adult education, the term "institutional barriers" refers to those of educational institutions' policies, practices, or structural constraints that hinder adult learners' access, participation, and success (Fairchild, 2003). These barriers may impede the pursuit of higher education, skill development, and lifelong learning for individuals returning to education as adults. However, as discussed in the dispositional barriers section, there is a fine line between dispositional and institutional barriers due to factors such as lack of confidence and self-esteem; what begins as social exclusion quickly escalates to social isolation. At the same time, the underwhelming performance of supervisors and the lack of interest from faculty members led the participants to understand the well-documented phenomenon of the "invisibility" of mature students. In their

findings, Deshler and Grundens-Schuck (2000) mirrored the participants' view of invisibility. They stated that the silence and invisibility of adult learners in the politics of knowledge construction need to be changed. Schlossberg et al. (1989) also added that the silence and invisibility of adult learners in higher education are so pervasive that, with rare exceptions, higher education administrators and student affairs professionals do not include information on adults as learners as part of their professional preparations (Kasworm et al., 2000). Sissel et al. (2001) described the adult learner as invisible and less critical to the traditional core student group. Whether in terms of policies, programs, attitudes, classroom environments, or funding support, adult learners face institutional neglect, prejudice, and the denial of opportunities. As a traditionally overlooked population, the participants stated that institutional barriers are the ones they have the least control over and are the most frustrating for them.

Social Isolation

Due to the participants' out-group status, they often found working alone to be a better option. Previous findings have described the emotional aspects of returning to education and feeling alone and disconnected from student life. Nicholson (2012) defined social isolation as "a state in which an individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimum number of social contacts, and is deficient in fulfilling quality relationships" (p. 137). With a gap in their educational careers and different responsibilities, adult learners may feel more acutely than their younger peers that they need to belong (Reay, 2004; Reay et al., 2003). Difficulties in adapting and being isolated as a learner are primarily viewed by the literature as having a negative impact, although research detailing this issue is limited (Doman & Roux, 2010; Ryan & Glenn, 2010).

However, contrary to the empirical studies' findings on social isolation, the participants often chose to self-isolate due to the multiplicity of their roles and time management issues rather than for social reasons. They found that, by working around their schedules, they did not need to schedule meeting times with other students and their work was completed on time.

Inequity

The existing literature has provided many studies on the issues facing mature students returning to higher education. The study by van Rhijn et al. (2016) on mature students returning to higher education explored issues affecting mature students' success in university study. The findings demonstrated that mature students struggle with access to needed resources, support services, and flexible study options. The current study expands on the inequity between the resources provided to traditional students and those (not) provided to non-traditional students, such as access to support services, academic advisors, and faculty members.

Unlike traditional students, who share spaces to work on campus and have easy access to their professors, the participants reported that they had to meet with their classmates outside of school, on weekends, and at night. This was because many in-school access areas were unavailable, such as meeting rooms that were open in the day but not at night or on weekends. Also, the participants described how contacting faculty members during the day was impossible due to their conflicting schedules. University policies and practices toward adult learners limit the adults' participation in academic settings; this takes the form of limited faculty availability (Hardin, 2008) and difficulties reaching out for academic support from faculty (Compton et al., 2016; Kasworm, 2010).

In summary, there are many reasons why a mature student might decide to wait to return or

not to return to education. The most imposing and widespread barriers, however, are the institutional ones, which overlap with situational and especially dispositional barriers. As mentioned in the dispositional barrier section, this type of barrier incites the strongest and most sensitive emotions in mature women. The participants often discussed the disconnect they felt when speaking with their professors or supervisors. The consensus from the participants was that the professors did not see them continuing and completing their degrees.

Many of the present study's findings are supported by those of past and current empirical studies. However, few studies corroborate the connection between the three barriers and the impact that institutions of higher learning have on student success. The present study provides insights into the lives of these mature students, witnessing the pain and dissatisfaction they felt as a result of not being seen or heard. Contrary to the findings of some other studies, these participants did not want special treatment—they wanted to be treated as equals.

The sub-research question on institutional barriers asked, "Do institutions of higher learning provide a culture of community for all students?" The participants reacted swiftly to this question, stating that they did not want to speak with others about the issues of being a mature student. As they had expressed many times, they simply want to be treated equally and offered the same opportunities as traditional students. The study by Aryes et al. (2013) on mature women returning to university investigated what social supports are necessary to mature women who have decided to return to university. Rather than academic support, more emphasis was placed on the university's provision of a sense of community. Most women had low expectations of the social support available; however, as they progressed through their courses, they realized that they relied on friendships to help them gain information, normalize their experiences, and

support each other through difficulties. Despite the participants' insistence upon the importance of being treated equally, some thought that universities could set up these communities of practice as places to go and be recognized as mature students, speak about the unequal treatment adult learners endure, and try to find solutions to these issues.

Participants' Reflections and Future Goals

An additional major theme worthy of discussion is that when the participants returned to higher education, they did not imagine how going back to school would change their lives. These changes are what Mezirow (1981) defines as "perspective transformations":

> The structure of psycho-cultural assumptions within new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experiences. It is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminatory integration of experience and acting upon our new understandings. (p. 6)

Similar to the participants in Mezirow's (1978a) study on women taking part in college re-entry programs, some of the participants in the present research study began to understand how education and the return to learning have changed their mindsets regarding the challenges and barriers they have faced in life, allowing them to better understand themselves. Many participants found that conquering the obstacle of insecurity and coming to understand their own needs were personally meaningful successes. One of the participants revealed that, after all the time spent caring for others, returning to school became a process that allowed her to learn about herself. She surrendered her old identity and became someone new, acquiring a sense of freedom and liberation. Another participant stated that the strength she established let her carve out a

distinct and unique path for herself. One of the final interview questions was, “What are your plans now that you have completed your degree?” The responses were very similar: lifelong learning; starting another degree; and giving back as a mentor to adult learners.

The participants in this research study displayed hope, determination, and perseverance. The journey I shared with the mature women in this research study was an emancipating and empowering experience. As a mature female student myself, I shared tears, laughter, and plans for the future with mature women who believe in second chances. One of the best pieces of advice from the participants was: “Take life one day at a time and appreciate every step. You will reach where you are going and be a different person when you get there.”

Much of the research and inspiration for this study stemmed from the desire to examine what might impede mature women’s return to higher education. Merrill’s (1999) study on mature, working-class women who had returned to education asked, “To what extent are the women’s experiences as adult learners emancipatory or empowered?” Merrill’s participants expressed feelings of empowerment, while the participants of the present study expressed a feeling of emancipation—of transformation toward freedom. The study by Antikainen et al. (1996), which focused on adult education and learning, drew upon Mezirow’s concept of “critical reflectivity” to define empowerment. For Antikainen et al. (1996), empowerment is “an experience that changes an individual’s understanding of him/herself or and/or of the world” (pp. 70–71). Empowerment, however, must embody a redistribution of power within society if it is to emancipate those who previously lacked power. In education, empowerment enables individuals and groups to view their lives and the world critically (Merrill, 1999). According to Thompson (1980), education has the potential to both reproduce social inequalities and transform social life:

> There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and conformity to it, or it becomes the "practice of freedom," how men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world. (p. 26)

Although there was space for something like this in Mezirow's (1978a) theory, the extent of the feelings of empowerment and/or emancipation experienced by mature women when they return to higher education were not expected.

Recommendations

This research study describes the challenges and barriers mature women face upon their return to higher education. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the landscape for mature women's return to education has changed over the past 50 years. Mature women have transformed the educational system by returning to education in large numbers at later years in their lives. The problem, however, is that despite women's accomplishments, such as positive changes in gender roles (e.g. lowered expectations around caregiving), significant challenges remain for mature female students. For example, the participants were considered part of the out-group due to the societal biases shown by both traditional students and faculty professors. The lack of support and recognition from these faculty professors was also a heavy weight for these non-traditional mature female students to bear.

Based on the findings collected from the participants and the literature review, several recommendations are possible. To conclude this chapter, I argue that college and university administrators should revisit their policies on adult education programs by making adaptations in

the following four key areas: academic course scheduling through online and hybrid courses; flexible course schedules; scholarships, grants, and financial aid; and support system networks.

Recommendations for Policies and Practice

Due to the multiplicity of their roles and time management issues, mature female students (and other adult learners) could be helped by the following recommendations. The findings indicate that these strategies would offer them the chance to learn in an accessible environment that supports them and makes them feel they are part of the institution's student body.

Academic Course Scheduling Through Online and Hybrid Courses

Distance learning has become popular in higher education due to its flexibility and availability to learners and teachers at any time, regardless of geographic location (Lawrence, 2005). The benefits of online courses are the accessibility of the education offered and the flexibility of scheduling school around work and family. However, some online courses are offered as "asynchronous" courses and have no real-time contact with students.

The synchronous online alternative, which has recently emerged, provides scheduled class time and allows students to login to a virtual online classroom with the instructor.
In general, synchronous online courses provide actual interaction between faculty members and the students. The class is a weekly time commitment that cannot be rescheduled. Like an on-campus class, students have readings and assignments to complete outside class time to help prepare to participate in classroom discussions. This in-class interaction provides for a better evaluation of performance. It also provides more input to the professor other than just the submission of assignments.

The synchronous online course allows attendance from any location with a connection to

the Internet. There is still a classroom; it is just a virtual, non-physical classroom. The class still meets at a specified time. There is still live interaction with the professor. Lectures can be done and feedback can be received. The class continues as it usually does in a physical classroom.

The benefit of the virtual classroom is that it makes available physical classroom space available. Scheduling classes in a limited number of available classrooms has become a large issue at many institutions. Another space- related issue for many is the use of remote campuses with courses offered at multiple locations to serve a more distributed student population more adequately.

Online learning is potentially very student-centered and ideal for adult learners. The online teacher must provide an interactive classroom and motivate students to participate in the educational process. Isolation is an issue associated with e-learning; the teacher–student relationship must be engaging, with both being responsible for the program's success.

Flexible Course Schedules

With the growth of online education and changes in student demographics, the traditional class schedule, when a class meets two to three times a week, may no longer be what some adult learners want or need to meet their educational goals . Since many adult learners are often unavailable to attend classes due to family obligations or work schedules, universities can create a more accommodating and learning environment that meets the needs of mature students by organizing varied course offerings in a range of formats (including evening, weekend, online, and hybrid options) to cater to students with different schedules. Precise scheduling and easily accessible information allow mature students to plan their academic paths more effectively.

Adult learners main concerns are that courses be available when they are available and have

the time to take courses. Part of the solution to meeting adult learners' scheduling needs involves using resource planning systems to better anticipate which courses they will need. Recent research indicates that an accelerated course schedule (more meeting per week for fewer weeks) can help adult learners . When courses are accelerated from fifteen weeks to there is less chance for life to get in the way of the course.

Another recommendation would be to introduce multiple start dates throughout the year to enable students to enter programs at various times. This recommendation would work together with the revision of academic calendars to accommodate the needs of non-traditional students, allowing for longer or shorter semesters as required. Lastly, universities should ensure that support services (such as libraries, tutoring, and counselling) are available during non-traditional hours to assist students who need flexible schedules.

Scholarships, Grants, and Financial Aid

Initiatives that offer mature students the opportunity to return to school should be promoted. Many mature students excel at their studies and work hard, and policymakers should be more attentive to this student population. Colleges and universities should establish scholarships and grants for mature students, considering their financial needs, academic achievement, and life experiences. Universities should also develop programs tailored to mature students' return to education, such as scholarships, financial aid, and support services.

van Rhijn's (2016) study was undertaken to contribute to a better understanding of mature students' needs and circumstances. The findings stated that financial support was one of the biggest challenges identified by the participants. Participants were denied student loans, scholarships, and bursaries; a number specifically pointed to their ineligibility to tuition rebate

plans and access to paid work opportunities.

To better support mature students, changes are recommended to non-repayable financial supports (grants, bursaries, and scholarships) that require demonstration of financial needs. Changes are also recommended to scholarships that require demonstrations, such as volunteer or extracurricular activities.

Financial support needs to be improved for part-time students, including access to student loans, grants, bursaries, and scholarships. Many financial supports are completely inaccessible to part-time students. If financial support is not available when studying part-time, income can be inconsistent, and the decision to continue will be impacted; a primary influence for mature students is the ability to pay both school-related costs and expenses at home.

Support System Networks

When returning to higher education, social exclusion and social isolation become part of many mature students' lives. There is a disconnect between traditional and non-traditional students; the values and attitudes of mature students often differ from those of traditional students. Institutions should provide opportunities for mature students to meet other mature students. Through the development of communities of practice, mature students could "share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4).

The term "community of practice" is of relatively recent coinage, even though the phenomenon it refers to is age-old. The concept has turned out to provide a useful perspective on knowing and learning. A growing number of people and organizations in various sectors are now focusing on communities of practice as a key for improving performance. In the educational

sector, communities of practice reinforce learning not only as a means to an end; it is the end product. For many mature students, having a community of individuals who share their thoughts and are part of a community where individuals engage in peer-to-peer professional development activities providing a sense of community and safe space. A place where a group of people can share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfil both individual and group goals.

Recommendations for Future Research

Unlike past studies on this topic, the present study's findings provide deep insights into its participants' home lives, the role of the 21st-century family, and the link between these factors and student success. More research needs to be conducted on the 21st-century mature woman to explore why she wants to return to education. A deeper analysis must then be made to understand what might impede this return.

The 21st-century women in this research study questioned universities' practical commitments to the EDI policies that they promote, which paint them as being open to and inclusive for all students. More research should be done to establish why these policies are not implemented more robustly. When students decide to go to higher learning institutions, they believe they will be accepted for who they are. The 21st-century mature student also believes that, despite being older than the traditional students, this should be the case for them. With an increase in mature student registrations over the past decade, future research should continue examining how to retain these students.

Conclusion

This discussion and recommendation chapter provided an awareness of how the 21st-century

mature women in this study experience their lives as mature female students. For many of the participants, returning to school was challenging and enlightening. Many assumed that situational barriers such as childcare, spouses, and support would be the obstacles they would have to overcome. It seems, however, that it was the dispositional and institutional barriers that were more challenging.

The participants did not accept these challenges passively; for example, following their past experiences with inadequate faculty, the participants quickly saw the patterns of a lack of interest and apathy and acted to change their supervisors. However, the reality of being a mature female student was unanticipated, particularly the social exclusion by traditional students and relegation to the out-group. The participants were determined to complete their degrees; through the process, another finding transpired—they began to transform and change. Education is a process of change, and the participants in this research study were part of this journey.

Based on the challenges, responses, and suggestions from the participants, the recommendations discussed above are essential to the provision of higher education and accessibility to knowledge for future mature students who decide to return to higher learning.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the large gap in the literature (from the 1970s to the early 2000s) is due to the fact that many of these past empirical studies were conducted on homogeneous groups of mature women returning to education. Some of the studies were carried out on middle-class mature women who had previously attended post-secondary institutions or on working-class women entering access or re-entry programs. Today's 21st-century mature female students, as shown by the participants in this research study, come from different backgrounds and have dissimilar educational experiences and motivations. More research needs to be conducted on the new reality of the 21st-century mature women, examining the objectives behind their return to education and the expectations they have of doing so.

When reviewing the concept of gendered ageism, it appears there is a great deal of research on gendered ageism and the workplace and on how women are discriminated against in this setting. However, there is very little on gendered ageism in education (especially studies that focus on female students rather than female educators). The participants in this research study recognized that workplace institutions do marginalize women through lower wages and fewer opportunities for growth; however, the findings indicate that institutions of higher learning do not tend to see gender—simply an older person intruding into their classrooms.

Getting old is a fact of life, and society sees older individuals as burdens. The literature is primarily located in geriatric studies; in addition, there is limited research on younger , middle-aged, individuals. The definitions of the term "mature student" constructed by higher learning institutions insinuate that adults returning to education are "seniors"; this misconception needs to

be addressed. More research needs to be conducted on the age groups of mature students who return to higher education to remove the perception of them as seniors.

The theory of intersectionality overlaps, in this research study, with discriminatory attitudes to gender and age. This study concludes that gender was not the discriminatory factor in the mature female students' discontent; rather, the ageist attitudes of traditional students and faculty members formed the barriers to a full experience of university life. This encouraged social isolation, as the participants were not accepted by the majority and were labelled as members of the out-group. The participants returned to higher education for different reasons and did not expect to be discriminated against because of their age. The traditional students' frames of reference and the attitudes they had about older individuals were then transferred to faculty members.

To attain a deeper understanding of these results, future studies could also address the effect of returning to higher education and the personal transformative changes mature women experience. The inspiration for this research study was Mezirow's (1978a) study on mature women returning to higher education and the resulting transformation of the self. For many individuals, returning to education presents hurdles and unexpected challenges. However, it also offers the potential for life-changing events, as this research study and its participants have discovered.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

My name is Heather Sorella, and I am a Ph.D. candidate from the Department of Education at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. I am currently recruiting mature female students aged 35–55 to participate in my research study on the barriers mature females encounter when deciding to return to post-secondary education. I am communicating with you in hopes that you will participate in my research study.

If you agree to participate in this study, we will schedule a one-to-one interview, approximately one hour long. The interview will consist of general and specific topics, discussing your experiences as a mature female student. If necessary, a second interview might be accommodated for follow-up questions to have you elaborate on specific answers. Semi-structured, open-ended questions will provide you with the transparency, flexibility, and confidentiality to discuss your individual experiences and obstacles as a mature female student returning to post-secondary education. Interviews will be conducted through a communication platform such as Zoom or Teams.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time up until four weeks after the interview date.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me at h_sorella@videotron.ca

Appendix B: Information and Consent Form

Study Title: The Challenges and Barriers Facing Mature Female Students Entering Higher Education

Researcher: Heather Sorella

Researcher's Contact Information: email: h_sorella@videotron.ca; phone: 514-880-7735

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. David Waddington

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: email: david.waddington@concordia.ca

You have been invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating means. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you need help understanding, or if you want more information on the research study, please contact the researcher.

A. Purpose

- The purpose of this research study is to examine the impact of the barriers faced by mature women aged 35–55 who decide to return to post-secondary education.

B. Procedures

- If you participate, you will be asked to partake in a one-to-one hour-long interview with the researcher. This interview will occur online and will be recorded. The interview format will be presented through general to specific topics. If necessary, a second interview, also online and recorded, might be accommodated for follow-up questions to have you elaborate on specific answers. Since this interview is voluntary, you can withdraw up until four weeks after the interview date.

- You will be asked to discuss your experiences and issues regarding returning to post-secondary education and the challenges and barriers you encountered.

C. Risks and Benefits

- This research study is not intended to provide any risks. However, if you feel acute distress during the interview, the researcher will ask if you want to stop and continue after a short break. In addition, the researcher has provided a list of services* you can contact if you have further distress after the interview.

Note: "For those participants who are experiencing acute distress but are not at risk of imminent danger, a call to the study psychologist or mental health provider is suggested if they feel that their distress worsens after the interview" (Draucker et al., 2009, p. 346).

D. Confidentiality

- We will gather the following information as part of this research study: your first and last name, your age, your civil status, and the name of the university you currently attend or attended.
- We will not allow anyone to access the information except the researcher directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.
- The information gathered will be anonymous. That means that it will be impossible to link you with the information you provide.
- We will protect the information by storing all collected data on Concordia University's One Drive for the duration of data collection. Furthermore, all original documents and copies will be stored on Concordia University's One Drive to safeguard your

information, with access only available to the researcher.

- Once compiled, analyzed, and pooled into published research, personal data will be destroyed five years after the end of the study.
- We intend to publish the results of the research study. However, it will be impossible to identify you in the published results.

E. Conditions of Participation

- You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you have the option to withdraw up to four weeks after the interview date—if you choose this option. Any data collected will be withdrawn from the study and will be destroyed and excluded from the data analysis.
- If you decide to withdraw from the research study, you may contact the researcher via email or phone at the address and number provided above to inform her of your decision.

F. Participant's Declaration

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions, and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____

Date _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Her contact information is on p. 1 of this form. You may also contact her faculty

supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the manager, Research Ethics, and Concordia University, 514-848-2424, ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

*List of services:

Ami- Quebec: https://amiquebec.org/

Concordia University Counselling and Psychological Services (for registered Concordia students): https://www.concordia.ca/health/mental-health/counselling.html

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Montreal Branch: https://acsmmontreal.qc.ca/en/

Douglas Hospital Health University Institute: https://ciusss-ouestmtl.gouv.qc.ca/en/contact-location/psychiatric-care-hospital/douglas-mental-health-university-institute/

Institute of Community and Family Psychiatry (JGH): https://www.jgh.ca/about-us/jgh-archives/exhibits-digitized-works/online-exhibits/institute-of-community-and-family-psychiatry-1969-2019-50-years-of-a-humanistic-approach-to-mental-health-at-jgh/

Institut Universitaire en Sante Mentale de Montreal: https://ciusss-estmtl.gouv.qc.ca/etablissement/institut-universitaire-en-sante-mentale-de-montreal

Montreal Centre for Anxiety and Depression: https://www.helpforanxietydepression.com/

The Montreal Wellness Clinic: http://www.drkhoury-montrealtherapist.com/

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Name of Interviewee: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Introduction

Welcome and thank you for accepting to be part of this research study. Before starting the interview, please remember that participation is voluntary, and you can discontinue the interview at any time. The interview will be for 60 minutes and will be recorded. Please review the consent form before we start the interview and sign it if you accept to participate.

Start of interview: Set a timer for 60 minutes.

Discuss the purpose of the study and explain the main question of the research study. How do situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers impede non-traditional mature women's return to post-secondary education?

Initial general question: What made you decide to return to school?

Interview Questions

Table 3

A Matrix of Question Options (Patton,2015)

Question Focus	**Past**	**Present**	**Future**
Behaviours/experiences	Can you tell me about your past experiences in education?	Why did you decide to return to post-secondary education?	
Opinions/values	Did you ever think	What is your opinion	What do you see

	you would return to school?	of education?	happening to you in the future as you continue with your studies?
Feelings/emotions	How did you feel the first day you returned to a classroom?	Do you have the support you need to continue with your studies?	What are your plans for lifelong learning?
Knowledge	Was it easy to enroll in your program?	Do you have challenges navigating your academic expectations?	Will you continue your studies despite your challenges?
Sensory	When you walked through the corridors of your faculty corridors, what did you see?	What does your professor ask you when you meet in the classroom? What do they actually say?	How will your future expectations provide the experiences you discovered in a post-secondary environment?
Background	When deciding to return to post-secondary education, how did you describe yourself to others?	What is your definition of a non-traditional student?	What do you think universities should do to provide a community of inclusivity for mature students?