An Exploration of Graduate Students' Career Transition Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The researchers explored the possible relationships between six specific influencing factors and the timing of a small group of graduate students' movement through their program, using a short researcher-designed qualitative survey administered once to students at three points in their programs: entrance, mid-point, and exit. While the experience of moving through graduate school does not appear to be well addressed in the research literature, this study points to the relevance of these specific factors for this small group of graduate students. Suggestions for further research are given.

RÉSUMÉ

Les chercheures ont exploré les relations possibles entre six facteurs d'influence spécifiques et le rythme du passage d'un petit groupe d'étudiants diplômés dans leur programme en utilisant une courte enquête qualitative conçue par les chercheurs et administrée une fois aux étudiants à trois moments de leur programme : à l'entrée, au milieu, et à la sortie. Bien que le vécu du passage des études supérieures ne semble être que peu abordé dans la littérature de recherche, cette étude indique la pertinence de ces facteurs spécifiques pour ce petit groupe d'étudiants diplômés. Des suggestions de recherches futures sont données.

An individual's career goals are the outcome of several factors including (a) gender, (b) health, (c) beliefs, (d) self-concept, (e) skills, (f) interests, (g) cultural and family influences, (h) peer influences, (i) historical events, (j) socioeconomic circumstances, (k) workplace trends, and (l) the current employment market (Patton & McMahon, 1999). The unique selection and strength of each factor differs from individual to individual, and changes over time. Career-satisfied individuals tend to adapt their career goals to changing circumstances while maintaining the core integrity of their original career aspirations. This ability to adapt to changing factors is an important aspect of "career resilience" (Hall, 1996) and is critical at all stages of one's career path, as one enters and moves through a series of career transitions in a typical North American worklife. Research indicates that one's ability to cope with continual change generally depends on several factors: the nature of the transition (timing, control, role changes, concurrent stress, previous experience); the nature of support available from family, friends, colleagues, and institutions; and one's unique set of psychological resources (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). How well one assesses and uses their support systems and personal resources to cope with and successfully navigate the ups and downs endemic to career transitions is critical to the successful fulfillment of one's career aspirations.

The concept of career encompasses not only work, but also leisure (McDaniels, 1984) and various life roles, such as citizen, parent, and student (Super, 1980). Career holds different meanings across various ethnic groups as a function of their economic, historical, sociocultural, and political experiences (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005). While many career development theories recognize the influences of individual-environment interactions in career development and decision-making, not all of these interactions have been fully researched. Historically, career development theories and interventions have focused on intra-individual variables such as ability, motivation, talent, and locus of control (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002). Only recently have career development theories attempted to understand the career development process of non-majority populations. Increasing attention is now being paid to the role of culture (Fouad & Bingham, 1995; Leong & Brown, 1995; Leong & Hartung, 1997), gender (Gottfredson, 1981; Herr & Cramer, 1996), and family influences (Roe, 1957; Splete & Freeman-George, 1985; Whiston & Keller, 2004) in the career development process. A more in-depth understanding of such career influences would assist career practitioners to more fully counsel diverse clients (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey).

Patton and McMahon's Systems Theory Framework (STF) is one recent "composite" theory that incorporates a number of influences that have been neglected in earlier career development research, representing a comprehensive theoretical framework that is both dynamic and systematic. This relatively new addition to the career development literature has the potential to increase the explanatory power of a number of diverse complex interacting influences on career development (Arthur & McMahon, 2005; McMahon, 2002). In the present study, several influences contained within the STF were examined in order to determine whether they had an impact on a small group of ethically diverse graduate students' career goals.

The Influence of Gender

The influence of gender, while first noted 50 years ago (Roe, 1956), has only recently been considered important in understanding the career development and decision-making processes of both men and women (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). From a very young age, girls and boys are socialized into gender-specific roles with the male role emphasizing skill mastery, competition, and achievement, and the female role emphasizing relationships, care, and connection (Gilligan, 1982). This gender-role socialization continues throughout elementary and secondary school, where young men are encouraged to pursue traditionally masculine fields (such as the natural sciences and engineering) and young women are encouraged to pursue traditionally feminine fields (such as teaching, nursing, and social work). Gottfredson (1996) has noted that "most young people orient to their own gender and social class when contemplating careers" (p. 202). This orientation toward sex roles in early childhood typically results in girls and boys perceiving only a limited choice of occupations that are seen as appropriate for their gender.

Once the career choice is made, the career development process of men and women is similar in many respects, except that each gender faces different chal-

lenges that often result in sex-role stereotyped decisions (Flores & Heppner, 2002). Women face the challenges of multiple role relationships (such as partner, home-maker, parent, wife, and worker), gender-related career barriers, and managing the career re-entry process after taking time off to have children (Brown & Lent, 2005). Women who plan their careers with potential roles as wife, homemaker, and mother in mind may limit their career achievements if they prioritize home and family over their career aspirations (Brown & Lent). In academia, this is illustrated with women having to juggle the "tenure clock" and the "biological clock" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). On the other hand, men are generally able to plan their careers without having to accommodate home and family responsibilities (Farmer, 1997). Men face different challenges of meeting their parents' career expectations for them, as well as eventually being a key family breadwinner. Most resolve work and family role obligations by "reverting to the traditional (and socially sanctioned) definition of father as provider" (Spade & Reese, 1991, p. 319).

In recent years, more women have been pursuing careers in such non-traditional fields as trades, natural sciences, engineering, medicine, and law (Patton & Mc-Mahon, 1999). Chusmir (1983) suggested that women pursuing non-traditional occupations tend to have personal characteristics often attributed to men, such as being autonomous, dominant, intellectual, and individualistic. These traits tend to result in career decisions that may be more achievement oriented, with underlying needs for recognition and status. According to Chusmir, the personal-ity and motivational traits of women who choose non-traditional vocations are usually formed by the time they reach their teen years. This implies that their career decisions are strongly influenced in the elementary school years, as well as by one's family and close community.

Family Influences

Family influences in career development have received some empirical atten-tion (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996) since first documented over 50 years ago (Roe, 1956), although current career decision-making models do not explicitly address them. Researchers have examined socioeconomic status (Heppner & Scott, 2004; Whiston & Keller, 2004), structural family features (e.g., birth order, family size), and process-oriented family features (e.g., parenting style, maternal employment) (Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Crouter, 1984). Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg (1986) have stressed the importance of hereditary and environmental factors when describing familial influences on career development. Family-related influences receiving less attention include the provision of educational and financial resources and family socialization practices (Amundson & Penner, 1998; Schulenberg et al.).

Culture

Closely associated with family factors is the influence of one's culture. While there has been an increase in recognition of cultural influences on career develop-ment, not all current career development models include this factor, resulting in

limited cultural validity (Arthur & McMahon, 2005; Leong & Brown, 1995). Some of the aspects of culture that Patton and McMahon (1999) include in the STF are gender, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status, globalization, geographical location, and knowledge of the world of work. Career counsellors must be aware of both their own and their clients' values influencing the career development process, as some minority individuals may espouse values that not the same as and/or not consistent with the mainstream culture. A career counsellor who subscribes to a Western, individualistic model of career development that emphasizes interests and abilities may inadvertently overlook the importance of a value not present in the West, such as occupational prestige held by a minority client. Often, career practitioners operating from an individualistic model of career development focus on intra-individual factors, such as interests, abilities, and personality traits, while neglecting the interaction between individual and systemic levels of cultural influences (Arthur & McMahon).

The Influence of Social Support Systems

The career transition process in itself represents a challenge for individuals facing this event, regardless of their gender, family, cultural, institutional, or workplace influences. The career transition process is described by Schlossberg et al. (1995) as consisting of moving into, through, and out of the career change situation. At each of these three stages, an individual's ability to successfully cope with the stresses associated with each is influenced by the nature of the transition (e.g., timing, trigger, source), the surrounding environment (e.g., social, family, community), and the individual's personal coping resources. Schlossberg et al. (1995) have developed a four-factor model to assist those in a transition process that consists of taking stock of what has changed in their situation, how differently they feel about themselves, who can be called upon for support, and what coping strategies they have or can develop. As well as one's family, friends, and community, additional important sources of support (or hindrance) for graduate students can be their educational institution and their workplace, given that many work at least part-time during this transition or are on sabbatical from their employer at this time.

Institutional and Workplace Influences

The three specific institutional and workplace sources of either help or hindrance examined in this study were the institutional environment surrounding this population of graduate students, the academic and administrative student support systems available to them, and the nature of the workplace supports available to those who also worked during their studies. Post-secondary institutions often present "unfriendly" environments for adult students returning to learning who have complex non-student lives that include family and worker roles. This non-traditional student group faces learning obstacles not recognized by institutional regulations and services designed for a traditional population of younger students with less complex lives (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1991).

Potential workplace supports include professional development policies that offer education leaves and resources (in the form of grants or access to company resources), as well as a positive attitude by management toward those employees who decide to return to school full- or part-time to further their careers. In an increasingly competitive global economy, continual employee development has become one of the pillars of a "learning organization" (Simonsen, 1997; Spikes, 1995; Wiesenberg & Peterson, 2004). Those organizations that recognize this by having in place progressive career management policies and practices that promote a culture of career development are more likely to successfully navigate the more complex global marketplace (Doyle, 2000; Simonsen; Watkins & Marsick, 1993).

A typical career path in today's constantly changing workplace encompasses many career re-decisions depending on economic, political, personal, and social issues in the individual's life. The researchers believe that information about how the career goals of graduate students may change at different phases in this particular career transition and with the nature of their support systems at home and work and within the post-secondary institution. We hope to add to the limited body of knowledge about key underlying career influences in the lives of graduate students, and how they successfully cope with changing circumstances and possibly career goals, as they move through this critical career transition.

Graduate students' choice of career goals as they enter and move through their programs of study does not appear to be a topic of discussion in the current research literature on career transition. Yet understanding the career goals and influencing factors of this population has the potential to increase the graduate students' self-knowledge, enhance the career counselling profession's understanding of this population at this crucial time in their career decision-making lives, provide the educational institution in which these students are enrolled with an increased understanding of how to help them deal with the "transition through graduate school" process, and assist employers of these adults to successfully enhance their professional qualifications. Overall, a better understanding of this important career transition period is the first step toward mutually benefitting all stakeholders in this situation (students, educational institutions, employers, and career professionals).

METHODOLOGY

This is a case study of a small group of graduate students enrolled in both counselling and educational research divisions in the Faculty of Education of a large western Canadian university. A short 11-question open-ended survey based on an examination of the current literature on career transition was developed by the researchers. The survey was piloted for question clarity on a small representative sample of graduate students from this same faculty. The final version of the survey was then administered through two of the Faculty of Education divisional graduate student listservs in the winter of 2005. Students were invited to participate by completing the survey attached to the invitation, and then send it back

via e-mail to one of the research team members, or anonymously to a faculty staff member. All participants were invited to attend a presentation of the study's results at a faculty research forum held in the spring of 2005.

The survey asked students about their career goals at three points in their programs: upon entrance, at mid-point, and as they graduated and exited the program. Information about six major influences that may have impacted their original or revised career goal as they moved through their program was also collected. The resulting qualitative data were analyzed for themes within each of the six key identified influences: gender, family, culture, social support system, institutional support system, and workplace support system.

The Respondents

Thirty students, representing a response rate of 3.3%, returned completed surveys. This low response rate may have been due to the fact that only a minority of the total potential population of about 900 graduate students enrolled in the two divisions involved in this study actually used the two listservs used to invite participation. Unfortunately, the researchers' planned strategy to also ask students for their participation in a face-to-face setting was not available when the data were being collected.

Of the 30 respondents, 66% were female and 33% were male. The age range was between 27 and 58, with the mean age being 41 years. This represents the typical adult graduate student profile within the faculty's professional development programs. Also, a large majority of respondents were enrolled in online programs, which are much more accessible to female adults who tend to carry a heavy family maintenance role in our culture. The mean age of respondents also represents the reality that adults returning to school for professional upgrading or career re-direction tend to do so in mid-adulthood.

Twenty percent of respondents were enrolled in the counselling division (which does not offer online courses) and 80% in the educational research division (which offers a majority of its programs in an online format). Approximately 17% were in the "entering" phase of their programs, 43% were at "mid-point," and 40% were in the "exiting" phase of their programs.

In terms of race (defined as "related by heredity based on physical traits like facial features, skin colour, and hair colour and texture" [Flexner & Hauck, 1987]), 67% of respondents described themselves as Caucasian, 7% as Black, 3% as Hispanic, 3% as Asian, 3% as Aboriginal, and 16% as Other or Multi-racial. This appears to be representative of the Faculty of Education's graduate population as a whole.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The two researchers analyzed the qualitative data by first organizing it into general topics and then into dominant themes related to the factors of interest (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1988). This section describes the themes derived for

each of these six factors, as well as a description of the respondents' initial career goals and how they may have changed as they transitioned through the three phases of their graduate programs. Specific illustrative quotes for each theme are included for each factor.

Question #1. Please describe your career goals when you entered your program

Thirty students responded to this question, with 25 (16 female, 9 male) stating well-defined career goals that appeared consistent with the programs in which they were enrolled (e.g., academic position in a post-secondary institution, school administrator, organizational development consultant, chartered psychologist). Five students stated that they had no defined career goals (4 female, 1 male), uniformly describing their goals as "personal growth."

Questions #2, 3, & 4. Please describe your current career goals; if entering, at mid-point, or if exiting your program if they are significantly different than your entering career goals. If different, describe why

Of the 29 students responding to this question, 5 were just entering their program, 11 (with 4 career goal changes) were mid-point, and 13 (with 2 career goal changes) were in their exiting phase. Twice as many changes were noted to have taken place mid-point (14%) in comparison to near the end (7%) of their programs. The key reasons for changes were respondents' enhanced knowledge about new options available to them, resulting in their original option being dropped. Altogether, 21% of respondents had changed their career goals between their entrance into, and exit from their programs.

Question #5. Describe some ways in which your culture (shared way of life of a group of people, including artifacts and symbols) has influenced your career goals

Twenty-six (87%) students responded to this question. Of these, 19 (67%) were Caucasian (15 females, 4 males). Themes that arose within this sub-group were mainstream Western cultural values that contain both "traditional" and "non-traditional" roles for women creating conflict, Western value of education as the route to career success, valuing of individual achievement (moving up the ladder), and self-sufficiency.

> My culture likely impacted my desire to "move up in the ladder" but it likely did not influence my decision to go into psychology at all. Likely my culture would have preferred that I went into a profession that has a more realistic expectation of making much more money than can reasonably be offered by the profession of psychology. (Caucasian response)

Seven (13%) non-Caucasians (4 females, 3 males) responded with these themes: highly valuing education, coming from a lower socio-economic status (SES), and growing up in a career-driven culture that values money (as a means of improving SES).

> [M]y "culture" (or at least my mother's culture) seems more content with "just getting by" … My other "culture" is Canadian, which means capitalism and self-interest is paramount. Meritocracy is important, you get what you deserve has been my understanding. When the

two cultures are combined … you get: "Get as much as you can, as fast as you can, by the easiest route possible, because you are already starting off in the hole as a visible minority." (non-Caucasian response)

Question #6. Describe some ways in which your family has influenced your career goals

All 30 students responded to this question: 20 (16 females, 4 males) Caucasian and 10 non-Caucasian (4 females, 6 males). Caucasian themes that arose were family values stressing hard work, education, and self-sufficiency; supportive family; and large number of role models of both genders, but females in particular.

> My family is very well educated and has always encouraged me to live into my potential. I come from a long line of feminists and feel empowered to take on new challenges. Many of my relatives were educators. I was taught that I can do whatever I want to do. (Caucasian response)

Non-Caucasian themes that arose were being the first in their family to go to university, family role models (both having role models and becoming a role model for others), and supportive family that value education and life-career flexibility.

> My family has always supported me in my career decisions. I come from a very humble background and I am the first with an interest in academia. Sometimes, this causes misunderstanding and conflict, but my parents have always been supportive in the end. (non-Caucasian response)

Question #7. Describe some ways in which your gender has influenced your career goals

Twenty-six (87%) students responded to this question—20 Caucasian (16 females, 4 males) and 6 non-Caucasian (3 females, 3 males)—with themes differing by gender. Female Caucasian respondents appeared to have conflicted feelings about cultural expectations to choose careers typical for women and having to work harder than men to be professionally successful. Male Caucasian respondents seemed conflicted about being male in female-dominated professions.

> I started out in social work and continued my studies working in the field of disability. I was reinforced at an early age how good a "caregiver" I was and how dependable and responsible I was. My mom died when I was 16 and my Dad fell apart emotionally, so I raised two younger siblings. I then married young (age 20) and looked after him until we both grew up and knew the marriage was going nowhere. So going into social work was a natural fit at the time. (Caucasian female response)

> The oppression associated with being male in a female-dominated area of study was impetus to work hard in order to be "successful" within this field … This combined with the importance of having males as role models for males who struggle with literacy was also important. (Caucasian male response)

Non-Caucasian female respondents expressed a desire for gender equality as well as fulfilling stereotypical gender expectations. Non-Caucasian male respondents expressed pressure from traditional role expectations to make money, as well as to become leaders in a female-dominated profession.

My gender has influenced my goals because I want to be right up there at the top with other women in a man's world. Hopefully in my lifetime it will be an equal world. (non-Caucasian female response)

I think the only influence has been society's tendency to look at the males in the room as the leaders. This is especially true in elementary schools, so people were looking to me to take on the leadership role with the retirements of many of the other previous leaders (who were primarily male as well). (non-Caucasian male response)

Question #8. Describe how your social support system (family, friends, community) has either helped or hindered your reaching your career goals

All 30 students responded to this question: 20 Caucasians (16 females, 4 males) and 10 non-Caucasians (4 females, 6 males). Overall responses indicated that support systems for both groups had been far more helpful than hindering. Themes reported by Caucasians were supportiveness of spouse, student peers, and community (friends, neighbours); family, friends, and colleagues providing tangible or direct (financial, reference letters, job placements, mentoring, assisting with household chores) support and intangible or indirect (emotional) support. A few experienced a lack of both supports growing up.

My social support system is my wife … and my friends … even my neighbours who value education but do not have a lot of formal education themselves. Finally, my graduate student colleagues have been supportive in ways I never imagined. (Caucasian response)

Themes reported by non-Caucasians themes were similar: supportive family, friends, colleagues, and social system providing tangible (financial, reference letters, job placements, mentoring, taking care of children) and intangible (emotional) support. A few mentioned the low aspirations of cohorts being a slight hindrance.

Low aspirations of my cohort and support system have hindered me significantly. (non-Caucasian response)

Question #9. Describe how the institutional support system (your faculty advisor, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Graduate Studies, other University of Calgary offices) has helped or hindered your reaching your career goals

Twenty-eight students responded to this question, and their comments were analyzed in terms of the phase in which students were currently enrolled in their programs, as well as relative to 'helpful' versus 'hindering' responses.

Four students (2 female, 2 male) who were entering their programs indicated that they were helped by being accepted into the academic community by all. The 11 students (9 female, 2 males) who were at the mid-point of their programs raised "helpful" themes about professors, support staff, and faculty generally helping them to find course/program and financial information, accommodating their busy life schedules, and providing tangible (references, mentoring) and intangible (emotional) support. For those 13 students (7 female, 6 male) who were exiting, similar "helpful" themes that arose were professors and advisors being supportive

in tangible (advice, money, reference letters, flexible assignment deadlines) and intangible (confident in respondent) ways.

> The Faculty of Education has given me scholarships … my advisor is supportive giving me work and opportunities to share research; pays for me to attend conferences. (entering response)

> The (program) faculty have always been available to answer questions and give me guidance and support when they can. Additionally, they have been very understanding about my work and family commitments and have accommodated my need for more time with assignments. (mid-point response)

> (University of Calgary faculty and staff) have generally been very helpful and willing to make things flow smoothly. (exiting response).

"Hindering" themes that arose for the 3 entering students (1 female, 2 male) were lack of financial support, lack of network, and the time and energy required to do "make-up courses." For 5 female students at mid-point, hindering themes were supervisors with too many students, office hours not suitable for full-time workers, and the university bureaucracy. For those 5 students who were exiting (4 female, 1 male), hindering themes were lack of financial support, administrative barriers, and supervisors "not available/not helpful."

> There seems to be very few funds available for conducting research … I do not have enough money of my own to fund my research efforts, and so being able to access this sort of funding (i.e., grants) would be very helpful. (entering response)

> Many of the office hours end before I have a chance to get to them as I work full-time. (mid-point response)

> Program changes have made courses less available, the administrator seems to create roadblocks that have stalled my progress, and the registration system is frustrating. (exiting response)

Question #10. Describe how your workplace support system (employer, workplace colleagues) has either helped or hindered your reaching your career goals

Twenty-six students responded to this question. Overall "helpful" themes that arose for 21 respondents (16 female, 5 male) were their employer's leave policy, financial aid, resources and skill development opportunities offered; supervisors' references; co-workers' support and encouragement; and academic peers' up-to-date career information and commiseration.

> My school district pays $220 per course that I complete, so that helps. (entering response)

> Helped in a sense that they (colleagues) serve as a sounding board for discussion and ideas as well as a practice arena and a source of information and resources. (mid-point response)

> My employer has been very supportive, allowing a short leave from work to write the project document and do interviews (i.e., collect data), colleagues listened and encouraged me along the way. (exiting response)

Eleven respondents (8 female, 3 male) described "hindering" themes as their employer not supporting career goals and not offering educational leaves or financial aid for continuing professional development; burnout; and co-workers feeling threatened by their graduate student status.

My department has done nothing but get in my way…they depreciate my work and goals, minimize any of my scholarly work. (entering response)

I think that a couple of my coworkers feel somewhat threatened by the fact that I will soon have a M.Ed. degree. (mid-point response)

(I always) have too much work and am always on the edge of burnout. (exiting response)

Question #11. Describe any other important influences that have not been mentioned here that have been significant for you in the initial forming of your career goals, as well as in the changing of them up to this point in time

Seventeen (59%) students (9 females, 8 males) responded to this question with various personal and environmental influences grouped into these primarily helpful themes: self-reflection, self-directedness, Canadian cultural support for lifelong career development, volunteer experiences, inspirational teachers and professional role models, importance of cohort group, and lack of finances (key continuing hindrance).

The overall support of Canadian culture for skill/personal training has been very influential. Education is ongoing, lifelong, personally rewarding … whereas my father's generation saw education as something for youth. (entering response)

My personal coach helped me clarify my higher education and career goals, and my life partner has been supportive and inspiring. (mid-point response)

For me it has been a very individual process. I have taken more time to examine my own values and beliefs. That has been my guide to my career goals … it is something that I have come to on my own. (exiting response)

DISCUSSION

The researchers have framed conclusions primarily within the context of Patton and McMahon's (1999) STF model of career development, Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) model of counselling adults in transition, and Schlossberg and associates' (1991) work on the importance of the educational institution attending to the needs of adult learners.

Students' Experience of the Career Transition Process

This small group of adult graduate students appeared to be fully committed to a Western cultural value of upward career mobility and the importance of lifelong learning in their decision to enroll in their professional development programs. Similarly, they reflected several personal values that helped them to successfully complete their programs: strong self-reflective skills; self-directedness; the presence of and appreciation of academic and professional role models in their lives; and the ability to find supportive fellow student groups, as well as mentors, within their programs.

As they entered this career transition period, the majority had clearly defined career goals of moving ahead on their respective career paths, with a significant pro-

portion of them adapting their original goals as they learned more about how well these professional aspirations fit their newly emerging talents and career dreams. This is consistent with the literature on adult development that describes the existence of a mid-life stocktaking period in which adults re-prioritize their career and life goals to match newly emerging values and dreams (Butler, 2005; Schlossberg et al, 1995). This period often results in significant changes in one's career or life path and prompts them into a major transition process (Merriam, 2005; Patton & McMahon, 1999). As well, the career counselling literature supports this study's findings that increased awareness of both self and the world of work can result in the adaptation of one's original career goal (Patton & McMahon).

The nature of this participant group's experiences upon entrance into their graduate programs, as they moved through these programs, and as they prepared to exit them appears to have been strongly influenced by a number of personal and environmental factors. Personal characteristics described included a strong sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, a strong belief of education being an avenue to career satisfaction and material comfort, and in some cases (notably for non-Caucasian respondents) a desire to perhaps break away from a family background that did not espouse such values.

To a certain extent, the self-imposed positively valued nature of this transition influenced respondents' ability to successfully cope with the stresses accompanying returning to school as an adult learner. The key stressors appeared to be lack of funds, combined with the demands of being a full-time worker with numerous family and community roles. This is typical of the adult student who has returned to learning after having been fully engaged in the world of work for a number of years and generally acquiring a number of demanding adult roles and responsibilities along the way (Wolf, 2005).

This group of graduate students described a primarily supportive environment within which to make this transition—strong family, community, friendship, and workplace support systems that provided both tangible and non-tangible help along the way. Their post-secondary institutional environment, as well as their individual workplace environments, also provided various supports that proved quite helpful to many (but not all) of this group of students.

Gender, Family, and Cultural Influences

It is clear that gender influences impacted both the majority and non-majority participants in the present study. Female Caucasian and non-Caucasian participants appeared to have conflicted feelings about cultural expectations to pursue careers deemed "traditional" for their gender, as they expressed a desire for gender equality as well as a desire to fulfill stereotypical gender expectations. Caucasian and non-Caucasian men appeared conflicted regarding their status as male role models in female-dominated professions. Non-Caucasian male participants expressed concerns about expectations to succeed financially. These findings underline the influence of early gender-role socialization on work and career expectations for both men and women (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

As expected, participants' family members exerted a strong influence on their career development and decision making, demonstrating the importance of family support for career development as an important predictor of career choices. Critical sources of influence included making available educational opportunities, having positive family role models, and positively valuing education. Numerous studies have demonstrated that perceived parental support plays a role in the career development of African American, Mexican American, and Asian-American college students (Fisher & Padmawidjaja, 1999; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). This study reveals that career development was strongly influenced by the values, expectations, and behaviours of these participants' families as well. That people in the process of career transition are affected by a number of sometimes conflicting cultural contexts (Leong & Hartung, 1997; Swanson & Fouad, 1999) was evident in this study.

Educational Institution and Workplace Influences

In terms of the participants' institutional support system (faculty advisors and Faculty of Education and Graduate Studies office staff), responses indicated both helpful and hindering factors that varied somewhat depending on where the students were in their career transition process. Almost all of the entering students mentioned that they were most helped by being accepted or welcomed in various ways into the academic community by professors and support staff. The most helpful acts for mid-point students dealt with both assistance in finding financial resources and having their unique personal circumstances accommodated. Mentoring by professors was mentioned several times at all points, along with providing emotional support, as being helpful to students making the adjustment from established working professional to inexperienced graduate student. The most helpful acts for exiting students were tangible support in the form of academic and professional job search advice and assistance.

A strong hindering theme expressed by the majority of students related to the lack of financial support available, beginning at entry into their program and continuing throughout. Entering students mentioned a lack of networks and that extra courses were required when they did not have the required academic background for their program. Mid-point students complained about non-accessible supervisors and the university bureaucracy (i.e., unreasonable rules and unworkable procedures) in general. Exiting students mentioned the continuing lack of financial and supervisor support, and administrative barriers getting in the way of program completion.

Overall, it appears that the participants' institutional support system was working up to a point, providing valuable help in many tangible and intangible ways, while failing students in key tangible ways. This finding supports themes in the research literature related to the need for students to be able to easily negotiate institutional regulations and to the existence of "adult-unfriendly environments" for adult students with work or family commitments (Schlossberg, Lassalle, & Golec, 1988; Schlossberg et al.,1991). The resulting sense of "belonging or mattering" is reflected in the nature and degree of helpful/supportive or hindering

actions and attitudes by faculty, administrators, and support staff. An unfriendly environment is one that provides more obstacles than bridges for those trying to navigate it, resulting in the adult student feeling at best marginal and at worst so out of place that they drop out.

In a similar manner, working students are affected by their workplace in either positive or negative ways. In this study, students at every stage of their programs mentioned that the most helpful acts were employer educational leave policies (often in the form of paid leaves of absence), workplace resources and skill development opportunities, and supervisor and co-worker active support. On the other hand, unhelpful acts were reflected in the lack of these elements, which often resulted in student burnout from full-time worker and student roles, as well as alienation from supervisors or co-workers. This finding is supported by the literature, which documents that a majority of North American organizations do not have policies that support continuing professional development (Wolf, 2005). It is only when organizations are striving to become "learning organizations" (Senge, 1990) or actively building a "culture of career development" (Simonsen, 1997) that employees striving for professional enhancement have a supportive workplace system in place.

IMPLICATIONS FOR KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings of this study are limited to this small group of graduate students enrolled in this western Canadian educational institute. However, the findings do suggest implications for this and other similar educational institutions and organizations employing graduate students enrolled in professional development programs. First, educational institutions must recognize that regulations and services that do not fit a working adult student's life must be modified to eliminate bureaucratic barriers that cause some to drop out in frustration. Employers must recognize that employees who wish to continue their professional development have much to offer them in return in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive global workplace. To have fair educational leave policies and to provide financial and other resources are corporate investments that pay off when the employee brings back valuable new knowledge and skills into the organization. At the same time, workplace learning practitioners need to fully understand the complexity and implications of this transition in order to assist employees through this process. Adults who decide to enrol in professional development programs need to appreciate the complexity and implications of this decision. It typically encompasses multiple role and self-image changes, alters their relationships with those around them, requires a diverse set of coping skills, and may all happen at a demanding time in their adult lives. In order to prepare for this career transition, it is wise to fully understand what it requires, how to navigate its many ups and downs, and who to turn to for both direct and indirect support along the way.

This study suggests the need for a number of future research studies. Generally, the key influencers that arose in this study could be explored in more depth,

possibly with individual interviews related to the nature of a career transition, the context in which it is taking place, the personal characteristics of the individual going through this transition, and the manner in which they deal with the stresses encountered. Of particular interest to these researchers is how post-secondary institutions could become more adult-student-friendly by adopting practices (e.g., student services and support systems) and policies (e.g., regarding financial assistance and service availability) for full-time working adult students. A more in-depth investigation of contextual career influences on minority students' career motivation would provide faculty advisors with the knowledge required to supervise and mentor these students. Equally important is how organizations can provide continuing professional development supports at a time when they are striving to become learning organizations to stay ahead of the competition by promoting continual employee skill and knowledge development (Collins & Young, 2000).

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