Patient to Agent: A Phenomenological Approach to Understanding Emergent Adult Women's Experiences of Entering the Workforce

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PATIENT TO AGENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING EMERGING ADULT WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF ENTERING THE WORKFORCE

A DISSERTATION

submitted by

KERRY C. AKASHIAN

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

LESLEY UNIVERSITY
February 25, 2013
Abstract

Although women are increasingly present in higher education institutions and in the workforce, and businesses led by women are thriving in the current economy, research indicates an increase in emerging adults who report experiencing excessive levels of stress and emotional conflict. This stress and conflict can contribute to the development of depression and anxiety, especially in the absence of adequate support systems. Frequent use of healthcare services, worker absenteeism, and the replacement of employees are three financial costs of stress on corporate employers. Although research on emerging adulthood supports the links between stress, emotional conflict, and support systems, less is known about the day-to-day thought processes, emotions, and experiences of emerging adults as they enter the workforce in various contexts. This study addresses the need for in-depth understanding of the day-to-day experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce to gain insight into the potential sources of stress and emotional conflict in their experiences, the ways in which they manage or cope while entering the workforce, and the support systems that they use to encourage the growth of opportunities available to them to succeed in corporate environments. This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of emerging adult women who have recently entered the workforce post-graduation from four-year institutions of higher education. A sample of ten emerging adult women, ages 22 to 25, participated in two rounds of semi-structured, asynchronous online interviews collected via email in which the women shared the most significant events that they have experienced since entering the workforce and the meanings that they ascribed to them. The instrument “The Life Chapter Interview” was created by the researcher and was
adapted from “The Life Story Interview” (McAdams, 1995) to focus solely on the experiences of an emerging adult woman entering the workforce rather than on her entire life story. The instrument served as a useful data collection tool for narrative research that solicited detailed descriptions of experiences and primary areas of concern without asking for a participant’s entire life story. The data collected were first organized into summaries of experience for each participant and were then analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data were analyzed from four perspectives: (a) emerging adulthood, (b) adult development, (c) women’s development, and (d) career development. Data analysis produced four master themes that defined the experiences of these emerging adult women: (a) experiencing a shift in sense of self in the context of choice, “patient to agent”, (b) experiencing a shift in self-perception in the context of achievement, “vital to my self-esteem”, (c) experiencing emotional conflict and the strategies employed to cope while entering the workforce, “to deal”, and (d) support systems as a context for experiencing health and well-being, “looking out for me”. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the experiences of emerging adults and demonstrates that the asynchronous online interview is an effective research tool with this specific cohort of emerging adult women. The findings presented can help corporate employers and career advisors to understand the developmental issues of emerging adult women and the roles that stress and emotional conflict play in their lives as they enter the workforce post-graduation from four-year institutions of higher education. In addition, the researcher wanted to draw attention to the multiple experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce to help corporate employers and career advisors to understand women’s developmental issues, potential sources of stress and emotional
conflict, and coping mechanisms to encourage opportunities that would support women’s success in the workforce. Recommendations are offered for corporate employers, career advisors, emerging adult women, and for further research possibilities.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving parents, who have consistently inspired me to achieve my academic and professional goals and have motivated me to follow through on my academic pursuits. I am grateful for the ways in which they have supported me through my struggles and successes while entering the workforce. I am forever indebted to them for their assistance throughout my life, and I recognize how incredibly fortunate I am to have their support. I only hope that I can model for my daughter throughout her life their engagement and energy.
Acknowledgements

After completing dissertation research and doctoral study, I now realize that it “takes a village” to get a Ph.D. Throughout my academic career and especially over the past four years, I have been extremely fortunate to benefit from a vast community of professors, mentors, colleagues, friends, and family who have guided me throughout this process.

As an undergraduate student at UMass Amherst, I was influenced by various courses that addressed the identities and survival of others. These courses explored the issues of diversity, racism, and gender equality and asked me to think critically about their roles in my life. During this time, I had the pleasure of working under Dr. Sunaina Maira on my first social research project, which focused on the experiences of Cambodian-Americans in Lowell. Throughout the project, Dr. Maira believed that my research was important and that I had a keen ability to share the voices of others through my narrative descriptions of their experiences. I thank her for instilling confidence in me at the beginning of my research journey.

I would also like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Amy Rutstein-Riley, who has provided consistent support throughout my doctoral studies. Dr. Rutstein-Riley continuously acknowledged the importance of my research in its contribution to the literature on emerging adult women. Additionally, as a person who wears many hats while remaining calm, collected, efficient, and productive, she has inspired me. I strive to model this behavior.

My committee members, Dr. Phala Chea and Dr. Jo Ann Gammel, supported me by reading and critiquing my work to make it stronger. Dr. Chea has cheered me on since
day one, and I appreciate her for being such a significant resource throughout my doctoral studies. She has helped me to recognize the importance of sociocultural influences and their impact on research, which helped me to consider possibilities for refining my research to include all races, cultures, and ethnicities. Because of her encouragement, I look forward to investigating in a wider scope emerging adult women entering the workforce. Dr. Jo Ann Gammel, who joined the committee towards the end of my doctoral studies, was a quick study, offered comprehensive advice, and motivated me to push myself and to expand my thinking about emerging adult women. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Marianne Reiff, who helped me to organize my thoughts into concrete ideas and has been instrumental in my development as a doctoral researcher.

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My family support network also assisted me through this journey. My aunt, teacher, friend, and writing tutor Norma Murphy spent hours reading and editing my work. My partner Jason Perez gave me the time and space that I needed to complete this degree. My sister-in-law Lauren and my brothers inspired me to complete this work.
Special thanks go to my daughter Fallon for behaving like a perfect angel by sleeping at least twelve hours a night and showing me that a mother of a newborn can write a dissertation while appreciating the little things that life has to offer. Finally, I thank the ten emerging adult women who were brave enough to share their struggles and successes with me.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study explores the experiences of ten emerging adult women (ages 22 to 25) who have recently entered the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education. The purpose of this study is to understand and interpret the reported experiences of these women and the contexts that influenced their experiences. A phenomenological approach was chosen for the investigation and included two rounds of semi-structured, asynchronous online interviews to collect descriptions of the women’s experiences and to determine the meanings that they attributed to their experiences. The data collected were first organized into participant summaries of experience as informed by the method of Giorgi (1997) and were then analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

This chapter begins with a preface, a presentation of the context of the study, and a discussion of the primary justifications for an exploration of emerging adult women entering the workforce. The discussion continues with the statement of the problem, the study’s purpose and research questions, and the research approach. Basic assumptions and a rationale for the study are presented. The chapter concludes with an overview of subsequent chapters and a glossary of key terminology used in the study.

Preface

As a high school English teacher and research/internship advisor of 12th grade emerging adults entering college, the researcher’s main occupational goal was to help students make academic decisions consistent with their future career goals. Perhaps because of the researcher’s approachable nature and enthusiasm for discussing the wide spectrum of career possibilities in the 21st century, several students began seeking her
support. As she listened to her students during class discussions and in private consulting sessions, she noticed that the students, especially the female students, were experiencing emotional conflict, anxiety, and distress while making career and academic decisions. They seemed intensely conflicted and often felt blocked or unable to make decisions that reflected their desires, exhibiting behavior that resembled ideas in the literature on self-doubt (Dickerson, 2004).

As the researcher witnessed the struggles that her high school students faced in attempting to plan for the future, she couldn’t help but make connections to her own and her female peers’ experiences as young professionals in the later stages of emerging adulthood. The researcher and her female peers intensively questioned their choices while navigating their new work environments. For example, the researcher considered whether her current job as a teacher was the right fit for her while deciding where she wanted to eventually live, settle down, and raise a family. It appeared that both groups of emerging adults, students in their final semester of high school and college-educated early career professionals, were grappling with similar questions and emotions regarding major career and life decisions while they were transitioning into new roles and responsibilities. At the same time, movies, self-help literature, and magazine articles depicted emerging adult women as struggling to find their identity and develop a career (Dickerson, 2004; Hassler, 2005; Jensen & Polluck, 2009) and as experiencing record levels of stress and anxiety (Lewin, 2011). Thus, questions began to form about the impact of emotional conflict on emerging adults of all ages, especially women, as they simultaneously make major life and career decisions and adapt to new academic and work environments.
Although not formally trained in the career development and guidance counseling domains, the researcher expressed enthusiasm on the topic of career development and continuously researched strategies and interventions that could potentially help her students and female peers clarify their goals, think deeply about their life options beyond high school and college, and manage the stress and emotional conflict that surfaced as a result of new transitions.

Specifically, the researcher investigated personal and career development programs in high schools and in institutions of higher education, including participating in a research project at Massachusetts Institute of Technology that evaluated a course which helps students to clarify their goals by identifying their excuses, personal theories, and ways of interacting with others. Evaluating this course helped the researcher to appreciate the complexities inherent in the life-planning process, hear more stories and concerns from students, and witness firsthand the stress and emotional conflict that can result from making choices and adapting to multiple new roles in emerging adulthood.

The researcher further researched, identified, and engaged in dialogue with instructors of other formal education courses at Stanford University, Harvard University, and the University of Iowa that focused on career and life design and career transitions. Based on the impact of research on her own life, the researcher felt strongly that interventions such as life coaching and career/life design courses in high school and in higher education could help her students and female peers better prepare to make choices and manage emotional conflict when entering the workforce, but she realized that she did not comprehensively understand the lives of emerging adults entering the workforce. In particular, she did not have a firm grasp on the sources of stress and emotional conflict in
their lives or an in-depth understanding of the developmental issues that can be problematic during emerging adulthood. As a result of experiencing her own emotional conflict when entering the workforce and by reflecting on the concerns of her students and peers, the researcher realized that she wanted to know more about the experiences of college-educated emerging adult women in order to help herself, her students, and her peers navigate emerging adulthood with ease. In addition, the researcher wanted to draw attention to the multiple experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce to help corporate employers and career advisors understand women’s developmental issues, potential sources of stress and emotional conflict, and coping mechanisms to encourage opportunities that would support women’s success in the workforce.

**Context and Background**

The idea for this study stems from significant issues in four primary areas that shape emerging adult women’s experiences when entering the workforce: (a) economics, (b) emerging adulthood, (c) women’s development, and d) adult learning.

According to a United States Department of Labor report conducted in January of 2011, 51.5% of high-paying jobs, including management and professional-related occupations, were held by women. A national report by the American Council on Education conducted in 2008 confirmed that 58% of undergraduate students were women. In 2010, Rosin wrote that for every two men who would earn a bachelor’s degree in 2011, three women would do the same (Rosin, 2010). The United States Department of Labor confirms that there is a direct link between a person’s level of education and likelihood of employment. The recent economic downturn has affected male employment
dramatically, which has reinforced the increased presence of women in the workforce and will impact the labor market in the United States and beyond (Harris, 2004; Rosin, 2010).

Statistics show that women are entering the workforce in large numbers because of their high levels of educational achievement (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Baumgarten, 2010), and businesses led by women tend to perform better than those led by men (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). Nonetheless, 82% of working women reported experiencing stress and anxiety in their everyday lives, and twice as many women as men experience stress and anxiety, which can be financially costly for their employers (Ross, n.d.). More than 42 billion dollars per year is spent in the United States on the direct and indirect costs of stress-related disorders, and these costs can include frequent utilization of the healthcare system, worker absenteeism, and reduced workplace productivity (Lepine, 2002; Ross, n.d.). In addition, emerging adult women are in a higher risk group for trauma, which can affect their ability to deal with stress and emotional conflict in the work environment (Odlaug, Mahmud, Goddard, & Grant, 2010).

With increasing numbers of emerging adult women entering the workforce, it is imperative for corporate employers and career advisors to gain in-depth understanding of the personal and professional experiences of these women to better support their success in the workforce. Examining the experiences of the research participants will encourage opportunities to support them in their transitions into the workforce and help to reduce the costs associated with mental health problems in corporate environments.

There have been advances in gender-specific research on emerging adults and how to optimize their learning experiences and functioning. This research has revealed the importance of understanding both their mental health needs and developmental issues
to better serve these adults (Tanner, 2010). This research has also identified the factors that help and hinder the psychological development of this group (Asberg, Bowers, Renk, & McKinney, 2008; Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009). “Emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469) has been defined as the period from ages 18 to 29 and is a rapidly growing research area. Issues currently investigated include the role of social media (Dierberg & Clark, 2011), sexuality (Eiesenber, 2010; Regnerus 2011), personality disorders, substance abuse, and the development of programs that address the specific mental health and development needs of this group (Tanner, 2010). Emerging adulthood is characterized as a time of possibilities marked by exploration of identity, experiencing instability and self-focus, and the feeling that one is neither an adult nor an adolescent (Arnett, 2006). Emerging adults are in the process of “recentering” (Tanner, 2006, p. 21), a three-stage process that involves pursuing life goals and shifting from the dependence of adolescence to the independence of adulthood. Emerging adults can experience dramatic changes, especially as they find careers and fulfilling romantic relationships and identify the type of person that they strive to be in the future, which can be extremely stressful (Asberg et al., 2008; Murphy, Blutstein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010; Riggs & Han, 2009; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). Mental health disorders, including anxiety, mood, and personality disorders, are most prevalent during emerging adulthood (Asberg et al., 2008; Tanner, 2010). In fact, 1 in 4 emerging adults will experience a depressive episode by the age of twenty-four (Kuwabara, Van Voorhes, Gollan, & Alexander, 2007), and 1 in 5 emerging adults meets the criteria for an anxiety disorder (Tanner, 2010), a highly treatable disorder when it is identified (Ross, n.d.). Furthermore, emerging adult women are more likely than men to report symptoms of depression (Asberg et al., 2008;
Kuwabara et al., 2007). While emerging adulthood appears to be extremely stressful and challenging for emerging adult women, this time period also offers an opportunity to adopt healthy behaviors and learn the characteristics of a mentally healthy adult (Tanner, 2010). By gaining a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce, corporate employers and career advisors can design programs and practices that promote mental health in the workplace.

Although research on emerging adulthood has grown rapidly over the past 12 years, studies for the most part still primarily examine the collective experiences of men and women (Murphy et al., 2010; Tanner et al., 2009). Furthermore, mental health information on emerging adults is lacking in contexts other than mental health (Tanner, 2010), including work environments. Thus, research for this dissertation is intended to advance the discourse on emerging adults by focusing exclusively on the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women, a neglected topic in the field of emerging adulthood, and to offer a holistic picture of the women’s day-to-day experiences to educate corporate employers and career advisors on how to support them.

A moderate amount of research has focused solely on emerging adult women’s experiences of entering the workforce and has tended to highlight the women’s struggles to find their identity (Josselson, 1996), discover their core values and beliefs (Dickerson, 2004), and take action to create their ideal lives (Budgeon, 2003; Christ, 2004). Additionally, questions have been posed about the legacy of feminism and its relationship to emerging adult women’s life choices (Harris 2004; Josselson, 1996; Wood, 2010). Although many options, especially regarding career choice, are now available to emerging adult women because of the work of feminists in the 20th century, emerging
adult women seem to feel intense pressure and an internal struggle to do and be
everything, which has implications for their mental and physical health. It appears that
emerging adult women are not prepared for the complexity and intensity inherent in the
process of entering the workforce. Although one can speculate as to what knowledge,
skills, and attitudes are necessary to enter the workforce, and although existing literature
provides perspectives regarding stress and emotional conflict in the workplace (Ross,
N.D.), research describing the daily experiences and perspectives of emerging adult
women entering the workforce is lacking (Munro, 2010; Murphy et al., 2010; Raman,
Ramendran, Beleya, Nadeson, & Arokiasamy, 2011). Thus, one goal of this dissertation
was to use a phenomenological approach to discover the significance that research
participants ascribed to their experiences to better understand the specific issues that they
grapple with on their own terms.

Literature suggests that to create support systems for adult learners, including
emerging adult women entering the workforce, employers and designers of training
programs must begin by holistically examining the broad scope of issues relevant to the
specific learners for whom they design, including the contextual elements present in their
lives (Barrett, 2011, Caffarella, 2002; Vella, 2008). Because many mental health issues
are related to career issues (Hansen, 2000), it is important for corporate employers to
understand the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce to reduce
mental health-related costs and to ensure the success of their companies.

Literature also suggests that adult educators in various contexts, including
corporate environments and in institutions of higher education, are unaware of the
developmental characteristics of emerging adults which can make it difficult to design
training and instruction for them (Marcotte, 2008). Literature also suggests that education should prepare adults for future life roles by gaining competencies in specific roles including the “worker” (Knowles, 1980, p. 40), and that vocational education programs are sex-segregated and offer limited access to career education for women (Pueschel & Zirkin, 2002). Understanding the developmental characteristics of emerging adult women entering the workforce and the specific issues that they are struggling with could help corporate employers and career advisors provide more appropriate programs and interventions that will help them succeed in the workplace.

Additional literature specific to women’s learning include reshaping curriculum to be inclusive of women (Minnich, 2005), privileging the voices and experiences of the students (Parry, 1996), and educating them about the various complexities that they could potentially face in order to empower them to make better choices (Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999). By examining the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce, corporate employers and career advisors could better prepare emerging adult women for the transition into the workforce by developing a more in-depth understanding of their contextual issues to help them become more competent in the workforce and provide career education opportunities geared specifically towards emerging adult women.

To interpret the contextual elements present in the descriptions of the research participants’ lives, this dissertation takes an alternative approach to gathering data, which will assist corporate employers and career advisors in designing programs and practices that will help emerging adult women to become aware of stress and emotional conflict at
work. These programs and practices can help to alleviate the costs associated with stress and emotional conflict in corporate environments.

**Statement of the Problem**

Although women are increasingly present in higher education institutions and in the workforce, and businesses led by women are thriving in the current economy (Beeson & Valerio, 2012; Rosin, 2010), research indicates an increase in emerging adults who report experiencing excessive levels of stress and emotional conflict, which can contribute to the development of depression and anxiety, especially in the absence of adequate support systems (Asberg et al., 2008). Frequent use of healthcare services, worker absenteeism, and the replacement of employees are three financial costs of stress for corporate employers (Lepine, 2002; Ross, n.d.). Research on emerging adulthood supports the link between stress, emotional conflict, and support systems, but less is known about the day-to-day thought processes of emerging adults experiencing stress and emotional conflict, the contexts in which stress and emotional conflict are most apparent, and the coping mechanisms and support systems utilized to manage stress and emotional conflict, especially for women. As a result, this study addresses the need for in-depth understanding of the experiences of emerging adult women and the contexts that influenced their experiences. Data on the participants’ experiences can reveal these contexts and help corporate employers and career advisors to facilitate the growth of opportunities available for emerging adult women entering the workforce.

**Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to understand and interpret the reported experiences of the research participants and the contexts that influenced their experiences. A sample of
ten emerging adult women (ages 22 to 25) who have recently entered the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education was chosen to describe their experiences and the meanings that they ascribe to them. Acknowledging the participants’ voices enabled them to be heard on their own terms and increased understanding and awareness of issues pertinent to this specific population. It was anticipated that better understanding of the participants’ experiences and the issues and challenges they face would lead to more informed decisions to better prepare them to succeed in corporate environments. The primary questions explored in this dissertation are the following:

- How do emerging adult women describe their experiences of entering the workforce?
- What contexts have influenced their experiences of entering the workforce?

**Research Approach**

Phenomenology, a key theory in the interpretive paradigm, seeks to describe the lived experiences of an individual. The term phenomenology serves as a research approach and a philosophical movement that varies in use depending on the researcher, and it is a widely debated issue in research (Finlay, 2009; Laverty, 2003). The goals of this study were to describe and understand the individual experiences of the participants and to capture the complexity of their experiences. Therefore, phenomenology serves two purposes in this work: it is both a philosophy and a research approach. To explain the meanings that the participants ascribed to their lives, the research is situated within the interpretive paradigm because of its focus on obtaining detailed descriptions in which the participants’ voices and values are privileged and central to the process (Fossey, Harvey,
McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). For these reasons, phenomenology is the most effective study design for exploring, understanding, and interpreting emerging adult women’s experiences and perceptions of entering the workforce, which is the goal of this dissertation.

The ten women who participated in this study were recruited by the researcher, who was assisted by three professional contacts. Data were collected from two rounds of semi-structured, asynchronous online interviews. Data were first organized into research participant summaries of experience, which included the descriptions and crucial details of each participant’s experiences as informed by the method of Giorgi (1997), and then the data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003), a strategy rooted in psychological inquiry and currently gaining attention in educational research (Bainger, 2011). IPA emphasizes the connection between what people say and what they are thinking and feeling when they say it, and this technique best captures the complexities apparent in experiences (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Data were presented in two ways and include 1) participant summaries of experience (see Chapter 4) and 2) an analysis of common themes linked to current research and literature (see Chapter 5).

**Researcher’s Assumptions**

Phenomenological researchers agree that researcher subjectivity, specifically the researcher’s influence on the interpretation of the data results should be acknowledged (Finlay, 2009). Thus, researcher reflexivity, the process of presenting researcher biases and predispositions that could potentially affect research, is performed for this study.
The researcher acknowledges that a combination of various research interests and theories influence her thoughts and perspectives, which produce meaning. These interests and theories include emerging adulthood, adult learning and development, women’s development, career development, feminism, and theories of cognition and emotion. The researcher also makes explicit the following assumptions based on the researcher’s experience as an educator and mentor of emerging adult women:

- Emerging adult women’s experiences of entering the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education are multifaceted, complex, and are influenced by their emotions, thoughts, and various other contexts.
- A central feature of the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education is confusion, which can cause emotional conflict and distress.
- Emerging adult women entering the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education place extreme pressure on themselves to attain their goals.

**Rationale and Significance of the Study**

The rationale for this study emerges from the researcher’s desire to discover ways in which corporate employers and career advisors can develop awareness of the experiences of emerging adult women who have recently entered the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education. The study approaches this goal by presenting the women’s voices to address the need for more in-depth examinations of the “multiple experiences of women” (Flannery & Hayes, 2001, p. 34).
A related goal is to bring these voices into other, ongoing discussions on adult learning. Because an adult’s life experience is a rich resource for learning, allowing the participants a voice in this research by presenting their experiences will help corporate employers and career advisors to become aware of the complexities involved in the women’s experiences. This approach will also help the employers and advisors to design interventions to manage the complexities that challenge emerging adult women as they enter the workforce post-graduation from four-year institutions of higher education.

**Dissertation Overview**

This dissertation is presented in six chapters. Chapter 2 presents a theoretical and contextual grounding for the research questions and a description of how the literature influences the research approach. Contributions from the fields of emerging adulthood, adult development, women’s development, and career development are discussed as they relate to emerging adult women entering the workforce. The theoretical frameworks are presented with an analysis of the current theory and practices that exist along with the thematic connections to the research for this dissertation. Chapter 3 presents an overview of the research methodology used for the dissertation research. Included in Chapter 3 is a reflection on the pilot study conducted prior to this dissertation research and the specific data collection and analysis procedures, including the sampling method. Ethical considerations, the trustworthiness of the study, and the study’s limitations are addressed. Chapter 4 presents the research participant summaries of experience. Chapter 5 presents the research findings derived from the data. These findings are presented as a discussion of the major themes identified. Additionally, Chapter 5 returns to the literature base on the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce. Analytic categories are
presented based on the findings and are connected to theory, research, and practice with the emerging adult women. The dissertation concludes with Chapter 6, which presents conclusions and recommendations for corporate employers, career advisors, and emerging adult women, provides implications for research related to emerging adult women entering the workforce, and offers the researcher’s final reflections.

**Glossary of Key Terminology**

**Asynchronous online interview**: The asynchronous online interview in this dissertation was created to gather via email in-depth data on experience. In contrast to synchronous online interviews and true to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003), asynchronous online interviews allow respondents more time to reflect on their responses. Data are collected via email instead of venues such as face-to-face interviews or online chat rooms (Cooper, 2009).

**Career Advisors**: Career advisors work in a variety of contexts including corporate environments and in institutions of higher education. For the purposes of this study, career advisors include career counselors and coaches in the private sector and in higher education who work with individual clients or students and who develop courses, trainings, and workshops for emerging adults, and instructors of courses and seminars in career development and life design in institutions of higher education. Individual consultations and courses, trainings, workshops, and seminars are implemented by career advisors in corporate environments and at various institutions of higher education throughout the United States and offer frameworks and methodologies to create satisfying lives after college, support vocation formation, formulate and follow through
on goals, and manage major life and career decisions (Blanck, 2012; Burnett & Evans, 2010; Gould, 2012; Jordan & Zander, 2009; Sutton, 2010).

**Emerging Adult Women:** Emerging adulthood spans ages 18 to 29 (Tanner et al., 2009) and consists of five main features: (a) identity explorations, (b) instability, (c) self-focus, (d) a feeling of existing between adolescence and adulthood, and (e) possibilities (Arnett, 2000). This dissertation focused on the experiences of a select group of emerging adult women, ages 22 to 25, who have recently entered the workforce in full-time positions after earning a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution of higher education.

**Gatekeepers:** Individuals who helped the researcher gain access to the research participants (Creswell, 2008).

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):** IPA is a research strategy rooted in psychological inquiry and is currently gaining attention in educational research (Bainger, 2011). The theoretical underpinnings of IPA are phenomenological, interpretive, and idiographic (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA emphasizes the connection between what people say and what they are thinking and feeling when they say it, and this strategy best captures the complexities apparent in experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA posits that the research participants are experts on their own experiences (Reid et al., 2005). The IPA process includes collecting a rich account of the experience, explores patterns in the data, and uses literature to raise questions about the findings (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

**Life Chapter Interview:** The Life Chapter Interview is an adapted version of Dan McAdam’s (1995) Life Story Interview. The interview was created by the researcher and was adapted to focus solely on the experiences of an emerging adult woman entering the workforce rather than her entire life story. The interview is intended to focus on that
particular time period in the woman’s life and includes seven main sections (See Appendix C).

Research Participant Summary of Experience: Research Participant Summaries of experience are concise descriptions of the participants’ experiences and the contexts that influenced them. The summaries follow the Life Chapter Interview. The summaries conclude with the essence of each participant’s individual experience based on the themes presented by the participants and through the researcher’s preliminary interpretations (See Chapter 4).
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

A critical review of the literature was initiated prior to the study and continued throughout all phases of the research. The goal of this literature review was to reveal previous and current ways of understanding emerging adult women and their career development issues. The literature review includes theoretical and contextual grounding for the following research questions:

- How do emerging adult women describe their experiences of entering the workforce?
- What contexts influenced their experiences of entering the workforce?

The review begins with a discussion of how the relevant research was chosen. Next, research on salient issues of emerging adulthood is presented. The discussion continues with examinations of the literature on adult development, women’s development, and career development. Finally, the review concludes with a summary of the research and implications of the study design.

Identifying the Literature

Although research on young women’s sense of self, including the themes of women’s development, gender equity in the workforce, identity, competence, and self-esteem, has been conducted from the feminist movement in the 1970s to post-feminism, there is a lack of current scholarly literature describing experiences of emerging adult women, specifically those who have completed college and who have recently entered the workforce. There is a multitude of literature and resources on how to empower women or develop women as leaders (Beeson & Valerio, 2012; Ruderman & Tavares,
2003; Valerio, 2006). Research also addresses gender differences in the workplace (Carli, 2001; Carlson & Crawford, 2011) and during career transitions (Motulsky, 2010). Additionally, there is a significant field of research that focuses on single themes in women’s development, such as competence, voice (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Gilligan, 1982), or identity (Good & Sanchez, 2010; Josselson, 1996), but few studies describe the spectrum of day-to-day experiences of women during emerging adulthood.

A thematic review was developed that showcases the interdisciplinary links (Klein, 1990) that exist among four major categories: (a) emerging adulthood, (b) adult development, (c) women’s development, and (d) career development. This study calls for an integration of various disciplines that share similar epistemologies and contribute to the topic. The major topics addressed in the literature review provide support for the research questions and for the chosen methodology.

**Literature on Emerging Adulthood**

This section provides an overview of the theory of emerging adulthood, cognitive attributes, and the terminology described in the research on emerging adults. The discussion continues with an explanation of mental health issues related to the experiences of emerging adults and the contexts affecting their experiences. The implications of the study design will be discussed.

The researcher’s interest in the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce first emerged from studying the work of Arnett (2000), a researcher and professor at Clark University, who addressed the question of when men and women feel that they have reached adulthood. Arnett defined the benchmarks for reaching adulthood
as accepting responsibility, making independent decisions, and gaining financial independence. These benchmarks helped the researcher to develop a framework to begin research and describe the experiences of emerging adult women.

“Emerging adulthood” is a distinct developmental stage marked by explorations in identity, especially in love and work, with the goal of attaining self-sufficiency before committing to enduring roles such as wives and mothers or to a fully committed career. Emerging adults gain more independence from their parents while learning who they are and what they want for their lives. Instability and uncertainty, especially in living situations, are key features of emerging adulthood (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). Arnett (2006) argues that emerging adults are optimistic because of the opportunity that this time provides for independent decision-making, but emotional conflict and identity issues can arise when emerging adults begin to intensely question their expectations for the future (Arnett, 2006).

Conflicting ideas exist on the usefulness of conceptualizing the experiences of young adults as a distinct developmental stage. The strengths of Arnett’s (2000) theory include its incorporation of psychological, sociological, and cultural conditions into his definition of emerging adulthood (Tanner, 2006). In this way, his theory serves as a useful means for developing in-depth understanding of the spectrum of emerging adult women’s experiences of entering the workforce and of the contexts that influence their experiences.

Another viewpoint argues that emerging adulthood is not a universal period of human development but a period that exists under certain conditions that have appeared only quite recently and only in some cultures (Hendry & Kloep, 2007). Arnett (2007)
acknowledges that because of diverse contextual factors, not all young adults experience emerging adulthood. He recognizes that more research is necessary to fully understand the scope of emerging adult experiences worldwide, and he does not view his theory as an endpoint describing all emerging adults. Furthermore, Arnett’s research includes women but focuses on the collective experiences of men and women, confirming the need for more gender-specific research.

**Cognition in Emerging Adulthood**

To interpret the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce, issues related to cognition during emerging adulthood were examined. Research indicates that more complex and mature thought structures develop during emerging adulthood, especially in the contexts of school and work, and emerging adults experience a shift in their priorities and begin to think differently about reality (Labouvie-Vief, 2006).

To interpret the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce and the meanings behind their experiences, “recentering” (Tanner, 2006, p. 21), a useful framework for understanding issues related to cognition and behavior during emerging adulthood, was also examined. Recentering is the psychological experience of taking responsibility and accountability for one’s actions and requires emerging adults to “…organize and self-regulate one’s efforts towards gaining self-sufficiency” (Tanner, 2006, p. 37). Recentering is a three-stage process beginning with Stage 1 in which an adolescent transitions to emerging adulthood by way of legal emancipation. Stage 2, emerging adulthood proper, involves temporary exploration in various contexts before emerging adults settle into Stage 3, forming permanent commitments to identity and to others. Separation versus individuation and ego development are features of the
recentering process that can help to determine which emerging adults thrive and which who do not (Tanner, 2006). It is likely that emerging adult women entering the workforce are in the recentering process, which has implications for determining the necessary supports that should be in place to help them.

**Mental Health Issues in Emerging Adulthood**

Mental health issues during emerging adulthood are topics that are rapidly gaining attention. The 5th Annual Conference on Emerging Adulthood promoted dialogue between scientists and mental-health practitioners to understand and treat emerging adults (Copeland, Davis, Eisenberg, & Viner & Viner, 2011). Because major life transitions as well as explorations in living situations and work during emerging adulthood involve feelings of instability and uncertainty (Arnett, 2004; Collins & van Dulmen, 2006), and emerging adults are learning to support their own mental health needs because they age out of previously provided care (Tanner, 2009), it certainly makes sense to examine mental health and a person’s ability to adapt to new situations.

Research has shown that various transitions and developmental experiences that occur during emerging adulthood lead to increased levels of both well-being and depressive disorders in this group (Boden, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2007; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006; Riggs & Han, 2009). The stressful demands of daily life, including transitions and new financial, academic, and relationship responsibilities, can affect any adult but especially emerging adults (Asberg et al., 2008). Males seek social support as coping mechanisms, whereas females tend to remove themselves from situations to focus on self-control (Asberg et al., 2008). Avoidant coping mechanisms can be useful in the short-term, but escaping problems can be maladaptive and lead to depressive affect.
UNDERSTANDING WOMEN ENTERING THE WORKFORCE

(Asberg et al., 2008). Whereas the literature scratches the surface on the coping mechanisms of emerging adults attending college, this dissertation research more deeply investigates the experiences of the research participants and the contexts affecting their experiences when entering the workforce, which can provide in-depth explanations and rationales for coping mechanisms and possible implications for mental health specific to emerging adult women.

Schulenberg and Zarrett (2006) note that certain situations, people, and contexts such as substance abuse, antisocial behavior, and the influence of parental relationships play central roles in determining the mental health of an emerging adult. This finding is confirmed in other research (Aquilino, 2006; Aquilino & Supple, 2001; Barry, Padilla-Walker, Madsen, & Nelson, 2008; Kenny & Sirin, 2006; Pettit, Roberts, Lewinsohn, Seeley, & Yaroslavsky, 2011). Additionally, current literature describes support systems in emerging adulthood, including mentors, as a context for developing competence and encouraging the success of emerging adults. Mentors in emerging adulthood can offer guidance, serve as sources of inspiration, provide recognition, and support the growing competence of an emerging adult (Daloz-Parks, 2011). Mentors can also serve as catalysts in helping young adults develop an authentic voice and discover parts of their identity that was not discernible to them previously (Palmer, 1998). Research that investigates the emotions that stem from the support of mentors and other support systems in emerging adulthood is needed. Additionally, further research that examines the contexts that foster well-being and depressive disorders is necessary (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006).
A dissertation by Rutstein-Riley (2005) focuses specifically on emerging adult women and their emotional health and well-being. Applying feminist research methods, Rutstein-Riley (2005) conducted an interpretive study that examined how emerging adult women understand and describe health and illness experiences. Rutstein-Riley noted that informal health relationships (such as family) and formal health relationships (such as those with healthcare providers) are central to how a young woman views herself and makes health-related decisions about her body. This study contributes to understanding the physical and mental health of emerging adult women and their experiences entering the workforce.

This section summarized major concepts in emerging adulthood and described various contexts that influence the experiences of emerging adults. The theory of emerging adulthood takes into account the psychological, social, and cultural conditions that affect emerging adults, which are useful for understanding their experiences and the contexts that influence their experiences. This section also provided insight into cognitive issues in emerging adulthood. In particular, the concept of recentering in emerging adulthood helps to understand the specific phases that occur as emerging adults transition to adulthood. This section also included research on current issues in the mental health of emerging adults, including the coping mechanisms they utilize and the support systems and contexts necessary to support their success.

**Literature on Adult Development**

This section provides an overview of the stages of the life course and a discussion of gender issues in stage theories of the life course. The discussion also describes theories
of adult development. This section concludes with a summary of the research and implications for the study design.

**Stages of the Life Course**

A historical examination of the stages of the life course is important for making sense of adult development. The literature on adult development includes perspectives from Levinson (1978), Gould (1978), Neugarten (1979), Erikson (1968), and Gilligan (1982). Gilligan’s perspective is discussed in the women’s development section in this review.

Daniel Levinson, a professor at Yale University, defines the concept of the “life structure” (Levinson, 1986, p. 6) as the current pattern or the most important parts of a person’s life. In this life structure, transitional periods occur and involve three developmental tasks: 1) termination (an ending of the existing life structure), 2) individuation (a process towards a more autonomous self), and 3) the initiation of a new structure (dealing with the task of termination and exploring and testing out new choices) (Levinson, 1978). The main elements of a life structure are relationships with the external world and include other people, groups, institutions, cultures, objects, and places. Levinson posits that patterns in an adult’s relationships in the external world must be explored to fully gain an understanding of the evolution of the self. Furthermore, developmental crises can occur when an adult struggles to meet the tasks of the current period in the life structure, and these crises can have positive and negative implications for the adult. On the one hand, a developmental crisis can be harmful to the self and others; on the other hand, transformation into more suitable ways of being can emerge. To determine if an adult is experiencing a developmental crisis, Levinson suggests
looking beyond one single event and evaluating the extent of the distress experienced in
the particular period of the life structure. Levinson’s concept of the life structure during
young adulthood compares with the process of “recentering” (Tanner, 2006, p. 21) in
emerging adulthood. Whereas Levinson describes the concept of the life structure as
occurring throughout one’s life, Tanner (2006) focuses specifically on the developmental
processes and contextual events that are occurring for emerging adults as they transition
to adulthood.

Levinson describes early adulthood in life structure development as an “era with
the greatest energy and abundance and of greatest contradiction and stress” (Levinson, p.
5, 1986). Levinson posits that in early adulthood, people form a dream and try to
establish and adopt adult roles, such as developing an occupation, a marriage and family,
and a mentor relationship to guide them towards their dream. Early adulthood spans from
ages 17 to 45 and has five developmental features, including the early adult transition
(17-22) in which childhood ends and a young adult begins to form an adult identity and
separate from parents, the entry life structure for early adulthood in which major life
choices are made, especially regarding careers and romantic relationships, an age-30
transition, followed by a settling-down period, and the period concludes with a mid-life
transition. This theory provides insight into emerging adults’ experiences of adopting
these adult roles and is useful for examining developmental issues and potential sources
of stress and emotional conflict in the experiences and contexts relevant to emerging
adult women entering the workforce.

Levinson’s theories on the lifespan definitely demonstrate the complexities
apparent in young adulthood. However, his focus on the ages of 17-45 as early adulthood
is much too broad. He does acknowledge that ages 22-28 can be considered as “the time for building and maintaining an initial mode of adult living” (Levinson, 1986, p. 7). Furthermore, although the author’s work was conducted for the most part on white men and excluded women and other minorities, the transitions that he articulates can serve to explain the experiences and, at times, the sources of stress and emotional conflict in the experiences of the participants of this dissertation study.

In Levinson’s (1996) later work, he was compelled to begin to understand the life trajectories of women. By interviewing samples of homemakers and career women, he attempted to explore the question of how women’s lives evolve in adulthood. Utilizing an intensive biographical interviewing method, Levinson concludes that women and men encounter the same sequence of events over the lifespan but have unique characteristics and experiences. The author expresses an urgent need for men to more accurately understand women and vice-versa.

Researching stage and lifespan theories can require researchers to come to terms with certain assumptions and revise preliminary beliefs. Psychologist Roger Gould (1978) illustrates this very notion. Gould posits the time from age 16 to 22 as the period in which adults begin the process of separating from their parents and forming their own identities through a deeper understanding and acknowledgement of self. Gould explains further that from age 22 to 28, young adults believe that if they work hard enough, they will achieve their goals, and if they cannot achieve their goals, their parents will help them to cope. During this time, young adults confront reality, as described in the literature on emerging adulthood (Labou-Vief, 2006), and learn that the world is not always just and that hard work does not always lead to success. Gould presents this
transitional period as a time of entering the adult world by coming to terms with new responsibilities and commitments. The attainment of goals and the inevitability of distress and turmoil are features of all aspects of his theory. Psychological health and development depend on the individual’s ability to adapt to the expectations of society. Thus, maladaptation stems from the individual’s failed efforts to become an adult, not the failures of society. This idea is in contrast to literature on emerging adult thought structures that questions the efforts of mentors and other middle-aged adults to help emerging adults develop more mature thought structures (Labou-Vief, 2006).

Additionally, whereas Levinson (1978) focuses on actions that occur during the lifespan, Gould’s (1978) stage theory explores the complexities apparent in adult thought processes. Gould’s theory reinforces the need in this dissertation to both seek descriptions of emerging adult women’s experiences and to analyze their thoughts and feelings about their experiences.

Gould’s (1978) ideas connect to the research of Neugarten (1979), who describes the social clock that is enforced by society, i.e., age-graded expectations regarding the fulfillment of certain life events. Self-esteem can be affected negatively if a person does not achieve what society expects by a certain point in life, and conforming to the social clock can build confidence (Henry & Kloep, 2007). Additional research on the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide insight into their self-esteem issues influenced by meeting or not meeting age-graded expectations.

Erikson (1968) affirms eight stages in the adult life course and identifies conflict between intimacy and isolation as the major issue of young adulthood, which he defines broadly as age 20 to 40. Erikson notes that during young adulthood, individuals are
finally able to begin the process of making commitments in friendships, romantic relationships, and in the wider community. If adults during this time do not form close relationships or commitments or have difficulties doing so, they can feel isolated, confused, and withdrawn. Critiques of Erikson’s theory have argued that his work excluded the experiences of women, and thus his findings do not apply to them (Gilligan, 1982). However, feminist researchers such as Horst (1995) encourage a re-examination of Erikson’s work to reveal the connections between male and female experiences during this time and to possibly link his developmental stages of identity-finding and capacity for intimacy. Horst argues that researchers interested in the female experience should not dismiss Erikson’s theory just because his work focused mainly on males and that the masculine perspective of his work simply indicates that Erikson was a product of his time. Horst further argues that researchers need to “rediscover the relational components” (p. 276) in Erikson’s work and should take care to recognize the similarities that exist in the lifespans of both males and females. This study focuses on the experiences of emerging adult women, but more research is necessary to demonstrate the similarities and differences between emerging adult women and men entering the workforce.

Research on adult women’s development describes the importance of relationships, work-life balance, role changes throughout the lifespan, and support systems for developing a secure sense of self (Caffarella & Olson, 1993). Further research specific to women’s development confirms these findings (Deanow, 2011; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1996; Miller, 1976) and is discussed in the women’s development section of this review.
Literature on the Life Course

Research suggests that changes during the life course are complex and can serve to explain the actions, emotions, and struggles of each stage. Adult development has been conceptualized through four lenses: (a) biological, (b) psychological, (c) sociocultural, and (d) integrative (Clark & Caffarella, 1999). The integrative dimension provides a means of analyzing the role of life context in adult development by considering the complexity and diversity of adult lives. Because this dissertation aims to analyze the psychological and contextual experiences of the research participants, the integrative lens allows for holistic interpretations of their experiences. In addition, the sociocultural perspective, which concerns social and life role changes and socially constructed ideas about race, ethnicity, gender, and social class can influence adult development (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Emerging adult women entering the workforce can be perceived as embarking on a major life role change and are influenced by ideas about gender, a factor highlighted in this dissertation research.

Issues in intellectual and cognitive development throughout the lifespan provide insight into the potential sources of stress and emotional conflict throughout an adult’s life. The literature examines the development of expertise as a process versus an outcome (Tenant & Pogson, 1995). Mature adults develop the capacity to live with a lack of clarity regarding their daily performance, as opposed to receiving grades on a test as in high school or college. Development and expertise are gained from experiences in the personal and professional lives of adults. Because adult development and expertise are based on accumulated life experience, emerging adult women entering the workforce post-graduation from college may not have the life experience to tolerate uncertainty about
their daily performance in their personal and professional lives. More research on life experiences and the development of expertise is necessary (Tenant & Pogson, 1995).

Adult development and life transitions can be understood through narratives that examine an adult’s experience through the construction of subjective meaning (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Clark & Caffarella, 1999). For this dissertation, it seemed reasonable that narrative data could be used as a tool to understand the lives of emerging adult women, along with a phenomenological approach to data analysis.

This section reviewed the research and literature on adult development and included a discussion of stage theories and literature on the life course. Stage theories connect to the theory of emerging adulthood but provide less information on young adulthood. For example, Levinson’s (1978), Gould’s (1978), and Erickson’s (1968) age ranges for young adulthood are too broad to understand the complexities and the specific transitions that are occurring for young adults. The theory of emerging adulthood provides the added layers of complexity neglected by adult learning theorists but does not provide in-depth explanations of the experiences of emerging adult women. Further research specific to emerging adult women in this stage of the lifespan will contribute to the theories of emerging adulthood and adult development. The use of qualitative methods is acknowledged by the research and literature on both emerging adulthood and adult development, which provided a rationale to use these methods in this dissertation research.

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**Literature on Women’s Development**

To analyze the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce and the contexts influencing their experiences, exploration of the field of women’s development is warranted. Issues of women’s development central to this dissertation include gender-based developmental issues, relational-cultural theory, and the themes of identity and achievement. Research on women’s development has also included interventions and support systems, communication styles, and career behaviors, which are discussed throughout this section.

**Issues in Women’s Development**

Conflicts exist between theories of adult development and of women’s development; therefore, the categories are separated to ensure that gender-specific research is considered. Gilligan (1982) critiques Levinson’s (1978) and Erikson’s (1968) above-mentioned theories, noting that these studies, though popular, were only conducted on males. Gilligan contends that women come to know themselves developmentally through relationships and that literature on development has for the most part been from a male perspective. Gilligan argues that male values (such as separateness and independence) are drastically different from female values (such as the importance of relationships and attachments), and she contends that women make judgments about themselves based on their ability to care for others. Gilligan further argues that research
conducted from a male perspective can lead to the perception that women do not express mature adult behaviors or that if they do not measure up to typical male standards, then something is psychologically wrong with them. Thus, a person who researches emerging adult women should investigate not only the transitional stages in the life course but also gender-based developmental differences. This is not to say that theories of adult development are invalid. However, to date, the theories are not inclusive of all adults because it does not yet sufficiently consider race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Research on the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce and the contexts influencing their experiences may provide additional insight into gender-based and developmental issues to advance the dialogue on issues in women’s development.

**Relational-Cultural Theory**

As a result of Gilligan’s (1982) efforts to initiate dialogue on women’s development, another theory specific to women emerged. A pioneer in women’s development is Jean Baker Miller (1976), whose work *Toward a New Psychology of Women* identified contextual factors and relationships as central to women’s development and developed relational-cultural theory, which posits that women “grow through and toward connection” (Jordan, 2008, p. 2). The basic tenets of relational-cultural theory contrast with traditional theories of adult development that have emphasized the attainment of autonomy and separation. Relational-cultural theory raises questions on how emerging adult women entering the workforce manage the process of individuation if it is not the ultimate goal of their development, which challenges the work of Levinson (1978) and Erikson (1968).
Relational-cultural theory posits that a woman’s sense of self develops in the context of relationships (Miller, 1991) and that a women’s self-concept relies on her ability to build relationships and has implications for self-esteem (Kaplan, 1991). A central concept in relational-cultural theory is mutuality, the capacity of individuals to appreciate the experiences of others and to participate in reciprocal relationships with the goal of connection and positive growth, features that often occur in woman-to-woman relationships (Jordan, 1991). However, research confirms the importance of both same-sex support systems (Lockwood, 2006) and male-to-female support systems (Beeson & Valerio, 2012) in the workplace. Mutual relationships occur when people display genuine interest in each other while understanding and validating the unique differences in their experiences. Connected relationships can help women to experience positive growth and development by increasing self-esteem and the ability to act and to gain clarity about oneself (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Relationships that are disconnected can create negative developmental outcomes (Jordan, 2008). Imbalances in mutuality can stem from various painful experiences (Jordan, 1991) and can lead to detrimental outcomes, including feelings of resentment (Stiver, 1991), guilt, shame, and a decrease in self-esteem (Surrey, 1991). Relationships that utilize mutual empathy can lead to an increase in self-worth and self-esteem, which in turn can contribute to more effective work environments (Freedberg, 2007).

The power of connected relationships to contribute to health and well-being is documented in current research on relational-cultural theory (Banks, 2011; Walker, 2011), especially during career transitions (Motulsky, 2010). Power dynamics in relationships, in families, and in society are also identified as major factors in successful
development among women (West, 2005). Thus, research on relational-cultural theory has proven to be applicable to emerging adult women’s experiences in the workplace and in their personal lives (Fletcher, Jordan, & Miller, 2000; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007).

Current research on relational-cultural theory describes a life-cycle approach to women’s development. Deanow (2011) builds on relational-cultural concepts and proposes a new model of development specific to women. Deanow offers a template for developmental tasks throughout the lifespan and includes the opportunities and challenges of each task. Deanow describes the age cluster 5 (12-25) as “authenticity and voicelessness” (Deanow, 2011, p. 130) and age cluster 6 (early adulthood through adulthood) as “mutuality/subordination or domination” (Deanow, 2011, p. 132). In age cluster 5, a woman’s sense of self continues to evolve through supportive friendships and relationships with parents. The challenges associated with cluster 5 include voicelessness because the fear of speaking out could pose challenges to relationships and to social norms dictating that adolescent women not be outspoken. The work of cluster 6 is to achieve “true relational mutuality” (Deanow, 2011, p. 132) in authentic relationships. Challenges to cluster 6 include inauthenticity in romantic relationships to maintain the relationship and focusing on the needs of the other. Implications for practice with women include helping them to understand their choices and challenges and to examine the consequences of losing their voices to maintain various relationships in their personal and professional lives. Although the age range in each cluster throughout the lifespan is not fully developed, the author suggests that more research on specific age ranges is necessary, which confirms the need for research focused on emerging adult women entering the workforce.
Deanow’s (2011) explanation of women’s development over the lifespan further connects to research on the communication patterns and behaviors of women in the workforce. Research on direct and indirect communication indicates that competent communicators use both methods to communicate and that indirect communication can be a form of politeness. Such communication is a way to avoid confrontation in case of a negative response and is typically associated with women’s language (Stein & Stelter, 2011). To preserve relationships at work, women tend to use indirect communication strategies. Further research indicates that men and women are held to different standards when it comes to evaluating their work performance, thus increasing the demand for women to display exceptional competence and ability to communicate effectively to be taken seriously in the workforce (Carli, 2001). Additionally, research indicates that women who do not use a warm style of speech can be seen as overly aggressive in the workforce (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Furthermore, career behaviors that include expressing emotions such as crying are considered to be highly unprofessional because they do not fit the male norm for appropriate workplace conduct (Stiver, 1991). In addition, women who display competitive behaviors in the workplace can become fearful that they will be categorized as aggressive, which makes workplace behaviors for women a complex issue (Stiver, 1991). Research on communication styles and career behaviors provides insight into the fears and anxiety that can result from attempting to preserve relationships and connect with others. Additional research investigating the modes of communication and behaviors that emerging adult women utilize and their rationales for adopting certain communication styles may provide insight into Deanow’s (2011) new model of
development specific to these women and may highlight the tensions that exist for them in the workforce.

Relational-cultural theory and the themes addressed within this theory not only relate to a possible and likely theory of women’s development but also motivated the design of this study. The theory claims that positive experiences in relationships are an essential element in emerging adult women’s development. The theory also supports the view that allowing the research participants to voice their struggles, successes, thoughts, and experiences allows them to truly be heard on their own terms. Thus, relational-cultural theory provides a contextual grounding for this dissertation, especially for how the theory explores the way in which relationships during this time period can influence individual experiences.

Identity in Women’s Development

Theories of women’s development are essential for investigating emerging adult women, and the theme of identity is also crucial during this time. This section explores the themes of identity and choice connected to the experiences of women.

Research on women’s identity has shown that identity is complex and is deeply influenced by an individual’s interactions with society (Josselson, 1996). Like Erikson (1968), Josselson (1996) discusses identity development in young adulthood; however, Josselson views a women’s identity development as occurring over the lifespan rather than during one stage in adolescence. Josselson (1996) questions how a woman comes to be who she is through the choices she makes beginning post-graduation from college. She posits that making commitments to one’s identity in adulthood can be challenging and can provoke fear of giving up childhood certainty. Josselson’s research further
reinforces the idea that women know who they are through connection with others. Josselson describes four pathways to adulthood: 1) Guardians, 2) Pathmakers, 3) Searchers, and 4) Drifters (Josselson, 1996). These pathways provided a means to categorize the research participants in this dissertation research and to think about their identities. Research that examines the experiences and the contexts influencing the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide additional insight into the theme of identity and its relationship to making choices specifically among this cohort.

Further research on the theme of identity and choice has shown that life choices are a central factor in developing an identity. One’s decisions construct one’s identity, and this can cause confusion (Belenky et al., 1997; Budgeon, 2003; Harris, 2004). Emerging adult women create a “reflexively organized biography” (Budgeon, 2003, p. 27) or narrative, and the choices they make result in lifestyles that express their identities. Other research on identity formation in emerging adult women shows that entering the workforce can lead to an intense struggle because of the multitude of options and choices available to emerging adult women. Making choices for the future can create expectations and pressure that lead to self-doubt, which can weaken identity formation (Dickerson, 2004). “Mid-wife teachers” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 217), who offer support systems that draw out new ideas or beliefs already present in the psyches of young women and foster connection help women to make choices and to form identities. Research on the role that choices play in the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide additional insight into issues related to identity formation, highlight the emotional conflicts and tension involved, and describe
the characteristics of support systems that help emerging adult women with identity formation.

**Achievement in Women’s Development**

Research specifically addressing the achievement experiences of emerging adult women has focused on either “can-do” women (those who are striving for success, are extremely ambitious, and are opportunists) or at-risk women with fewer advantages and opportunities, typically from minority groups (Harris, 2004). Both groups have been affected by the expectations placed on them by society, which at times can lead to self-doubt (Dickerson, 2004). Young adult women tend to believe that hard work and dedication equal success and that any young woman who invests enough time and energy is entitled to succeed in her goals (Wood, 2010). The possible implications of this belief could contribute to a negative self-image and extreme disappointment for young women entering the workforce (Harris, 2004). Research on the experiences of a select group of emerging adult women may provide insight into their beliefs and emotions in the context of achievement.

This section reviewed the research and literature on women’s development. Research on gender-based developmental issues specific to women were addressed and provide a lens for analyzing the experiences of emerging adult women. Research on relational-cultural theory was presented and highlighted issues regarding the experiences of connection and disconnection. Research on relational-cultural theory also addresses support systems, communication styles, and the career behaviors of women. Therefore, the use of relational-cultural theory for this dissertation research may provide additional insight into the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce and the
contexts influencing their experiences. This section also presented the themes of identity and achievement and the roles they play in a woman’s life. Because emerging adult women are in the process of identity formation, and they face choices in their personal and professional lives more than ever before, it seems important to understand the roles of choice and decision-making in constructing identities. Furthermore, because achieving goals is a major element in forming an identity in emerging adulthood, it is important to understand the role that achievement plays in the lives of emerging adult women entering the workforce. This fact reinforces the importance of capturing the identity, cognition, and events that influenced the research participants in this dissertation research.

**Literature on Career Development**

As noted in Chapter 1, women are an increasingly dominant presence in the workforce. A 2010 study titled *Women Matter* was conducted by the consulting firm McKinsey and Company and finds that women conceivably represent the future of business and that companies run by women appear to be performing more successfully than companies led by men (Desvaux et al., 2010). The study also presents issues and barriers to women’s success and suggests strategies to retain female employees. Thus, an investigation of the career development of emerging adult women entering the workforce is called for in this research. This section discusses theories of career development, research pertaining to women’s career development, and transitioning into the workforce.

**Career Development Theories**

Career development is a complex discipline in which most theories to date have focused on career behaviors. Research suggests that the relationship between individuals and their context is lacking in career development theory and that the process of
development has not been given enough attention (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Although it is extremely important to identify the processes involved in the career development of emerging adult women to understand their experiences, it is also necessary to examine early career development theories and their implications for these women entering the workforce.

Theories of career development seem to be evolving to include considerations of race, gender, and economic background. Research indicates that career choices occur during adolescence and young adulthood and are determined by the following four influences: (a) the reality factor, (b) the educational process, (c) the emotional factor, and (d) individual values (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, & Herma, 1951). Research on the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide additional insight into the process of making career choices and the feelings and thoughts involved in the process.

Super’s (1954) theory, which received much attention despite its exclusion of women’s and minorities’ experiences, recognizes a person’s self-concept as a key element in vocational choices. The theory posits six stages of career development, including the implementation stage (ages 21 to 24), a period in which a person trains for employment and becomes employed, and the stabilization stage (ages 24 to 35), in which a person confirms a career choice. Super posits that vocational self-concept is developed as a result of experiences in various contexts in an adult’s professional and personal life. Thus, career development is a lifelong process. Because Super’s theory is based on self-concept, subsequent research has found that it can account for life interruptions that occur over a woman’s lifespan (Coogan & Chen, 2007). Research on the experiences of
emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide additional insight into the process of career development specific to emerging adult women.

In contrast, Holland’s (1959) Career Typology categorizes people into six groups (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional). Although the Career Typology is supported by research, it has also been criticized for gender bias because women were placed only in the artistic, social, and conventional groups. Research on the experiences of a select sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce and the contexts influencing their experiences may provide additional insight into the preferred career types of a select sample of these women.

Social cognitive career theory recognizes contextual factors such as race and gender in determining career success and argues that the process of choosing a career begins in childhood, ends in adulthood, and is determined by the activities in which the individual is successful (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1987). Research on the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide additional insight into the contextual factors that determine career success and the process of choosing a career specific to these women.

Although historical theories of career development shed light on the decisions a person makes to choose a career and affirm that one’s career can be deeply connected to identity and self-concept, the theories fail to include the experiences and complexities unique to women’s development. Thus, an in-depth investigation into the experiences of emerging adult women for this dissertation advances and refines the research on a select cohort of emerging adult women’s experiences of entering the workforce.
Research on Women’s Career Development

Career development is a more complex issue for women than for men because of internal and external barriers. Early gender-role orientation, family responsibilities, and employment inequities such as discrimination, lack of mentorship, sexual harassment, and issues of gender socialization are identified as barriers to career development for women and can influence job choice (Coogan & Chen, 2007; Heppner & Fu, 2010). Additionally, time constraints and motherhood can be barriers for women in the workplace because American work culture considers one’s investment of time in the workplace as a major factor for promotion and advancement (Christ, 2004). Research on the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide additional insight into the complexities in women’s career development and the internal and external barriers.

Research conducted on young women ages 15 to 17 shows that their career decisions are deeply connected to their anticipated role as a mother, which is a potential barrier in career development, and that early interventions in school should provide a venue for young girls to learn about and understand the complexity of balancing motherhood, education, and career (Marks & Houston, 2002). Although balancing multiple roles in a woman’s life can be perceived as a barrier to a woman’s success in the workplace, research indicates that succeeding in the workforce can help prevent depression and provide social support (Heppner & Fu, 2010). This finding is also consistent with literature suggesting that through the contexts of achievement in the workplace, a woman can experience increased self-esteem and self-worth, which can be linked to a woman’s financial success (DeBord, 2009). Questions arise concerning the
connections between perceived barriers, choices, and the role of motherhood. Research on the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce may shed light on those questions.

Self-efficacy beliefs about career behaviors, educational and occupational choice, and performance capabilities can have implications for a woman’s self-esteem (Lent & Fouad, 2010). Women gain confidence and increase their self-efficacy beliefs from various experiences, especially witnessing other women similar to themselves succeeding in certain tasks or careers and listening to people who encourage their ability to be successful in those tasks or careers (Heppner & Fu, 2010). Research on the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide additional insight into their self-efficacy beliefs and the contexts influencing self-efficacy to better support the women’s success in the workforce.

Research on emerging adult women with learning disabilities indicates three stages of career development: unsettled, exploratory, and focused (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002). This research also identifies individual motivation, family support and advocacy, opportunities for career exploration, on-the-job training, and supportive work environments as contributors to the success of the women studied (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002). Research on the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce may provide insight into the process of career development for these women and the contexts that contribute to their success.

**Transitioning into the Workforce**

The transition into the workforce for emerging adult women involves gaining experience, making career choices, and identifying support systems. Research suggests
that the amount of work experience that a women accumulates, the period in the lifespan in which the work experience occurs, and the volatility in the work experiences deeply influence women’s attachment to the labor force (Alon, Donahoe, & Tienda, 2001). In addition, young women who do not commit to jobs in early adulthood can be perceived as unreliable to employers. This perception can limit a young woman’s job prospects, which can result in taking jobs sensitive to economic downturns and can limit the woman’s future earning potential (Alon et al., 2001). Research on the experiences of a sample of emerging adult women and the contexts affecting their experiences may provide additional insight into issues relating to the consequences of early career experience and labor force attachment.

While women enter the workforce, intense feelings can surface when they make career choices and can provide information about the lack of stable employment in emerging adulthood. These feelings can include the emotional conflict of uncertainty, which can influence the work experiences of emerging adult women. Although uncertainty is a normal and mature emotion while making career decisions, having a positive outlook usually leads to persistence in times of uncertainty, and feelings of uncertainty are particularly unavoidable in the face of current economic conditions (Miller, 1995). On the other hand, Staff, Harris, Sabates, and Briddell (2008) argue that those who demonstrate uncertainty in career aspirations in adolescence have lower wages than their peers with career certainty. Thus, uncertainty can be perceived as risky for the labor market. Chari (2008) suggests that helping a person to accelerate the transition process involved in career choices will help that person to gain confidence, which leads to better performance. Emerging adult women grapple with uncertainty in personal and
professional decisions on a day-to-day basis, which can cause emotional conflict. This dissertation research revealed the participant’s feelings about making career-related decisions and may provide insight into the implications of career uncertainty in the lives of this sample of emerging adult women. The research may also reveal environments that were helpful in accelerating the women’s transitions.

This section summarized traditional theories of career development, current research on women’s career development, and research on transitioning into the workforce. Theories of career development explain the elements of career choice but tend to neglect the process of career development and the experiences of women and minorities. Research suggests that women’s career development may be more complex because of multiple role changes, personal characteristics, and the availability of support systems in various contexts. Furthermore, although the theory of emerging adulthood and theories of the lifespan in adult development describe emerging adulthood as a time for exploring identity before committing to a career, research specific to women’s career development may be more complex because of various contextual factors. This dissertation research may contribute to the current research base by providing additional insight into the career development issues of a select sample of emerging adult women.

Summary

This review summarizes research on emerging adult women in the following areas: (a) emerging adulthood, (b) adult development, (c) women’s development, and (d) career development. This research suggests that the roles that identity formation and relationships play in emerging adult women’s development are central. The behaviors of
emerging adult women can be influenced by their experiences in certain contexts and through certain relationships.

Issues affecting an emerging adult woman’s life include developmental and mental health issues. This review also showed that understanding the stages of the lifespan allows for deeper understanding of emerging adult women. The research on women’s development and career development provided insight into the differences between men and women and how these differences affect the experience of women entering the workforce as well as their personal and professional lives.

Each area presented in the review displayed how the research conducted for this dissertation will advance and refine what is already known about the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce and the contexts influencing their experiences. Although existing research offers insight into the experiences of emerging adult women, research is lacking on their thought processes, perceptions, and “how they are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 55). This dissertation research will fill this gap and will contribute to a richer understanding of the topic.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to understand and interpret the reported experiences of the research participants and the contexts that influenced their experiences. A sample of ten emerging adult women (ages 22 to 25) who have recently entered the workforce upon graduating from four-year institutions of higher education were chosen to describe the perceptions of their experiences and the meanings that they ascribe to them. The primary questions explored in this dissertation are the following:

- How do emerging adult women describe their experiences of entering the workforce?
- What contexts have influenced their experiences of entering the workforce?

This chapter provides a detailed description of the strategies used for data collection and analysis and begins with a description of the pilot study conducted prior to this dissertation. The discussion continues with a description of the sampling methods, data collection and analysis procedures, and issues of ethics, trustworthiness, and limitations. The chapter concludes with a summary of its key elements and a preview of Chapter 4.

Pilot Study

The pilot study involved three semi-structured, asynchronous online interviews to collect data from a sample of women aged 22 to 25 who had recently graduated from a four-year institution of higher education and had entered the workforce in full-time positions. The data received from the pilot interviews allowed in-depth summaries of the research participants’ transitional experiences and set the framework for this dissertation.
Analysis and interpretation of the data during the pilot study were examined through the topic of the research participants’ experiences with self-doubt. The pilot study approached this topic solely by asking the emerging adult women to describe their experiences with self-doubt. This topic was chosen because of its prominence in the current research base in popular culture and in reports from emerging adult women themselves. Salient themes that emerged from this study included the prevalence of fear and the influence of expectations and support systems on the participants’ lives.

The most prominent theme that emerged was that each participant had a feeling of being “almost there” when thinking about adulthood and the direction that they wanted their lives to take, but they were not there yet. Thoughts and emotions about education, careers, and romantic relationships were also prominently expressed. Although the pilot data definitely reflected the occurrence of self-doubt, which is consistent with earlier findings in the literature, this chosen question also raised questions about the research strategy employed. For instance, was the researcher merely choosing to perceive self-doubt in the data? Were the chosen questions leading the research participants to express self-doubt? What did the participants experience that was not self-doubt?

After analyzing the personal assumptions and prejudgments made prior to the pilot research and revisiting the pilot data, the researcher was able to discover that other experiences and themes were reported but were clouded by the emphasis on self-doubt. For purposes of this dissertation research, the researcher rephrased the research questions to include other themes of experience to be analyzed, interpreted, and represented.

To clarify assumptions made during the pilot study, the researcher used a research diary. Because the research diary proved to be an important analytical tool, the researcher
continued to utilize it throughout this dissertation. The research diary served throughout as a record of the researcher’s involvement in the project and of the research process. The diary also served to explore research practices and to reflect on assumptions. The researcher’s diary was informed by Conroy’s (2003) use of on-going logs “…to help track the researcher’s understandings, misunderstandings, and decisions” (p. 20), and it helped immensely during the interpretation of the data. The research diary also served as a place for memos, an analytical and procedural tool to help retain ideas, as a means to extract meaning from the data, and as a way to maintain project momentum (Borg, 2001; Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Utilizing the research diary throughout this dissertation on a daily basis enabled the researcher to document questions and insights, make observations, and clarify and reflect on her thoughts; in this way, the diary contributed to the procedural rigor of the research.

**Sampling Methods**

**Defining the Target Group**

The phrase “emerging adult women entering the workforce” can be defined in multiple ways based on certain descriptors or characteristics including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and educational background. Most researchers agree that emerging adulthood spans ages 18 through 25 and can often extend to age 29 (Arnett, 2007; Tanner et al., 2009). Research for this dissertation focused on ages 22 through 25 because this is the period in which the research participants graduated from college and first entered the workforce in full-time positions. Additionally, recent studies on the collective experiences of men and women entering the workforce rely on collecting data from this select age group to document their transition into the workforce (Murphy et al.,
2010; Plunkett, 2001). For the purposes of this dissertation, an emerging adult woman entering the workforce was defined as a woman between the ages of 22 and 25 who has completed a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution of higher education and was employed in a full-time position during the interview process.

**Selecting Research Participants**

Individuals meeting this definition of emerging adult women were eligible for participation in this study. Purposeful sampling strategies were utilized to identify multiple individuals meeting these criteria (Creswell, 2008). Sampling strategies used for this research included 1) recruiting an appropriate and adequate number of research participants, 2) gaining access, and 3) developing rapport with the research participants. The appropriateness of the sample was determined by age, gender, and the ability and willingness to share their experiences. Current interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research considers ten participants an adequate sample. This size is large enough to ensure diversity of responses, obtain a holistic account of the relevant phenomena, and provide sufficient depth, redundancy, and theoretical saturation (Reid et al., 2005). This number of participants was also appropriate for this project’s pragmatic constraints, such as the limited time available to collect, analyze, and interpret the data and the limited funds available to compensate research participants.

To obtain a full description of the phenomenon under investigation, the researcher gained access to the research participants by means of three gatekeepers. The gatekeepers are professional contacts and friends of the researcher and had rich access through their professional positions to the population being recruited. Gatekeeper 1, a teacher and colleague of the researcher from Lowell High School, provided the email addresses of
family members and friends who met the criteria for and expressed interest in the study. Gatekeepers 2 and 3 are personal friends of the researcher. They both have several colleagues who are emerging adult women in the age range of 22-25, and they agreed to send email addresses of potential participants to the researcher after the potential participants expressed interest in the study. After receiving Lesley University Institutional Review Board approval, the researcher informed the gatekeepers via email and telephone that participant recruitment could begin. The gatekeepers sent the potential participants’ email addresses to the researcher after the women expressed interest to them.

The next step in accessing the sample was to establish rapport with the potential participants by sending an introduction to the study and an informed consent form (See Appendix A) via email. Maintaining rapport throughout the study was a fairly natural process for the researcher because she had also been an emerging adult woman entering the workforce and is familiar with the language, expressions, and issues of this cohort. Familiarity with these issues can be an advantage in the data-gathering process for facilitating trust between the researcher and research participants (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

A disadvantage of familiarity with the participants’ lives of is that it can hinder interpretation because the researcher’s preconceived interpretations of certain words and phrases may skew the data presented. To address this issue, the researcher utilized “hermeneutic alertness” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 620), which requires the researcher to reflect on the meanings that the research participants assign to their experiences by
stepping back, rereading the texts several times, and writing down thoughts and insights. This practice is documented in the research diary for this dissertation.

The researcher also maintained rapport with the participants by providing cordial and timely responses to their questions and concerns. She responded to the concerns and emails of the participants within two days throughout the research process. This timeliness allowed the participants to understand the researcher’s investment in understanding and describing their lives accurately and displayed her eagerness to complete the research process. For example, one participant asked whether the initial questions in the first round of the asynchronous online interview were soliciting responses that addressed emerging adult women’s experiences only in the work setting. The researcher responded to this email the same day and explained that the initial interview questions could be answered with anything relevant to the participants’ experiences and were not limited to experiences that occurred at work.

**The Research Participants**

The research participants were ten emerging adult women (ages 22-25) who have recently entered the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education. Demographic data including age, gender, race, current occupation, and location of employment were collected at the beginning of the asynchronous, qualitative online interview. Table 1 outlines the demographic data for the research participants in this dissertation. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ identities.
UNDERSTANDING WOMEN ENTERING THE WORKFORCE

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Clinical research coordinator</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AfricanAmerican</td>
<td>Assistant editor</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Research administration, finance</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Fellow at a nonprofit</td>
<td>Amherst, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Account executive</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Household manager and childcare</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Portfolio associate and researcher</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Nanny and graduate student</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Advertising and sales executive</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Administrative associate</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this sample, 9 of the 10 research participants were white, and the age range was 22 to 25, with a median age of 23.5. Four of the research participants, Meghan, Ashley, Jennifer, and Elizabeth, had work that included research in some capacity. Two of the participants, Lauren and Brittany, provided childcare. Stephanie was an assistant editor, Samantha was an account executive, Jessica worked in advertising and sales, and Amber was an administrative associate. Six of the research participants were employed in Massachusetts. Four of the research participants were employed in New York.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

This section discusses the method of data collection and analysis adopted for this dissertation and includes a flowchart providing an overview of the research approach, a description of specific data collection procedures, including the semi-structured,
asynchronous online interview, and an overview of the stages of data analysis and the tasks completed in each stage. Figure 1 shows the flowchart.
UNDERSTANDING WOMEN ENTERING THE WORKFORCE

Figure 1: Overview of Research Approach

Paradigm:
Interpretive Paradigm

Methodology:
Phenomenology

Ethics Clearance

- Institutional Review Board
- Introductory e-mail
- Online informed consent

Data Collection Methods:
- Demographic Data
- Asynchronous Online Interview No. 1: Life Chapter Interview
- Asynchronous Online Interview No. 2: Probing Questions

Stages of Data Analysis:
1. Immersion
2. Understanding
3. Abstraction
4. Synthesis and Theme Development
5. Integration and Critique

Product:
- Research Participant Summaries of Experience
- Discussion of Themes
Data Collection

In this phenomenological study, experience-centered narratives were collected from two rounds of semi-structured, asynchronous online interviews, which granted access to the thoughts, emotions, and contextual worlds of the research participants. Collecting narratives is a research tool often used in phenomenology and promotes immersion in the world of the research participants (Conroy, 2003; Reid et al., 2005). Collecting stories of people’s lives through narratives can help researchers to understand how people make sense of their own lives. This method can be used to collect data to understand a person’s identity from his or her vantage point by searching for important themes that emerge from the data (Atkinson, 1998; McAdams, 1995), and it can accurately represent the participants’ voice (Richmond, 2002).

The collection of the narratives entailed the adaptation of Dan McAdams’ (1995) Life Story Interview protocol into a Life Chapter Interview. Created by the researcher, the instrument was adapted to focus solely on the experiences of an emerging adult woman entering the workforce rather than on her entire life story. The interview questions chosen for the Life Chapter Interview were broad enough to allow the research participants to discuss areas of main concern in their day-to-day lives, a key component in IPA research (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This protocol included seven main sections, which are described in detail in Appendix C. After the demographic data were collected and the Life Chapter Interview introduction was presented to the participants (See Appendix B), a series of predetermined questions guided the first round of the asynchronous online interview.
After the first interview was completed and returned, the researcher developed additional questions to delve deeper into the experiences of the research participants.
These questions were based on Smith and Osborn’s (2003) suggested questions, were intended to obtain rich descriptions, and focused mainly on investigating identities and acquiring more in-depth detail on the participants’ day-to-day experiences. The questions developed for Round 2 of the interview process were different for each person. Thus, the interview series was semi-structured rather than prescriptive. This method allowed the participants to take the lead in the interviews and share their stories (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). The following example presents the questions and answers from Rounds 1 and 2 of Jennifer’s interviews. Because Jennifer’s emotions were not addressed in the rationale of her title during the first round, the researcher was able to collect more data from the follow-up question, which led to a richer description and deeper reflection from Jennifer.

Table 3: Sample Data, Probing Questions
Data Analysis

Specific data analysis procedures were developed after an investigation of approaches used in recent phenomenological studies (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Eatough, Smith, & Shaw, 2008; Morrissey & Higgs, 2006). Accordingly, the data were analyzed first by phenomenological reduction, which included searching for the essence of the individual experience (Giorgi, 1997) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Data analysis for this dissertation was conducted in five stages and began with the researcher’s immersion in the data. Because the research process was iterative, researcher immersion occurred at all stages; however, to display the analytic processes in a linear...
fashion, the preliminary immersion into the data is presented. Table 4 displays the stages of data analysis and the tasks completed.

Table 4: *Stages of Data Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Tasks Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1: Immersion</td>
<td>• Iterative readings of the interview transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Wrote concise descriptions of experiences in research diary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Completed research participant summary of experience charts for each research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Preliminary interpretation: Organized the data-sets into research participant summaries of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2: Understanding</td>
<td>• Revisited notes in research diary and research participant summary of experience charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reread research participant summaries of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identified first-order themes by rereading transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3: Abstraction</td>
<td>• Transformed first order themes into higher order emerging themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Created a chart of emerging themes for each research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 4: Synthesis and Theme Development</td>
<td>• Developed themes that best articulated the experiences of the research participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Created a master theme list with support from the research participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 5: Integration and Critique</td>
<td>• Linked the literature to the themes identified in Stage 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Critiqued the themes on their applicability to the study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 1: Immersion. The researcher first approached the data by treating the two rounds of asynchronous online interview transcripts for each research participant as a single data set. The researcher read through each transcript several times, made notes in the margins and in the research diary, and highlighted significant statements throughout the research process. The researcher then wrote concise descriptions of each experience presented by the participants in the research diary to check the overall coherency of each participant’s Life Chapter. The following is an example of such a summary.

Table 5: Sample Data, Concise Description of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Samantha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Finding Samantha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak Experience:</td>
<td>Promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadir Experience:</td>
<td>Death of grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important Scene:</td>
<td>Moving into new apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Chapter Challenge:</td>
<td>Breakup with boyfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Influence:</td>
<td>Tennis Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Influence:</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Future:</td>
<td>Meaningful job, romantic partner, children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Future:</td>
<td>No happiness in career or family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Chapter Theme:</td>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, the data sets were organized into research participant summaries of experience (See Chapter 4). The research participant summaries of experience enabled the researcher to produce descriptions of each participant’s experiences. Writing the descriptions helped the researcher to recognize patterns, contradictions, and consistencies in each story and to locate the many expressions of the participants’ experiences at a preliminary level. Additionally, the research participant summaries of experience revealed aspects of the participants’ individual identities that helped during analysis and interpretation of the findings. The individual summaries and the collective themes in the experiences were viewed as equally important components of the study (Conroy, 2003).
To write the summaries, a Research Participant Summary of Experience Chart (See Appendix D) was used to provide an outlet for reflection on the meanings in the participants’ stories, preliminary interpretations, and links to literature. Because IPA connects with the cognitive paradigm (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith & Osborn, 2003), the participants’ thoughts were a central concern addressed in the analysis. Additionally, because IPA is concerned with accessing the psychological world of the research participants, including the inner and contextual elements affecting the experience, the identity and emotions of the participants were explored. Thus, “who the participant is” (identity), “what the participant thinks” (cognition), “what the person feels” (emotions), and “the contexts that affect or influence the person’s identity, cognition, and emotions” (events) are reflected upon in the Research Participant Summary of Experience Chart (See Appendix D). An excerpt from Meghan’s completed chart is on the following page.
Table 6: Sample Data, Research Participant Summary of Experience Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant: Meghan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peak Experience</strong>: Accepted into a doctoral program in clinical psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What does this experience mean for her? (Significance):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This peak experience means that she can begin to create her ideal future. She has wanted to be a psychologist since she was a child. “This event is huge for me because I have wanted to be a psychologist since I was in middle school, and that reality is actually going to be true for me now.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The experience was “bittersweet” though because she had to tell her boyfriend that she was moving across the country and felt “torn”. “It was so bittersweet because this should have been a happy time for me, but instead I felt so torn.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What does this experience say about her identity or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interpretive comment: This experience displays the importance of education for Meghan in her future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The experience solidified Meghan’s idea that she is a very dedicated and hard-working person. “I think this shows that I am a very hard working person when I know what I want.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interpretive Comment: Cares about relationship with boyfriend and the impact of this acceptance/move on relationship. Empathy? (Brizendine, 2006, brain research possibly?) and (Connects with Cote’s 2006 research). “My happiness immediately turned into a feeling of anxiety and nervousness for all that this would mean for us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What does this experience say about her cognition or how does it/did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Believes the acceptance into the doctoral program will help her achieve her life goals. Also, it will impact her relationship with her boyfriend because he is considering moving to the west coast to be with her. “I am so happy and proud that I am going to achieve my life goals.” “I know this will impact my relationship, seeing as my boyfriend is now considering moving to the west coast for me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Questioned the importance of the acceptance because of boyfriend. “I had wanted this for so long, but now it didn’t seem so important anymore.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What does this experience say about her emotions or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The acceptance made her feel “relief and happiness”. “sheer joy”. Smile across her face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There were also negative aspects of the acceptance or mixed emotions. She had to tell her boyfriend about the acceptance. “anxiety and nervousness” Sad and upset that she had to tell her boyfriend. “It made me feel really sad and upset.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• She felt “torn” between the excitement/happiness of getting accepted and telling her boyfriend about the move.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After completing the Research Participant Summary of Experience Chart (See Appendix D) for each participant and reflecting in the research diary on what each participant valued, the researcher further abridged the stories into summaries. These summaries reflected important themes and key aspects of each participant’s experiences of entering the workforce. The research participant summaries of experience are featured in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

**Stage 2: Understanding.** Like Stage 1 of the data analysis, Stage 2 focused on the individual experiences of the research participants. However, the primary emphasis was to identify the connections and contradictions in the transcripts. The researcher approached the data again by reviewing notes and reflections recorded in the research diary and in the transcripts and reread the summaries of experience to identify more themes, become more familiar with the transcripts, and to ask more questions of the data.

The researcher then identified first-order themes by completing a two-column interpretation worksheet (See Appendix E) for each participant. As the researcher read through the transcript, anything deemed significant or interesting was listed on the left column of the worksheet. The following is an example from Page 1 of Stephanie’s interpretation worksheet.

**Table 7: Sample Data, Interpretation Worksheet, Column 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant: Stephanie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claiming dreams/becoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear vision of dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chasing dreams in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard work=claiming dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a path towards the job I want</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Stage 3: Abstraction.** In Stage 3, the researcher returned to the beginning of the transcript and wrote emerging theme titles on the right column of the worksheet. At this point, the researcher reminded herself that she aimed to communicate something about the participants’ thoughts and emotions. She reflected on the subjective experience of entering the workforce (what it feels like) and the contexts that influenced the experience. After completing the notes in the right-hand margin, the researcher made a list of emerging theme titles (higher order themes and abstractions) for each participant. The following is an example of the abstraction stage from Stephanie’s interpretation worksheet.

Table 8: *Sample Data, Interpretation Worksheet, Columns 1 and 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-order themes</th>
<th>Second-order themes, interpretive commentary, and emerging theme titles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claiming dreams/becoming</td>
<td>• becoming signifies change, a metamorphosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear vision of dreams</td>
<td>• clarity of future goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chasing dreams in college</td>
<td>• struggle for dreams in college, claiming is more powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard work=claiming dreams</td>
<td>• core belief: hard work=attaining desires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a path towards the job I want</td>
<td>• path=claiming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emerging Theme Titles:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ownership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• context of the path or form of entering workforce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• shift in self-perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• context of dreams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 4: Synthesis and Theme Development. In Stage 4, the emerging themes from each participant were clustered by making connections among the participants’ experiences. While clustering the themes, the researcher checked the transcripts to ensure that the connections were appropriate and considered the actual words written by the participants. A recommended strategy in IPA is for the researcher to “imagine a magnet” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 70) to help draw the themes together and to help make sense of them. For example, after rereading the summaries of experiences, transcripts, and notes in the research diary, the researcher was struck by the intensity of the emotional reactions and visual images described by the participants in the context of making choices. Thus, “choice” emerged as a major theme. After clustering the themes, a master theme list (see Appendix F) was created to best articulate the participants’ experiences. It is important to recognize that the themes noted reflect one possible profile of emerging women entering the workforce. The themes were chosen not only based on their prevalence in the data but on their relevance to the research questions and purpose of the study (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The themes are presented in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Stage 5: Integration and Critique. In Stage 5 of the data analysis, the researcher examined the links between the literature and current research and the master themes identified during Stage 4. The researcher completed several research memos in the research diary to delve deeper into the data, consider other possible interpretive categories, and document additional reflection. The researcher then critiqued the themes according to their applicability to the research questions for this dissertation. As a result of Stage 5, analytic categories were developed to answer the research questions and are
discussed in Chapter 5. The researcher combined the research questions to give titles to the analytic categories.

**Ethical Considerations**

**Researcher’s Ethical Standards**

As with any study that requests the sharing of personal information, there are potential risks for the research participants. For example, the participants could experience stress over sharing and reflecting on sensitive information. Related to this are concerns about how the researcher ensures confidentiality and anonymity. To avoid harming the research participants, the researcher implemented policies and procedures to maintain research ethics. The researcher clearly communicated the nature of the study to the research participants. At the beginning of the interview process, the participants were introduced to the study and had opportunities to ask questions throughout the research process. Any concerns of the research participants were addressed immediately.

Confidentiality and anonymity were granted to all participants. All research participants were assigned pseudonyms. The researcher was the only person that had access to the collected data with the participants’ names and contact information and stored this information in a locked file on her computer. Second readers, committee members, and the gatekeepers were not provided this information. The gatekeepers had the participants’ email addresses that they provided to the researcher. However, the gatekeepers did not know who responded to the researcher at the beginning of the study. The research participants were made aware that data would be retained as long as the researcher deems it useful (i.e., to inform further research), in which case informed consent for additional use would be obtained from them.
Institutional Review Board and Informed Consent

The researcher received permission to collect data from the Lesley University Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.) and collected informed consent forms (See Appendix A) from each research participant. These measures involved submitting a proposal to the Lesley University I.R.B. and collecting informed consent forms from all the participants after a detailed summary of the study was presented to them.

The process of gaining informed consent began with collecting the research participants’ electronic signatures. The creation of the informed consent form and the decision to obtain electronic signatures was informed by a study from Varnhagen, Gushta, Daniels, Peters, Parmar, Law, Hirsch, Takach, and Johnson (2005), whose research found few differences between collecting and obtaining signatures electronically versus in person. The only difference found was that when face-to-face informed consent forms were presented to the participants, they had an opportunity to pose oral questions to the researcher. To compensate for this lost opportunity, the researcher provided timely email correspondence on issues of informed consent. None of the research participants expressed concerns or questions about protecting their identities.

The informed consent form contained a summary of the study and the expectations of the research participants. The form also contained background information, including a brief description of the purpose of the research, the nature of participation, the description of the research procedures, a description of the risks, the voluntariness of participation, the right to withdraw anytime without penalty, the handling of data for anonymity and confidentiality, and the researcher’s contact information.
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research refers to the measures adopted in the research process to support the claim that the findings are valid and reliable. Because of the active role of the researcher in interpretive studies (Smith & Osborn, 2003), strategies to ensure credibility and reliability were needed for this research. To ensure trustworthiness in this dissertation, Guba and Lincoln’s (1998) four tests of procedural rigor – credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability – were applied.

The researcher addressed credibility by clarifying and monitoring her assumptions and questions throughout the research process and by documenting them in the research diary. Other steps taken to ensure credibility included returning to the data several times to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomena, being open to new possibilities that emerged in the data, and collecting multiple sources of data. Feedback from second readers during the data analysis also reinforced credibility in this study. Second readers, who were colleagues from Lowell High School, read the data for themes and provided “wider scrutiny” (Conroy, 2003, p. 30) in the interpretive process. For example, one second reader, whose interpretations aligned with the researcher’s for the most part, discovered an oddity in the data that had not been considered by the researcher. The following is an excerpt from the second reader’s response to the data on Elizabeth.

For all Elizabeth’s motivation and dedication in her financial job, it is odd (to me) that she doesn’t look beyond one year of her career: For example: “I do not have a plan for where I will be in 5 years or even 1 year from now” and “I do not have particular career goals.”(Second Reader 1)
Credibility was also addressed by engaging in member checking, a validity check to verify whether the summaries presented by the researcher were accurate (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2003). For example, after the researcher wrote the participant summaries of experience, the participants were allowed access to their narratives to verify whether their stories and the themes presented in the stories accurately portrayed their experiences entering the workforce.

In an IPA study, the researcher’s goal is to provide an in-depth description of a particular group of people’s experiences, but the researcher does not intend to make claims about all cultures and groups of people (Smith & Osborn, 2003). To address transferability, or the applicability of the findings to other populations or settings, the researcher presented a thick description (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) of the participants’ experiences and offered background and contextual data. For instance, to provide researchers with procedural information that may help them replicate a similar study in the future, the researcher offered examples of email correspondence with the research participants to establish the setting of the asynchronous online interviews (See Appendix G).

To address dependability, or the reliability of the findings presented in the study, the researcher kept a “decision trail” (Conroy, 2003, p. 20) in her research diary that tracked her thoughts, choices, and decisions throughout the research process. The researcher also offered a detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures and presented flowcharts to allow other researchers to replicate her work. Additionally, the researcher offered a “reflective appraisal” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72)
describing the effectiveness of the research approach. This reflective appraisal is presented in Chapter 6.

The researcher addressed confirmability, i.e., the assurance that the themes presented stemmed from the accounts of the research participants, by providing an “audit trail” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72), a detailed description of the research process that included reader feedback (See Appendix F). This audit trail was used to track the readers’ thinking. Employing second readers not connected to the academic setting in which the research occurred also helped to identify themes (Conroy, 2003).

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study included issues inherent to qualitative research, such as the relatively small sample size and constraints on collecting online interview data. Qualitative research methods can be influenced by researcher bias and can be extremely time-consuming because of the vast amounts of data collected. Additionally, positivists argue that qualitative researchers write fiction and that their findings cannot be verified (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). To navigate the challenges of qualitative research methods, the researcher was explicit about her assumptions at the beginning of the study. The researcher also used data management strategies to organize and streamline the data. For example, the research participant summaries of experience were written to capture the essential qualities of each participant’s experience.

The sample size in this study could be regarded as a limitation. This research was based on a qualitative investigation of a sample of ten participants in a particular context. The research study is not intended to make a statement about all emerging adult women...
entering the workforce. It would be valuable to conduct this research with a more diverse range of emerging adults and their experiences of entering the workforce.

Collecting narrative data online was another limitation. When deciding to collect narrative data online, the researcher was faced with methodological and ethical questions and concerns, including the perception that collecting data online is an easy option for research. After investigating in detail the resources available for online interview methodology and using this method during the pilot study, the researcher was able to highlight the positive aspects of online interviews as a means of collecting narrative data. Some positive aspects of collecting narrative data in an online setting include response flexibility by completing the interview asynchronously, minimized interviewer error in transcription, and minimized interviewer bias, which is confirmed by research on online research methodology (Sheehan, 2002).

There are, however, limitations to online interviews. Generalizability, accessibility of the sample, slow response time, impression management, and “lurking” (James & Busher, 2009, p. 86) have been noted as potential difficulties in online research (James & Busher, 2009; Sheehan, 2002). The researcher mitigated most of these concerns by collecting data online during the pilot study. To locate and access an appropriate sample of participants, the researcher relied on gatekeepers. Issues with response times were resolved by creating a timeline for each participant and asking that they complete each round of interview questioning within two weeks.

Impression management, or the inability to receive nonverbal cues during the interviews, was addressed to the highest extent possible by collecting data in two rounds. The issue of inability to receive nonverbal cues could not be completely addressed.
However, this issue was partially remedied by attending to the word choice and phrasing that the participants used in their descriptions. For example, Brittany used exclamation points when expressing something important, such as something that excited her. Additionally, lurking, or invading people’s privacy online without their knowledge, was prohibited. Lurking by researchers can detract from rigorous data collection. The researcher did not attempt to gather additional data on participants via social networks such as Facebook as this could possibly have led to interviewer bias.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed in detail the research methodology for this dissertation. Findings from the pilot study enabled the original methodology to be revised for the dissertation. Issues pertaining to the sample were detailed, including defining the population to be interviewed, accessing the research participants, and providing the demographic data for the participants. The discussion continued with an explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures, which included collecting two rounds of asynchronous online interviews, reducing the data into participant summaries of experience, and the process of IPA. Ethical considerations were addressed, including the researcher’s ethical standards, approval from the Lesley University Institutional Review Board, and informed consent. Finally, the trustworthiness of the study and its limitations were discussed.
Chapter 4: Research Participant Summaries of Experience

The purpose of this study is to understand and interpret the reported experiences of the research participants and the contexts that influenced their experiences. The primary questions explored in this dissertation are the following:

- How do emerging adult women describe their experiences of entering the workforce?
- What contexts have influenced their experiences of entering the workforce?

This chapter presents the research participant summaries of experience and begins with a description of the summaries. The purpose for writing the participant summaries of experience is addressed. The discussion continues with the organization of the summaries. Then, the ten research participant summaries of experience are presented. Chapter 4 concludes with a chapter summary.

Research Participant Summaries of Experience

Research participant summaries of experience are concise descriptions of the participants’ experiences and the contexts that influenced them. The summaries follow the Life Chapter Interview. The summaries end with the essence of the individual experience of each participant based on the themes presented by the participants and through the researcher’s preliminary interpretations.

The research participant summaries of experience enabled the researcher to produce descriptions of each participant’s experiences. Writing the descriptions helped the researcher to recognize patterns, contradictions, and consistencies in each of the stories and to identify the many expressions of the participants’ experiences at a
preliminary level. Additionally, the summaries revealed aspects of the participants’ individual identities that helped during analysis and interpretation of the findings. These summaries reflected important themes and key aspects of each participant’s experiences of entering the workforce.

The research participant summaries of experience are presented according to the order in which the researcher received the completed online interviews from the participants. The summaries of experience follow the data collected from the Life Chapter Interviews and culminate with essential descriptions. The setting for each interview and correspondence between the researcher and research participant is featured in Appendix G. These materials will help the reader to understand the virtual relationship between the researcher and the participant.

**Meghan**

Meghan, 23, a clinical research coordinator at a major hospital in Massachusetts, described her experiences of entering the workforce as a time for “making decisions” for her future and experiencing transitions. For Meghan, entering the workforce and the “real world” meant beginning to think “like an adult.” She believed that she is now perceived as an adult but does not always feel like one. She felt at times that she is “putting on a show” to be perceived as an adult. Meghan also felt that it is “scary” to be regarded as an adult because of the pressure this entails. At the same time, however, she felt “excited” but also “nervous” that she won’t succeed as an adult.

Meghan was accepted into a doctoral program in clinical psychology; because she had wanted to be a psychologist since she was a child, she felt extreme “relief and happiness” because she could now begin to create her ideal future in terms of her career.
As a result of her acceptance, Meghan felt “sheer joy” and “anxiety and nervousness” because this meant that she would have to tell her boyfriend that she was moving across the country for school. She described this experience as “bittersweet.” This experience displayed the importance of education for Meghan and solidified her belief that she is a “very dedicated and hard-working person”.

Meghan reported that her lowest point was her entire first year of work. She expressed that socially, it was not as fun as college because she worked long hours and on the weekends. When she was not working, she was studying for the GRE. When she did go out, she found herself less interested than when she was in college. Going out wasn’t as fun for her, and she was not meeting anyone romantically. This experience prompted feelings of low “self-worth and self-esteem”. Although she had these feelings and “no support system,” she persisted. She realized that she would need a job that would financially satisfy her lifestyle while making her happy. It was a humbling experience for her.

While entering the workforce, Meghan said, “I love you” for the first time to her boyfriend because although she was “scared,” she felt that she had to say it. She explained that through this experience she learned that she was finally “capable of opening up to someone else” and “ready to share herself with someone else.” Meghan said that this has “made our relationship stronger because we are open with our feelings and truly care about one another.”

Meghan reported being challenged to “choose the right path.” At times, she worried about regretting her choices. She dealt with this challenge by living “day to day” and by trying not to dwell on her future. Additionally, she said she “consults her mom”
from time to time when feeling “helpless.” Having weighed options such as travel or the Peace Corps rather than graduate school, she believed that graduate school is the better choice for her. She said she is “a pretty independent person” and that she is serious and dedicated to creating a future that she is happy with.

Meghan reported that her mother has influenced her by being “supportive” and by being there for her when she expressed worries about her future. Her mother was also financially supportive. Her relationship with her mother made her feel “confident” in her choices and gave her the finances to pursue her “passion”.

Meghan explained that society and the stress it places on people her age to be successful had been difficult for her. Meghan considered society the basis for how she viewed herself in relation to others and how she measured her success. In Meghan’s ideal future, she reported seeing herself as a “successful psychologist” who is also a happy wife and mother. She expressed a desire to “conduct meaningful research,” be a practicing therapist, and be dedicated to her job. However, she said she doesn’t want it to “run her life.”

For Meghan, her ideal future does not set her apart from anyone else. She believes that she wants the same things as most people. Although at times she reported feeling “scared and sad” when thinking about a negative future, these thoughts motivate her to do her best, enjoy herself, and be happy.

The essence of Meghan’s entry into the workforce is that she is striving for “love, life, and happiness.” She is persistent, thinks in-depth about her future, and prepares for it each day. The transitions she has encountered and continues to experience challenge her daily. She values financial stability, family, romantic relationships, educational
attainment, motivation, positive feedback from people and society, structure, fulfillment, and success in the future.

Stephanie

Stephanie, age 23, an assistant editor at a publishing company in New York City, explained that entering the workforce after college had been a time for claiming her dreams and becoming herself. Before entering the workforce, Stephanie felt that she was only “chasing” her dreams instead of claiming them. She explained that in college, she was working so hard “chasing,” and now she can begin to “claim” something for all of her hard work. Stephanie also described entering the workforce as a time for transitions, making difficult decisions for which she is now accountable, and experiencing stressful and challenging situations, including moving, finding a job, adjusting, and learning the differences between college and the workforce. Stephanie noted, “When I was in college my dreams focused mostly about my relationship and my career. My dreams now extend beyond this into marriage and a family.”

One experience that influenced Stephanie’s entry into the workforce was obtaining a job after interviewing with six different publishing houses. This experience made Stephanie feel “extremely happy and relieved” because she would now be able to pay her rent and not have to move back home. This event, while “stressful and absolutely insane,” also solidified her resolve to “make a life” for herself in New York City.

Another significant experience for Stephanie was her grandmother’s death. Stephanie’s grandmother was her “biggest advocate” and was extremely sad to see her move away. Stephanie was the only grandchild who was unable to say goodbye to her because she could not get home in time. This made her feel extreme guilt. Although
Stephanie explained that she has not really dealt with the death of her grandmother, she felt that the act of burying her made her stronger and more mature.

Stephanie experienced happiness when her boyfriend moved to New York City to make their relationship work. Through this, she has realized “how grateful I am and how lucky I am to have someone love me deeply and unconditionally.” Stephanie also explained that this move has made her stronger in her relationship and “less willing to give up.” Although it was not always easy for her boyfriend to adjust to living in New York City, Stephanie recognized the sacrifice he made to make her happy. Sometimes, she felt guilty about his difficulties adjusting and only wants him to be happy.

Stephanie’s relationship with her older sister had also been significant while entering the workforce. Stephanie reported that she speaks to her at least every other day. Her sister offered her encouragement while she was moving to New York City, whereas her mother and some other family members were discouraging. Stephanie’s sister understood what it meant to “claim her dreams” because she had worked hard in her own life to achieve her goals. Her sister not only built her confidence and became a source of inspiration but also served as “an amazing resource.”

Stephanie reported that seeing some people that she attended college with has been a negative influence because it reminded her that she had to work extremely hard in college while her college cohorts, she felt, were more privileged than she was. When she thinks about them, she is not angry or resentful, just aware that people’s lives are different. She reports she is now “okay” with that.

Stephanie reported that an ideal future for her consists of being promoted at work, being able to afford a nicer apartment with her boyfriend, and being able to “make more
friends in our neighborhood.” When Stephanie thought about a negative future, she envisioned the possibility of not being able to get along with her boyfriend, him moving back to Boston, and feeling emotional pain because she would “feel like our love was not strong enough to survive.” Stephanie would not like to be “stuck” in her current position because as an assistant, she worked the hardest and was paid the least, so being promoted was extremely important to her.

The essence of Stephanie’s entry into the workforce is that the risk she took to move to New York City to “claim her dreams” is proving to be a great choice. She is happy with her life, the independence she has secured, the choices she has made, and the direction that her life is taking. Although her entry into the workforce had been anything but easy, Stephanie knows the importance of hard work and will continue with this in mind. Stephanie is persistent and hardworking because she believes that those qualities will lead her to future success, happiness, and financial security. Because she worked so hard, she values having a job, the opportunity for promotions and career advancement, and receiving positive and encouraging feedback. Stephanie also values romantic and family relationships and establishing a home and community in which she can be more involved and feel connected.

**Ashley**

Ashley, age 25, a research administration finance assistant for a prestigious university in Massachusetts, described her experiences of entering the workforce as a time of having “flames but no fire.” She reported having interests, “flames,” but no “fire” – interests exciting enough to pursue. Ashley claimed that although this did not affect her basic job functioning, it potentially affected her investment in her current job.
For example, she was not always motivated to go the extra mile for the company by applying for promotions or attending seminars.

While entering the workforce, Ashley’s boyfriend prompted her to begin to think about happiness as a key element in life. This in turn helped to relieve some of the pressure associated with her uncertainty about her future and helped her to focus on being happy in the present moment. This relationship served as a consistent and loving support system while she was entering the workforce.

Ashley became extremely depressed after moving to Boston and starting her first job. The depression surfaced after a few weeks into the job. She began to feel “overwhelmed” at work because she was given new responsibilities without any training, and she worked overtime and without lunch breaks to keep up with the workload. Ashley had no car and despised the long train commute home from work. Having no car posed challenges because she could not easily access stores to buy food for dinner, and the long commute to and from work did not allow her time to do laundry. Ashley felt guilty because she knew that many people would love the position that she had. She felt like a failure, would sleep as soon as she got home from work, and was cold to her boyfriend. As a result of her unhappiness, Ashley eventually left Boston, moved back in with her parents, and sought treatment for the depression and anxiety.

After much deliberation with herself and with people in her support systems, Ashley decided to move back to Boston. She chose to move to the center of the city for its conveniences, such as being close to work, groceries, and laundry facilities, and she moved in with her boyfriend rather than with the friends she had been living with previously. Although Ashley is away from her family, doctor, and therapist, she “is
okay.” This move had been a challenge for her, but she was happy to say that it was working out.

Ashley’s therapist helped her learn about the importance of creating balance in her life and helped her realize that she is not a weak person for needing balance. The relationship with her therapist helped her while entering the workforce because Ashley now looks for jobs and situations in which she can achieve balance instead of ones that might be overwhelming.

Although Ashley said that she has “no specifics” on exactly what she wants in the future, she is certain that an ideal future for her would be one filled with happiness. Ashley was clearer on what she does not want to happen in her future, which includes never finding a dream or goal that she wants to work towards and feeling lost because of this. Ashley admitted to feeling jealous of others who know what they want to do. In addition, she said she does not want to stay on her medication for the rest of her life or return to a state of depression as she did before.

The essence of Ashley’s experiences of entering the workforce is her uncertainty about her goals and future directions for creating a fulfilling life. This uncertainty has affected her day-to-day mental and physical health. Thankfully, support systems are in place that have helped her to manage depression, remain hopeful for the future, and persevere through all of her endeavors. In addition to benefiting from and appreciating the support systems currently in her life, Ashley values “structure and continuity” in her personal and professional life, a sense of balance and control, and happiness.
Jennifer

Jennifer, age 22, a fellow at a nonprofit, described her experiences of entering the workforce as a time for “finding my way.” This was significant because it meant that during this time in her life, Jennifer was taking ownership in the process of “forging a path.” She was attempting to make decisions that will impact her life in a positive way. She realizes that she might make mistakes but also that she is trying to do the right things to become a “self-reliant” adult. Jennifer said that this is a time in her life for decision-making and creating her future. She explained that entering the workforce can feel “exhausting – mostly in an emotional sense,” and it can be a scary time filled with anxiety directly resulting from decision-making responsibilities. Jennifer also realized the effort it takes to gain control of her life because she is “on her own.”

An experience that stood out in Jennifer’s mind as “pleasant” was an afternoon that she spent alone and in which she felt “content.” She explained that her work as the managing editor of the organizational magazine at her workplace was stressful because of an approaching deadline, so she decided to take the rest of the afternoon off. During that pleasant afternoon, she went to a movie, went for a run, went to the local library, coffee shop, and went home to watch her favorite television shows and cook dinner. She further explained that this particular afternoon was pleasant because it gave her confidence to be on her own and showed that she could be “on my own and be happy.” She expressed that she needs times like this to “counterbalance” the periods in which she is alone and feels lonely.

Jennifer experienced challenges in her personal life that influenced her experiences entering the workforce. When Jennifer learned of the sudden and unexpected
death of an 83-year-old friend whom she had met through work, she had a difficult time controlling her emotions and asking for and receiving support in her grief. She cried in front of her boss at work. Jennifer reported that her boss knew of the death but did not know that she was upset about this event. Jennifer felt that her friends tried to be supportive but were not necessarily able to truly help. Although Jennifer’s parents offered their “unconditional love,” she was devastated by the event and felt isolated in her grief. Through this experience, she learned that she must “reevaluate her local friends,” which reinforced the idea that she must forge her own path in this world.

Another important event for Jennifer was the experience of dating someone who was “much more experienced sexually” but made her feel comfortable with what she was “willing to do.” She explained that he was “assertive and gentle” at the same time and that this relationship “became a benchmark for how other sexual relationships could be.” In this important experience, Jennifer began to feel that she is more desirable to men than she gives herself credit for. She learned “that there is a healthy way to communicate about sex” because the relationship was fairly open. Jennifer experienced “empathy and empowerment” which prompted her to feel more “able” to do this with other people she meets.

A challenge for Jennifer is her search for a romantic partner. She explains that the “lack of a robust social network” has been difficult, and she felt that she has not met anyone who is truly there for her, whereas in college, she had more of a social life. Jennifer coped with this challenge with the help of other people and Internet dating sites. For instance, Jennifer’s friends brainstormed ways to meet more people, and her boss wanted to try to develop a networking program in which young adults could meet people
and potentially find romantic partnerships. Additionally, Jennifer was a member of two
Internet dating websites. Although at times she felt exhausted and depressed because of
the situation, she used her support systems to help her navigate this challenge.

Jennifer also received support from a 35-year-old female coworker because they
shared similar interests, and she “is comfortable with herself” but also remembered what
it was like to be “unsure of her next move,” like Jennifer. The coworker made Jennifer’s
workday more “bearable” because she could go into her office to talk. Her coworker
offered her encouragement and inspiration for her writing and looked out for her by
inviting her to parties to meet people.

Jennifer’s parents served consistently as a support system throughout her life.
She reported that they attempt to remind her of her self-worth, encourage her to “pursue
professional interests,” help her to make decisions, and allow her to vent about work and
relationships. Although Jennifer made the “conscious decision” to talk to her parents less
often as she attempts to be more independent, she said that she is grateful for their
support.

The head of the organization that Jennifer works for made her work difficult. She
explained that he “demonstrated negative feelings” towards her ideas and some of her
work. At times, she said that he “disregards or shrugs off” her ideas while brainstorming,
and this contributed to her stress in the workplace. Although Jennifer noted that
sometimes the head of the organization was “encouraging and affirming,” she was most
deeply affected by his negative tendencies. As a result, Jennifer said that she has
questioned the value of her work and the organization that she works for. This experience
was shocking to Jennifer because she received so much positive feedback from her other
Jennifer said she copes with this relationship by venting to other coworkers and attempting to convince herself that “it’s not personal, but rather more reflective of his tendencies than the quality” of her work. Through this relationship, Jennifer realized that she cares deeply about the opinions of others and certainly does not want to work in a negative environment when she is older.

Jennifer said that in an ideal future, she hopes to find a romantic partner to share her life with, a career that utilizes her “creativity” and writing skills, and “consumes” her in a meaningful way. When Jennifer considered the possibility of a negative future, she reported that she would not like to feel the isolation she now sometimes feels or be dependent on her parents financially. Jennifer said that she knows that she needs positive reinforcement and does not want to be in an unappreciative work environment or one that does not challenge her intellectually. She said that she does not want to be in a relationship in which she feels “worthless or inadequate” and does not want to feel as if she has missed opportunities.

The essence of Jennifer’s entry into the workforce is that being on her own and making decisions have been stressful and have caused her anxiety; however, central to her identity has been her ability to embrace this process by taking ownership of her life. Although Jennifer is actively seeking opportunities to create her ideal future, she perceives the search for meaning and purpose in her life to be difficult. Jennifer appreciates and wants to achieve balance and flexibility, and she wants to be challenged in the workplace. She values supportive and connected relationships, positive feedback, and a sense of community in her personal and professional life.
Samantha

Samantha, age 23, is an account executive for a major newspaper in New York City. She described her experiences of entering the workforce as a time of making independent decisions, gaining and securing control of her life, and at times, experiencing fear and uncertainty about the future. Samantha explained that prior to entering the workforce, her decisions were based mainly on the guidance of others, whereas now she takes ownership of her decisions. Samantha reported that making independent decisions can be “gratifying” when she makes the right ones but “detrimental” when she makes the wrong ones. She viewed the responsibility of making decisions as “immense.”

One event that affected Samantha was earning a promotion, which “boosted her confidence and helped propel me to new levels in the workplace.” Another significant experience for Samantha was her grandmother’s death. This event was particularly challenging for Samantha because she had just started her job the month before. Although she was granted bereavement days from her work, returning to work afterwards was challenging. Samantha found it difficult to concentrate on her day-to-day activities because she was away from her family. She thought that work would be a distraction from her sadness, but in reality, she felt that it “hindered her from dealing with the pain.” Through this event, Samantha learned to keep her emotional and personal life separate from her work life because she believes that it is unprofessional to carry “emotional baggage” into the workplace.

Samantha encountered other challenges in her personal life that have helped her learn new things about herself in life and at work. Moving into her first apartment in New York City was important to Samantha. This event solidified the idea that she was now an
adult because it meant that she had a place of her own to call home and that she had to be financially responsible for herself. Samantha also reported that she decided to break up with her boyfriend, even though he had moved from Florida to New York City to make the relationship work. Through this relationship she realized that “love just really isn’t enough.” As a result of this relationship, she began to search more realistically for partners. For her, this meant a person who will make a good husband instead of “superficial qualities that can fade as time goes on.”

Samantha described two major influences during the time she was entering the workforce. One influence was her decision to join a tennis team, and the other was her relationship with her father. Samantha reported that the team “broadened my horizons socially and provided an outlet for me to escape my day-to-day routine and exercise in a way that I love.” Samantha’s relationship with her father had been difficult. Though she felt guilty about expressing this, she considered him to be a negative influence.

Samantha further explained that her relationship with her father had been difficult ever since her younger brother came out to the family three years earlier. Her father had had an extremely difficult time coping with this knowledge, and Samantha found that this deeply influenced the family dynamic. Samantha explained that because her father’s relationship with her brother was “deteriorating,” she found it difficult to maintain a relationship with him. She also explained that being so far away did not allow her to confront him because when she was home, she did not want to spend time arguing.

Samantha reported that her ideal future is to find a “challenging and meaningful” job where she feels valued as an employee. Samantha said that she wished to get married, have children, and settle down near her parents and brother. It was important to Samantha
to create a comfortable home environment for her children. Samantha would be upset in the future if she did not find happiness in her career or personal life. At times, she feared that she would never meet “the right person,” which is why she now views dating and being open to others as priorities, but she said that she does not let it “consume” her life.

The essence of Samantha’s experience entering the workforce is that although uncertain of her future, she is exploring new opportunities that she hopes will lead to her happiness. As a result of her decision-making while entering the workforce, she is “getting to a stage of contentment.” Samantha values advancement and positive feedback in the workplace, connected family relationships, creating a comfortable home life with a romantic partner and children, and ultimately finding happiness in her career and family.

Lauren

Lauren, 24, is a household manager and childcare provider for a wealthy family in Boston. She described her experiences of entering the workforce as a “transition period” from college into the professional world filled with many new responsibilities. The “new responsibilities” that Lauren described were mainly financial and included repaying college loans, paying for her car and health insurance, and “finding a career that suits me.” She further mentioned that making decisions about her future has been a key element during this time in her life and that this can cause excitement and nervousness but, on the other hand, can be “stressful and aggravating.”

When Lauren was accepted to graduate school, she felt “excited” and “nervous” at the same time, but she realized that her acceptance was due to her own hard work and the help of her parents, who have served as a support system during this time.
While entering the workforce, Lauren’s addiction to Valium “affected her relationships” and finances, yet she was able to “overcome this low” in her life and take more responsibility for her actions. Additionally, support systems in the form of her doctor, parents, and friends helped her through this time.

The sudden death of Lauren’s roommate was extremely difficult, scary, and confusing for Lauren, and she had trouble focusing at work. However, she explained that she “experienced a lot of personal growth and maturity” because it was the “first real tragedy I had experienced.”

Lauren’s struggle with ADHD helped her to understand how to overcome her limitations. Lauren expressed new insights as a result of dealing with ADHD. For example, she reported, “I have found that my extra attention to detail has helped with my job and my relationships with friends. I always take the time to review my work, whether it be a quick memo to a coworker or a note to my mom.”

Lauren’s experiences have been influenced by one of her friends, who “helped me get excited about working out,” which in turn prompted Lauren to lose 30 pounds and to stop drinking alcohol. Additionally, Lauren’s friend helped her to learn much about herself by helping her to realize that she must take care of herself and not worry about gaining the approval of others. Lauren was also deeply influenced by her failed relationship with her older sister and hopes that they will once again become close.

Lauren said that she fears the future and “what lies ahead.” An ideal future for her would include financial, professional, and personal success. Additionally, she would like to get married and have a family. Lauren said her “absolute fear” is that she will be without a family of her own, working at a job she despises, and struggling financially.
The essence of Lauren’s story is that her experiences of entering the workforce have been challenging yet manageable with the help of support systems. Lauren has come to the realization that she must embrace her new adult responsibilities and make decisions for herself. Although it is important to Lauren to achieve financial, professional, and personal success, she fears the future, which has caused her frustration. Characteristics of Lauren’s identity include determination and persistence, which are evident from the outcome of the struggles she experienced when entering the workforce. Lauren values educational attainment, hard work, a career that reflects her identity, and financial stability. She also has a deep appreciation for supportive and connected relationships.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth, age 24, is a portfolio associate and researcher at a wealth management firm. She described entering the workforce as a time for “hustling” at work to make a good impression and advance her career. Elizabeth enjoyed this process because her time at work “goes by fast” and “suits my personality.” Additionally, she said her boss and clients are “thankful” for the preparation and investigative work that she has offers. As a result of hustling and impressing her co-workers, Elizabeth was granted more participation and acknowledgement in meetings and was promoted. Elizabeth also described entering the workforce as a time of accepting consequences for mistakes and of experiencing disappointment and gratification. Elizabeth called her time entering the workforce “a learning stage” in which she learned about who she is now and who she wants to be in the future.

Elizabeth experienced her fair share of challenges while entering the workforce. These challenges include “not getting a job after five rounds of interviews” and dealing
with an unruly coworker. Not obtaining the job that she wanted was “hugely disappointing” to Elizabeth because it made her realize that even though she did the best that she could, there was still someone better suited for the position. This experience also “put a hinder” in her job search for a while because she lost motivation, something she said is normally extremely important for her. After discussing the job with a friend who worked for the company, Elizabeth was offered advice and support that helped her to focus on “potential new jobs and positions.” This support helped her to resume her job search.

One of Elizabeth’s coworkers served as an influence during this time in her life because he was available to answer and clarify questions and guided her when she was feeling overwhelmed. She explained, “It felt great that he recognized my motivation and potential and was willing to invest the time and energy in teaching me.”

A challenge occurred for Elizabeth when she made a mistake in handling a new and “fussy” client’s account. As a result of her mistake, a coworker screamed at her. Although Elizabeth was “furious” and embarrassed, she chose only to apologize for her mistake because she knew that she had to accept the consequences of her actions. The relationship with that same coworker continued to be challenging for Elizabeth. She felt that she was continuously being “critiqued” by her, and this made her feel hurt. As a result of this relationship, Elizabeth learned to try to not take this treatment personally and to fully document all correspondence with her.

Although Elizabeth said that she does not have definite career goals, she knows that she wants to travel, move to a warmer climate, and be in a position to “run her own
firm.” Additionally, Elizabeth reported that she fears losing motivation, remaining in Boston, and missing out on travel, work, and educational opportunities.

The essence of Elizabeth’s experience of entering the workforce is that she is motivated and dedicated to her current job although she does not wish to remain there for her entire career. Elizabeth deeply enjoys her life and is exploring a wide range of options and interests. Elizabeth’s identity is that of a self-directed, motivated, and hardworking person who values opportunities for career advancement and appreciates positive feedback and a managerial style that acknowledges her thoughts and voice.

**Brittany**

Brittany, age 25, is a full-time nanny and graduate student and is obtaining her master’s degree in social work at a university in New York City. She described entering the workforce as a time for “adjusting to a new way of life.” Brittany experienced stress in learning to balance the important areas of her life but said that she is “satisfied” with how she is handling it all.

While entering the workforce, Brittany first went on a date with her new boyfriend after her friends reported how wonderful he was, and she ended up having a wonderful time. Through this relationship, Brittany was able to discuss her feelings with someone else and became more open with a romantic partner, which taught her to be more “confident” in herself. She explained that in the past, she was “closed off,” whereas now, she is communicating more and learning about herself through another person. Although she said that she is “scared,” she tells herself to work through her insecurities and reports that she is attempting to trust and communicate more.
One challenge for Brittany was negotiating a living situation with her cousin. She reported that they both disrespected each other by eating each other’s food and not cleaning. As a result, Brittany and her cousin decided to not live together but have since established an open and honest relationship for the future. Through this challenge, Brittany learned that she values family and realizes that she should never take them for granted.

During this period in her life, Brittany experienced her first orgasm, which made her feel more confident in her “sexual ability” and taught her more about what she wants in a sexual encounter. Although she felt embarrassed that this was important for her, Brittany explained that she experienced a “sexual awakening” as a result of this experience.

Brittany described the challenge of “trying to establish myself as a young professional and become serious about my career.” She felt uncertain and scared that she did not know what to do with her life, but she said that she tries “not to put too much pressure” on herself. Additionally, Brittany reported that she thinks she is taking the appropriate steps to establish her future self and felt as though “time will only tell, and allow for me to determine the correct career path, occupational choice.”

Brittany said that her parents have been a consistent support system during her entry into the workforce, standing behind her decisions, encouraging her to “discover what she really wants to do,” listening to her when she was “stressing” about educational programs, and making the effort to visit her in New York City. Through her relationship with her parents, Brittany believes that she works harder to achieve her goals because
they have worked hard to provide her with a vast array of opportunities throughout her life.

Dealing with the negative influence of her friends has been challenging for Brittany. She explained that although she “cherishes” her friendships and regarded her friends as somewhat supportive, she also was at times affected negatively by their behaviors. For example, her friends sometimes joked with her or mocked her about how dedicated she is to her future. While studying for the GRE or completing applications, she would not reveal this to them because she felt “paranoid” that they were “laughing at me inside their heads.” Through this, Brittany realized that her friends were possibly jealous because she knew what she wanted to do and was taking the “necessary steps to get there.”

Brittany said that when she imagines her future, she sees herself married with three children, living in an urban setting close to her parents and sister, and having a successful career as a clinical social worker. She also said that she plans on earning her doctorate.

The essence of Brittany’s experience entering the workforce is that she is “finding myself, learning who the real me is, and coming to terms with my future plans.” Although Brittany experiences stress, anxiety, and uncertainty at times, she feels that she is happy and satisfied with the choices that she has made thus far. She has learned much about herself through this transitional period in her life. Brittany deeply values her family, romantic partnerships, friendships, educational attainment, career achievement, balance, openness and honesty, commitment, and financial success.
Jessica

Jessica, age 23, works in the advertising and sales division of a major newspaper based in New York City. Jessica described her experiences of entering the workforce as “experimental,” especially relative to work and relationships. She explained that she was trying to choose a career and that her current position is a “building block” for what she wants to eventually pursue. She said that she enjoys the flexibility of her current position but felt that she was not challenging or pushing herself; she is considering leaving this job for another one. At times, this “experimental phase” felt uncomfortable because while most of her friends knew what they wanted to do, she said that she still experiences uncertainty. Additionally, Jessica described entering the workforce as a time for experiencing growth and securing independence, which made her feel confident but also stressed and anxious.

An important event for Jessica was breaking up with her boyfriend. The breakup was significant for Jessica because it showed that she wanted to be “more independent.” She explained that she relied on her boyfriend and “knew she would never fully grow” unless she broke up with him. She continued to explain that the relationship “hindered her from experiencing new people and opportunities,” and she needed to break up with him to “get the most out of NYC.”

A key event that impacted Jessica’s experience of entering the workforce was earning a promotion that made her feel “proud” and helped her to gain new responsibilities at work. This promotion made Jessica feel “very confident and content” and gave her an opportunity to “make more money to shine above” her competition. Additionally, “preparing for a huge presentation” and offering the best performance of
her group for the vice president of the company secured her confidence in her abilities at work. From this event, Jessica learned that she can present effectively and “can do anything” if she puts “enough energy and thought into it.”

One work experience that Jessica endured while entering the workforce was being “yelled at” by one of the vice presidents of the company because she made a mistake. The mistake occurred because her boss had called in sick, which meant that she was in charge of working for a client although she lacked prior training. In this experience, she felt sadness, guilt, and anger. She felt resentment towards her job and manager. Jessica, a “perfectionist,” said she does not like “to be involved in situations where I look bad, careless, or stupid.” From this experience, Jessica learned new ways of interacting with clients, managers, and vice presidents.

While entering the workforce, Jessica was affected by the sudden death of her 31-year-old cousin. Jessica stated that her cousin felt like a brother to her, was very smart, and served as a role model. Jessica felt anger over his death because she felt that he had so much to offer this world. From this experience, she learned that “every day counts,” and his memory will live on with her because he was a person who “constantly” pushed himself. This event made her question whether or not she was challenging herself enough in her career.

While entering the workforce, Jessica’s coworker was the most positive influence on her because “she has a contagious attitude that pushes me to do anything I set my mind to.” She offered Jessica encouragement to work hard, look on the bright side, not take anything too seriously, and to defend herself. During this time in Jessica’s life, this coworker has served as a “great role model and friend.”
One of Jessica’s coworkers was recently fired “for inappropriate work behavior,” which made Jessica nervous because she used to spend time with her and could appear to be closely associated with her. This coworker had an extremely negative attitude towards her job, which made Jessica “constantly question” working there. Jessica explained that “since she (coworker) has left, I’ve had a higher morale.”

Jessica said that in the future, she envisions herself becoming a vice president in the marketing industry and receiving her MBA. She said that she wants to be viewed as a respected person in the workplace and as a mentor by others. She also wants to marry a man who is “equally if not more successful” than she is. It is important to Jessica that her future husband be career-oriented, motivated, interested in maintaining an active lifestyle, and financially secure. She wants at least two children and is currently “laying the foundation” for a successful future regarding career and family.

The essence of Jessica’s entry into the workforce is that she is working on a daily basis to achieve her ideal future. She knows what she would like to happen but is unsure of the path to achieve it. Although at times, Jessica is terrified of making the wrong decisions or choosing the wrong path, she is attempting to figure everything out, “piece the puzzles together,” and explore the world around her. Jessica is motivated, career-oriented, and accustomed to adjustment because of frequent moves during her childhood. In addition to appreciating this time in her life because it allows her to explore her options, Jessica values drive in others, being challenged, competition, opportunities for advancement, positive feedback, confidence-building experiences, financial security, independence, family, and romantic relationships.
Amber

Amber, age 24, an administrative associate at a hospital in Boston, experienced intense uncertainty that has caused her to feel “lost,” “uneasy,” “anxious,” “stressed,” and “disappointed” at times. Amber was unsure of what she wants to do for her career. This was “scary” to her because she is 24 and has a master’s degree. She felt that because she is no longer in college and has been in the workforce for a year, she should already know what she wants to do. She said that this uncertainty has caused her to be “very on edge” and “snap at people” at times. Amber found that entering the workforce has been a time for feeling and expressing negativity, contrary to her normal personality. She reported that other people in her life have recognized this and were “not used” to seeing her behave negatively.

Amber felt extreme relief after finding a job. Even though she knew that she was overqualified, she felt relieved that she no longer had to hunt for a job and that her parents were happy for her. Before accepting the job, she felt pressure from her parents to accept it because she had turned down other positions. She says that she “took the job to make them happy” and felt “reassurance” because she would now be employed. Amber believes that it is common for people to be overqualified for their first jobs.

Certain events at work made Amber feel “hurt,” embarrassed, and unappreciated by her supervisor and other doctors in her department, especially since she views herself as a hard worker who is “readily available to anyone who needs my assistance.” For example, Amber heard a doctor comment that she did not “look like someone who would have such a high degree” (a reference to her master’s degree). Additionally, a doctor in her office made her feel “diminished” when he confronted her in front of others about a
Amber was extremely excited about the idea of moving to Boston with her friends. She subsequently realized that she wanted to come home to a clean apartment and felt that she had to do the bulk of the household work. It was difficult for her to confront her roommates and explain her unhappiness. She was nervous about confronting them because she was unsure of how they would react, yet she knew she had to tell them how she felt. After she told them that she wanted to leave, they were sad but still desired a relationship with her. Thankfully, Amber’s parents were supportive of her choice to move back in with them, but this made her feel “even more lost” and uncertain about what to do with her life.

While entering the workforce, Amber’s parents supported her by allowing her to move back in with them after helping her move in with her friends, listening to her, offering her advice, trusting her decisions, and helping her find a job that will make her happy. She felt lucky to have their support during this time in her life.

Amber was excited about having a supervisor close to her in age but became disheartened by the relationship because the supervisor speaks to Amber in an “awful tone,” “commands” her to get things done, and makes her “feel anxious.” Amber said that she has not confronted her supervisor about this because she might need her as a future job reference.

For Amber, a positive future would entail moving back to Boston with one friend instead of three to make her home life “less messy and chaotic.” She said that she does not want to live at home with her parents for a long time and wants to stay there only for
a few months to save money. Amber would prefer to change departments or jobs so that she could work with children. She felt that if she continued in her current position, she would be settling, and this would make her unhappy.

The essence of Amber’s experience of entering the workforce is uncertainty. She is confused about what steps to take next and is disappointed that she settled for her current job in the first place. Amber refused to be unhappy in her living situation and has realized that she mustn’t settle with her career, either. Although uncertain of her next career move and living situation, she is “determined” to make things better for herself. Amber values having a job, obtaining positive feedback, feeling appreciated, having parental approval, enjoying supportive work relationships, and living independently.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the research participant summaries of experience. The summaries enabled the researcher to produce descriptions of each participant’s experiences. Writing the descriptions helped the researcher to recognize patterns, contradictions, and consistencies in each of the stories and to locate the many expressions of the participants’ experiences at a preliminary level. Additionally, the summaries revealed aspects of the participants’ individual identities that helped during analysis and interpretation of the findings, the subject of Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study is to understand and interpret the reported experiences of the research participants and the contexts that influenced their experiences. The primary questions explored in this dissertation are the following:

- How do emerging adult women describe their experiences of entering the workforce?
- What contexts have influenced their experiences of entering the workforce?

This chapter is organized into two main sections. Section 1 presents the major findings from the collected data and discusses the most prominent themes that emerged from the participants’ experiences. These themes include choice, achievement, coping strategies, and support systems. Section 2 presents the analysis and interpretation of the findings and analyzes them in light of current research to develop deeper understanding of the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce. The chapter concludes by revisiting the assumptions identified in Chapter 1, providing a summary of the major learning and insights from this research, and introducing the material presented in Chapter 6.

Major Findings

This section describes the major findings from the ten online interviews. This description is intended to reveal how the research participants made sense of their experiences and how particular events or contexts impacted their experiences. The description features a discussion of the major findings obtained using Interpretative
Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for data analysis. The findings are separated into four central features common to the experiences of all 10 participants:

1. All 10 (100%) research participants experienced a shift in sense of self within the context of choice.

2. All 10 research participants (100%) cited achievement as a context for experiencing a shift in self-perception.

3. All 10 research participants (100%) described strategies employed to cope with emotional conflict while entering the workforce and the meanings underlying the strategies.

4. All 10 research participants (100%) commented on experiencing health and well-being in the context of support systems while entering the workforce.

**Experiencing a Shift in Self-Perception in the Context of Choice**

All of the research participants (100%) described a shift in self-perception influenced by the act of making choices and a sense that making choices was a new responsibility in their lives. Their experiences included a sense of ownership of choices and positive growth. For most of the participants (80%), emotional conflicts were major factors in making choices. However, there were also areas of divergence or difference among the participants.

Jennifer explained that making choices “feels scary” or makes her “anxious.” She also described a shift in self-perception and the anxiety that surfaced as a result of making decisions. She expressed ownership of her decisions and acknowledged her shifting role in decision making and the uneasiness that accompanies this shift: “I have to
be an agent, not a patient, in the situation, and the prospect of making the effort to be proactive in decision-making induces some kind of anxiety,” she reported.

Lauren, like Jennifer, described emotional conflict while entering the workforce after she was accepted to graduate school. The shift in ownership that she experienced regarding life decisions elicited feelings of fear: “Previously, everything had been planned and there was no question about what happened next. I am at a crossroad where I need to start making serious life decisions and this scares me,” she wrote.

Jessica was emotionally conflicted when making the choice to break up with her boyfriend. There was a sense of fear or perceived threat in losing the security that he provided: “I was wondering whether or not I made the right decision. I was scared because he is my best friend…I relied on Jack for many things (advice, attention, security),” she noted. She explained that she “knew she would never fully grow” unless she broke up with her boyfriend and that now “I am only thinking about what is best for me.” Although this decision caused Jessica emotional conflict, she knew that experiencing growth and independence was more important than continuing the relationship. She experienced a shift in ownership of responsibility for growth and independence.

This section presented the participants’ emotions involved in making choices and their experiences of shifts in a sense of self. Many of the participants described what it felt like to make choices and experienced shifts in self-perception as a result of making choices. The participants viewed themselves differently as a result of the new responsibility of making choices.
Experiencing a Shift in Self-Perception in the Context of Achievement

All of the research participants (100%) spoke of the influence of achievement on their self-perception. For most of the participants, achievement was extremely important, and the struggle to achieve caused emotional reactions but led to new understandings about themselves. Most of the participants reported a sense of validation in their abilities and self-recognition resulting from achievement; several participants considered achievement to be essential to their self-esteem. Once again, several differences emerged in the participants’ accounts.

Jessica described the confidence she gained as a result of a presentation she gave in front of her boss, but she also described anxiety and stress as a main component of her preparation for the challenge. She attributed the stress to wanting to “have the best presentation in my group.” She said, “I ended up doing the best on the presentation out of my co-workers and this secured my confidence in my abilities at my job. I was anxious and stressed.”

Samantha, like Jessica, reported the anxiety that she felt while applying for a promotion and described it as a “weight.” The heavy anxiety that the promotion provoked in Samantha implies the significance of the achievement and its influence on her self-perception. Samantha said, “The anxiety was overwhelming and the fear of not being one of the five chosen for promotion was all-consuming…. I felt a huge weight lifted off of my shoulders now that I was relieved of the anxiety….”

Samantha, like Jessica, felt that she gained confidence as a result of her achievement and that it was “vital” to her self-esteem. She further explained that gaining the promotion served as a way to “gauge my success” because in the workplace, “you are
not constantly graded on tests/exams/papers,” and the promotion “boosted my confidence.”

When Stephanie obtained a job after enduring “six rounds of interviews,” she described her emotions after the event and then reflected on her achievement. She felt a sense of pride in her achievements, an acknowledgement of dedication and persistence in her goals, and a sense that the hard work was worth it:

I was extremely, extremely happy and relieved…. I think it showed how determined I was to make a life for myself in NYC and to make something out of the education I had just worked so hard to achieve…. I look back now, now that I have a job and an apartment with my wonderful boyfriend, and I am just thankful that I had the courage and strength to stick it out and not give up. (Stephanie)

This section displayed the shifts in the research participants’ self-perception in the context of achievement and their emotions associated with achievement. For most of the participants, achievement was extremely important, and the struggle to achieve caused emotional reactions but led to new understandings about themselves.

**Experiencing Emotional Conflict and Coping Strategies Employed**

Coping mechanisms were a common theme for all of the research participants. Their emotional reactions and strategies for coping with their experiences emerged in their narratives. Most of the research participants coped primarily by avoiding the situations that caused the emotional conflict with the exceptions of Brittany and Meghan, who coped by communicating their feelings verbally with the sources of the emotional conflict. Again, there were differences among the accounts of the research participants.
Ashley described the depression that surfaced as a result of her feeling overwhelmed at work. She expressed this depression by crying and sleeping to avoid her thoughts:

I would cry myself to sleep at night…. I knew nothing was as bad as I thought it was and yet I couldn’t shake the despair, guilt, and sadness from my body…. I would sleep 12-13 hours a night so I didn’t have to deal with my thoughts.

(Ashley)

Ashley was also “cold” to her boyfriend, which implies unresponsiveness and possibly a desire to avoid communication with her boyfriend, which could have been a means of coping with her depression.

Amber explained that she had trouble communicating her feelings, and to cope with this, she avoided expressing them: “I tend to have a hard time talking about my feelings so I hold things in. This causes me to be very on edge and then I will randomly snap at someone,” she reported. This description suggests that as a result of holding feelings in too long, Amber overreacts.

Amber also described having difficulty with confrontation and expressing her feelings to bosses or friends. Her avoidance of confrontation appeared to be prompted by fear of the emotional reactions of others. To cope, she chose not to communicate:

I never resolved this with the doctor and I didn’t talk to him or bring it up again to anyone else in the department. I get nervous about things like this at work because I don’t want to cause a situation and I want my bosses to like me…. While confrontation is necessary at certain times, it is hard to tell how some people will react to it. I was nervous that my roommates might be the type of
people that would hold a grudge instead of taking what I was saying into consideration and making the steps to correct it. (Amber)

However, later in the interview when asked about communicating feelings, Amber contemplated changing her current practice to communicate rather than withhold her feelings: “This is definitely something I need to work on if I am going to be at this job longer,” she noted.

While living with her cousin, Brittany expressed the impact of the disrespect in their relationship but coped with it by being honest and expressing her feelings:

It was an accumulation of events – not helping with cleaning, eating each other’s food, and overall not being respectful of one another…. We have discussed our situation, we have remained honest with one another, and we have put everything on the table. (Brittany)

Like Brittany, Meghan expressed her feelings to her boyfriend directly, although as she did so, she “felt fear, relief, and happiness all at the same time.” She coped with the fear of expressing herself by rationalizing her true feelings: “Finally, I realized that if I felt that way I should say something,” she reported. When questioned about what this reveals about her as a person, Meghan expressed a shift in her self-perception in relation to others: “Maybe it said that I was capable of opening up to someone else. That I was ready to share myself with someone else and ready to accept someone else into my life.”

This section presented the participants’ strategies employed to cope with their emotional experiences while entering the workforce.
Experiencing Health and Well-Being in the Context of Support Systems

All research participants (100%) reported that their health and well-being were affected by entering the workforce. Almost all participants mentioned other people as supportive influences on their personal, professional, and physical well-being, whereas Samantha mentioned joining a tennis team. Interestingly, all of the research participants recognized the importance of these influences on their personal, professional, or physical well-being.

Ashley cited her therapist as someone who advanced her personal well-being by prompting her to come to new realizations about herself. Ashley said, “She helped me see my problems and challenges in a different light…. She made me see that I just found out these things about myself much earlier than most people do.”

Elizabeth reported that a coworker was an “encouraging influence” because he helped her to navigate somewhat unfamiliar territory. He also expressed an interest in helping her to succeed:

This guiding person was comforting in a new job where I felt overwhelmed with the newness and sheer amount of information I needed to be absorbing. It felt great that he recognized my motivation and potential and was willing to invest the time and energy in teaching me. (Elizabeth)

Jessica likewise noted that upon entering the workforce, a coworker helped her and encouraged her to be more assertive:

She taught me not to take anything too seriously and that I need to learn to stick up for myself…I have learned a lot about advertising and sales through her. She has positively influenced me by being a great role model and friend. (Jessica)
Samantha reported that joining a tennis team was a positive influence that contributed to her personal, professional, and physical well-being. She said, “It has broadened my horizons socially and provided an outlet for me to escape my day-to-day routine and exercise in a way that I love.”

Support systems emerged as salient contexts in the participants’ experiences and appeared to be instrumental in their positive development and growth.

This section presented findings that shed light on the following research questions: How are emerging adult women describing their experiences of entering the workforce? What contexts have influenced their experiences? Data analysis resulted in the major findings for the group, which contribute to understanding the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce. The following section presents the analysis and interpretations of the findings.

**Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

This section presents the analysis and the interpretation of the findings identified in Section 1 and analyzes them in light of current research to develop deeper understanding of emerging women entering the workplace. Section 2 begins by outlining the organization of the analysis and interpretation and reviewing the research questions. The discussion continues with a presentation of four analytic categories and how they relate to theory, research, and practice with emerging adult women entering the workforce. The chapter concludes by revisiting the assumptions identified in Chapter 1, providing a summary of the major learning and insights from this research, and introducing the material presented in Chapter 6.
Research on experiences in a person’s life should address the psychological, physical, and contextual world in which they live (Levinson, 1986), and the aim of this study is to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to capture the complex nature of emotions connected to themes in experience (Eatough et al., 2008). The key findings are considered in light of the following research questions: How do emerging adult women describe their experiences of entering the workforce? What contexts influence their experiences of entering the workforce?

Overall, the findings suggest that the research participants expressed intense emotions in their descriptions of their experiences. These experiences included “paradigm shifts” (Conroy, 2003, p. 31), which are changes in the ways in which they think, cope, and view the world around them. Each analytic category in this chapter describes the emotions associated with the relevant experiences, notes the paradigm shift or sense-making of the experiences, and draws from current research to support the interpretation of the findings.

To analyze and interpret the findings, the researcher investigated the significance of the data by reviewing the participants’ descriptions of how it feels mentally and emotionally to be an emerging adult woman entering the workforce and by using the literature as a point of reference to support interpretations. The findings offered rich illustrations of the participants’ personalities, the complex layers of their emotions, their mental processes or sense-making while entering the workforce, and the most salient contexts that influenced their experiences. The researcher combined the research questions to assign titles to the analytic categories. The analysis yielding interpretive insights into the findings is arranged into the following four analytic categories:
Choice and Emotions: “Patient to Agent”

This section discusses the participants’ emotions involved in making choices and their shifts in self-perception. The discussion also considers current research on emerging adult women’s experiences of entering the workforce. Many of the research participants described how it felt to make choices and experienced shifts in self-perception as a result of making choices. Their experiences included developing a sense of ownership of choices, positive growth, and learning. The participants viewed themselves differently as a result of the new responsibility of making choices.

While making life choices, the research participants experienced unsettling emotions such as stress, anxiety, and fear. Emotions appeared to be particularly intense when choices involved a shift in authority (as in Jennifer’s account), a sense of loss (as in Jessica’s case), uncertainty (as in Amber and Ashley’s accounts), when realizing the magnitude of the choices (as in Meghan and Lauren’s accounts), and when tension was involved (as in Brittany and Samantha’s accounts). All of the participants experienced a shift in their self-perception as a result of making life choices. Although their experiences prompted much emotion, the participants indicated that gaining control of their lives by making choices was necessary. For Jessica, decision-making spurred growth, whereas for Samantha, it instilled confidence. Elizabeth and Stephanie gained new insights from their choices.
Choice first emerged as a shift in perspective about accepting responsibility and decision-making or, in Jennifer’s words, shifting from “patient to agent”. This shift in perspective is consistent with existing research on emerging adulthood which documents that accepting responsibility and making independent decisions are two criteria for reaching adulthood (Arnett, 2006). It appears that for the most part, the participants felt as if they met the criteria simply by entering the workforce post-graduation and that prior to graduation from college, they did not view themselves as adults who were fully responsible for their lives or their decisions. In essence, it appears that for the research participants, graduating from college meant that they had entered adulthood, which caused emotional conflict. This finding is consistent with research that indicates that the stressful demands of daily life, such as new financial, academic, and relationship responsibilities, can affect the mental health of emerging adults (Asberg et al., 2008).

Choice as a context for emotional conflict and a shift in self-perception also resembles the shift from Stage 1 to Stage 2 in the recentering process. During Stage 1, power is shared, and more structured guidance is offered, whereas in Stage 2, temporary explorations in relationships and work and choices about a wide spectrum of opportunities on a more autonomous level occur (Tanner, 2006). It is likely that the shift from the guidance that college provided to the more autonomous nature of the workforce was a major source of the research participants’ emotional conflict. For example, Ashley and Lauren discussed the structure and continuity that college provided and that the workforce did not. It appears that some of the research participants felt an almost immediate drop in structured support when entering the workforce post-graduation, which at times made the process of making life choices feel overwhelming.
It also seemed that entering the workforce entailed more responsibility for decision-making, which led the participants to feel more adult-like and likely caused the emotional conflict and the positive growth apparent in the shift. For example, Samantha described the “weight” of making choices and the new accountability involved, including being the one to “blame” when making the wrong decision. On the other hand, the accountability in accepting responsibility for decisions made her feel more confident, which led to positive growth and illuminated the complexities and feelings involved in becoming an adult. Samantha’s experience supports the argument that emerging adults are optimistic because of the opportunity that this time affords for independent decision-making; however, emotional conflict and identity issues can arise when emerging adults begin to intensely question their expectations for the future (Arnett, 2006). This dissertation highlights the complexity in Samantha’s process of gaining self-sufficiency by documenting her thoughts and emotions in the particular context of choice, thereby extending the research on emerging adults.

The experience of a shift in self-perception in the context of choice connects further to ideas in adult development, particularly Levinson’s (1978) concept of the life structure. The research participants in this study appeared to be in the individuation stage as they became more autonomous in their decision-making, and they were also in the initiation stage as they transitioned out of college (termination) and explored new choices to initiate a new life structure. It appears that intense emotions surfaced for the participants while they entered the workforce because they were simultaneously terminating a prior life structure and initiating a new life structure, which entailed grappling with individuation. For example, when Jessica was grappling with the decision
to break-up with her boyfriend, she experienced emotional conflict and faced the potential loss (termination) of his “advice, attention, and security.” However, Jessica realized that her desire for autonomy in making decisions required her to explore other options and opportunities that would lead to growth. Jessica’s account connects to ideas in women’s development by highlighting the confusion that can surface when a young woman attempts to construct her identity (Belenky et al., 1997; Budgeon, 2003; Harris, 2004).

The findings also revealed that while the women entered the workforce, the experience of uncertainty in making choices was a source of emotional conflict. The findings revealed self-doubt and pressure in making choices, which is consistent with previous literature indicating that self-doubt stems from the feminist movement’s efforts to make options for women more available than ever before and that pressure can be intensified because of the overwhelming range of options available (Budgeon, 2003; Dickerson, 2004). Because emerging adult women have endless options available and ample time for exploration (Arnett, 2006), they could have difficulty deciding which direction to take (Christ, 2004). For example, Lauren explained that she was at a “crossroads” when making life choices after graduating from college and entering the workforce, and she recounted her fear, which resembled self-doubt. Although Lauren did not mention having to sort through choices, she did mention the emotional conflict that surfaced when making life decisions, conflict that could have stemmed from the numerous options available to her. Furthermore, Lauren’s narrative connects to previous research that documents questioning choices and exploring various contexts as the beginning of developing deeper understanding of one’s self-concept and of thinking
differently about reality (Gould, 1978; Labouvie-Vief, 2006). Thus, it appears that emotional conflict existed as a result of the participants sorting out identity issues and developing more sophisticated thought structures.

For the research participants, uncertainty in making choices, especially career choices, resembled the exploratory stage of women’s career development, a stage characterized by job stability without long-term career goals (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002). For example, although Amber has been employed for the past year, she does not plan on remaining in her current position and is unclear of her long-term career goals. This finding further connects to previous research on career development theory that suggests that a person’s self-concept can relate significantly to making choices (Super, 1954).

Because emerging adulthood is a time for exploration in various contexts, and emerging adult women entering the workforce post-graduation are just beginning to accept responsibility for their life choices, it is unsurprising that the research participants’ emotional conflict and confusion were likely related to their lack of a well-defined self-concept.

Brittany’s narrative illustrates another theme: tension between remaining true to the choices she made for herself and fear of being mocked by her friends. Her experience appears related to Gilligan’s (1982) theory that women grow in relation to others and to Erikson’s (1968) theory of intimacy vs. isolation. These theories argue that emerging adults attempt to form commitments in work, community, and romantic relationships while they develop their own identities (Erikson, 1968). The potential conflict between forming an identity and forming and maintaining commitments can provoke intense emotions in emerging adult women. Because research indicates that women grow through
connected relationships (Gilligan, 1982) yet are self-focused, which is a key feature of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2006), life choices could be complicated by the competing forces of connection versus individuation (Tanner, 2006). Relational-cultural theory posits that a woman’s sense of self develops in the context of relationships (Miller, 1991) and that a women’s self-concept relies on her ability to build relationships and has implications for self-esteem (Kaplan, 1991). Perhaps the emotional conflict involved in some of the research participants’ choices could be gender-related and due to the tension between forming a career and remaining connected.

Significant to the context of choice was the concept of identity. Although the findings revealed emotional conflict across the participants’ accounts, none of the participants appeared to experience an intense identity crisis that was different from the normal crises that can occur while building a life and forming an identity in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007). Even in Ashley’s experience of emotional conflict provoked by a shift in self-perception, she eventually returned to work and lived apart from her parents. This finding confirms research that suggests examining a broad scope of events in a person’s life to determine whether her or she is experiencing a crisis (Levinson, 1978). Furthermore, most of the research participants appear to be “pathmakers” (Josselson, 1996, p. 77), in a process of exploration that will form into commitments. Although the participants did have concerns, doubts, and were sometimes unaware of where to find support, it seems that the notion or use of the term crisis may be exaggerated (Arnett, 2007). Nonetheless, the term crisis effectively draws attention to the intense emotional conflict that can occur during the process of building a life.
Although the findings did reveal a shift in the participants’ self-perception in the context of choice, the findings did not illuminate how they chose their occupations with the exception of Jessica, who explained, “I tend to think I want to go into finance because that is what my father does and I know it could become a lucrative career…” Jessica’s response confirms research on career development that emphasizes career choices as based on individual values (Ginzberg et al., 1951) and heredity (Holland, 1959). More research that focuses specifically on career choice for emerging adult women entering the workforce is necessary.

Developmentally, emerging adult women entering the workforce are coming to terms with their identities and changing the ways in which they relate to people and society. The women are making independent decisions and choosing the paths that feel right to them. Thus, it appears that because emerging adult women are confronted with new choices, feelings of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty emerge. These emotions are possibly due to an underdeveloped, insecure identity and lack of experience in making choices. However, when emerging women assume the role of making choices in their lives, they become more self-confident. This study’s work of identifying emotions such as anxiety and fear experienced by the participants when making choices illuminates the process of the shift in responsibility for making choices and advances the literature on the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce.

Achievement, Emotions, and Self-Perception: “Vital to My Self-Esteem”

This section addresses the emotions associated with achievement and examines the shifts in self-perception described by the research participants. Striving for achievement was a challenge for them and triggered feelings of stress and anxiety, then
relief when desired results were achieved. A sense of achievement triggered a shift in their self-perception that included boosts in confidence and, for the most part, an affirmation that hard work leads to success. Some of the research participants considered achievement to be essential to their self-esteem; most of their accounts reflected a sense of self-acknowledgement, recognition, or self-acceptance resulting from achievement. Fears and worries during the process of achievement or following a lack of achievement led the research participants to experience pressure and self-doubt.

Current research on emerging adulthood supports the idea that feelings of stress and anxiety can lead to either positive or negative outcomes depending on the person (Riggs & Han, 2009) and that both well-being and depression increase during this time (Boden et al., 2007; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). Furthermore, research on women’s career development indicates that success in the workplace helps to prevent depression (Heppner & Fu, 2010). This result is consistent with the findings of this study. Although most of the research participants expressed stress and anxiety in relation to achievement, some were better able to manage the stress and found that it acted as a positive influence that resulted in a shift in self-perception. For example, Meghan, Stephanie, Jessica, and Samantha felt extreme stress and anxiety when completing difficult tasks but still persevered, which suggests that even in the face of extreme stress, they believed that achievement was possible. This finding is consistent with Arnett (2004), who asserts that one aspect of emerging adulthood is the “age of possibilities” (p. 8), and Miceli and Castelfranchi (2005), who indicate that although people can be anxious, those who are more comfortable with the uncertainty of success spend more time focusing on what is possible instead of what is impossible, and this focus can lead to achievement. In all of
the participants’ accounts, a major source of stress was the significant emphasis they placed on achieving goals.

In addition, as a result of their achievements, the participants expressed acknowledgements of themselves and self-acceptance. They noted increases in self-esteem, confidence, and pride, and were presented with opportunities for financial success, new responsibilities, validation, and acknowledgement of voice. The participants’ experiences are consistent with the literature on adult learning theory (Levinson, 1986), the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), and women’s development (Belenky et al., 1997). This finding is also consistent with literature suggesting that through the contexts of achievement, a woman can feel an increase in self-esteem and self-worth, which can be linked to her financial success (DeBord, 2009).

While striving for achievement and attempting to reach their goals, the research participants experienced emotional conflict, pressure, and self-doubt, which is consistent with research on women’s development (Dickerson, 2004; Harris, 2004; Wood, 2010). Based on the descriptions of their experiences, the participants all appeared to be “can-do” women; however, all of them experienced some type of self-doubt in the process of achieving their goals. It was only when they achieved their goals that they felt relief and acknowledgement of self.

Most interesting in the findings is that the participants appeared to believe that hard work and dedication equaled success, which connects to ideas in feminist literature suggesting that any young woman who invests enough time and energy in her goals is entitled to succeed (Wood, 2010). This idea became clearer by identifying lack of achievement in the responses. For example, Elizabeth experienced a negative view of
herself because of a perceived lack of achievement. She could not believe that she had worked as hard as she could yet did not obtain a job after rounds of interviews. Across all accounts was a sense of entitlement or belief that if a person works hard enough, the person will achieve. The possible implications of this belief could contribute to a negative self-image and extreme disappointment for young women entering the workforce (Harris, 2004).

Ideas in the literature on adult development appear to explain some of the developmental issues occurring in young adulthood and provide insight into the issue of entitlement among emerging adult women. In early adulthood, young adults confront reality and learn that hard work does not always lead to success (Gould, 1978). Thus, emerging adult women entering the workforce might not be influenced simply by the “can-do” cultural narrative as Wood (2010) asserts. The women could in fact be grappling with changes in adult thought structures. This study illuminated the participants’ experience of revising beliefs about achievement in emerging adulthood. Thus, the notion that emerging adult women have a sense of entitlement stemming from “can-do” discourse may be complicated further by changes in their adult thought structures.

Related to developmental changes during emerging adulthood is the issue of maturity, which could contribute to the emotional conflict that surfaced for the research participants in the context of achievement. Mature adults learn to function without clear feedback on their performance (Tenant & Pogson, 1995). The significant emphasis that the participants placed on achieving goals appears to result from a lack of maturity or a struggle to live with uncertainty regarding their performance. The emotional conflict that
surfaced as a result of achievement, including earning a promotion, appeared to serve as a form of grading for these adults. For example, Samantha explained that her promotion was a way to “gauge” her success and provided validation for her work because she was no longer “graded” as in high school and college. It appears that opportunities to achieve and to be assessed were extremely important to the research participants. This finding relates further to the idea that self-efficacy beliefs about performance capabilities can have implications for a woman’s self-esteem (Lent & Fouad, 2010). By achieving goals, the research participants experienced an increase in their self-efficacy.

Although the participants experienced shifts in self-perception in the context of achievement, motherhood as a barrier for success was not mentioned (Christ, 2004). For example, Samantha did explain that she wants to be a “stay at home mom” when she has children, but her narrative highlights that work achievement is currently “vital” to her self-esteem. Samantha also explained that she wants to know that she is “important to a company’s bottom line” in the future and regarded as an “invaluable asset.” Although Samantha did not state this directly, perhaps the pressure to succeed at work in emerging adulthood could relate to her anticipated role as a mother in the sense that she needs to prove herself now before she has children. More research that examines emerging adult women’s perceptions regarding pressure to achieve and their anticipated roles as mothers is necessary.

Although pressure and self-doubt were apparent in the participants’ experiences, society was not mentioned as a major source of pressure, with the exception of Meghan, who explained that society is a negative influence that places stress and pressure on people her age to be successful. For some of the participants, pressure to achieve might
have stemmed from the “social clock” (Neugarten, 1979), and not fulfilling the perceived expectations of society by a certain point in their lives could have implications for their self-esteem (Hendry & Kloep, 2007). More research is necessary that examines society’s influence on achievement in emerging adulthood, especially for women.

Complex emotions were central features of the participants’ experiences with achievement. While in the process of working towards achievement, all of the participants experienced forms of stress, anxiety, and/or confusion. As a result of their achievements, the participants experienced shifts in their self-perception. Although the descriptions of the experiences of working towards achievement fail to capture the entire scope of issues, they signal a need to research emotions related to both achievement and lack of achievement in the experiences of emerging adult women.

**Emotional Conflict and Coping: “How to Deal”**

This section describes in light of existing research the strategies employed to cope with emotional experiences while entering the workforce. While entering the workforce, the participants expressed intense emotions due to conflicts with work (Ashley, Amber, Jessica, and Elizabeth), as a result of death (Stephanie and Jennifer), with family members (Brittany and Samantha), and in friendships and romantic relationships (Lauren and Meghan). The language of the participants’ responses vividly captured their sensations of grief, confusion, hurt, and embarrassment.

Research indicates that explorations in living situations and work during emerging adulthood accompany feelings of instability and uncertainty (Arnett, 2004; Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). These variables appeared to be major sources of the conflict and distress reported by the research participants. For example, in the workplace, pain surfaced as a
result of being scolded by superiors or coworkers, as reported by Jessica, Elizabeth, and Amber. Additionally, Stephanie experienced guilt because she could not get home in time to say goodbye to her dying grandmother. These experiences were marked by hurt, confusion, anger, and embarrassment. Overall, the findings revealed that the participants coped primarily by using indirect communicative strategies such as avoidance, which included avoidance of people, emotions, and certain contexts. Brittany and Meghan, who used direct forms of verbal communication, were exceptions.

Most interesting in the findings was that when the participants faced interpersonal and emotional conflict, they experienced feelings of disconnection (Jordan, 2008). As a result, the participants withdrew from the problematic relationship or context, having learned that it is easier not to confront or discuss the issue of disconnection but to allow it to persist and thus to settle for losing their voices and accepting an environment in which disconnection exists. For example, Samantha explained that although she was angry at her father for not accepting her brother because of his sexual orientation, instead of confronting her father by telling him her “true feelings”, she explained that she chose not to communicate these feelings because things would be more difficult for the family when she came home to visit.

Samantha’s experience further draws attention to the challenges associated with Stages 5 and 6 of the new model of women’s development (Deanow, 2011). By not presenting her authentic self to her father and remaining voiceless to maintain the relationship, Samantha essentially does not have a real relationship with him. This issue has implications for the challenges associated with Stage 6, achieving relational mutuality in romantic relationships. If Samantha is challenged by the work of Stage 5, she may
have difficulties bringing her authentic self into other relationships, including work and romantic relationships, which have implications for her mental health and development (Surrey, 1991).

In addition to relational-cultural theory and theories of emerging adulthood, research on direct and indirect communication indicates that competent communicators use both methods to communicate and that indirect communication can be a form of politeness. Indirect communication is a way to avoid confrontation in case of a negative response and is typically associated with women’s language (Stein & Stelter, 2011). This finding is consistent with the rationales for why some of the participants avoided confrontation and were indirect in their handling of conflicts. For example, Amber explained that when there was a disagreement, she did not want to cause conflict with her roommates or with her boss because she was uncertain of what their emotional responses would be. It appears that she anticipated a negative response because she was afraid that her boss or roommates would not like her anymore or be angry with her if she confronted them.

Amber’s thoughts and emotions described in her experiences of emotional conflict connect further to ideas about gender (Carli, 2001). For example, Amber did not seem to be aware of how to utilize direct communication to help her confront conflict at work or in her living situation, which has implications for her mental health and her ability to advance in the workplace. Amber’s worries about approaching personal and professional conflict could stem from the fact that it challenges traditional female norms (Carli, 2001; Crawford & Carlson, 2011). Additionally, research indicates that women who do not use a warm style of speech can be seen as overly aggressive in the workplace.
(Eagly & Carli, 2007). Amber’s decision to avoid conflict in the workplace could stem from fear of being perceived as too aggressive.

Stephanie, who also uses avoidant coping mechanisms, readily admits to numbing her feelings by trying not to think about her grandmother’s death and her inability to say goodbye to her. She felt extreme guilt, but she chooses not to think about those feelings on a day-to-day basis. Stephanie’s experience appears to connect to themes in women’s development. For example, research indicates that for women, the ability to make and build relationships is central to their self-worth and self-esteem (Kaplan, 1991), and because women are socialized to focus more on connected relationships than on their careers (Motulsky, 2010), perhaps Stephanie’s guilt stemmed from tension regarding her pursuit of her career rather than being home with family, which in turn caused her to want to “numb” her feelings. Stephanie’s experience highlights the issues and tensions that can exist when attempting to build a life, which confirms research that characterizes young adulthood as a time in which stress is inevitable (Levinson, 1978; Gould, 1978).

Other research specific to the experiences of some emerging adult women suggests that to cope with stressful situations, women tend to distance themselves and focus on self-control, an avoidant coping mechanism (Asberg et al., 2008). This finding is consistent with the experiences of the research participants. For example, Ashley’s account included excessive crying, sleeping, and avoiding speaking to her boyfriend. She also left her job and apartment in Boston and moved in with her parents to manage her discomfort and possibly to avoid the emotional conflict that surfaced as a result of entering the workforce for the first time. Ashley’s experience highlights the stressful demands of managing her new job, coping by displaying avoidant mechanisms, and
finally experiencing depression, which is consistent with research on emerging adulthood demonstrating that over time, avoidant coping mechanisms can be maladaptive and lead to depressive affect (Asberg et al., 2008). In addition, Ashley described feeling guilty about being depressed, which can add another component to depression (Jordan, 1991). Thus, in Ashley’s experience, the many layers of thoughts and emotions illuminate the compounding consequences of experiencing emotional conflict and using avoidant coping mechanisms while entering the workforce.

Ashley’s experience connects further to Gould’s (1978) description of young adulthood in which adults (ages 16-22) separate from their parents, come to terms with new responsibilities and commitments, and believe that if they cannot achieve their goals that their parents will help them to cope, showing that healthy psychological development depends on the young adult’s ability to adapt to society’s expectations (Gould, 1978). This finding is consistent with Ashley’s experience because depression surfaced as a result of not being able to adapt to her new environment, and to manage her depression, she retreated to her parents’ home to help her cope. Ashley’s account displayed the emotions and thoughts associated with the experiences of stressful demands in emerging adulthood. Her experience confirms the need for early interventions to help young women achieve balance in their personal and professional lives (Marks & Houston, 2002), supportive work environments (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002), and research that examines the work experiences of young adult women (Alon et al., 2001).

Across the accounts were clear connections to previous literature, and they documented the participants’ multi-layered thoughts and emotions while coping. For the most part, the participants resorted to avoidant coping mechanisms. The findings
demonstrated the centrality of connection in the lives of women (Gilligan, 1982), gave voice to the participants’ experience of disconnection to increase understanding of women’s self-perceptions (Jordan et al., 1991), and provided implications for understanding developmental issues specific to emerging adult women entering the workforce.

Support Systems and Connection: “Looking Out for Me”

Support systems emerged as salient contexts in the participants’ experiences by contributing to their emotional health, which is consistent with research conducted on the collective experiences of men and women entering the workforce (Asberg et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2010). This section describes in light of current research the meanings that the research participants assigned to support systems and their contribution to their well-being. Several research participants described their parents as contributing to their well-being while entering the workforce (Meghan, Brittany, and Amber), whereas Stephanie described her sister as a support system. Other support systems that contributed to the participants’ health and well-being included coworkers (Jessica, Jennifer, and Elizabeth), a therapist (Ashley), and a friend (Lauren). Support systems appeared to be instrumental in the participants’ positive development and growth.

The benefit of these support systems for the participants is consistent with previous theory, research, and practice on emerging adult women entering the workforce. Gilligan (1982) indicates that women know themselves developmentally through relationships. Through the contexts of support systems, especially the support of other people, the research participants experienced “growth-fostering relationships” (Jordan, 2008, p. 2) that inspired them and helped them to develop confidence in their personal
and professional lives, which is consistent with current research on relational-cultural theory (Jordan, 2008; Walker, 2011; West, 2005). For example, Lauren’s friend served as an inspiration by modeling a “strong work ethic” and helping her to develop more autonomous thinking, which helped her physical and emotional health, consistent with the attributes of a growth-fostering relationship (Banks, 2011; Jordan, 2008; West, 2005).

The language that the research participants used to describe the attributes of the support they received is useful for understanding the characteristics that contributed to their health and well-being and is consistent with research on women’s development. For example, Stephanie used the phrase, “pull from her” when describing the advice that she received from her sister and explained how her sister “builds” her confidence. Ashley’s therapist helped her to view her challenges in a “different light”. Both examples relate to the attributes of growth-fostering relationships and ideas in adult development specific to women because the support systems helped the participants to develop a sense of self-worth and to clarify their goals and understanding of themselves (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Jordan, 1991; Freedberg, 2007; Miller & Stiver, 1997). This finding connects further to ideas in career development indicating that self-efficacy beliefs have major implications for a person’s self-esteem (Heppner & Fu, 2010). For example, Lauren’s and Jessica’s support systems contributed to their self-efficacy beliefs by acting as role models and by making them aware of the necessary steps for becoming successful in their personal and professional lives. These descriptions represent the characteristics that support systems should include to contribute to the health and well-being of emerging adult women.
Furthermore, the people acting as support systems empowered the research participants and listened to their ideas rather than exerting authority or power over them (Freedberg, 2007; West, 2005). For example, Elizabeth’s coworker helped her to succeed in the work environment by investing time in teaching her because he recognized her motivation and potential, and he wanted to help her to adjust to the work environment, which made Elizabeth feel “great” and contributed to her experience of well-being.

Elizabeth’s experience of health and well-being demonstrates the importance of recognizing that mutual relationships between men and women in the workplace can exist (Beeson & Valerio, 2012), although research stresses the importance of same-sex mentors (Lockwood, 2006).

Both Elizabeth’s and Jessica’s mentors also offered guidance, recognition, and supported the development of their competence, which is consistent with the description of mentors in literature on emerging adulthood (Daloz-Parks, 2011). These participants’ experiences of well-being in the context of support systems confirm research indicating that helping a person transition to the workforce can lead to increased confidence, which leads to better work performance (Chari, 2008). Elizabeth’s and Jessica’s experiences further illuminated the attributes of support systems that foster health and well-being in the workplace.

Research on adult development by Levinson (1986), who defines a mentor relationship as a main component of young adulthood because it helps young people to form dreams, is also consistent with the findings from these narratives. For example, Jennifer’s coworker served as a mentor by listening to her, offering encouragement in
pursuing her goals, and also by “looking out” for her in her personal and professional endeavors.

Financial and emotional support have also been shown to play a role in emerging adults’ lives in the literature on parental support (Aquilino & Supple, 2001; Barry et al., 2008; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006), which is consistent with Meghan’s account of receiving both emotional and financial support from her mother, which allowed her to pursue her interests. In this way, Meghan’s mother served as a supportive context for exploration by allowing Meghan to focus on her own development, which can prevent feelings of resentment later in life (Stiver, 1991).

Most interesting in the participants’ descriptions of their support systems was that their supporters identified, respected, nurtured, and awakened something that was central to their core identities. Palmer (1998) indicates that he was deeply influenced by a mentor who helped him to discover “a dormant dimension” (p. 22) of his identity, which is consistent with the research participants’ stories. For example, Jessica described her mentor as a role model who pushed her to stand up for herself and to challenge herself in her personal and professional life. The support systems also acted as “mid-wife teachers” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 217), who drew out new ideas or beliefs already present in the participants’ psyches and fostered connection instead of separation. For example, Brittany’s parents listened to her when she was “stressed” and unsure about which direction to take in her life. Although her parents were supportive and listened willingly, they did not tell her what to do by imposing their ideas on her, which are characteristics of connected teachers (Belenky et al., 1997).
In summary, support systems emerged as salient contexts for connection, growth, and development. Through the context of support, the research participants developed a clearer self-perception and experienced increased self-esteem and self-efficacy.

**Revisiting Assumptions from Chapter 1**

As discussed in Chapter 1, phenomenological researchers agree that the researcher’s influence on the interpretation of the findings from the data should be acknowledged (Finlay, 2009). The operative assumptions in this study were based on the researcher’s background, which include her professional experiences and interdisciplinary theoretical orientation. Three assumptions were identified prior to this dissertation and are discussed in light of the analysis and interpretation of the study’s findings.

The first assumption is that emerging adult women’s experiences of entering the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education are multifaceted, complex, and are influenced by their emotions, thoughts, and various other contexts. The first assumption held true and was reflected across the participants’ accounts. All participants described multifaceted emotions and tensions associated with gaining authority, control, and accepting responsibility for making choices. For example, Meghan stated that making independent decisions while entering the workforce is “scary” and can make her feel “terrified” or worried about regretting her current choices but that her ability to make decisions in emerging adulthood displays her “independent” nature.

The second assumption underlying this research is that a central feature of the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce is confusion, which can cause emotional conflict and distress. Although confusion was not cited as a major
finding in this study, confusion resulting from confronting choices and coping with lack of achievement was prevalent in the accounts. For example, Elizabeth described the disappointment she experienced in the context of lack of achievement, which made her realize that hard work did not always lead to success as it had in the past. Confronting this new reality caused confusion for Elizabeth.

Finally, the third assumption identified in Chapter 1 is that emerging adult women entering the workforce placed extreme pressure on themselves to attain their personal and professional goals. This notion was confirmed by the participants’ experiences of striving for achievement. Although the assumptions identified by the researcher were confirmed to varying degrees, the findings revealed a much more in-depth description and understanding of the women’s experiences. For example, Jessica described being “hugely anxious” and “stressed” while preparing for a presentation at work. This presentation “secured” her confidence at work.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings and explored the complexities in the experiences of a sample of 10 emerging adult women who have recently entered the workforce upon graduating from four-year institutions of higher education. The analysis and interpretation highlighted the emotional conflict prevalent in the lives of the research participants and showed how they constructed the meanings of their experiences. Using the integrative lens to collect and analyze the findings and collecting narratives to examine the influence of role changes gave voice to the research participants, a result confirmed by other research (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Clark & Caffarella, 1999; Merriam et al., 2007; Rutstein-Riley, 2005). After the researcher rigorously reviewed,
critiqued, analyzed, and reflected on the data and relevant literature, the discussion revealed the themes that had emerged.

Four analytic categories were created that addressed the research questions posed for this dissertation:

1. Choice and Emotions: “Patient to Agent”
3. Emotional Conflict and Coping: “How to Deal”

Qualitative studies recognize that the researcher serves as the primary instrument in the study and that analysis and interpretation of the findings should not be generalized without caution. To manage potential bias, the researcher’s assumptions were made explicit at the beginning of the study and were revisited. Additionally, the researcher utilized the research diary to facilitate ongoing critical reflection, remained open to other possible interpretations, and engaged in discussions with her doctoral committee. The researcher further acknowledged that this study represents one interpretation of the findings. Although the findings are consistent with previous theory and research, which supports the interpretations, the researcher recognizes that the small sample size represents a limitation in the study.

The following chapter presents the significance of the study, provides conclusions and recommendations based on the findings and interpretations, cites the strengths and the limitations of the study, suggests implications for future research, and concludes with a reflection on the research experience.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study is to understand and interpret the reported experiences of the research participants and the contexts that influenced their experiences. A sample of ten emerging adult women (ages 22 to 25) who have recently entered the workforce upon graduating from four-year institutions of higher education were chosen to describe the perceptions of their experiences and the meanings that they ascribe to them. Acknowledging the voices of the research participants enabled them to be heard on their own terms and contributed to increased understanding and awareness of issues pertinent to this specific population. Through better understanding of the participants’ experiences and the issues and challenges they face, more informed decisions can be made to ensure their success in the workforce. The primary questions explored in this dissertation are the following:

- How do emerging adult women describe their experiences of entering the workforce?
- What contexts have influenced their experiences of entering the workforce?

This chapter addresses the major findings of the data analysis and interpretation. The chapter includes discussions of the study’s contribution to research on emerging adult women’s experiences of entering the workforce, conclusions and recommendations for corporate employers, career advisors, and emerging adult women, the strengths and limitations of this phenomenological study, suggestions for future research, and the researcher’s overall experience.
Significance of the Study

This study develops in-depth understanding of emerging adult women’s experiences entering the workforce post-graduation from four-year institutions of higher education. Although literature searches confirm that similar research approaches have been conducted with emerging adults (Barrett, 2011; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Plunkett, 2001), the literature indicates that no other research study has been conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with semi-structured, asynchronous online interviews with this population. Although the sample size was small (10), the findings contribute to a richer understanding of the complexity of their experiences. Specifically, this study identified the participants’ felt experiences and sense-making associated with choices, achievement, and coping. This study also described the support systems that contributed to their health and well-being. Because research on emerging adulthood is in its infancy, and because current studies have focused on the collective experiences of men and women, this dissertation contributes to the literature by focusing on emerging adult women entering the workforce after graduating from four-year institutions of higher education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study highlighted shifts in self-perception within the context of choice, the relationship between achievement and self-perception, the coping mechanisms employed to manage emotional conflict while entering the workforce, and the support systems that contributed to the health and well-being of the participants. As discussed in Chapter 5, the findings are consistent with previous research and therefore support the following conclusions and recommendations.
The first research finding is that the participants experienced a dramatic shift in self-perception as a result of taking ownership and responsibility for their choices, and this shift often involved emotional conflict. This phenomenological study provides evidence of the complex and multi-faceted emotional experience of accepting responsibility for one’s choices. In particular, the study emphasizes emotions such as fear and confusion that surfaced as a result of the participants being held accountable for major life decisions for the first time. The autonomous nature of the workforce also contributed to the emotional conflict that surfaced as a result of shifts in self-perception in the context of choice. The participants further noted that the lack of structure and continuity in the context of choice caused emotional conflict. The participants made sense of the emotional conflict and developed agency and authorship to varying degrees. Additionally, although the research participants struggled and experienced emotional conflict, they all took ownership and responsibility for their choices. Favorable aspects of experiencing shifts in self-perception in the context of choice for the participants included increasing self-esteem as a result of learning to become self-sufficient.

The findings from this research can help corporate employers and career advisors to understand the complexities involved in transitioning to the workforce for this sample of emerging adult women, especially the confusion in identity construction and the feelings that can surface as a result of being accountable for one’s decisions for the first time. The results from this finding suggest the need for corporate employers and career advisors to be aware of the developmental issues of emerging adult women entering the workforce post-graduation from four-year institutions of higher education and how these issues could impact their work performance. For example, seminars and trainings could
address the characteristics of emerging adults, including the process of recentering (Tanner, 2006) and the emotional conflict that can surface as a result of the dramatic shift in responsibility for one’s choices. Also, career advisors, especially instructors of seminars in career development and life design, could incorporate the theory of emerging adulthood and the recentering process into their curriculum so that emerging adult women will be more prepared for the dramatic shift in responsibility that takes place when leaving college and entering the workforce. Understanding developmental issues can help corporate employers and career advisors to develop more appropriate methods of helping emerging adults transition to the workforce (Tanner et al, 2009).

It would be helpful for corporate employers and career advisors to understand the impact of uncertainty in making choices and to provide emerging adult women with opportunities to practice making day-to-day decisions. For example, to improve emerging adult women’s abilities to make decisions at work, employers and advisors could offer opportunities for the women to lead small projects. Opportunities to develop women’s leadership and decision-making skills can help companies ensure an adequate pipeline of future leaders (Beeson & Valerio; Valerio, 2006). Also, career advisors in institutions of higher education could advocate for and create courses that address career development and life design for emerging adult women that employ strategies to help emerging adult women come to terms with the emotional impact of becoming an author of one’s life. Specifically, courses could be created that help them identify their specific needs, desires, and help them create plans for making choices that will benefit them in the future. Offering opportunities to succeed and to learn to succeed can help an emerging adult
woman increase her self-efficacy beliefs, allow her to feel that her thoughts are acknowledged, and lead to increased self-esteem (Valerio, 2006).

There are actions that emerging adult women can take to be more prepared for the emotional conflict that can surface when making choices while entering the workforce. Emerging adult women who are currently undergraduate students can become more knowledgeable about the college to career transition by meeting with emerging adult women who have graduated from four-year institutions of higher education and have recently entered the workforce. Providing emerging adult women undergraduate students with realistic career expectations, and the personal and professional successes and challenges that they might encounter when entering the workforce will prepare them to make choices and deal with the emotional conflict that can surface as a result of entering the workforce for the first time (Munro, 2010).

Additionally, emerging adult women who are currently undergraduate students should begin to establish support so that they are more prepared for the drop off in the structured support that college provides. For example, emerging adult women undergraduate students should develop plans to stay connected with career advisors and supportive faculty members to be able to turn to them for support in making decisions when entering the workforce.

Emerging adult women who have recently entered the workforce and who are experiencing emotional conflict due to the new responsibility of decision-making can identify work adjustment counselors (Lent & Fouad, 2010) and career and life coaching programs and presentations (Blanck, 2012; Sutton, 2010) to help them make important life decisions when transitioning to the workplace. Gaining awareness of the realities of
entering the workforce and taking advantage of opportunities to better prepare for success in the workplace can help emerging adult women become more self-sufficient (Tanner, 2006).

The second finding in this study is that for the research participants, achievement served as a context for experiencing a shift in self-perception. Achievement served as a context for validation, self-acknowledgement, and self-esteem among the participants. For emerging adult women, the struggle for achievement is complex and can evoke multiple emotions, thoughts, and reactions, both positive and negative. Although the emerging adult women in this study experienced stress and anxiety as a result of placing significant emphasis on achieving their goals and had extremely high expectations for themselves, this study found that they believed that achievement was possible even in the face of acute stress.

Although the emerging adult women in this study were provided with opportunities for advancement and confidence-building by their supervisors, this study revealed the emotional impact of achievement on their self-perceptions. The results suggest the need for corporate employers and career advisors to become aware of the positive and negative influences that achievement can have on the self-perceptions of emerging adult women. Specifically, corporate employers and career advisors should be mindful of the pressure that emerging adult women place on themselves to achieve and the implications of this pressure for their health and well-being. First-year orientation programs for new employees and workplace transition programs for emerging adult women during their senior year of college could be created to help emerging adult women become more aware of the psychological and physical stress that can occur while
entering the workforce, and the programs could offer specific stress management techniques, including guided imagery (Ross, n.d.), goal setting, and time management skills (Jordan & Zander, 2009). Additionally, current policies for promotions could be reviewed. Specifically, offering opportunities to work from home while preparing for major presentations that potentially result in promotions could be beneficial. This action would also model the commitment of the company to provide balance and a flexible work environment (Valerio, 2006), which could help to alleviate the emotional conflict and anxiety that emerge while preparing for major projects.

It would be useful for corporate employers and career advisors to understand that emerging adult women’s view of reality is shifting, and they are confronting the reality that hard work does not always lead to success. Additionally, emerging adult women are more capable of achievement and managing emotional conflict when they understand why a particular situation is challenging. Corporate employers and career advisors in four-year institutions of higher education could partner to implement a formal course that would better prepare emerging adult women to confront this new reality and to understand the emotional conflict that can result from this shift in reality while entering the workforce. Furthermore, corporate employers and career advisors could provide internship opportunities for students who complete the formal education course to provide practical experience, which would encourage a more realistic view of and better preparation for the workplace. Current emerging adult women employees could mentor the interns, which would help build self-efficacy and confidence for both the employees and the interns.
Additionally, because emerging adult women are accustomed to frequent evaluation by being graded on tests, performance feedback is important for their self-esteem. Corporate employers and career advisors should examine current policies and practices for feedback and evaluation.

Moreover, corporate employers and career advisors should recognize the ambition that emerging adult women bring to the workforce and should tap into their eagerness to be successful. Specifically, corporate employers should examine current opportunities for advancement and offer day-to-day tasks that allow the women to display their competence. Career advisors could also promote participation in competence-building activities. For example, they might assign “stretch” (Valerio, 2006, p. 17) tasks, such as speaking at conferences, to emerging adult women.

It would be helpful for emerging adult women entering the workforce to become more self-aware by planning for the transition to the workforce to lessen the emotional conflict associated with achievement. Specifically, they could create timelines for achieving their weekly, monthly, and yearly goals, and identify their strengths and challenges to begin to correct them (Chari, 2008). Also, emerging adult women should request feedback from their employers, colleagues, and advisors to help them identify their strengths and challenges (Valerio, 2006).

The third finding is that all of the research participants employed strategies to cope with emotional conflict. In particular, this study found that the participants displayed avoidant coping mechanisms to focus on self-control, to maintain a relationship, or as the result of experiencing disconnection. The participants made sense of their emotional conflicts and coping mechanisms by rationalizing their responses or
strategies to manage the emotional conflict and utilized forms of direct and indirect communication as specific coping mechanisms. For the most part, the participants used indirect forms of communication and avoidance as coping mechanisms.

Emotional conflict was prevalent in the experiences of this sample. As a result of this finding, it is recommended that corporate employers and career advisors become aware of the multiple sources of emotional conflict in the lives of emerging adult women and their methods of coping. Training that addresses a multi-system view of emerging adult women’s development, including their communication styles and preferences, could help the employers and advisors to better support and understand emerging adult women entering the workforce. Additionally, providing opportunities to practice engaging in healthy workplace conflict and scenarios that can involve emotional conflict could help emerging adult women to identify strategies, such as competent communication techniques (Stein & Stelter, 2011), to reduce anxiety, improve self-esteem, and to cope (Riggs & Han, 2009). Furthermore, educating corporate employers and career advisors about the significance of emerging adult women experiencing disconnection in the workplace and the benefits of relational practices could help with employee retention and increase workplace productivity (Hartling & Sparks, 2008). Utilizing relational practices in the workplace and can help strengthen an individual’s ability to be more resilient which can help them face challenges in the workplace (Harling, 2008), and is helpful to women during career transitions (Motulsky, 2010).

It would be beneficial for emerging adult women to develop an awareness of the negative effects of using avoidant coping mechanisms on their mental health (Asberg et al., 2008) and to seek out support to help them confront the issue causing the emotional
conflict. For example, emerging adult women who struggle with having difficult
conversations with employers, family members, and friends could attend coaching
workshops (Sutton, 2010) that offer strategies to have more effective conversations.

The fourth finding is that all the research participants reported that support
systems played an instrumental role in their health and well-being while entering the
workforce. These support systems fostered positive growth and helped the participants to
develop their identities. Characteristics of support systems in this study included offering
respect, acknowledging voice, and helping the participants to clarify their goals and
desires while entering the workforce. This finding leads to the conclusion that the support
systems identified by the research participants served as catalysts for positive growth and
development. These results indicate the potential benefits for emerging adult women if
corporate employers and career advisors were to develop awareness of relational-cultural
theory (Jordan, 2002) and adopt the characteristics of connected teachers (Belenky et al.,
1997). Specifically, the employers and advisors could examine ways to stimulate positive
growth in emerging adult women by learning techniques to strengthen resilience
(Hartling, 2008; Hartling & Sparks, 2008), practice mutual empathy (Walker, 2011), and
deepen their understanding and assumptions of the women’s needs (Fletcher & Ragins,
2007; Fletcher, Jordan, & Miller, 2000). Additionally, the employers and advisors could
offer training for mentors on how to enhance the self-concept of their mentees by
learning about the various contextual issues present in their lives (Coogan & Chen,
2007).

Corporate employers and career advisors could also explore transition
acceleration models to help emerging adult women become more aware of the new
expectations that can arise while entering the workforce. These models could include strategies to identify a mentor, manage key relationships (Chari, 2008), and create plans to foster work-life balance and manage stress (Ross, n.d.). The employers could also promote a culture that rewards mentoring emerging adult women by offering compensation, advancement, and recognition to mentors (Beeson & Valerio, 2012; Tanner, 2006). Career advisors could encourage the development of women’s networks to ensure that women can share their experiences with one another (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). Furthermore, it is extremely important that corporate employers understand that only 3 of the 10 research participants described support systems in the workplace, and they were all unofficial. Re-examining current mentoring policies and practices is therefore essential.

The results from this finding suggest that it would be helpful for emerging adult women to begin to develop strong networks of support in college and when entering the workforce. For example, emerging adult women who are currently undergraduate students can begin to form supportive relationships with career advisors and faculty members prior to entering the workforce. Building a network of support to refer to for advice can increase confidence when transitioning to new career roles (Chari, 2008). Additionally, emerging adult women who have entered the workforce can ask for support from their employers and colleagues to help them develop their support systems and networks. Furthermore, emerging adult women entering the workforce should identify support systems to draw upon by brainstorming the people in their personal and professional lives who push them to develop autonomous thinking, contribute to their physical and emotional health, build their confidence, and help them clarify their goals.
Most importantly, when implementing any recommendations proposed in this study, corporate employers and career advisors must begin with small steps to create lasting change. Small steps allow employers and advisors to evaluate current efforts, readjust them according to the needs of the company and/or the individual, and allow a company or an advisor to rethink and refine strategies that are more precise and effective in helping emerging adult women succeed in the workforce (Hartling & Sparks, 2008).

**Strengths and Limitations**

As with any qualitative study, there are several strengths and limitations of this study that should be considered in the development of future studies.

**Strengths**

Strengths of the study design included the semi-structured, asynchronous online interview, which proved to be a useful tool to acquire in-depth data on experience. This methodology created a structure for the research participants to tell their stories, eliminated the risk of errors in transcription, and was tested in a pilot study prior to this dissertation.

Using a phenomenological approach with inclusive practices, including member checking of the research participant summaries of experience and the use of second readers, helped to ensure the ethical integrity of the research. Specifically, these processes gave voice to the research participants and acknowledged the perspectives of others. Other strengths included the research diary, which helped the researcher to retain ideas, and the use of data summary tables to help manage and organize the data analysis and interpretation. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, an approach that
allowed the researcher to analyze the data carefully and in extensive detail, likewise improved the rigor of the study.

In sum, the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and asynchronous online interviews were effective tools for capturing in-depth data on descriptions of experiences. Therefore, this study can be replicated in various contexts. For example, researchers interested in acquiring in-depth data on experiences, especially how people think and feel about particular situations that they face, could use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to analyze their data. Additionally, because the asynchronous online interview was successful with this sample of emerging adult women entering the workforce, researchers could use the same method for collecting data on experience with other emerging adults and other populations.

**Limitations**

Although this dissertation has several strengths, it also has limitations. For instance, Chapter 3 discusses logistical and ethical issues specific to the online interview process, including response rate, unauthorized access to research participant information via internet lurking, and the unavailability in written interviews of nonverbal cues. Another limitation is that this study cannot be construed to represent all emerging adult women and their experiences of entering the workforce. It is also imperative to note that nine out of the 10 of the women interviewed were Caucasian. Replicating this study with participants of other races, ethnicities, and genders would definitely expand the discussion on emerging adults’ experiences of entering the workforce. Moreover, the asynchronous online interview provided its own unique set of challenges. The researcher could not fully verify the accuracy or authenticate the responses of the research
participants because there was no face-to-face interaction. Future research conducted online could add a face-to-face component to ensure such authentication. Additionally, interaction with the second readers depended solely on online communication. From a methodological standpoint, a face-to-face focus group to discuss the data analysis and interpretation might have been beneficial. Future online research could include this element as well.

Another limitation of the study was research participant retention. Although ten of the eighteen people recruited completed the interview process, the researcher had no way of knowing the definitive reason why some of those who signed the informed consent form did not complete the interview process, and the researcher could not consult the gatekeepers on this question because of confidentiality issues. The researcher can only speculate that it was the length of the interview that quelled some potential participants’ interest in continuing with the study. A strategy to alleviate this problem could be sending a follow-up email asking the research participants who did not complete the process about their decisions.

Finally, a phenomenological study is extremely time-consuming. The tasks of monitoring research participants, second readers, and gatekeepers and keeping a research diary/decision-trail log can be challenging. Careful data management, including data reduction tables, research diaries, and an organized computer filing system, were essential for conducting this research.
Future Research

As a result of this study, several possible areas for further research were identified and suggest topics for future studies on emerging adults. Although the focus of this study was to highlight the participants’ most important reported themes and patterns in their lives, more specialized research could be conducted to develop more in-depth understanding of emerging adult women entering the workforce.

The asynchronous online interview strategy can also be used to focus on a single area of the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce. For example, a study could be conducted that focuses specifically on a peak experience or an important challenge faced by the research participants instead of a wide range of experiences. Additionally, follow-up studies could be conducted from the perspectives of the employers, mentors, parents, grandparents, and siblings of emerging adult women entering the workforce to gain a more holistic grasp on the women’s experiences by adding the voices of others.

In addition, although this study focused on the more universal aspects of the research participants’ experience, other topics surfaced and could be studied in depth. For instance, some of the research participants mentioned the interview process. Specifically, they mentioned the rounds of interviews they endured to obtain employment. Research addressing emerging adult women’s experience of undergoing rounds of interviews could provide insight into their thoughts and emotions, which might help corporate employers and career advisors make more informed decisions about the interview process, including exit interview procedures and interview preparation. Additionally, research addressing the simultaneous experiences of moving and gaining new employment in emerging
adulthood could provide insight into the emotional conflict and/or positive aspects of the experience to help corporate employers and career advisors develop in-depth understanding of variables that may affect work performance. Furthermore, because the goal of this study was to provide a rich descriptive account of the complexities inherent in emerging adult women’s experiences of entering the workforce, the discovery of emotional conflict challenges researchers to re-examine Arnett’s (2007) claim that optimism reigns in emerging adulthood and that the notion of a crisis is blown out of proportion. Although it appears that the emerging adult women in this study were able to adapt to stressful situations, the emotional conflict present in their experiences did resemble aspects of a crisis but was also exaggerated in some cases. Perhaps a more appropriate term could be created to describe the complexities apparent in the experiences of emerging adults. More research on other cohorts of emerging adults experiencing emotional conflict is necessary. Future research specific to women’s development could reexamine the age clusters proposed in the new model of women’s development (Deanow, 2011). Specifically, adding an age cluster for emerging adult women (ages 18-30) could highlight the specific capacities, opportunities, obstacles, and challenges specific to these women. Finally, examining a wide range of issues from various perspectives can help corporate employers and career advisors better understand the experiences of emerging adult women and learn how to best support them.

Researcher Reflection

This phenomenological study has provided convincing evidence of the complexities apparent in the lives of a sample of emerging adult women who have entered the workforce post-graduation from four-year institutions of higher education.
This study illuminated previously neglected aspects of the experiences of emerging adult women entering the workforce. Specifically, this study not only presented the experiences of the research participants but also featured their thought processes and emotions involved in making choices, achieving goals, coping, and experiencing positive growth through support systems. Given that the goal of this study was for the research participants to describe their experiences and the contexts that influenced their experiences, the study design was found to be effective for research. By utilizing the semi-structured, asynchronous online interview, the researcher was able to collect vast amounts of information to better understand the participants’ experiences. Although completing the research process was taxing at times, the experience allowed the researcher to “…follow the twists and turns of the terrain” (Conroy, 2003, p. 5) by delving deeper into the data to develop a more powerful understanding of the participants’ inner and contextual worlds. Furthermore, the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis allowed for exploration into the participants’ thoughts and emotions and represents a methodological approach not often used for analyzing data from emerging adults. The researcher was able to document not only the descriptions of the experiences but also the participants’ feelings associated with entering the workforce. More research on emerging adult experiences could likewise utilize a phenomenological approach.

This dissertation contributes to and expands upon existing theories and research on emerging adult women by providing insight into the personal and professional issues that they face when entering the workforce. The fields of emerging adulthood, women’s development, adult development, and career development benefit from studies on
emerging adult women’s thoughts and emotions when entering the workforce, especially
gender-specific studies including holistic accounts of experience. To the researcher’s
knowledge, this is the first phenomenological study that documents, analyzes, and reports
data in such a manner for emerging adult women entering the workforce. Providing a
richer and fuller understanding of a specialized group of emerging adult women entering
the workforce fills a gap in the research on emerging adults and indicates directions for
future research. The findings of this study can be used to enhance practices in corporate
environments and in institutions of higher education.
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UNDERSTANDING WOMEN ENTERING THE WORKFORCE


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Title: An Exploratory Study of Emerging Adult Women (Ages 22-25) Describing Their Experiences Entering the Workforce

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this electronic interview is to understand the experiences of young adult females in the United States, between the ages of 22-25 who are recent college graduates and who are currently employed at a full-time job. As a researcher and educator, I am interested in understanding the descriptions of your experiences and the meanings you give to them. Specifically, I am interested in your struggles, successes, and experiences in work and life since graduating from college and entering the workforce.

Time required: The time required for this study should take between one and a half to three hours of your time. There will be one email interview session and one follow-up email interview session. In addition, the researcher will send you a copy of a summary of your experience. She would like you to comment on her faithfulness to the description that you provided.

Compensation: You will be compensated $25 for completing the two interview sessions and reviewing the summary of your experience.

Risks and Benefits: The risks of completing the interview process are that you will be asked to discuss topics in your life that may cause you to reflect on some negative occurrences or experiences. The benefits of the study are that your honest and open answers could contribute to a richer and fuller description of the struggles, successes, and experiences of young women in your age group.

Confidentiality: Your confidentiality will be maintained and assured by the following measures.

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned code name in lieu of any personally identifying information. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file on the researcher’s computer. Data will be retained as long as the researcher deems it useful (i.e., to inform further research), in which case, informed consent for additional use will be obtained from you. Your name will not be used in any report.
Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions that I ask you.

Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Name: Kerry Akashian    Telephone Number: 978-551-7070

Email Address: kxakashian@lowell.k12.ma.us

Name: Gene Diaz, Associate Provost/Chair of Institutional Review Board

Telephone number: 617-349-8426

Email Address: gdiaz@lesley.edu

If you have questions at any time throughout the study and at the commencement of the study you are encouraged to seek the information from the researcher.

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received an electronic copy of this description. Your signature will be obtained electronically.

Participant: _______________________________ Date: __________________________

Principal Investigator: _______________________________ Date: ________________
Appendix B: Introduction to the Interview and Demographic Data Sheet

To the interviewee:

This is an online interview about a chapter in your life. If you think about your life as a story, your early twenties would be a chapter. Specifically, I am asking you to tell me stories about your life in regards to work, relationships, and anything else that you feel is particularly relevant in this period of your life. Please answer the following questions with as much detail as possible so that I can understand your personal descriptions of this chapter in your life. Thank you so much for participating.

Note: When I ask about your “early twenties” I mean since the time that you entered into the workforce.

Background Information/Demographic Data:

Name:

Age:

Race/Ethnicity:

Current occupation and location of employment:
Appendix C: Interview Schedule

1. Life Chapter Title
   The following interview serves as a glimpse into a chapter in your life. I would like you to give a title to this chapter. In addition, I would like you to describe the meaning you attribute to this title. Why did you name it this?
   
   Life Chapter Title:
   
   Rationale for choosing this title:

2. Critical Events
   Now that you have given me a chapter title and rationale for this chapter in your life, I would like you to concentrate on a few key events that have taken place during your early twenties. I am going to ask you about three specific events in this life chapter. For each event, please describe in detail:
   
   a) What happened?
   b) Where you were.
   c) Who was involved?
   d) What you did.
   e) What you were thinking and feeling in the event.
   f) What impact this key event had in your life chapter and what this event says about who you are as a person.
Peak Experience

A peak experience is a high point in your life chapter. It would be a moment or episode in your experience emerging into the workforce that made you feel positive emotions such as joy or excitement.

Response:

Nadir Experience

A “nadir” is a low point, the opposite of a peak experience. Thinking back since you have emerged into the workforce, try to remember a specific experience in which you felt extremely negative emotions such as despair, disillusionment, terror, guilt, etc. Even though this memory is unpleasant, I would still appreciate an attempt on your part to be as honest and as detailed as you can be.

Response:

Important Scene

Now describe another memory from your early twenties that stands out in your mind as something important or significant. It may be a positive or a negative memory.

Response:

3. Life Challenge

During this time in your life, please describe the single greatest challenge that you have faced. How have you faced, handled, or dealt with this challenge? Have other
people assisted you in dealing with this challenge? How has this challenge had an impact on your life chapter?

Response:

4. Influences on Life Story

Positive Influence

During this time in your life, please identify the single person, group of persons, or organization/institution that has had a positive influence on this time in your life. Please describe this person, group, or organization and the way in which he/she/it/they have had a positive impact on your life chapter.

Response:

Negative Influence

During this time in your life, please identify the single person, group of persons, or organization/institution that has had a negative influence on this time in your life. Please describe this person, group, or organization and the way in which he/she/it/they have had a negative impact on your life chapter.

Response:

5. Alternative Future

Positive Future

First, please describe a positive future. That is, please describe what you would like to happen in the future in your life story, including what goals and dreams you might
accomplish. Please try to be realistic in doing this. In other words, I would like you to give me a picture of what you would realistically like to see happen in the future chapters in your life story.

Response:

Negative Future

Now, please describe a negative future. That is, please describe a highly undesirable future for yourself, one that you fear could happen to you but that you hope does not happen. In other words, I would like you to give me a picture of a negative future for your life story that could possibly happen but that you hope will not happen.

Response:

6. Life Chapter Theme

Looking back over at your life chapter stories that you have described to me, can you discern a central theme, message or idea that runs throughout the chapter? What is the major theme of this life chapter? Please explain in as much detail as possible.

Response:

7. Other

What else should I know to understand your life chapter?

Response:

Sample Probing Questions:

1) How did you feel when…prompt: physically, emotionally, mentally?
2) If you can remember, what were you thinking and feeling when…? What words or images come to mind?

3) How does it feel to be…? What does this say about you as a person?

4) Does this affect your daily life? If yes, how so? Prompt: in work, relationships, interests?
## Appendix D: Research Participant Summary of Experience Chart

### Research Participant Summary of Experience Chart

**Research Participant:**

**Current Position:**

**Age:**

**Race/Ethnicity:**

**Life Chapter Title:**

- Title:
  - What does this title mean for her? (Significance):
  - What does this title say about her identity? (who she is or who she was)
  - What does this title say about her cognition? (what she thinks about)
  - What does this title say about her emotions? (how she feels or felt)

**Peak Experience**

- What does this experience mean for her? (Significance):
  - What does this experience say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):
  - What does this experience say about her cognition, or how does it/ did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):
  - What does this experience say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):
Nadir Experience

What does this experience mean for her? (Significance):

What does this experience say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):

What does this experience say about her cognition, or how does it/ did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):

What does this experience say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):

Important Scene

What does this important scene/experience mean for her? (Significance):

What does this important scene/experience say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):

What does this important scene/experience say about her cognition, or how does it/ did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):

What does this important scene/experience say about her emotions or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):

Life Challenge

Challenge:

What does this challenge mean for her?:

How did she face, handle or deal with this challenge?:

Who helped her handle this challenge?:

What does this challenge say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):
What does this challenge say about her cognition, or how does it/ did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):

What does this challenge say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):

**Influences**

**Positive Influence:**

What does this influence mean for her?:

What does this influence say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):

What does this influence say about her cognition, or how does it/ did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):

What does this influence say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):

**Negative Influence:**

What does this influence mean for her?:

What does this influence say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):

What does this influence say about her cognition, or how does it/ did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):

What does this influence say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):

**Alternative Future**

**Positive Future Summary:**
What does this future mean for her (significance)?

What does this future say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):

What does this future say about her cognition, or how does it/ did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):

What does this future say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):

**Negative Future Summary:**

What does this future mean for her (significance)?

What does this future say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):

What does this future say about her cognition, or how does it/did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):

What does this future say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):

**Life Chapter Theme**

Theme:

What does this life chapter theme mean for her? (significance):

What does this theme say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):

What does this theme say about her cognition, or how does it/ did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):
What does this theme say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt): What does this other information presented mean for her? (Significance):

What does this other information say about her identity, or how does it/did it impact her identity? (who she is or who she was):

What does this other information say about her cognition, or how does it/did it impact her cognition? (what she thinks about):

What does this other information say about her emotions, or how does it/did it impact her emotions? (how she feels or how she felt):
Appendix E: Research Participant Interpretation Worksheet

Research Participant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-order themes</th>
<th>Second-order themes / interpretations / emerging theme titles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F: Master Theme List

Themes, Research Participant Support, Example Quotations

Finding 1: Experiencing a Shift in Sense of Self in the Context of Choice

Finding 2: Achievement as a Context for Experiencing a Shift in Self-perception

Finding 3: Experiencing Emotional Conflict and the Strategies Employed to Cope

Finding 4: Support systems as a Context for Experiencing Health and Well-being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Coping</th>
<th>Support systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Meghan | **Emotions:** scary, terrified, regret (p.9)  
**Shift:** “…I’d say that I’m a pretty independent person when it comes to dealing with my challenge…” (p. 9) | **Emotions:** relief, happiness, sheer joy (p. 4)  
**Shift:** “I think this shows that I am a very dedicated and hard working person when I know what I want.” (p. 5) | **Emotions:** fear, happiness, relief, felt great (p. 8)  
**Strategy:** Direct communication  
**Paradigm shift:** “…I finally opened up to someone and felt comfortable enough to say that I loved him…and ready to accept someone else into my life…” (p. 8) | **Emotions/ description:** …there for me when I’m worried…. …feel very confident…, proud of me has been rewarding… (p. 11)  
**Support:** “…she has agreed to support me financially so I can pursue a career for which I have a passion.” (p. 11) |
| Stephani e | **Emotions:** college: difficult experiences and hard situations, …life throws a lot of things at you that you may have not experienced in the past…(p. 2)  
**Thought:** absolutely insane, p. 3  
**Shift:** “…I think it showed how determined I was to make a life for myself in NYC and to make something out of the education I had just worked so hard to achieve.” (p. 3) | **Emotions/process :**  
Mourned, guilty, I felt like I let her down (not saying goodbye), sudden, grow, stronger (p. 4)  
**Strategy:** avoidance/indirect communication“… I haven’t really dealt with my grandmother’s death properly. I | **Emotions/ description:** positive, encouraging, understands, encouragement, love, friendship (p. 7)  
**Support:** “My sister builds my confidence every single day. She is the source of all my inspiration and I love her so
| Ashley | **Emotions:** overwhelmed, without control, unhappy, feel overwhelmed, jealous scared (pp. 18-19) | **Shift:** “…the fact that I have to make those choices for myself now | **Emotions:** after depression, scared me, excited, extremely nervous, doubt, fear griped me, bad feelings, afraid, plunge back into depression, hopeless, terrified, didn’t dread going to work, feel this good, enjoy, relief, felt like a failure before, ashamed, feel okay, hope (pp. 11-13) | **Shift:** “…Now I feel as though I can get over my... | **Emotions:** after depression, no energy, overwhelmed, miserable, scared, too weak, ashamed, failure, anxious, despair, guilt, sadness, sadness, lost, despair, stressed, couldn’t enjoy, trapped, distressed, anxious, upset, sad (pp. 7-9) | **Strategy:** Direct: crying, sleeping; **Emotions/ description:** positive influence, helped me (p. 15) | **Support:** “…My therapist thought it would be a good idea for me to overcome a challenge that I found hopeless…” (p. 11) “…She helped me see my problems in a different light…She made me see that I just...
makes me feel overwhelmed and that is why I need to have more control over the small things in my life…” (p. 19) “…I am mostly jealous of people that know what they want to do and scared that I will never know.” (p. 19)

Jennifer

**Emotions:** exhausting, scary, anxious, induces anxiety (p. 2)

**Shift:** “…I have to be an agent not a patient…” (p. 2)

**Emotions/reactions:** excited, fidgeted, giggled, totally enjoyed the experience, feels like an accomplishment, feel good, happy, feel fulfilled, accomplished, capable (pp. 3-4)

**Shift:** “…it was proof that I could be on my own and be happy…I need times like this to counterbalance the times when I’m alone and feel lonely…I remember confidence flood in my body in some way, like I looked good being on my own and I should relish it.” (p. 4)

**Emotions:** low point, difficult time controlling myself, didn’t feel like there was anyone I could count on, that week felt interminable, weird, upside down, upset (pp. 5-6)

**Strategy:** “…I felt like I cried more that week than I had cried in a whole year…I wanted to deal with it on my own…I don’t like to ask for help especially when it shows my vulnerability, or when I think it might burden others…So I

**Emotions/description:** friend, coworker, same interests, similar sensibility, get along, stable, comfortable with herself, bearable, inspired, invited, encouraged, impact (pp. 12-13)

**Support:** “…She makes my work day much more bearable, because I know I can pop into her office for a quick chat or a story or a joke. She also has inspired me to become more involved in the writing community because she is a writer…She is looking out for me in that way…” (pp.
| Samantha | **Emotions:** gratifying, detrimental, blame, happy (p. 2)  
**Shift:** “Moving and making independent decisions has considerably changed the way I view myself as a person….” (p. 2)  
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lauren | **Emotions:** fear of future, scares me, frustrating (pp. 10-11)  
**Shift:** “…I am at a crossroad where I need to start  
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Emotions:** desire: I wanted this promotion more than anything, worrying, anxiety, overwhelming, all-consuming, weight lifted, relieved of the anxiety (p. 3)  
**Shift:** “This event was vital to my self-esteem in the workplace…boosted my confidence and helped propel me to new levels…” (p. 3)  
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Emotions:** guilty, negative influence, difficult, (pp. 7-8)  
**Strategy:** indirect communication and avoidance, moving has helped avoidance, “…Since I don’t live at home I am able to escape from the day to day arguments and discussions…I can push it out of my mind for such long periods of time instead of confronting him and letting him know my true feelings…” (p. 8)  
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Emotions/description:** positive impact, hobby, broadened my horizons socially, exercise in a way that I love (p. 7)  
**Support:** “…I recently joined a tennis team which has enabled me to continue playing the sport that I love and meet new people at the same time…” (p. 7)  
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Emotions:** hesitant, excited, nervous (p. 3)  
**Shift:** “…I didn’t know what the future held…I think that this says that with all the obstacles I have faced I was able to succeed and come out the other side stronger and with more insight.”(p. 3)  
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Emotions/description:** blamed, failed, hope, negative influence, upset (pp. 8-9)  
**Strategy:** indirect communication, backing off, breathing room, “…I am done  
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Emotions/description:** friend, positive influence, helped me, excited, became more fit, inspiring, positive influence, grateful, (pp. 7-8)  
**Support:** “…I find her strong work ethic and hard work
| Elizabeth | **Emotion:** enthusiastic, freedom, excited, enjoy (p. 12)  
**Shift:** “…and am generally enthusiastic for everyday and the future I am building for myself…I am figuring out who I am going to be professionally and how my personal life intertwines into this…” (p. 12) | **Emotion:** hugely disappointing, lost motivation (p. 7)  
**Shift:** “…the most disappointing part was that I gave my best and realized there was a better candidate for the position…” (p. 7) | **Emotions:** blatantly hurtful, toxic relationship, rude, demanding, difficult, hurts, treats me poorly, blame, (pp. 9-10)  
**Strategy:** Direct and indirect “…To deal with her, at first I took everything because I was new and realized it was a waste of my time to try and tell her otherwise…I realize she is an unhappy person and try not to let it bother me…I have learned to fully document myself and our conversations…I make a point to always electronically save these and show them to her…” (pp. 9-10) | **Emotion/ description:** encouraging influence, guiding person, comforting, overwhelmed, peer, mentor (p. 8)  
**Support:** “…He immediately recognized my interest in the firm…and has voiced to me the availability of him to be there for me…It felt great that he recognized my motivation and potential and was willing to invest the time and energy in teaching me…” (p. 8) |
| Brittany | **Emotion:** negative  
**Emotion:** overwhelming, relief. | **Emotions:** took advantage, not | | **Emotion/ description:** |
| **Jessica** | **Emotion:** scared (p. 3)  
Shift: “...This key event shows that I want to be more independent...I knew I would never fully grow unless I broke up with him...” (p. 4) | **Emotion:** challenge, hugely anxious, stressed (p. 8)  
Shift: “...I ended up doing the best on the presentation out of my coworkers and this secured my confidence in my abilities at my job...” (p. 8) | **Emotion/Description:** yelled at, guilty, sad, angry, resentful (p. 6)  
Strategy/Learning: “...I am a perfectionist and I don’t like to be involved in situations where I look bad, careless, or stupid...It has taught me how to deal with particular clients and the best way to interact with my managers and VPs.” (p. 7) | **Emotion/Description:** energy, spirit, looks on the bright side, positively influenced me, great role model, friend, encouraged, contagious attitude, pushes me (p. 9)  
Support: “...Although she taught me to work hard she always did it with a smile...She taught me not to take anything too seriously and that I need to learn to stick up for myself in this work environment...She has a contagious attitude that pushes me to do anything I set my mind to.” |
| Amber | **Emotion:** lost, scary, uneasy, stressed (p. 2)  
**Shift:** “…I have named my life chapter “Lost” because I do not know what my next move should be…” (p. 2) | **Emotion:** happy, hard time, relieved, extremely happy, thrilled, pressure, reassurance (p. 4)  
**Shift:** “…I knew this was a job that I was overqualified for, but I was relieved that this long job-hunting process was finally over…” (p. 4) | **Emotion/Description:** hard time, on edge (p. 3) hurt, very negative feeling, caught me by surprise, embarrassment, diminished, unhappy, dread, nervous (p. 5)  
**Strategies:** Avoidance, overreaction “…I tend to have a hard time talking about my feelings so I hold things in. This causes me to be very on edge and then I will randomly snap at someone.” (p. 3) “…I never resolved this with the doctor and I didn’t talk to him or bring it up again to anyone else in the department. I get nervous about things like this at work because I don’t want to cause a situation and I want my bosses to like me…” (p. 5) | **Emotion/Description:** positive influences, listened, support, feel very lucky, (p. 8)  
**Support:** “…They have been giving me great advice…since they know I am unhappy they have been sending me emails with different job postings…I feel very lucky to have them in my life at a time like this…” (pp. 8-9) |
Appendix G: Virtual Correspondence Examples

Research Participant 1: Meghan

Setting: I recruited Meghan through Gatekeeper 1. She responded to my introductory email with, “I’d be happy to participate.” We had a little confusion with the informed consent form because she did not understand what I meant by signing electronically. She asked by sending a clarifying email the same day. Meghan took six days to complete the first round and five days to complete the second round. We completed the data collection process in less than two weeks. When she sent the second round back she replied, “Hi Kerry. Here you go! Let me know if you need anything else! Good luck with this!” She seemed very enthusiastic and provided close to 20 pages of documented experience.

Research Participant 2: Stephanie

Setting: Stephanie, who I found through Gatekeeper 1, took less than two weeks to complete Rounds 1 and 2 of the online interviews. When I sent my introductory email introducing the study, she emailed back the same day saying, “Sure, Kerri, I can help you out. Let me know what you need me to do!” Stephanie sent back Round 1 within a couple of days and took about six days to complete Round 2. She emailed me and apologized for the delay and expressed that she hoped that this information would help me out. In addition, she emailed me back to apologize for spelling my name wrong so many times, which I found to be nice. Her timely responses allowed me to begin data analysis while awaiting other participants’ emails.
Research Participant 3: Ashley

Setting: Ashley, recruited through Gatekeeper 1, consented the same day that I contacted her to participate in the study. There was some confusion with the informed consent form because she sent it back in Google docs, html, and then finally in Word. She explained that she spelled her name incorrectly on the first two and swore it wouldn’t happen again. It took Ashley four weeks to complete the first round of questions. I sent her an email that served as a gentle reminder because she seemed extremely interested at the beginning of the process. When she emailed the first round to me she wrote, “So sorry this is so late! I hope you can still use it. I kind of ramble so sorry haha.” I found her “ramblings” to be honest and insightful. After reading through her preliminary interview transcript, I sent back the follow-up questions to her, and she wrote, “No problem! I’ll get these done on Sunday, I promise :-).” She then returned her responses to the clarifying questions a few days later and wrote, “My responses are attached. Good luck with it - let me know if you need anything else! She provided pages of valuable information for which I am grateful.

Research Participant 4: Jennifer

Setting: Jennifer was recruited by Gatekeeper 2 and took a little over one month to complete the two rounds of online interviewing. In our first email exchange, she explained that she was on vacation, which was why she didn’t respond to the introductory email until three days after I sent it. She apologized and offered to ask other people to be interviewed who fit the criteria for this study. I was grateful that she responded in what I thought was a timely fashion, and I emailed her that I would love to interview others. I sent recruitment emails to three of her friends. I received answers from all three of her
friends. They all sent back the informed consent, but none of them completed the first round of interviewing. It is likely that they did not have the time to complete the interview process. Jennifer took about two and a half weeks to answer the first round of interview questions and two weeks to answer the clarifying questions. She explained, “Some of these things are what I should have written in a journal weeks ago!” Because Jennifer is a writer by trade, I was delighted by her metaphors describing her experiences of entering the workforce.

**Research Participant 5: Samantha**

**Setting:** Samantha, recruited as a result of snowball sampling from a person suggested by Gatekeeper 2, responded with her informed consent form within a week. We had a couple of problems with her understanding how to sign the electronic informed consent. In addition, I could not open the document she sent back to me because it was not a Word document. Despite our rough start, Samantha followed through on the entire interview process. She sent me the initial interview within one week of receiving it. She wrote in the email along with the completed first round, “Please let me know if you have any questions! Thanks.” That response was comforting to me as a researcher. After completing the second round she wrote, “Please let me know if I can provide any additional information or help out in any other way!” Samantha was extremely articulate in her answers, which I communicated to her. She was truly a pleasure to interview.

**Research Participant 6: Lauren**

**Setting:** I recruited Lauren through Gatekeeper 3. Initially, we had problems with the informed consent form because she could open it on her phone but not on her computer. We resolved the issue together after I sent multiple copies to her, and she
notified me about whether they worked. After nearly a month, I had not received the first round from Lauren, so I sent her an email to see if she was still interested. Lauren completed Round 1 over the next two days. She replied with Round 1, “Yea some of them were done a lot better than others. Sorry I don’t have a ton of time before nxt wk. But, I can do the revisions np.” Twelve days later I received her completed Round 2. I was grateful that she took the time to complete the interview.

**Research Participant 7: Elizabeth**

**Setting:** I recruited Elizabeth through Gatekeeper 1. I sent her an introductory email, and she completed the informed consent form that very same day. She wrote in her email, “I more than willing to help out with your research and take the survey.” She responded with the first round of questions seven days later. I then asked her to complete the clarifying questions, and she responded, “No problem.” Four days later, she responded, “Here are my responses to your questions. Let me know if these are more clear. Thanks - Elizabeth”. I appreciated her thoughtful and timely responses.

**Research Participant 8: Brittany**

**Setting:** Brittany, recruited by Gatekeeper 1, said that she would “gladly help out.” When I sent her Round 1 of the interview, I forgot to attach it to the email, so she sent me a polite email asking for the interview. It took Brittany almost six weeks to complete the first round of interview questions; she explained that she was on vacation, trying to find a new apartment, and that things were “crazy busy.” I sent her an email to see if she was still interested. When she replied, she asked me to forgive her. I was happy that she was still willing to complete the interview process. When I sent back the follow-
up questions, she returned detailed responses the following day. Brittany provided a wide spectrum of experiences that allowed me to paint a holistic portrait of this time in her life.

Research Participant 9: Jessica

Setting: I recruited Jessica on the recommendation of Gatekeeper 2. When asked if she would complete the interview, Jessica replied, “Of course.” That same day she sent the informed consent form, completed the interview process, and offered to recruit more women that fit the criteria. I did email the people that she suggested for the study. All three people completed their informed consent but never the interview. Although Jessica finished Round 1 of the interview in one day, the entire interview process took a little over a month. I sent her two reminders and she finally sent Round 2 three days after the second reminder. She provided a great deal of insightful information on this time in her life.

Research Participant 10: Amber

Setting: I recruited Amber through Gatekeeper 1. Amber sent back the informed consent form the same day that I sent her the introductory email. She sent Round 1 back within 10 days. I then sent her clarifying questions. She responded four days later, “I have attached the interview with the clarifying questions answered, let me know if you need anything else! Also, I received your check in the mail yesterday thank you so much!” It was nice to be thanked for the compensation sent for completing the interview. Amber offered a great deal of information about work and life conflict.