# A QUALITATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF OCCUPATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN

# COLLEGE STUDENTS

BY

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Psychology and Research in Education and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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# ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

I would be extremely remiss not to express my gratitude toward my friends and family for their unwavering support as I trudged through one draft after another of this "script" that is my dissertation. I could not have persevered through the seemingly endless days and nights (and Carpel Tunnel Syndrome) that accompany such a substantial project without the support of my cast of protagonists. In particular, my mom and dad (Sue and Curt Bjornsen) have been my cheerleaders during this undertaking, believing in me even when I told them they shouldn't. I love you both more than you know, and I would never have made it to this point in my life without you. And to my brother Matt: thanks for supplying me with distracting (yet entertaining) calls and texts (and for taking the heat with dad when we would go over on our phone minutes!)

Perhaps the most pivotal character to whom I owe appreciation is my advisor, dissertation chair, and mentor, Dr. Tom Krieshok. From the day I began my doctoral studies at the University of Kansas, Tom has been a storyteller. His way with words and his capacity for capturing the intricacies of humanity in his tales of his own life experiences have altered the lens through which I see the world, and will stick with me for the rest of my life. Always telling me to "go North", Tom never allowed me to say "I can't", challenging me instead to have confidence in my knowledge, abilities, and strengths…encouraging me to be me even when I thought I should be somebody else. When I would reach an impasse in combing through the hundreds of pages of transcript produced in this project, Tom would tell me to relax with a glass of wine, put on the hat of a poet, and listen for the "soul" of the story. I owe much of my own "character development" to Tom, as he has guided me in understanding my unique "roles" as a scholar, a psychologist, and as most broadly as who I am in the tale of my own life.

And now, on with the story….

# ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study is to examine the transition experiences of college students nearing graduation through the lens of occupational engagement. The construct of occupational engagement is defined as "…taking part in behaviors that contribute to the decision-maker's fund of information and experience of the larger world, not just the world as processed when a career decision is imminent" (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009, p. 284). The Occupational Engagement Scale – Student, OES-S (Cox, 2008) was administered to 205 college seniors at a large Midwestern university. The OES-S is a 14-item questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale that has been empirically demonstrated to support the argument that the construct of occupational engagement is important to the success of college students. Ten students scoring in the upper 10% on the OES-S (five males and five females) and ten students scoring in the lower 10% on the OES-S (five males and five females) were contacted via email and asked for their participation in a 30-minute, in-person interview. Interviews were conducted on-campus, during the daytime hours, and at the convenience of each interviewee. Upon interviewee consent, each interview was audio-recorded. Audiotapes were transcribed and coded for themes. Due to the exploratory nature of the current study, existing literature did not serve as a basis for theme development. Therefore, a grounded theory approach was utilized, with themes emerging during the process of data analysis. Results are presented via eighteen sub-themes and categories falling under four meta-themes: 1) On (and Around) the Fence; 2) Internal Processes; 3) External Factors; and 4) Taking Action. It was ultimately concluded that the construct of occupational engagement as it has been operationally defined plays a critical role in the experience of transitioning from college for these 20 individuals nearing graduation. Limitations of the current study are discussed, and directions for future research are provided.

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# Chapter I

# INTRODUCTION

## Statement of the Problem

College graduation serves as a major milestone in the lives of millions of young people every year. According to the 2009 Student Survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), only 19.7% of students who applied for a job were successful in securing a position. This is a steep drop from the figures obtained in 2008 and 2007 (26% and 51% respectively). NACE pointed out that fewer 2009 graduates elected to seek post-graduation employment (59%) than did graduates of previous years (e.g., 67% of 2008 graduates sought jobs). NACE speculated that this drop may be due to the nation's heightened attention toward the current economic climate (e.g., high unemployment rates; the global financial crisis), as well as the impact of these economic developments upon the recruitment and hiring of new college graduates by employers (NACE, 2009).

According to Gordon (2009), when it comes to unemployment, the shortage does not lie in the number of available jobs, but rather in the skills of potential employees. Gordon asserts that the rapidly accelerating industrial age around the globe calls for an influx of highly skilled technical employees, and advocates for an overhaul of the education-to-employment system in order to provide individuals seeking employment with the necessary preparation. It is speculated that the national unemployment rate will reach its peak in 2010 at 10.5%. If individuals who are working part-time but would like to work full-time are factored into this figure, as well as those too discouraged to seek employment in the first place, a projected 15% of potential U.S. workers fall under the unemployment umbrella (Gordon, 2009). The technology-based economy in the United States has failed to provide the education necessary to prepare individuals to work in

burgeoning science, technology, engineering, and mathematical (STEM) fields, resulting in outsourcing such positions to other countries who have more adequately prepared potential employees for such jobs (Gordon, 2009).

Similarly, Settersten and Ray (2010) point to a mismatch between institutional supports and young adults attempting to transition into adulthood, calling for action to boost the skills and abilities possessed by young adults and to advance institutional effectiveness. In spite of the fact that young adults in the United States receive more education at present than at any other time in our nation's history, the globalization, internationalized markets, sophisticated technology, and tight job competition that have spiked in the past three decades have ignited a new host of uncertainties regarding employment. Given such barriers and hurdles, the transition into adulthood is not what it once was only a short time ago. Many young people and their families are left scratching their heads concerning the most effective way of navigating this transition, only to end up feeling isolated and coming up empty handed. "In the United States, the solutions for managing this extended transition are, to a great degree, private ones, made possible by whatever social connections or resources young people and their parents happen to have or can create" (Settersten & Ray, 2010, p. 33). While this manuscript will focus primarily on the transition experience from the vantage point of the college student, the reader would do well to keep in mind that the old adage "it takes a village to raise a child" may be applicable in young adulthood, and that the village may have expanded to the institutional level.

In their longitudinal analysis of the school-to-work transition of recent college graduates, Cassidy and Wright (2008) found that both unemployment and underemployment exert a negative impact upon these individuals in a variety of ways. Underemployment was defined as the inability to secure a job that equates with the skill level of the individual. Cassidy and Wright

examined psychological health, physical health, social support, optimism, and achievement motivation over an 18-24 month transition period between their final year of college and 9-12 months post-graduation. They found that of the 51.6% that were employed 9-12 months after graduation, a mere 26% indicated that they were working in positions that were a part of their career plans. Perceived social support, optimism, and achievement motivation were found to decrease over time for the unemployed and underemployed. The authors asserted that many individuals nearing college graduation are unprepared to successfully navigate the transition from college student to career person: "There are skills other than those traditionally acquired through higher education involved in seeking opportunities, making applications, and successfully competing for jobs" (Cassidy & Wright, 2008, p. 190). The questionable readiness of recent college graduates to transition into the world of work, coupled with the influence the economy is currently exerting upon job availability, demonstrates that the readiness of college students to enter the workforce is a topic in need of intense investigation

**Significance of Current Study**

This study aims to qualitatively explore the construct of occupational engagement in college students of senior academic standing. While occupational engagement has been quantitatively examined (as will be discussed next in the review of the literature), a qualitative exploration of the manifestation of this construct in individuals on the cusp of a major life transition (graduating from college) has yet to be undertaken. Given the existing literature that points to the utility of storytelling (Savickas, 2005) in making sense of vocationally-related experiences, it is hypothesized that inviting interviewees to verbally construct their story of where they have been, where they would like to go, and their feelings about their path will yield a deeper understanding of the role of occupational engagement in their career decision-making

process. It is projected that the use of stories will facilitate a more complete conceptualization of the attitudes and behaviors associated with the exhibition of high levels of occupational engagement, thus highlighting the role of occupational engagement in the transition from college.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of the current study is to examine the transition experiences of college students nearing graduation through the lens of occupational engagement. This study aims to address three research questions. First, this project investigates the experience of college seniors approaching graduation, with special attention to the manner in which occupational engagement plays a role in their transition. Second, do any differences emerge between students obtaining a high score on the OES-S versus students obtaining a low score on the OES-S? Third, do there appear to be any gender differences in the experience of this transition?

**Grounded Theory**

Qualitative interviewing is unique from quantitative approaches in that it allows for the deeper investigation of topics that cannot be simply or briefly answered (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Regarding the construct of occupational engagement, it is anticipated that it will be necessary to ask individuals to explain and clarify their responses, provide examples and descriptions of their experiences, and elaborate upon their stories in general, all of which are difficult, (if not impossible) tasks for the strictly quantitative researcher.

The current project was undertaken utilizing a grounded theory approach. According to Glasser and Strauss (1967), the grounded theory approach to qualitative study entails the inductive development of a theory over the course of an investigation. The data collected in such a study "grounds" the theory; in other words, the theoretical tenets are developed from the data

itself as opposed to being referenced from an existing theory or cluster of theories. At the initial conception of this project, my intention was not to conduct a grounded theory investigation. However, the complex nature of the data I collected (due primarily to the examination of this construct in terms of not only occupational engagement status, but also of gender), coupled with the absence of qualitative literature concerning occupational engagement in college students, led me to believe that a grounded theory approach would be the most effective medium through which to describe my rich data to the interested reader.

The following chapter will discuss the literature I believed to be relevant to the current study. Given the wide scope of my research topic, I could have written hundreds of pages summarizing the literature tied in some way to my project (either proximally or distally). However, such a review of the literature would in and of itself constitute a doctoral dissertation, so I exercised careful judgment in choosing the precise areas of research upon which to base my study. The "meat" of the following chapter will consist of research from the areas of both vocational psychology and general college student development, although related literature from areas outside of these two spheres will be touched upon as well. Based upon this review of the literature, the following chapter will culminate in the rationale for the current study as the logical next step in this line of inquiry.

## Chapter II

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

**Transitioning into Adulthood**

The words "adult" or "adulthood" conjure up different images for different people. For the fourteen year old frustrated with chores and curfews, becoming an adult represents liberation from parental rules and constraints. For the concerned parents of these teenagers, adulthood may represent either a spike in anxiety regarding the safety of their children, (over whom they may no longer be able to exercise restraint) or personal freedom from many of the responsibilities of decades of parenting. For the "emerging adult", typically between the ages of 18 and 25 (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010), the word may bring to life a confusing slew of emotions: excitement, fear, jubilation, or even panic. "Emerging adulthood comprises a new developmental stage for individuals who are between the ages of 18 and 25 years and who have postponed adult roles and responsibilities for further exploration of unusual work and educational possibilities" (Murphy et al., 2010, p. 174).

How can one word spark such a wide range of reactions and emotions? According to Settersten and Ray (2010), it may be due to the changing nature of the landscape between adolescence and adulthood: "…for most young people, whether by choice or by circumstance, adulthood no longer begins when adolescence ends" (Settersten and Ray, 2010, p. 36). In their recent article, these authors examined the manner in which the transition into adulthood has lengthened over the past several decades. They noted that the path into adulthood shifts to match the social realities of the times, and sought to counter many of the popular assumptions about young people currently floating around in popular culture: "Much of the media attention and public debate on the subject of the changing transition to adulthood start from the assumption

that something is wrong with young people today as they take longer to 'grow up', that the 'fault' is of their own doing" (Settersten and Ray, 2010, p. 36). Unless you've been living under a rock, almost everyone in the United States is familiar with the economic constraints placed on large groups of individuals because of the labor market. While college students seem to receive a four (or even five or six) year pass to evading adult responsibilities, there appears to be more pressure than ever upon young adults to obtain the education and training necessary to make them competitive in the tight job market they will soon confront head-on.

Not surprisingly, corresponding delays in other adult tasks such as marriage and child bearing have occurred for many young adults as they focus first on establishing themselves in a career. Settersten and Ray (2010) discussed how new barriers along the path to financial freedom have pressed young people to reconsider not only their investment in furthering their education, but also their living arrangements and readiness to start a family of their own. Marriage rates for young people have dropped dramatically as they pursue higher education. In 1960, the median age for first marriage was 20; today, it is between 26 and 27, a dramatic shift within a relatively short period of time. In the middle of the twentieth century, due to both societal expectations and to a bountiful job market, leaving home immediately after high school was normative. At present day, young people are extending their stay at home due to both social and economic conditions: "…even at the ages of thirty-five and forty, between 4 and 12 percent of adult children live with their parents" (Settersten & Ray, 2010, p. 24). Having an adult child living at home undoubtedly places stress upon a family, particularly since parents today are shouldering the responsibility to provide financial assistance to their young adult children. This is an astounding concept when we remember that it was the other way around just a century ago, with young people making financial contributions to their parents upon securing their first job (Settersten & Ray, 2010).

Yang and Gysbers (2007) noted that an individual's first experience with the job search process may serve as a template for the strategies they will utilize in the future job searches that they are likely to encounter given the current trends related to changing careers in adulthood. In their study on the experience of career transitions by college seniors, Yang and Gysbers (2007) found that students with low self-efficacy and elevated distress reported lower levels of readiness, confidence, and support, all of which were stated to be necessary for a successful transition from college. In addition, these same students displayed decreased motivation to secure positive outcomes and increased motivation to evade negative outcomes, which may confine their career exploration and openness to occupational change (Yang and Gysbers, 2007).

From a context-rich perspective of career exploration (Blustein, 1997), the capability of an individual to effectively cope with unforeseen occupational changes is bolstered through the development of exploratory skills and attitudes. Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, and Roark (1997) utilized a grounded theory framework in order to qualitatively examine such skills and attitudes in individuals who had navigated a school-to-work transition. They found that individuals who experienced the most satisfaction with their eventual career decisions tended to seek advice concerning their vocational options and took part in activities that afforded immersion in occupational environments. Individuals who joined activities displayed greater person-environment fit, which was found to correlate with flexibility in the realm of career decision-making.

While the discussion of the literature thus far has encompassed young adults in general (e.g., those moving from high school to employment as well as those attending college in between), the reader will now be asked to shift their attention to the particular experiences of young adults will attend or who have already graduated from in institution of higher education.

**Motivation for College and Beyond**

  Shashkova (2010) recently published an article concerning the motivation of students to pursue higher education in Russia. Although this piece was not written about young people in the United States, it seems plausible that several of the points made by Shashkova may apply to college students in our nation as well. The author noted that it is common for students to select their area(s) of study based upon a combination of practical reasons coupled with a shallow understanding of not only what given specialty entails (e.g., what do lawyers *actually do*), but also of the career opportunities offered within that occupational realm. Citing the tendency for many students to select multiple specialties, (which would be termed a "double major" in the United States) Shashkova argued that "the student is uncertain as to his profession or is indifferent about the actual process of his choice. In such a case, evidently the main goal is just to enroll in an institution of higher learning in order to obtain a diploma" (Shashkova, 2010, p. 22). The author discussed how higher education is conceptualized by young people as a vehicle to satisfy the expectations of society rather than the requirements of the area of study about which they are passionate. More specifically, Shashkova examined the data of a 2005 sociological survey and concluded that less than half of the young people sampled indicated that obtaining higher education primarily serves the purpose of guaranteeing solid employment.

  However, it should not be inferred from such findings that students of higher education see no purpose in obtaining their degrees: "…the respondents stated that having a higher education provides them with a very important asset…not so much an education, but rather a circle of associates on the necessary level" (Shashkova, 2010, p. 25). In this sense, the act of networking appears to emerge as critically important for young people in Russia; given the old

adage "it's not what you know, but who you know", it would seem that the same may be true for young people seeking post-collegiate employment in the United States.

Concerning the plans of young people in institutions of higher education in Russia, Shashkova (2010) noted that the professions in which young people intend to seek employment negatively correlated with distribution of professions in reality. In other words, higher numbers of young people voice the desire to enter socially coveted professional positions, (e.g., medical doctors, high-powered lawyers, etc.) yet such positions are much harder to secure, and require far more education and resources, than are those that may be seen as less prestigious (e.g., sales persons, mechanics, etc.). From my two years of professional experience instructing collegiate underclass students in a career planning course, I can attest that the same appears to be true for students in the United States, with large numbers of my students aspiring for careers in medicine and law, and only a sprinkling articulating their desire to sell used cars or repair leaky roofs for a living. As the students enrolled in my class were primarily of freshman and sophomore academic standing, it would be interesting to catch up with them during their final semester of college to see if their early aspirations continue to hold (and if they have managed to put in the grunt work necessary in order to turn these aspirations into reality).

**Transitioning from College**

As was briefly discussed in the previous section (Shashkova, 2010), it is not uncommon for the occupational expectations of college students to lack realism, likely due (at least in part) to the widespread and largely inaccurate media portrayals of a variety of careers. A lack of knowledge concerning the world of work may be at least partially to blame for the indecision and uncertainty experienced by many college students regarding their academic major, or even their reasons for being in college in general. Perhaps the relatively newfound societal (and oftentimes

familial) expectation of immediate enrollment in higher education following high school has pressured some young people to enter college before they are mature enough to do so. "Our young people, first and foremost under pressure from their parents, having no real professional guidance and not having mapped out their path in life in advance, are massively taking aim at enrolling in an institution of higher learning, and…immediately set about their studies…unfortunately, the random choice of major is widely prevalent, and as a consequence, their motives to learn are weak, their level of confidence is low, and they intend to change professions in the future" (Shashkova, 2010, p. 28). I have seen this argument in action in my own teaching experience with first-year college students. On the first day of class, I typically have them jot down their reason(s) for being in college and turn it in to me so I can get a feel for the mindset of the group as a whole. Without a doubt, the vast majority of students are stumped by this question, never having given it a second thought, and they routinely write comments such as "I graduated high school, so now I'm going to graduate college", or "My parents pushed me to get a college degree so I can get a well-paying job". Very rarely did I have students indicate that they were passionate about fields X, Y, or Z, or that they wanted to get a college education so that they could better contribute to society.

Whatever their initial motives for attending an institution of higher education, young people on the verge of graduation from a college or university face a major life transition. Individuals at this crossroads have likely spent the past three to six years taking classes in the hopes of earning a degree that will allow them to obtain employment in a desired field. However, young adults, particularly those who are educated, tend to change jobs more often than older individuals (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). Major changes have occurred in the past twenty years in the transition from college to career as it becomes increasingly common to delay making

decisions regarding both work and family (Murphy, et al., 2010). Young adults are utilizing their first few years after college to explore life options, a trend which could potentially pose problems not only for young people, but for employers, higher education institutions, and career counselors (Murphy et al., 2010).

The challenging environment in which young people find themselves in their transition from college-to-career can be risky in that both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes can result (Arnett, 2000). It has been longitudinally demonstrated that social supports act to facilitate the transition to adulthood. Conversely, a lack of social supports appears to be closely tied with lowered well-being, self-esteem, and general adjustment (Polach, 2004). This sparse social support could serve to exacerbate the fact that an individual's well-being can shift trajectories during the time of emerging adulthood, and not always in a positive or adaptive direction (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004). Murphy et al. (2010) suggested that emerging adults have challenging subjective experiences, both psychologically and vocationally. In their qualitative investigation of the college-to-career transition, Murphy et al. (2010) found that one of the most prevalent themes consisted of the role of social support in assisting this transition for emerging adults. In addition, most of the ten participants in their study indicated a sense of optimism in spite of a difficult transition, and many of their ten participants expressed ambivalent reactions towards work. Much to the surprise of the authors, participants reporting a relatively smooth transition did not necessarily indicate that they were satisfied with their life at present, and those describing a rough transition were not more likely to report dissatisfying current life circumstances. It was concluded that properly informed realistic expectations may serve a critical purpose in the perception of satisfaction with life and the college-to-career transition for emerging adults (Murphy et al., 2010).

In addition to realistic expectations, Heppner (1991) recognized several psychological resources that may act as supports or barriers in the career transition process. Readiness encompasses an individual's perception of their own motivation to move forward in their transition. Confidence refers to self-efficacy in navigating the transition process. Control is reflective of an individual's perceived power to influence the process or outcome of their transition. Support is indicative of the degree to which the individual can rely on others in their environment to support them in their transition. Decision independence relates to the subjective level of autonomy experienced in the transition process. Heppner, Multon, and Johnston (1994) further noted that when individuals possess greater psychological resources, they tend to experience lower levels of stress and are more progressive in their career transitions, in addition to espousing a more defined vocational identity.

It is important to note that even the soon-to-be college graduates equipped with the psychological resources to explore the work or school possibilities available to them may not be as well-informed in their choices as they would like to believe, often arriving at decisions regarding their plans and goals well before they are adequately prepared to do so (Gottfredson, 2005). In her Theory of Circumscription and Compromise, Gottfredson argued that individuals engage first in circumscription (removing from consideration occupational alternatives that are incongruent with their self-concept) and later in compromise (abandoning the occupational alternatives they prefer the most for those that are more accessible, but may be less compatible). While a comprehensive overview of this theory will not be discussed in the current project, it is most important for the reader to note Gottfredson's (2005) sentiment in the close of her discussion of this theory: "Dealing with the barriers in life is difficult, and the freedom to choose can be yet more daunting when the stakes are high and conditions uncertain" (p. 98). As was

noted in the first chapter of the current study, there is more uncertainty in the world of work today than perhaps ever before, and while a college degree can and does serve to open the door to greater opportunity, it comes attached to a slew of expectations and responsibilities that can place considerable pressure upon the (naïve) recent college graduate to "go forth and prosper" when they remain uncertain or undecided concerning what they are going forth "to".

**Indecision and Readiness for Making Career Choices**

Serving to compound the difficulties experienced by the undecided student transitioning out of their undergraduate career is the widely held view among recent college graduates that the first job they hold after graduation sets the stage for the rest of their career, and that if they misstep in selecting or securing their most desired position, the effects are somehow irreversible (van Vianen, DePrater, & Preenen, 2009). This line of thinking is associated with the linear career paths of the past, not the nonlinear trajectories upon which the majority of individuals currently find themselves. The parents of recent college graduates, essentially the baby boomers, largely experienced such linear career paths and as a result, may be imparting this expectation onto their children, pressuring them to find their "perfect" job immediately after receiving their diploma (van Vianen et al., 2009). Of course, this brings to mind the possibility that young people may prematurely lock themselves into a specific career niche that may not fit them well in order to avoid the nonlinear path to exploring other vocational possibilities; in essence, failing to exhibit career adaptability.

In spite of the fact that American society as a whole tends to operate under the assumption that "more to choose from = better" (just take a look at the array of dish soap brands or potato chips the next time you visit the store) van Vianen et al. (2009) maintain that a plethora of career options may serve to paralyze decision makers, acting as a barrier to fruitful decision

making. Career-related decisions must typically be made under uncertain conditions. More specifically, ambiguity in both the outside environment (e.g., what is available in the job market) and within the self (e.g., awareness of capabilities and interests) leads to conscious decision making that is either difficult or impossible. Add to this the notion that one "best" option may fail to exist, and any guarantee for vocational success and satisfaction evaporates even further (van Vianen et al., 2009).

Anderson (2003) maintained that individuals are more likely to exhibit indecision when either, 1) the selected option is not at least minimally attractive, or 2) the selected option is not deemed to be relatively better than alternate options. This may be due to the "tyranny of freedom" posed by Schwartz (2000), indicating that the more choices available to an individual, the less happiness they report with their decisions. While the precise explanation for this tendency is unclear, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) hypothesized that when people have more options available, they feel more pressure to select the best choice, and they may erroneously believe that they possess total control over the outcome of their choice, neglecting to account for extraneous factors. According to Iyengar, Wells, and Schwart. (2006), this tendency may be particularly predominant in younger individuals (e.g., college students), who are more likely to hold high standards for making the "best" decisions, often clinging to an expectation about their vocational future that may be unreasonably high.

Indecision related to career is a prevalent occurrence among college students nearing graduation. van Vianen et al. (2009) assert that young adults in present day experience pressure to make the "best" choice among the variety of educational and vocational options that are available after graduating from college. These authors note that the conscious decision making emphasized by many career theories may not be the most optimal strategy, arguing instead for

the promotion of components of career adaptability such as short-term decision making, flexibility, and proficiency in more than one occupational role.

According to Solberg, Good, Fischer, Brown, and Nord (1995), career search self-efficacy comprises an individual's subjective confidence in their ability to successfully carry out various career search activities, and seems to be predictive of the job search outcome. More specifically, self-efficacious individuals tend to tap into an array of career search behaviors (Wanberg, Kanfer, and Banas, 2000). In their examination of career search self-efficacy with graduating college students, Crossley and Stanton (2005) observed a direct positive relationship between the psychological distress experienced by the student and the success of that student's career search process. While the authors maintain that the reason for this relationship is not easily explained, it seems plausible that elevated levels of distress may be related to imminence of graduation, and hence the urgency of finding a career.

According to Phillips and Blustein (1994), the construct of readiness refers to the planning, exploring, and deciding in which individuals must engage in order to be adequately prepared to make career choices. The concept of readiness for career choices encompasses an attitudinal component, including both exploring and planning, as well as a cognitive component, enveloping informational knowledge and decision making. While the construct of readiness (also known as vocational maturity) is somewhat controversial due largely to its unknown predictive validity, Phillips and Blustein (1994) argue that readiness can be effectively adapted to the dynamic world of work in which we currently find ourselves. In terms of planning, individuals must be equipped with insight into the actions needed to pursue their career goals. Exploration encompasses engagement in an array of experiences to expand knowledge of both oneself and of

the world of work. Deciding necessarily entails the comparison of differential alternatives with the end goal of committing to the option that is most satisfying for the individual.

Phillips and Blustein (1994) assert that contextual issues must be infused into the current understanding of the construct of readiness in order for it to be useful in our ever-changing work environment: "…local, temporally specific, and culturally sensitive models may need to elaborate the relevant developmental tasks—and the requisite attitudes and behaviors—for a given cohort in the population" (Phillips & Blustein, 1994, p. 66). Given that college students nearing graduation can no longer expect to enter into their ideal job immediately after commencement, that their path to their ideal position will likely not be linear, and that they are likely to travel several career paths in their lifetime, it makes intuitive sense to maintain a flexible view of planning, exploring, and deciding related to college student career planning and decision making: "flexibility…is a two-way skill. It involves being capable of responding to change and being capable of creating change. Responding to change may mean changing old habits. Creating change may mean inventing something new" (Gelatt, 1989, p. 255). The act of creation involves action, and for many college students, creating change for themselves in terms of their career development path entails direct, personal involvement with their college or university.

## Campus Involvement

It is obvious that on any college campus, there are some students who choose to become involved in their college or university via clubs, groups, and the like, and others who refrain from such involvement for a variety of reasons (e.g., apathy, limited time due to holding employment, etc.). Those who do become involved likely possess different rationales for doing so (e.g., boosting their resume, truly having a passion for their involvements, enjoying leadership

opportunities, etc.). Ferrari, McCarthy, and Milner (2009), guided by goal orientation research, examined student motivation in three forms: mastery orientation, performance-approach and performance avoidance. More specifically, students motivated by mastery tend to set goals aimed at learning the content of any given course (driven by curiosity and love-of-learning); performance-approach students set goals centered on achieving favorable results (e.g., good grades); performance-avoidance set goals aimed at evading negative results (e.g., avoid failing a course). In their study with students at a faith-based university primarily serving first-generation college students from urban Chicago, the authors found that students high in campus engagement also tended to perceive their institution as inclusive and innovative. In addition, students reporting higher levels of campus engagement (e.g., involvement in clubs), also reported greater mastery and performance goal orientations when compared with students exhibiting little to no campus engagement. However, the authors expressed surprise in the elevated performance avoidance levels exhibited by highly engaged students, offering the limitation that their study addressed quantity as opposed to quality of campus engagement, and encouraging future researchers to investigate levels of engagement.

According to an investigation conducted by Hall, Smith, and Chia (2008), possessing an internal locus of control constitutes the primary predictor for graduating on time, with "on time" referring to the traditionally expected four-year college career. In addition, the authors assert that the self-perception of college students regarding their ability and effort (internal factors), as well as the experience of luck or the receipt of help (external factors) can exert an impact upon both their success and their failure in college. In fact, Hall et al. (2008) found that academic engagement strategies resulting in student integration with the university community and a sense of what it means to be in college served as a significant predictor of college GPA. It can

therefore be surmised that there are many benefits reaped by students involved in their university in a manner that transcends traditional, required coursework. As will be discussed in the following section, mentorship serves as a critical component of campus involvement for a significant portion of successful college students.

**Mentoring**

According to Nora and Crisp (2007), the multitude of mentoring programs that have been established at institutions of higher education in the United States do not have a unifying theoretical framework. They note that, given the high outcome expectations of these programs, it would benefit colleges and universities to examine the underlying constructs that contribute to successful mentoring experiences for college students. In their attempt to identify the dimensions associated with mentoring, the authors recognized four latent constructs in the literature (Cohen & Galbraith, 1995; Roberts, 2000), upon which they based their conceptual framework. First, psychological/emotional support refers to feeling listened to and encouraged, receiving moral support, engaging in collaboration to identify the problem(s), and the general establishment of a link between the student and their mentor. Second, goal setting and career paths encompasses an assessment of the student's strengths and areas for growth, as well as facilitating goal setting and decision making for both school and career. Third, academic subject knowledge support entails the education and evaluation of the student academically, appropriately challenging them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to move toward their goals. Finally, role modeling prioritizes student learning from the previous and current successes and failures of the mentor, enriching the mentor/mentee relationship through sharing personal feelings and life experiences.

In their analysis of 200 student responses to 36 survey items based on existing literature, Nora and Crisp (2007) extracted three factors that seemingly captured the mentoring experiences

of these undergraduate students. First, educational/career goal-setting and appraisal entailed engaging the student in discussions related to their academic goals. Second, emotional and psychological support encompassed the provision of encouragement, following up or keeping in regular contact with the student, and guiding the student in the direction of their goals. Finally, academic subject knowledge support aimed at advancing a student's knowledge relevant to their chosen field essentially points to the necessity of the student acquiring the knowledge necessary to attain their career goals; if the mentor is not equipped to help the student with this task, it is essential that they point them in the direction of someone who can. The authors concluded that "…mentoring programs aimed at providing experiences designed to assist students in adjusting to college life and becoming fully engaged in classroom and out-of-class activities should focus on providing support for the latent variables identified" (Nora & Crisp, 2007, p. 337).

Hall et al. (2008) noted that college students (particularly incoming college students) who have someone with a general knowledge of academia to guide them, they may be more likely to get off to a "good start" in college, potentially placing them in a position to enjoy the long-term effects of such early guidance. Similarly, in their 2007 investigation, one of the relationships examined by Ullah and Wilson was that between academic success and relationships with faculty. Using data derived from the National Survey of Student Engagement, these authors found that students' relationships with faculty exert a positive influence on their overarching achievement in school as measured by their grades. "Activities such as student-faculty interaction…have been positively associated with student persistence and educational attainment" (Ullah and Wilson, 2007). This finding is not surprising given the results offered by Astin (1984) that the most effective way for students to learn is by becoming involved, asserting that gains in both learning and development are proportional to the level of involvement of the

student. Specifically, Astin proclaimed that both quantity and quality of involvement are crucial, pointing to the importance of an array of involvements, including interactions with faculty and administration. From a mentoring standpoint, it makes sense that the more frequent interactions that students have with a variety of faculty or staff members, the more likely they are to encouter an effective mentor that can aide in guiding them through their college years and potentially beyond. It is not uncommon for individuals to get linked with employment opportunities forwarded to them by people who know them well (e.g., mentors). Therefore, the development and maintenance of solid mentor relationships could foreseeably serve as an important component of success during and after college.

**National Survey of Student Engagement**

As was referenced in the previous section, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), first administered in 2000, obtains annual information from hundreds of universities and four-year colleges (approximately 1200) regarding the participation of students in institutionally provided programs and activities aimed at fostering both learning and personal development (retrieved June 16th, 2010 from http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm). In the 2009 annual report, it was noted that several compelling findings have emerged related to student engagement and the undergraduate experience. Perhaps most importantly, student engagement has been found to improve both grades and retention rates for students deemed to be under-prepared for college, as well as students who have been historically under-represented (NSSE, 2006). Therefore, student engagement may be most important for those students who are presumably least likely to exhibit such engagement. In addition, the predisposition of an individual for engagement (based off of both engagement in high school as well as expectations for engagement in college), is correlated with actual college engagement, but not predictive of college engagement. Furthermore, a

positive relationship exists between student engagement in college and plans to return after the first year, a finding which holds true regardless of prior engagement behavior (NSSE, 2008). Given these findings, engagement appears to not only be beneficial, but rather, crucial for success and retention in college. Occupational engagement would seem to serve as an underlying component of student engagement, as many of the ways that students become occupationally engaged involve campus sponsored clubs, organizations, and employment opportunities.

**Positive Uncertainty**

Much of the aforementioned literature has addressed the success (or lack of success) of college students. A reasonable question at this juncture concerns what is reflective of success for these individuals. Is the successful college student one who knows the precise path they wish to follow, adhering to this course of action with the utmost dedication and perseverance? Contrary to Shashkova's (2010) previously discussed emphasis upon academic and occupational decision and certainty, the notion of positive uncertainty was put forth by Gelatt (1989) to illustrate the necessity of maintaining an open-mind throughout the career-decision making process. "Does it seem paradoxical to be positive (comfortable and confident) in the face of uncertainty (ambiguity and doubt)? Yes. But that is exactly what a person will need in order to be a successful decision maker in the future" (Gelatt, 1989, p. 253). Positive uncertainty entails embracing the ambiguity inherent in the future, particularly given that what an individual believes to be true one day may not hold true the next. The author encourages openness to possibility, asserting that flexibility in career planning and decision making can pay dividends in the career development of the individual. As several scholars will attest in the following section, such openness and flexibility on the part of the individual can result in unexpected outcomes that transcend the imagination.

**Planned Happenstance**

Bloch (2005) asserted that the transition from college is marked by fluctuations between order and chaos, often resulting in occupationally-related distress no matter how "decided" an individual may be. Moreover, events that appear to be unrelated or insignificant to defining career objectives can exert a substantial impact upon the vocational path selected, both at the time of graduation as well as in the future. As was stated by Gottfredson (2005): "Chance will have played a part in who ends up where, but the pattern of outcomes will hardly be random—or novel" (p. 72). If an individual is receptive to chance events, the resulting non-linear path toward career development can potentially result in greater occupational satisfaction (Bloch, 2005).

Planned happenstance theory (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999) works to examine the role of chance events in the realm of career development. This theory posits that individuals not only can generate events, but can capitalize upon unpredictable occurrences in order to maximize their benefit. "Planned happenstance theory is a conceptual framework extending career counseling to include the creating and transforming of unplanned events into opportunities for learning" (Mitchell et al., 1999, p. 117). The concept of indecisiveness is replaced with that of open-mindedness, as the goal is to increase the individual's tolerance of ambiguity so that they develop a general attitude of exploration. Planned happenstance theory does not advocate relying on luck as a means of making career decisions, but rather, champions actively searching for career experiences while remaining open to new and unexpected opportunities (Mitchell et al., 1999).

"Influential unplanned events are not uncommon; they are everyday occurrences. Serendipity is not serendipitous. Serendipity is ubiquitous" (Krumboltz, 1998, p. 391). Krumboltz makes the case that, with a little hindsight, virtually anyone can reflect upon their

past and pinpoint unplanned occurrences that have exerted an influence on our occupational trajectory, either major or minor. Noting that the person-environment fit model outlined by Parsons (1909) neglects to leave space for the occurrence of such unplanned occurrences, Krumboltz urges against a heavy reliance upon such traditional theories that only include "chance" as a source of error. He instead argues that unplanned events must occupy a major role in the conceptualization of the career development process, particularly in light of the recent reality that career transitions are becoming more and more prevalent in the rapidly changing world of work in which we now find ourselves. Unplanned events appear to go hand-in-hand with the notion of career adaptability, as individuals open to chance occurrences are also likely to exhibit a greater ability to adapt to a shifting occupational landscape.

**Theory of Career Adaptability**

"It is now understood that it is not possible to choose one path in life, to stand still after acquiring a set of one-way skills and stay on the same job" (Shashkova, 2010, p. 24). While Parsons's notion of person-environment fit is intuitively appealing, it may not boast as much utility in contemporary times as it did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was first established. Parsons' paradigm assumes that occupations will be stable and that career paths will be predictable, neither of which seem to be the case in the current era of the global economy (Savickas, 2000). A linear occupational path now seems to be the exception rather than the norm, and individuals must be able to effectively respond to new occupational circumstances on a relatively regular basis. (Savickas, 1997). The current state of affairs requires a certain degree of flexibility on the part of the worker to adapt to the seemingly ever-changing occupational landscape. According to Savickas (1997), career adaptability is defined as "the readiness to cope with the unpredictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments

prompted by changes in work and working conditions" (p. 254).  Career adaptability (Super & Knasel, 1981) constitutes the relationship between a person and their environment and encompasses five distinct dimensions: 1) planfulness concerns preparedness for life events; 2) exploration relates to obtaining relevant occupational information; 3) information and skills refers to an individual's capability of utilizing information to occupationally adapt more effectively; 4) decision-making is the awareness of the primary principles related to making career-related decisions; and 5) reality orientation equates to possessing a knowledge of both self and environment related to coping with career development tasks (Cairo, Kritis, & Myers, 1996).

Being adaptable translates into modifying behavior according to fluctuating circumstances. Van Vianen et al. (2009) maintain that when individuals are on the cusp of beginning their career, they are most likely to be malleable to becoming more vocationally adaptable. However, recent empirical study has demonstrated that young people may be less willing to immerse themselves in challenging experiences that could teach them a great deal, instead choosing to pursue less challenging work in which they feel self-efficacious (De Prater, 2005). Avoiding risks that could potentially result in failure experiences prevents these individuals from fully engaging in their environment and developing mastery orientation(s) in their work lives.

The concept of career adaptability stems from the construct of career maturity, or the level of readiness an individual possesses in terms of making choices related to education or vocation (Super, 1955). London and Stumpf (1986) coined the related construct of career resilience, which concerns not only flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity, but also the ability to effectively navigate occupational obstacles (e.g., the rampant unemployment in the current economic environment in the United States). According to Savickas (1997), an individual's

ability to plan is of paramount importance in terms of preparing to explore anticipated

opportunities and to make career-related decisions that can turn these opportunities into realities.

Ebberwein et al. (2004) conducted a qualitative investigation in an attempt to gain an

understanding of how adults are able to successfully manage a career transition. Using Super's

construct of career adaptability (Super & Knasel, 1981) as a theoretical framework, the authors

interviewed 21 individuals through a career counseling agency specializing in helping people

who have lost their jobs or have been unemployed for an extended period of time. Participants

submitted subjective ratings of their own adaptability, and the analysis of the 60-90 minute

interviews produced three categories of themes. First, the adaptable responses category entailed

approaching job loss with a healthy sense of urgency; picturing the details of a subsequent career

move (even in the absence of an impending transition); being proactive and looking ahead when

taking note of a change in the current situation that may signify an impending transition; utilizing

caution when making decisions about stop-gap employment; and setting realistic goals as well as

specific steps to move toward those goals. Second, the contextual themes category included the

impact of financial concerns on job loss and the attitudes and emotions arising from this loss; the

interaction of family life and work life; and the influence that an employer can exert on an

individual's experience of a transition. Finally, the big picture category accounted for the fact

that the needs and responsibilities of an individual may lie in conflict with their ideal career;

adults in the midst of a career transition tend to prefer helping professionals who attend to the

bigger context of their lives; and a realization that the world of work is dynamic and that new

skills may need to be acquired. The authors asserted that these findings seem to be indicative of

the importance of an adaptable approach to job loss. More specifically, individuals who were

oriented toward the future in a realistic way (e.g., accounting for personal factors and contextual

factors in their circumstances) may be more adept in navigating a career transition in that they may possess a heightened awareness to changes (within themselves or in their environment) that could influence their career path.

According to Murphy et al. (2010), adaptability offers a pertinent theoretical framework for investigating and conceptualizing the transition of emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25. These authors posit that young adults who anticipate that their first job out of college, as well as their transition in general, will be challenging and potentially unfulfilling may be more capable of accessing the resiliency and adaptability that will prepare them for this challenge.

**Other Relevant Theory**

In contrast of traditional career theories, those of the future (e.g., the Theory of Career Adaptability) are shaping up to account for the nonlinear nature of the vocational paths experienced by many people in our current environment. In other words, the more conventional career path, which offered stability, will be replaced in newer career theories by the necessity of committing to a lifetime of learning in order to be adaptable to changing trajectories (van Vianen et al., 2009). What follows is a brief discussion of two such theories: Social Cognitive Career Theory, and the Theory of Career Construction. While I have come to conceptualize the Theory of Career Adaptability as harboring the greatest relevance to my overall research topic, I found the following two theories to be pertinent to the conceptualization of occupational engagement in college students as well.

*Social Cognitive Career Theory*

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) seeks to examine the ways in which individuals develop their occupational interests, make work-related choices, and attain success and stability in their careers (Lent, 2005). This theory places an emphasis on

human agency in career development, while still taking into account the various personal and environmental influences that serve to enhance, diminish, or prevail over human agency. According to Lent (2005), SCCT recognizes the critical roles played by interests, abilities, and values throughout the career development process, and attends to the manner in which individuals navigate milestones as well as barriers in this process. This theory accounts for the dynamic and situation-specific nature of both people and environments, asserting that an individual's views, expectations, and behaviors can shift along with the supports and barriers they encounter. Specifically, SCCT outlines the interaction between three "person variables" facilitating human agency in career development. First, self-efficacy beliefs entail how an individual judges their ability to organize and carry out the actions necessary to achieve a certain caliber of performance: "Can I do this?" (Lent, 2005, p. 104). Second, outcome expectations involve an individual's perception regarding the consequences/outcomes of behaving in a certain manner: "If I try doing this, what will happen?" (Lent, 2005, p. 104). Finally, personal goals constitute the intentions of an individual to become engaged in a given activity or to reach a particular outcome: "How much and how well do I want to do this?" (Lent, 2005, p. 105).

SCCT encompasses three differential (yet interlocking) process models: interests, choices, and performance. The following discussion will focus exclusively upon the interest model, as it possesses the greatest relevance to the current study. According to the interest model discussed by Lent (2005), young people are exposed to an array of activities through the variety of environments in which they find themselves (e.g., growing up in their family, school experiences, and co-curricular activities) that may lay the groundwork for career options in adulthood. Young people are encouraged by important others (e.g., parents and teachers) to pursue and excel in certain activities; for some, this might be athletics, for others, mathematics,

and so on. As these individuals practice particular activities and receive feedback concerning their performance, they refine their skills and develop their own standards of performance for these activities (forming self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations). Therefore, emerging interests (coupled with self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations) foster an individual's goals for increasing their involvement in particular activities. For instance, take the young person encouraged to compete in debate competitions in high school. As this individual attends practices and group meetings, they will either receive feedback from instructors or peers that is either 1) positive; fostering their self efficacy beliefs, or 2) negative; squelching their self-efficacy beliefs. The young person receiving positive feedback will likely exhibit more investment in practicing to improve their skills, eventually arriving at their own performance standard, while the individual receiving negative feedback will likely drop from debate at some point if this does not change. For the successful debater, this feedback loop of interests, goals, practice, outcomes, and self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations will continue, potentially directing them into certain college majors (e.g., political science) and careers (e.g., law). It is important to note the SCCT assumption that shifting career interests are primarily due to shifting self efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations: "Whether interests change or solidify is determined by factors such as whether initially preferred activities become restricted and whether people are exposed (or expose themselves) to compelling learning experiences (e.g., childrearing, volunteering, technological innovations) that enable them to expand their sense of efficacy and positive outcome expectations into new spheres (e.., teaching, social service, computer use)" (Lent, 2005, p. 107).

Feldt and Woelfel sought to apply SCCT to career indecision in their 2009 study with 179 college undergraduates. Noting that when individuals of both genders consider occupational

possibilities, their expectations for success in a given occupation influences the likelihood of their selection of a particular career. The authors assert that, although not a core component of SCCT, the inclusion of specific career outcome expectations (e.g., variety, job security, high income, etc.) in the SCCT model may increase our understanding of career indecision. Perhaps an individual is undecided about a particular career choice because they are not certain if this occupational path would fit with their most valued outcome expectations (e.g., desiring the outcome of ample time at home with family, yet hoping for a career as an attorney). Feldt and Woelfel note that including specific outcome expectations in the model could facilitate career counselors in more effectively evaluating the match between a client's values and career outcome expectations, as well as how realistic the client's expectations are for them. "As individuals acquire additional information about potential occupational choices, they may consider new choices" (Feldt and Woelfel, 2009, p. 435). As was previously mentioned, the goal of occupational engagement is to provide the individual with information and experiences to contribute to their understanding of the career options available to them, which is essentially what Feldt and Woelfel are calling for with their revised model.

*Theory of Career Construction*

"The theory of career construction explains the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals impose meaning and direction on their vocational behavior" (Savickas, 2005, pp. 42). Hartung and Taber (2008) sought to utilize the theory of career construction as a vehicle for fostering subjective well-being (SWB). Diener (1984) conceptualized SWB as encompassing certain elements such as happiness, satisfaction, personal fulfillment. It might also be asserted that these elements can arise as a result of work (Hartung & Taber, 2008). As these authors asserted, work can and does play a very influential role in a

variety of dichotomies (e.g., energy vs. exhaustion; fulfillment vs. discontent; achievement vs. failure), thus explaining the applicability of the theory of career construction to understanding and fostering SWB in career counseling clients. Career construction counseling aims to boost career adaptability in the client, attending to the role transitions, the resulting developmental tasks, and the coping strategies individuals employ to cope with changes (Hartung & Taber, 2008). It has been found that individuals who hold personal goals that are in line with their personality traits and that are consistent with their subjective life story tend to indicate the most happiness (McGregor, McAdams, and Little, 2006). Given that work is an integral part of the lives of most individuals, it would seem plausible that work related goals that are congruent with these same personal aspects would promote happiness as well.

As was touched upon, career adaptability serves as one of the three central components of the Theory of Career Construction (along with vocational personality and life themes, which will not be discussed in-depth in the current literature review). As was noted by Savickas (2005): "Individuals mentally structure the story of their own work life using the social structure provided by society's grand narrative of a career…the grand story of career synchronizes individuals to their culture by telling them in advance how their work lives should proceed and prompting them to stay on schedule" (p 49). Given the qualitative nature of the current study, I believe the theory behind the grand career narrative to be particularly pertinent to my project. As will be discussed in the following chapter concerning methods, the sample of students I interviewed were asked a series of questions in which they relayed to me their stories concerning how they arrived at their current life position, and how they foresee themselves moving on to the next chapter in their story. "The grand narrative of career tells a story, an account that people use to understand themselves and others" (Savickas, 2005, p. 50). Of particular interest in the current

project was the manner in which constructs believed to be related to occupational engagement played supporting roles in the stories people told about themselves and their world.

Before discussion of the Theory of Occupational Engagement can ensue, it is necessary to first review some of the pivotal literature that led to the development of this theory. Of particular interest will be the critical but insufficient roles played by our rational and intuitive processes making career decisions, as well as revised model for adaptive career decision-making that espouses the critical nature of the construct upon which the current study is based: occupational engagement.

**Rational and Intuitive Processes**

Self-schemata refer to generalizations about the self that arise as a result of experiences accumulated over time (Markus, 1977). These generalizations are utilized in processing information about the self, and exert an impact on the type of information used to make judgments and inferences about the self. Self-schemata become more solidified as generalizations accumulate, and as a result, may be weak in some areas due to lack of experience. Markus goes on to argue that perceiving a particular trait as part of the self may not be the result of a developed self-schema, but rather of the level of desirability of the trait. This notion was supported by Gilbert (2005) who asserted that the "Reality Movie" produced by the human brain is not reality, and it may erroneously include non-existent aspects or omit key existing factors. Due to the ability of the mind to distort reality, the self may make a rational decision that inevitably leads to an unsatisfactory conclusion (Winkielman & Berridge, 2003). Therefore, relying solely upon rational processes to make career-related decisions is likely to lead to disappointing outcomes for the individual.

As was noted above, most models of career decision-making rely solely on the rationality of the decision-maker. Relying heavily on self observation and report, these models may be problematic because introspection does not effectively allow access to more sophisticated cognitive processes, often resulting in decisions that are not a product of reality (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). This sentiment was echoed by Simon (1955) who asserted that introspection seldom renders all of the information that would be needed for rational decision-making, so satisficing occurs, which entails making sufficient, not optimal, decisions.

Occupational introspection assumes that individuals are inherently conscious of their vocational motives and preferences (Krieshok, 2001). Quite to the contrary of the logic behind the widespread administration of vocational assessments in the facilitation of career decision-making, Krieshok (1998) hypothesized that "…most processing performed by the human mind for decision-making and behavior initiation is not performed at the conscious level, and that reflection on those decision making processes is not only futile but possibly confusing and detrimental to good decisions" (p. 217). Krieshok's anti-introspectivist (AI) view of career decision making holds that it is difficult to accurately introspect about the processes going on inside of us. The probable influence of personal biases upon the cognitive processes of the individual makes the case for the dual-consideration of rational (deliberate and explicit) and intuitive (habitual and implicit) processes in career decision-making and adaptability (Krieshok et al., 2009).

Support for the role of intuition in making choices was also detected in a qualitative study of seasoned decision-makers. Klein (1998) found that under ambiguous circumstances, individuals tend to choose the first option that works, asserting that errors in decision-making are likely the product of a paucity of information and experience. Singh and Greenhaus (2004) found

that when a rational strategy (e.g., thinking things through, simplifying the task at hand, and constructing decision-making rules) was supplemented with using intuition, the rational strategy exhibited value locating a suitable job that was a good fit for the individual. The authors explained that people who rely on both rational and intuitive processes in their decision making tend to indicate elevated levels of awareness of both themselves and their environment, enabling them to select a suitable option. They posit that an awareness of options is gained only when rationality is supplemented with intuition, as this allows for unconscious processes to operate in a way that influences decisions for the better. Support for the dual-importance of reason and intuition can be found in a study involving college students trained in a multi-step model of rational decision-making (Soelberg, 1967). The author speculated that students relied primarily on their intuitive hunches in making decisions, justifying them with a rationally-constructed argument they were able to derive from their training in the multi-step model of rational decision-making.

The existing literature on rational and intuitive decision-making strategies fails to account for outside experiences that are likely contributing to the development of this "felt preference": engagement experiences. The notion that rationality is useful when individuals possess information that boosts their knowledge about themselves and their environment points to the importance of occupational engagement as a means of providing funds of information and experience. In other words, acquiring information and experience through engagement allows for our unconscious processes (intuition) to spring into action. When this intuition then marries with rationality, more optimal career decision making can result.

Much of the initial literature on career decision-making does not account for active involvement on the part of the individual, but rather, investigated the roles played by rational and

intuitive processes. Krieshok, Black, and McKay (2009) asserted that both rational and intuitive approaches to processing are critical in career decision-making, but do not complete the puzzle. Similarly, Gelatt (1989) argued that: "rational strategy is not obsolete, it is just no longer sufficient" (p. 255). Krieshok (1998) argues that it is worthwhile for individuals to engage in activities that set them up to pinpoint themes in their lives (e.g., through guided imagery exercises, journaling, etc.). Such engagement experiences encourage individuals to be proactive in seeking information and experience to feed their intuitive reactions and inform their rational decision making. These three components (reason, intuition, and engagement) comprise the trilateral model of adaptive career decision making (Krieshok et al., 2009) that will be discussed in the following section.

**Trilateral Model of Adaptive Career Decision Making**

In light of their argument for the importance of engagement in the career decision making process, Krieshok et al. (2009) proposed the trilateral model of adaptive career decision making. This model asserts that the decision making process is comprised of reason, intuition, and engagement, all three of which must be present for optimal (adaptive) career decision making to occur. Engagement serves as the foundation of the trilateral model, and is defined as having experiences that enhance an individual's understanding about themselves and the world of work, or "taking part in behaviors that contribute to the career decision-maker's fund of information and experience of the larger world" (Krieshok et al., 2009, p. 284). Engagement expands an individual's options concerning their current and future relationship to work. Vocational options, as well as an individual's understanding of these options, are stimulated through activities that add to the individual's available pool of information upon which to make optimal decisions via reason and intuition. The trilateral model stresses that an individual can tap into their reasoning

and intuition only when a sufficient fund of information is available, obtained via engagement (Krieshok et al., 2009).

According to the trilateral model, an individual aware of the limits of relying solely upon rational and intuitive strategies for making decisions can attain and sustain optimal (adaptive) decision making from their ongoing involvement with the world around them. "Adaptive career decision making, in which decision making is enhanced through the accumulation of information and experience, becomes possible as a result of occupational engagement" (Krieshok et al., 2009, . 284). Part of the underlying logic to this argument concerns the notion that ongoing engagement experiences allow the individual the opportunity to become an expert in their own life, affording them with an ever-growing bank of information and experiences from which to draw when faced with a decision, a moment Krieshok et al. (2009) refer to as the "grunt moment" (p. 284).

The idea of a person-environment match originated with Parsons' (1909) systematic conceptual framework, which eventually culminated in trait-factor theory. This theoretical framework posits that matching individual traits to occupational requirements is the most effective means of occupational selection because it yields not only vocational satisfaction, but also vocational satisfactoriness (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). The trilateral model is termed "adaptive" because it emphasizes the importance of re-visiting the match between an individual and their occupational environment on a consistent basis (Krieshok et al., 2009).

**Theory of Occupational Engagement**

Krieshok's (1998) previously discussed anti-introspectivist view of career decision-making falls under the umbrella of adaptive rationality. The construct of adaptive rationality champions experiential learning as a means of creating circumstances in which optimal decision-

making can occur as a result of the conglomeration of information and the experiences collected by the individual (Krieshok et al., 2009). Individuals who understand the confines of their rational and intuitive processing can theoretically achieve and maintain optimal decision-making as a result of continuous, purposeful involvement with their environment. Krieshok et al. (2009) posit that the rational and intuitive processes utilized to make career-related decisions are funded by engagement, which they conceptualized as a melding of both exploration and enrichment. Occupational engagement is defined as "…taking part in behaviors that contribute to the career decision-maker's fund of information and experience" (Krieshok et al., 2009, p. 30).

According to Krieshok et al. (2009), engagement comprises two distinct, yet interlocking, components: exploration and enrichment. Exploration (Super & Knasel, 1981) is a state activity that involves obtaining information deemed to be relevant to the process of adaptive career decision making. The construct of enrichment, added by Krieshok et al. (2009) entails a trait activity: an ongoing process of involvement in activities (experiential in nature), aimed at increasing an individual's bank of information about themselves and about the world in which they inhabit. It is asserted that the construct of exploration is insufficient in that it implies an endpoint in decision-making, whereas engagement refers to a constant process without an endpoint (Krieshok et al., 2009). Enrichment is vitally important given the rapidly shifting nature of the current economy and world of work, as it ensures that the information acquired by an individual (for the purpose of informing decisions) is up-to-date and relevant. "As for the basic mechanism by which rationality and intuition become richer, it is experience acquired via engagement" (Krieshok et al., 2009, p. 285).

At its core, occupational engagement requires that individuals be continuously involved in activities aimed at enhancing both their personal skills and their occupational knowledge.

Individuals who are engaged increase the likelihood of finding themselves in unplanned situations they may be able to take advantage of, boosting their ability to adapt to constantly changing (unpredictable) situations in optimal ways (e.g., finding themselves suddenly unemployed). Therefore, a valuable link appears to exist between being occupationally engaged, reaping the benefits of planned happenstance, and being able to effectively adapt to occupational changes (voluntary or involuntary). In essence, occupational engagement facilitates adaptive career decision-making (Krieshok et al., 2009).

The job markets of the future are hypothesized to require workers who possess self-efficacy in performing a wide variety of tasks and who are capable of building upon skills they have already acquired, effectively adapting old skills to new situations (van Vianen et al., 2009). These transferable skills are not typically accrued through one job, but through a variety of work related experiences that being occupationally engaged makes possible. This idea may be particularly important given the aforementioned rapid shifts in the occupational landscape in which soon-to-be college graduates may quickly find themselves: "Over the past thirty years, the labor market has also seen increased 'churning'—a term used by economists to refer to movements from employment to unemployment…as well as movements from one job to another…especially among younger workers" (Danziger & Ratner, 2010, p. 140). In this sense, perhaps it is adaptive for individuals to possess uncertainty related to what they want and where they are trying to go, as it could serve to broaden the nature of their engagement experiences, resulting in adaptive decision making that is even more fine-tuned: "New experiences help develop new information, new values, new goals, and new wants. Being uncertain about goals and wants leads to new discoveries" (Gelatt, 1989, p. 254).

The construct of engagement has been assessed through multiple research endeavors (Black, 2006; Rasmussen, Cox, Sharma, Jacobson, Yang, & Cole, 2007; Scott, 2006; Conrad, Syme, Sharma, & Wells, 2007; Cox, Rasmussen, Jacobson, Wells, Rettew, & Sirridge, 2006). The Occupational Engagement Scale – College (OES-C) was established as initial support for the existence and measurement of occupational engagement in college students (Black, 2006). The OES-S (Cox 2008) was established in order to correct for some of the limitations in the OES-C (e.g., psychometric properties, test length, participant variability, etc.). Interventions designed to teach engagement have been established and evaluated as well (Cox, Rasmussen, & Conrad, 2007). Given the strictly quantitative nature of all of the existing research on the construct of occupational engagement, I developed a qualitative pilot investigation as a means of gaining an initial insight into the manner in which occupational engagement presents itself (or fails to present itself) in the lived-in words of college students, to which the reader will now turn their focus.

**Pilot Study**

Bjornsen (2009) conducted a study with the intent of completing a pilot project for the current study. Thirty students in a Positive Psychology course at a large Midwestern university were administered the OES-S (Cox, 2008). The author contacted two students scoring in the top 10% on the OES-S (one male, one female), and two students scoring in the bottom 10% on the OES-S (one male, one female) via email to request in-person follow-up interviews. The interview protocol utilized in the pilot study differed slightly from the interview protocol in the current study (e.g., there were fewer questions).

Analysis of the transcriptions of the interview audio-records led to the development of several themes related to each interview question.  Regarding what the first question ("Tell me

about what you see yourself doing ten years from now") high scorers on the OES-S were able to articulate more specific jobs goals than were low scorers (who conveyed more general plans), and were able to do so more quickly. Also, low scorers spoke of the importance of being able to work with other people, whereas high scorers referred to their aspirations on a more individual level. Gender differences emerged in terms of the integration of non-career related interests into future plans, with the male interviewees spontaneously discussing these interests, and the female interviewees failing to do so, regardless of level of engagement.

Concerning the second interview question ("Walk me through the story of how you will get there"), high scorers were also able to articulate specific plans for their immediate futures, whereas low scorers talked in broad, general terms. Three out of four interviewees (both high scorers and the female low scorer) conveyed openness to vocational experiences. All four interviewees spoke about unique personal attributes they believed would help them to achieve their goals, and all communicated the belief that they would have to "start from the bottom" and work their way up.

Group differences emerged in responses to the third interview question ("Tell me how your life has prepared you for the narrative you just described"). High scorers reported that involvement from their parents was critical in their career-decision making process, but low scorers made no mention of this. Also, low scorers discussed significant (difficult) life experiences (e.g., involvement with drugs and alcohol, moving, etc.) that shaped their occupational aspirations, whereas high scorers reported no such difficulties. Gender differences emerged in responses to this question as well, with male as opposed to female interviewees spontaneously discussing confidence in their abilities. In addition, gender discrepancies in values materialized as female interviewees articulated socially-oriented values (e.g., accounting for

significant people when making career-related decisions) whereas male interviewees championed concrete, external values such as prestige and income. All four interviewees spoke of the impact of previous work experience, and conveyed that they began working at a young age (typically in their early teen years).

All interviewees expressed both positive (hope and excitement) and negative (anxiety and a sense of being unprepared) emotions in response to the fourth interview question ("As you tell this story, how do you feel?"). The fifth and final interview question ("How are you doing now?") produced group differences in that high scorers conveyed that they were currently preparing for the future, and low scorers reported that they would worry about preparing for the future later on down the road.

**Current Study**

The aforementioned research has provided support that the construct of occupational engagement exists, is measurable, and can be altered by outside influences. However, the existing research on occupational engagement, (my pilot study aside) is purely quantitative. While establishing assessments of occupational engagement (Black, 2006; Cox, 2008) lay the groundwork for understanding the practical importance of this construct, the virtual absence of research examining occupational engagement from a qualitative stance points to a significant gap in the literature. The aim of the current study is to work toward filling this void in the research via the qualitative examination of occupational engagement in college students. This exploratory, grounded theory study sought to investigate whether tendencies toward or away from being occupationally engaged were reflected in the transition experiences of college seniors nearing graduation. A thorough overview of the methods I utilized in conducting the current study will now be outlined in the following chapter of this project.

# Chapter III

## METHOD

The current study aims to address three general research questions. First, this project investigates the experience of college seniors approaching graduation, with special attention to the manner in which occupational engagement plays a role in that transition. Second, do any differences emerge between students obtaining a high score on the OES-S versus students obtaining a low score on the OES-S? Third, do there appear to be any gender differences in the experience of this transition?

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed in order to most effectively investigate these research questions. Grounded theory is, according to Chamez (2000): "the study of experience from the standpoint of those who live it" (p. 522). Strauss and Corbin (1990) assert that grounded theory presents the potential to formulate theories that are grounded on empirical interviewing. In the current study, my "core category" (Glasser & Strauss) was occupational engagement, as it emerged as the primary concept to which all of my sub-themes and categories related. More detail concerning grounded theory will be offered later in this manuscript. For the time being, the reader would do well to keep in mind the following explanation offered by Strauss and Corbin (1990): in the grounded theory approach, the theory itself is "inductively derived from the phenomenon it represents…discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon…one does not begin with a theory…rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge" (p. 23). In other words, I aimed to build a theory around my data.

The following section includes a discussion of the interviewees (including a brief description of each individual), measures, data collection, and data analysis as related to the examination of my three research questions.

**Participants**

College students were utilized as a means through which to explore the construct of occupational engagement because they were deemed to be likely to have more opportunities to be engaged, and are immersed in career decision making more so than most other populations. Participants in the current study consisted of students at a large Midwestern university that were scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2010. I was able to use data from 205 of the 262 who completed the OES-S, with 20 students selected for interviews. In order to be selected for an interview, individuals must have indicated that they were of senior undergraduate academic standing, and would graduate in May of 2010 (students indicating that they would graduate in the summer or fall of 2010 were excluded from the interview process). This exclusionary criteria forced me to exclude data from 57 participants, resulting in 205 usable sets of data. The one caveat to my exclusionary criteria concerned student from the school of Architecture, whose program of study was structured in such a way to entail five years of formal study, culminating in a masters degree.

The average age of my final sample ($N = 205$) was between 22 and 23 years of age ($M = 22.56$; $SD = 2.00$), and most of them had spent between four and five years obtaining their undergraduate degree ($M = 4.58$; $SD = 1.08$). My sample was comprised of approximately 56% females ($N = 115$) and approximately 44% males ($N = 90$).

Due to the exploratory nature of the current study, demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic status were not controlled, although

this may be a useful tactic for future research. This information, along with other demographics was collected on a short questionnaire, which will be discussed later on in this section. A brief description of each of my 20 interviewees will now be provided. For the sake of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used in place of interviewee names.

High Scoring Females

*Diane.* Diane was a 23 year old European-American female majoring in Geography. Originally from rural Kansas, Diane spent five years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a job search strategies course offered through the University Career Center by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans were to "travel for three months, work after that"[1]. Diane obtained a score of 61 on the OES-S.

*Sue.* Sue was a 21 year old female majoring in both Social Welfare and Film. She indicated on her demographic form that she is both European-American and American Indian/Alaska Native. Originally from rural Kansas, Sue spent four years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a 600-level seminar in Social Welfare. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "internship – NYC. Either casting department (*listed specific company*) or (*another company*)". Sue obtained a score of 65 on the OES-S.

*Rhea.* Rhea was a 23 year old European-American female majoring in Architecture. Originally from the state of Missouri, Rhea spent five years obtaining her degree, and was

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[1] It is important to note that the exact phrasing I utilized in my inquiry regarding post-graduation plans included parenthetical examples: "e.g., working; traveling; internship; etc.", which may have influenced how interviewees responded to this question.

recruited for participation through a 500-level seminar in Architecture[2]. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "work/internship". Rhea obtained a score of 67 on the OES-S.

*Victoria.* Victoria was a 21 year old European-American female majoring in both Economics and Political Science. Originally from Austria, Victoria indicated that she grew up in urban Washington. Victoria spent four years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through an international trade course offered in the Economics Department. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "graduate school in public policy". Victoria obtained a score of 67 on the OES-S.

*Kate.* Kate was a 22 year old European-American female majoring in Journalism. Originally from rural Kansas, Kate spent five years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a 300-level course in the department of Communication Studies. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "working at a major daily newspaper and applying to graduate schools". Kate obtained a perfect score of 70 on the OES-S.

High Scoring Males

*Tye.* Tye was a 22 year old African-American male majoring in Communication Studies. Originally from urban Illinois, Tye spent five years obtaining his undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a job search strategies course offered through the University Career Center by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. He indicated on his demographic form that his immediate post-graduation plans included "working, looking for a job, traveling". Tye obtained a score of 58 on the OES-S.

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[2] In the School of Architecture at the university where participants were recruited, obtaining a degree in Architecture entails a well-defined five-year program out of which students emerge with a Masters degree.

*Tom.* Tom was a 27 year old European-American male majoring in Political Science. Originally from the state of Ohio, Tom spent six years obtaining his undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a job search strategies course offered through the University Career Center by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. He indicated on his demographic form that his immediate post-graduation plans included "the military". Tom obtained a score of 60 on the OES-S.

*Brett.* Brett was a 22 year old European-American male majoring in Computer Engineering. Originally from urban Kansas, Brett spent four years obtaining his undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a design laboratory offered to seniors in Computer Engineering. He indicated on his demographic form regarding his immediate post-graduation plans: "I have a private-sector job lined up in (*a major city*)". Brett obtained a score of 61 on the OES-S.

*Curt*. Curt was a 22 year old European-American male majoring in Architecture. Originally from the state of Missouri, Curt spent five years obtaining his degree, and was recruited for participation through a 500-level seminar in Architecture. He indicated on his demographic form that his immediate post-graduation plans included "internship in (*specific city*), Germany". Curt obtained a score of 62 on the OES-S.

*Jim.* Jim was a 24 year old European-American male majoring in Architecture. Originally from the state of Kansas, Jim spent five years obtaining his degree, and was recruited for participation through a 500-level seminar in Architecture. He indicated on his demographic form that his immediate post-graduation plans included "work in Paris". Jim obtained a score of 63 on the OES-S.

Low Scoring Females

    *Sarah.* Sarah was a 21 year old European-American female majoring in Sociology (she also indicated on her demographic form that she is minoring in Business). Originally from the state of Kansas, Sarah spent four years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a job search strategies course offered through the University Career Center by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "working full time". Sarah obtained a score of 27 on the OES-S.

    *Kristen*. Kristen was a 22 year old European-American female majoring in Psychology. Originally from the state of Kansas, Kristen spent five years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a job search strategies course offered through the University Career Center by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "traveling over the summer and then finding a full time job for the fall". Kristen obtained a score of 31 on the OES-S.

    *Candie*. Candie was a 22 year old African-American female majoring in Human Biology. Originally from the state of Georgia, Candie indicated on her demographic form that she is a "military brat". She spent five years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a 300-level course in the department of Communication Studies. Candie also served as a collegiate athlete during her first four years at the university. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "a summer trip to the Bahamas, then begin graduate school in the fall, going for a masters in healthcare administration". Candie obtained a score of 37 on the OES-S.

*Aunnie.* Aunnie was a 23 year old female identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander majoring in Social Welfare. An international student originally from Kazakhstan, Aunnie spent four years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a 600-level seminar in Social Welfare. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "working". Aunnie obtained a score of 37 on the OES-S.

*Barb.* Barb was a 21 year old European-American female majoring in English. Originally from the state of South Dakota, Barb spent four years obtaining her undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a job search strategies course offered through the University Career Center by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. She indicated on her demographic form that her immediate post-graduation plans included "working". Barb obtained a score of 37 on the OES-S.

Low Scoring Males

*Richard.* Richard was a 23 year old male majoring in Political Science who self-identified as multiracial. Originally from the state of Kansas, Richard spent five years obtaining his undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a job search strategies course offered through the University Career Center by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. He indicated on his demographic form regarding his immediate post-graduation plans: "I hope to be attending law school at (*listed two local schools*)". Richard obtained a score of 34 on the OES-S.

*Ben.* Ben was a 28 year old European-American male majoring in Psychology. Originally from urban Kansas, Ben spent ten years obtaining his undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through an international trade course offered in the Economics Department. He indicated on his demographic form regarding his immediate post-graduation plans: "I will

hopefully be working for the Social Security Administration". Ben obtained a score of 34 on the OES-S.

*Matt.* Matt was a 24 year old male identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander majoring in Electrical Engineering. Originally from the state of New Jersey, Matt spent six years obtaining his undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a design laboratory offered to seniors in Electrical Engineering. He indicated on his demographic form that his immediate post-graduation plans included: "work". Matt obtained a score of 36 on the OES-S.

*Dan.* Dan was a 22 year old European-American male majoring in Electrical Engineering. Originally from rural Kansas, Dan spent four years obtaining his undergraduate degree, and was recruited for participation through a design laboratory offered to seniors in Electrical Engineering. He indicated on his demographic form regarding his immediate post-graduation plans that he was: "undecided between grad school (*at current institution*) or getting a job". Dan obtained a score of 37 on the OES-S.

*Dave.* Dave was a 24 year old European-American male majoring in Architecture. Originally from the state of Kansas, Dave spent five years obtaining his degree, and was recruited for participation through a 500-level seminar in Architecture. He indicated on his demographic form that his immediate post-graduation plans included "working/moving to NYC". Dave obtained a score of 41 on the OES-S.

**Measures**

Participants were provided with a small packet consisting of two pages (front and back) stapled together. The first page (front and back) was the document for informed consent (Appendix B), which required participants to print and sign their name, as well as to include the

date upon which they completed the form. The front of the second page consisted of a demographic questionnaire (Appendix C)

The OES-S (Cox, 2008) is a 14-item single scale measure of occupational engagement. It has been shown to have adequate reliability (.85) and an acceptably normal distribution of total scores. The OES-S has been found to successfully predict various measures of being "better-off" over and above related variables. Cox (2008) found scores on the OES-S to be highest for students majoring in the humanities, followed by those in the social sciences, followed by students in the sciences, and lowest for those who were undecided about their major. College students of freshman status were found to score the lowest on the OES-S, with sophomores, juniors, and seniors receiving similar scores. Females scored higher on the OES-S than did males. Concerning the construct of "better-off", it was found that older students received higher scores on estimates of gains in general education. Students of the same age who were found to be occupationally engaged were more likely to: experience greater estimates of gains in both general education and intellectual skills, have greater vocational identity, and have greater satisfaction with life. Regardless of gender, students who exhibited higher occupational engagement were more likely to have greater estimates of gains in personal development. Cox (2008) concluded that, over and above related covariates, the OES-S serves as a significant predictor of being "better-off", providing support for the benefit of being occupationally engaged.

After reviewing the literature, Cox (2008) conceptualized the construct of "better-off", as it relates to college students, as being comprised of three primary components. First, student gains can encompass the seven tasks outlined by Chickering and Reisser (1993): developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward independence, developing

mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, and developing integrity. Second, Astin (1993) noted that college grade point average (GPA) is likely to be the most relevant measure of academic outcome in college students. Finally, Diener, Lucas, and Oishi (2005) stated that subjective well-being refers to a method of assessing how individuals feel about themselves, and noted that certain personality characteristics (e.g., extraversion) have been found to have strong positive relationships with subjective well-being. It has been argued that individuals with high levels of subjective well-being are 'better-off' across all life domains. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to investigate the relationship between subjective well-being and occupational engagement (Cox, 2008).

The interview protocol (see Appendix F) was semi-structured. Each participant was asked the same questions during the interview. According to Maxwell (2005): "Structured approaches can help to ensure the comparability of data across individuals, times, settings, and researchers, and are thus particularly useful in answering variance questions, questions that deal with differences between things" (p. 80). Due to the fact that my second research question was geared toward detecting differences between interviewees who had displayed high versus low occupational engagement on the OES-S, utilizing the same basic questions with each interviewee was of paramount importance. However, Maxwell (2005) also asserted that unstructured approaches facilitate the researcher in focusing on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ from one interviewee to the next, requiring individually tailored amendments to the interview protocol. Different prompts and follow-up questions were utilized for each of my interviewees based on the responses they provide to the questions on the structured portion of the interview protocol.

**Data Collection**

In order to recruit participants for the current study, I began my data collection by searching the online directory at our university, selecting various heads of departments around campus to contact. My selection was based strictly upon an individual's position as head of a given department, as well as selecting departments from virtually every college on campus (e.g., School of Fine Arts, School of Business, etc.). I sent emails to a total of 36 instructors (some of which I was referred to via the heads of departments, others of which qualified to have me visit their own classes), briefly explaining my study and requesting their collaboration (see Appendix A for the template of this email). Upon each instructor's indication of their willingness to allow their class the opportunity to participate in the study, we agreed upon a date in which I would visit their class. I made personal visits to a total of 16 classrooms from eleven departments on campus, listed as follows and accompanied by a parenthetical notation of the percentage of eligible students coming from each department in relation to the final eligible sample: Social Work (15.0%), Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (16.1%), Accounting and Information Systems (3.1%), Architecture (16.1%), Education Leadership and Policy Studies (11.3%), Psychology and Research in Education (3.6%), Communication Studies (5.2%), Mathematics (6.2%), Economics (1.0%), Atmospheric Sciences (4.1%), and Liberal Arts and Sciences (23.8%). The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences offered a course entitled "Job Search Strategies" which was taught by an Associate Director of the University Career Center. This course attracts students from a wide variety of majors, so the breadth of schools and departments utilized in the current study is actually much broader than those stated above.

During these visits, which took no more than 10-15 minutes of regular class time, I briefly explained the purpose of my study and provided a rationale for the importance of their

participation. Students were encouraged to ask any questions about the demographic form and OES-S, as well as about the follow-up interview for which they could potentially be contacted.

I collected data from 262 individual students. Some of these students did not pass the initial screening (rendering them to be ineligible), and were removed from further analysis. Students were removed for one of two primary reasons: 1) they were not graduating in May 2010, which consisted of 32 students, or 12.2% of the total sample, or 2) they explicitly indicated on their demographic form in the space allotted that they did not wish to be contacted for an interview, which consisted of 23 students, or 8.8% of the total sample. Two additional students were removed from the potential interview pool, one because of a blank demographic form and another because they were enrolled in a masters program[3]. I was able to recruit my final sample of twenty interviewees from a pool of 205 participants graduating in May 2010 that had indicated their willingness to be contacted for the follow-up interview. In sum, I was unable to use data from 21.8% of the sample of students to which I administered my demographic form and the OES-S, meaning that the data collected from 78.2% of students was available in my pool of potential interviewees.

The OES-S was scored for each participant. Five males and five females scoring in the top 10% on the OES-S as well as five males and five females scoring in the bottom 10% on the OES-S were contacted for interviews (N = 20). Participants were contacted via email (see Appendix E) or via telephone, depending upon the preferred method of contact they indicated on their demographic questionnaire. I contacted a total of 23 students for interviews. Two of these twenty-three (both males) did not respond to my contacts, and one female responded that she was no longer interested in participating in an interview in spite of what she indicated on her

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[3] This student is distinguished from the Architecture students in that the Masters degree was not a degree requirement as it was in the School of Architecture.

demographic form. Therefore, the final the ratio of students interviewed to students contacted was 20:23, or an 87% participation rate.

In terms of selecting the students for interviews, I first and foremost used their OES-S score as selection criterion, as I was working to maximize the variation in scores between students obtaining high versus low scores on this measure. However, an additional goal in terms of my sample was to interview students from a variety of academic majors. In order to satisfy this objective, I was mindful of the course in which each student was enrolled during the time of my visit to their classroom. In the event of two students possessing the same score on the OES-S, I would deliberately choose the student enrolled in a class that was under-represented in my sample to that point (e.g., if an architecture major and an economics major possessed identical scores on the OES-S and I had already secured interview participation from two architecture students, I would choose the economics student to contact for an interview). Wherever possible, I attempted to diversity my sample in terms of racial/ethnic background when both of the aforementioned conditions (OES-S score and diversity of major) were also accounted for.

The final sample of 20 students was taken from seven separate courses to which I made personal visits. Several students were selected from the aforementioned job search strategies course offered in the Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In terms of specific classrooms visited, the percentage of the final sample of twenty students belonging to each department is as follows: Liberal Arts and Sciences (35%); Architecture (20%); Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (15%); Economics (10%); Social Work (10%); Communication Studies (5%); unknown (5%). It should be noted that two of the seven courses were through the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science: one from Electrical Engineering and one from Computer Science.

Eighteen of the 20 interviews were conducted at the interviewee's convenience in my on-campus office during the school week. Two interviews (both for high scoring females) were conducted in alternate campus locations at the request and convenience of the interviewees. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized (see Appendix F), and interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes. Upon consultation with our department's Vocational Psychology Research Team, which meets bi-monthly and is comprised of my academic advisor and between five and ten fellow graduate students in Counseling Psychology, I elected to slightly modify my interview protocol at the completion of the first three interviews, adding a standardized follow-up question regarding how each participant became interested in their chosen major. It should be noted that I did not formally incorporate the 14 items from the OES-S into my interview protocol. However, a multitude of information related to several of these 14 items emerged spontaneously over the course of all 20 interviews (e.g., discussion of career choices with family or friends, active involvement in groups or organizations, etc.).

The responsive interviewing approach advocated by Rubin and Rubin (2005) was utilized as a means of learning about the manifestation of occupational engagement from the point of view of the interviewees[4]. Responsive interviewing is indicative of a dynamic, iterative process as opposed to a mechanically applied set of questions and tactics. "In this model, questioning styles reflect the personality of the researcher, adapt to the varying relationships between researcher and conversational partner, and change as the purpose of the interview evolves. Responsive interviewers begin a project with a topic in mind, but recognize that they will modify their questions to match the knowledge and interests of the interviewees" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 15). I listened carefully to interviewee responses, and posed additional questions

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[4] It should be noted that Rubin and Rubin (2005) utilize the term "conversational partner" in place of "interviewee". For the sake of simplicity (given the number of times I referenced my "interviewees", I decided against the wordiness of "conversational partner".

(probes) about their answers (opposed to relying solely upon the predetermined questions in my interview protocol) until I felt confident that I fully comprehended interviewee responses. In this sense, each interviewee was asked a standard set of questions, but follow-up questions and probes varied considerably based upon the nature and content of interviewee responses. As was noted by Rubin and Rubin (2005), I too found that, if I was asking the wrong question (or the right question in the wrong way), my interviewees would typically rephrase what I had stated, thus responding to the inquiry I *should* have posed. Therefore, I am confident that any mistakes I made in my inquiries were of little importance, as they seemed to self-correct through the diligence of my interviewees.

*Conversational Partnership*

In responsive interviewing, a conversational partnership is developed which impacts the process of conducting an interview (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). One aspect of this partnership encompasses the emotions and personality of the interviewer, both of which can substantially influence the nature of the conversation. It is critical for the interviewer to balance their own personality with the interviewing situation (e.g., the physical context, the time of year/day, the personality/demeanor of each interviewee, etc.). In personality, I tend to be rather gregarious, which can be an asset in building rapport with interviewees. However, I found it both necessary and beneficial to utilize a shorter introduction and a more formal interviewing style when interviewing individuals I perceived to be more subdued. In essence, I made attempts to match the physical/verbal presentation of my interviewees (e.g., body language, tone/volume of voice, etc.) so as to convey a sense of similarity in the hopes of further enhancing rapport and trust. "Trust increases as people see that you share a common background with them" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 92). Each of my interviewees knew prior to the interview that I was a student at

the university they also attended, and that I was conducting my project in partial fulfillment of a graduation requirement, something quite familiar to seniors nearing graduation. In addition, in order to soften the academically understood role of researcher-participant, I attempted to establish myself as knowledgeable about the area of occupational engagement (which I believe was accomplished through conveying that this construct served as the topic of my doctoral dissertation), while demonstrating an eagerness to learn from my interviewees about their experiences (thus, treating them as the "expert"). I believe that I was able to effectively negotiate this balance in a manner that encouraged my interviewees to be forthright and to "teach" me about their path toward their goals. In fact, the overall tone in portions of several of my interviews was that of the interviewee imparting their life lessons onto me as the interviewer/learner.

**Data Analysis**

"Data analysis is the process of moving from raw interviews to evidence-based interpretations that are the foundation for published reports" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 201). In the current study, the audio-record of each interview was uploaded onto my personal computer and transcribed (after removing identifying information such as specific names of people or places) in order to obtain and easily maintain a permanent record of the data, and the resulting data sets were analyzed to make sense of the information collected from the interviewees. At the end of the transcription process, all 20 audio-files were transferred from my personal computer onto a flash drive, which was stored in a locked file cabinet. According to Merriam (1998), making sense out of data essentially refers to the process of making meaning out of the data through consolidation, reduction, and interpretation of not only what the interviewees have said, but also of what the researcher has learned. In line with the aforementioned responsive

interviewing approach, data analysis was ongoing, as I reflected on each interview after its completion, considering any changes that might have been helpful in terms of my interview protocol or my general approach or conversational partnership with each interviewee.

In the process of creating the individual interview transcriptions, thoughts or ideas that occurred to me were maintained in a memo file. Rubin and Rubin (2005) indicated that memos may suggest reformulations of the initial research questions, deal with potentially relevant concepts or themes, or may simply include comments regarding how well the interview went or any biases detected in the responses. As per the guidelines of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I made sure to maintain a clear separation between my data (e.g., my transcripts) and my own ideas and burgeoning analysis, which was tracked in separate documents. My memos, which were maintained electronically via "track changes" on my electronic transcripts, tended to encompass my initial ideas about potential themes, as well as the ways in which tentative themes might relate to one another or possibly subsume one another. I also maintained a "notable quote file" in which a list of interviewee quotes that seem to be suggestive of themes was compiled. (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). My method of creating a notable quote file was to electronically underline pieces of text that I believed to be highly illustrative of a particular theme, eventually copying these segments into a separate electronic document.

Appropriate data units, or blocks of information that are examined together, needed to be determined. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), concepts refer to terms that are representative of an idea that is important to the research problem, whereas themes are summary statements and/or explanations of what is happening The responsive interviewing approach recommends several stages of data analysis: 1) recognize concepts and themes in the interviews; 2) clarify the meaning of concept and themes and then synthesize an understanding of the narrative; 3) create

additional concepts and themes via elaboration; and 4) code (label) concepts and themes on the interview transcripts (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

"Part of analysis involves combining data units on the same topic, both within single interviews and across the entire set of interviews" (Rubin and & Rubin, 2005, p. 203). As part of the analysis, I clarified and synthesized emerging ideas, and elaborated upon these ideas to create new concepts and themes. At this juncture, coding began, which entailed crafting a short label (typed in the margin of the page via track changes) to designate each concept and theme. Coding serves the purpose of grouping statements according to the content of concepts or themes as opposed to classifying statements by interviewee. Since it is impossible to code for everything in the data, I systematically looked for items that were determined to exhibit the greatest importance in understanding the manifestation of occupational engagement. These items were deduced via the examination of those that have appeared in the memo file, as well as those suggested in the relevant literature.

I followed the grounded theory model (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2000) throughout the coding process. As was explained by Rubin and Rubin (2005): "This model argues that coding, reorganizing concepts and themes, and theory development are parts of one integrated process. Further, the concepts and themes must emerge from the data without the use of literature" (p. 221-222). As will be discussed shortly, I utilized open coding, formulating my codes in the margins of my documents as I proceeded to read through and conceptualize them.

According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the process of picking concepts and themes out of interview transcripts can take several forms. I elected to begin with the common sense approach, and searched for the terms contained in the interview questions themselves, as well as those that emerged as frequently mentioned by interviewees. Other methods of uncovering concepts and

themes are more indirect (e.g., making a note when interviewee speech is incongruent with affect; shifting from an active to a passive voice; variations in tone, etc.), and I made every attempt to annotate each transcript for the existence of such occurrences. Other concepts and themes presented themselves when interviews were compared with one another, and certain concepts and themes led to the development of new concepts and themes (e.g., splitting codes apart or grouping codes together). Closely attending to figures of speech (e.g., similes or metaphors) as well as parallel stories (or wildly different stories) from several interviewees hinted at potential concepts and themes as well.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) outlined a series of steps to facilitate in the development of clear and consistent definitions of concepts and themes: 1) What am I going to call/label it? 2) How am I defining it? 3) How am I going to recognize it in the interviews? 4) What do I want to exclude? 5) What is an example? I accounted for the possibility that not all interviewees may view the same concepts/themes in the same manner, and thus, adjusted the relevant labels and definitions as needed in order to accommodate for this discrepancy (via testing out labels/definitions on a small sample of interview transcripts).

I began reading through transcripts, line-by-line, and created a working codebook. As was mentioned above, this is called open coding. "Through what is termed open coding, that is, coding as you go along, grounded theorists have worked out a systematic approach that often results in fresh and rich results. The downside to this approach is that it requires an enormous amount of coding, most of which you will never use" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 222). Indeed, after utilizing open coding for six of my 20 transcripts, it became clear that the list of codes was becoming exponentially unwieldy. Preliminary data analysis generated a very large number of themes which needed to be consolidated into more manageable categories (Rubin & Rubin,

2005). Instead of continuing this coding process through the remainder of the twenty transcripts, I consulted with my academic advisor and we jointly determined that it would be beneficial to recruit my independent raters at this juncture.

**Trustworthiness**

Merriam (1998) asserts that a variety of strategies exist for promoting validity and reliability in qualitative research. In order to achieve inter-rater reliability, two doctoral students (one male, one female) in my Counseling Psychology program were recruited to independently code interview transcripts for themes. I solicited cooperation from these individuals in particular due to the fact that they were, alongside me, active participants in the biweekly meetings of the Vocational Psychology Research Team led by my academic advisor. The male was a first year doctoral student, and the female was a third year doctoral student.

Prior to meeting with my two independent raters, I consulted with my advisor, who is the chair of my dissertation committee and an expert on the construct of occupational engagement, and another member of my committee who is an expert in qualitative analysis. We agreed that inter-rater reliability would occur in two waves. First, I presented each of my independent raters with two blind transcripts (one high-scoring female and one low-scoring female) and the accompanying audio files, instructing them to independently listen to each interview once through to gain a general feel for the content. The independent raters were then asked to independently listen to the audio file again, this time making annotations in the text for anything that stood out to them (e.g., change of tone, laughter, long pauses, etc.). Independent raters were then instructed to independently read through the annotated transcripts and code for themes. I coded both interviews independently prior to this, arriving at my own set of codes. I refrained from providing my coders with any codes to use in their independent analyses, as I did not want

expose them to any biases I might have had in creating my own codes. At the completion of this process, the three of us met as a group to discuss the codes for each interview, one interviewee comment at a time. The two independent raters tended to code on a more broad level than I had initially done, thus many of my initial codes were subsumed under larger, more comprehensive umbrella codes. Themes were interpreted via searching for similarities, differences, and patterns of interviewee responses.

At the conclusion of this process, I created a mind-map in which I separated the codes that had emerged as primary (N=20), and clustered around each code different potential instances or specifications that would also constitute a comment as falling under that specific code. After the creation of this visual representation, I scheduled another consultation with my academic advisor and qualitative committee member in order to work through what had occurred in my first meeting with my independent raters. The three of us agreed upon an initial list of themes (N=25), to which I added working definitions that I had constructed, and I provided this list to my independent raters for the purpose of blindly coding two more transcripts (this time one low-scoring male and one high-scoring male). At the close of this process, I met again with my independent raters to compare how each of us coded the second set of transcripts, with the intention of revising the initial list of themes as it became relevant to do so. Emerging ideas were progressively defined, refined, and labeled until the three of us were confident that a consistent understanding of each concept and theme had been reached, at which time a coding list was created that served to guide the subsequent analysis of the remaining sixteen transcripts, which I undertook by myself. The themes that emerged out of this second wave of seeking inter-rater reliability were virtually identical to the initial list provided to the independent raters, leading us to feel confident that saturation had been reached. In essence, I commenced the coding process

via the grounded theory model, and later switched to the "hybrid model" outlined by Rubin and

Rubin (2005): "In this hybrid model, part-way between the responsive interviewing formal

coding schema and grounded theory models, you need not code every passage or term, but select

only those concepts or themes that are most closely related to your research question" (p. 223).

After the interviews were coded, the data were sorted. The process of sorting involved

grouping together all data units with the same label, with the underlying purpose of examining

similarities and differences between groups of interviewees on the same concepts and themes

(Rubin and Rubin, 2005). I read through the codes of each individual transcript (which were

electronically maintained in the margins of the page for ease of reference and access), and

electronically cut and paste each interviewee passage tagged with a particular code into a

separate electronic document. In other words, one document contained all interviewee statements

related to "Networking", another document contained all interviewee statements related to

"Affect", and so on. I independently undertook the process of sorting the data in order to

minimize any variance that may have been potentially introduced via the existence of multiple

sorters. I constantly revised the manner in which passages were coded during the sorting process,

leading to some passages being re-labeled with an alternate code that, in hindsight, was a better

fit, and some passages were eliminated altogether on the basis of a lack of relevance and/or fit

with the existing thematic framework.

At the close of the sorting process, I sought consultation with my academic advisor, and

subsequently with our Vocational Psychology Research Team. More specifically, this research

team (which we affectionately refer to as the "A-Team", where "A" refers to adaptability, as in

career adaptability, which serves as a cornerstone of a great deal of our research) consists of my

academic advisor, the director of the career center on campus, and five to ten graduate students

in our Counseling Psychology program. Each academic semester, our team comes together as a group for two hours bi-monthly and discusses ongoing research projects in the area of Vocational Psychology (e.g., theses, dissertations, or independent endeavors), and brainstorms ideas for new projects that team members may wish to pursue. Concerning the post-sorting portion of the current project, our team met as a group and read through the passages for one tentative theme. The team was naïve to my working definition of the theme, as well as my tentative codes for each passage, which were temporarily concealed. The members of our research team provided me with feedback regarding what they felt the collection of passages were "hinting at" (basically components of a working definition), as well as their beliefs on the iterative nature of this portion of the analysis (e.g., if what I expected of them seemed clear or not). My advisor and I met shortly after this research meeting and worked through two sorted themes together, essentially reading the interviewee passages associated with a particular theme, revising the tentative definition as was deemed necessary, and moving around passages that seemed to be better fit to an alternate code, or removing passages altogether. Passages within a particular theme were further broken down. For example, the theme of "Support" was categorized into "internal" versus "external".

Systematically combing through potential themes in this manner with the A-Team as a group and individually with my advisor proved to be rather helpful in terms of refining my initial working definitions and coming to a more developed conceptualization of what makes a particular passage fit underneath the umbrella of a particular theme. Therefore, I elected to continue with this process for the remaining themes. During the academic semester in which my analysis was taking place, I was serving as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for my academic advisor in his graduate level Vocational Psychology course. He allowed me to recruit students in

this course to assist me with working through my sorted data, one theme at a time. I met with willing and available graduate students individually, and I briefly trained them on the purpose of further categorizing my sorted data (again, keeping them blind to the source of each passage in terms of high versus low membership category). I worked through one theme in a single sitting with each volunteer student, the end result of which was agreement upon both my tentative definition of a given theme as well as the reasons why each interviewee passage exhibited an adequate fit with that particular theme. In many cases, this process entailed further categorizing the passages under each theme, distinguishing between two or more presentations of a given theme in the responses of the interviewees, largely resulting in the creation of variance within themes (e.g., "approaching attitude" versus "avoiding attitude"). While not all subsequent categorizations were dichotomous in nature, the intent of breaking down passages within themes was the same: how are these passages that allegedly capture the same theme doing so in ways that are similar to or different from one another?

At the conclusion of the process of gaining inter-rater reliability on the passages grouped under each theme, I consulted again with my academic advisor, and we closely examined my list of twenty themes. Agreeing that this list was unmanageably large, we set out with goal of condensing these twenty themes into a much smaller number of meta-themes. Meta-themes were defined as "overview" labels for certain groups of sub-themes. Given the grounded theory nature of the current project, I did not begin my analysis with pre-determined meta-themes. Instead, these overarching clusters emerged (and were continually refined) throughout the process of data analysis. Together, my advisor and I examined a physical list of my initial 20 themes (which was eventually reduced to 18) and searched for ways in which several themes could be clustered together around a bigger idea. Together, we arrived at five meta-themes which we jointly

believed captured the larger essence of the data. These original five meta-themes were later reduced to four meta-themes, as the sub-themes underneath one of my original meta-themes did not "hang together" well, and I determined that each of these sub-themes would be a better fit under one of the other four meta-themes. The resulting four meta-themes will provide the organization for my interpretation of the results of my analysis in the following chapter.

# Chapter IV

# RESULTS

The current study was guided by three general research questions. The first (and most broad) question seeks to investigate the experience of college seniors approaching graduation, with special attention to the manner in which occupational engagement plays a role in their transition. Second, do any differences emerge between students obtaining a high score on the OES-S versus students obtaining a low score on the OES-S? Third, do there appear to be any gender differences in the experience of this transition? The first part of this chapter is divided into four sections consistent with the four meta-themes that emerged during the process of analyzing the data: 1) On (and Around) the Fence; 2) Internal Processes; 3) External Factors; and 4) Taking Action. Each meta-theme and its accompanying sub-themes (and for several of the sub-themes, operational definitions of the categories encompassed by that sub-theme) will be operationally defined, and examples of each sub-theme will be provided via direct quotations from interviewees deemed to be most illustrative of each sub-theme or category. The second part of this chapter examines each sub-theme and related categories by the numbers. Numerical comparisons between individuals scoring high versus low on the OES-S, as well as females versus males were conducted as a means of highlighting group differences that emerged in the data analysis.

In sum, the current chapter aims to outline the findings that emerged from the process of analyzing the data, and to address the applicability of these findings relative to the aforementioned research questions. Possible interpretations of these findings will be provided in the final chapter of this manuscript, Chapter V.

**Research Question #1: Experience of the Transition from College**

## I.  On (and Around) the Fence

College students nearing graduation are on the brink of a major life transition. Whether they begin work immediately, continue their education into graduate or professional school, take time off to rest or travel, or any other imaginable alternative, they are no longer classified as an "undergraduate". The receipt of a college diploma can often accompany the receipt of a host of responsibilities that accompany "adulthood" (e.g., financial independence, forty-hour work weeks, etc.), and the anticipation such life changes can understandably elicit a host of mixed emotions in these individuals.

The word "transition" in and of itself suggests movement from one reality to another. Let's take the example of standing in one backyard and climbing the fence into another. Some individuals are able to clear the fence with ease, whereas others become stuck "on the fence" for a variety of reasons (e.g., they injured themselves in the climbing process, the are worried they might fall, they possess a fear for what lies on the other side of the fence, etc.). College students approaching graduation could be said to occupy a position similar to that of our fence-climber. They may feel *ambivalent* about climbing the fence to begin with, preferring to remain in the familiar, comfortable backyard they have occupied for the past four to six years (ambivalent about reaching this milestone in their lives). In spite their practice climbs, as well as any plans they have made to climb over this fence, they may feel *uncertain* about their ability to clear the fence, or about what the other backyard holds in store for them. Having arrived at a *decision* about what lies on the other side of the fence, some of these individuals in transition may feel ready to hop right into the next backyard, whereas some of their peers may remain *undecided* about the landscape of the new backyard, aimlessly pacing back and forth without a sense of

direction concerning what to do next. Independent of being decided or undecided, some individuals may carry with them a general demeanor of *openness*, confident that whatever lies on the other side of the fence will be okay. Together, ambivalence, uncertainty, the decidedness-undecidedness dichotomy, and openness to differential trajectories comprise the meta-theme "On (and Around) the Fence".

  *A. Ambivalence.* For the purpose of this study, ambivalence was defined as difficulty occupying a firm position in any particular area (e.g., committing to graduate school, beginning a full-time job, leaving college, or even their feelings about something), or more generally as sitting atop the fence. In anticipating where she would attend graduate school, Victoria expressed mixed emotions: "I'm excited because I know I'm going, but I'm nervous because I don't know where I'm going". Jim contemplated the attribute he developed during college about which he felt the most pride: "Discipline. Which, it's kind of a burden and a blessing at the same time. Because even though I've become very disciplined in not wanting to let myself down or let my family down, it's opened a lot of good doors, but it's also become kind of this thing like, I can't relax, and I'm always very self critical". In pondering keeping her college job after commencement versus branching out, Sarah indicated: "I've been working there for six years. I want something new. It's a love hate relationship that I have. I'm not trying to brag but I'm very good at what I do. Like, we have to be certified to buy, and I'm one of the top buyers, but at the same time, I get sick of going through people's shit". Dan expressed ambivalence regarding the nature of his post-graduation plans in general: "Well for me, it's kind of been the grass is always greener kind of approach that, during the summer when I had an internship…I interned in Nevada over the summer, and I thought, I think I really wanna go to grad school. And now that

I'm back, I kinda wanna be done and just get a job and start actually making a little money as opposed to just scraping by".

B. *Uncertainty.* Interviewees were deemed to possess uncertainty (as opposed to undecidedness) if they were planful and if their post-graduation plans were contingent upon a particular occurrence (e.g., hearing back from a graduate school about admission or receiving a call-back from a potential future employer after an interview). In other words, uncertain individuals had committed to a decisive course of action (e.g., applying for jobs), but their particular path remained uncertain due to being contingent upon an external force (e.g, an employer's willingness to hire them). Therefore: uncertainty = planful + contingent.

Tom, who had taken time out of his undergraduate career to pursue the military, pondered how his post-graduation plans could depend on being admitted to school: "It's in limbo now. Probably waiting to see what happens with Officer Candidate School for the Marine Corps. I could be going in October or I could be going at a later date so at that point, just seeing what comes along". In considering the possibility of pursuing a Law degree after graduation, Richard indicated: "I hope to be attending law school next year, but I'm not sure if that will happen next year; I might take it…if I don't get the score I want, I'll just take it again next year". Jim spoke of an environmental contest he had recently entered, and reflected on how the outcome may affect his post-college plans for international employment: "But it all depends on…I'll know by March if I won this contest. And it's kinda one of those things where if I win, I'll definitely not go to France. But probably I won't win, so I'll go to France".

C. *Decidedness-Undecidedness.* In the current study, decidedness entailed a *deliberate* commitment to a particular course of action or way of being. However, decidedness was not necessarily deemed to be "informed" or associated with engagement; some individuals who

came across as "decided" may have arrived at their decision without much forethought or exploration, which would classify them not as decided, but as prematurely foreclosed in their decision making. Again, no such distinction was made in the current study between informed-decidedness versus uninformed-decidedness, as this was not a focus of deep exploration in any of the twenty interviews. Opposed to uncertainty, which is both planful and contingent, undecidedness is conceptualized as aimless or directionless; there were no plans in the works, and ideas about potential paths to follow were ill-defined at best.

*i. Decided*

Tom reflected on the lasting impact of seeing the movie *Top Gun* as a child: "The minute I saw that, I was just like, that's what I want to do. And since then, it's never really changed. I've taken longer paths of getting there, and I'm still not there yet, but it's never changed. Some kids you go to grade school with are like, I wanna be a doctor, and you talk to them now and they're a salesman; they're teachers and doing something completely different. I've never really strayed from that". Candie contemplated two potential career trajectories in a very specific area of work: "In 10 years, well, I see two sides of it. I know I either wanna be a CEO of a hospital, like with my masters and if I wanna get my Ph.D., but I wanna work in a hospital and pretty much climb the charts…but I wanna own my own hospital and do managerial work and patient care starting here and now just understanding the basics I need to know as far as that. So ten years I see myself there, but if not my own CEO, I wanna be a doctor as far as working with children, either pediatrics or OB/GYN delivering babies; that's something I always wanted to do". In terms of choosing a major, Victoria indicated: "I knew political science. I was sure about Political Science; because I did debate in high school and like, it was either gonna be Political Science or Philosophy because all debaters do political science or Philosophy". Kate echoed similar

thoughts about selecting her major: "I *knew* I wanted to do Journalism; I *knew* I wanted to do that, so I was pretty set in my ways about doing Journalism…so I guess it was an easy question".

*ii. Undecided*

In contemplating his life 10 years down the road, Tye expressed difficulty articulating long-term plans: "But the picture get fuzzy after a year. It get really fuzzy cuz my brain is still brainstorming for exactly what I want to do. So maybe like, after a year, I'll be able to answer your question. But at this certain point in time, in three years from now it's like a dark room". Kristen noted something similar: "A lot of people are very one-track; and a lot of people know exactly what they're gonna do; and I never did". In comparing her earlier experience of being asked by others about their major, Kristen commented on her current experience of fielding inquiries from others about her plans after college: "It's just as hard as it was before I feel like because I still don't know what to say because I feel like I could do really anything. And I may not like everything, but as far as right out of the gate, I just need something to get started on. And I kind of need that experience to know; because I don't know what I'm gonna like and not like, and I don't know what all the opportunities are out there for me. I only have a very, very small awareness of what is possible for me once I get out of school". In a similar line of thought, Dan commented on his longstanding lack of occupational preference: "I've never been the kind of person, even growing up, saying, I wanna be a lawyer or I wanted to be…I've never had anything specific I wanted to be". Ben possessed similar sentiments: "I've always been lost as far as knowing exactly what I want to do professionally, where some people knew at 14 and 15 and now they're actually doing it 15 to 20 years later. I've always been all over the board with that".

*D. Openness to Differential Trajectories.* As was previously noted in summarizing the literature on career adaptability, a linear occupational path is no longer the norm, but rather the

exception. Given the strong likelihood of experiencing at least one, and likely multiple, career

changes in one's vocational lifespan, maintaining an attitude of openness to occupational

possibilities and refraining from becoming stubbornly locked into a solitary career track can pay

dividends to individuals who finds themselves abruptly changing positions for reasons that may

or may not be within their control.

Curt exhibited openness in articulating plans for the next decade of his life: "I'm very

open-minded, and I realize I may not be in Architecture in 10 years, that's just right now I think.

Even now I see things I'd like to do. I really like what my brother is doing with Industrial

Design. That scale at least seems like something I'd like to explore. I don't think I'd have to rule

that out if I was doing Architecture. What I'd like to do just as far as continuing to be creative, I

think you can do within Architecture, so I think I'll probably just stick with it for now".

Similarly, Tye indicated that he was considering multiple trajectories for his immediate post-

graduation plans: "After graduation, my first thought is…well, I'm going to St. Louis to do an

internship with the FBI or the CIA; I'm looking for a government job. If that don't work out, I'm

gonna come back for grad school here at [*current undergraduate institution*] or [*an alternate

higher education institution*], and go to grad school. If that don't work out, I'm gonna get my

passport to go overseas to play basketball over there". Later on in our interview, Tye elaborated

further upon his earlier line of thought: "Depending on how I feel after the summer internship,

depending on my satisfactory, I could either stay with them or come back for grad school…and

depending on where that takes me, I thought I'd keep my options open from there". Dan

presented his philosophy regarding the likelihood of returning to school after a hiatus, then

countered this statement based on previous experiences: "But, if I don't do engineering grad

school engineering right now, I don't know if I'll ever come back to it; it's just sort of the way I

feel…but things change. When I was a freshman and sophomore, I said I'd never go to grad school period, and now I've already been accepted, so I don't know what that will come down to". Later in our interview, Dan credited a relatively equal interest in his academic courses with his openness to varying vocational pursuits: "It wasn't in any of my classes that I enjoyed one thing way more than the rest, or I hated one thing way more than the rest; it's all been kind of even, and that's why I've kept my options open".

## II. Internal Processes

Everyone deals with change differently. There are those individuals who embrace change with open arms, expressing excitement about starting anew. Others may cling to their present circumstances, questioning their readiness, or even their willingness, to tackle the next chapter in their lives. Perhaps the act of "moving on" evokes a sense of panic in those who have yet to discover what they are moving on "to". Alternately, some individuals may call upon their perseverance to hoist them onto the next step, exuding a sense of confidence that they will "make it" no matter what comes their way. The anticipation of a major life transition can elicit a host of internal processes (e.g., affect, attitude, and self-determination) and can prompt a spike in self-awareness relative to personal readiness to proceed through impending change. Transition can also propel individuals to reflect on their own interest development and how that fits with what they want to do with their lives. These five sub-themes seek to further expand upon the internal processes at play when the transition from college becomes imminent.

*A. Affect.* This sub-them refers to the affective, or emotional, experience of transitioning out of the role of "college student". In the current project, affect was defined broadly as anything an individual stated pertaining to emotion or mood. More specifically, most affect statements

were categorized as either positive (e.g., excitement, pride, hope, etc.) or negative (e.g., anxiety, insecurity, lack of preparation, etc.).

*i. Positive Affect*

When asked what it was like to answer inquiries about post-graduation plans indicated: "So it's an amazing feeling when someone actually asks like, 'hey you're graduating, what are you gonna do'? It's just like, 'this is awesome'". Similarly, Tye noted: "I love answering that question now. I just tell them the whole list of things I have brainstormed". Kristen reflected on her positive experience in networking for post-graduate employment: "And they were like, what's your major? And I said Psychology, and they were like, we take any major really, but that's a great one to have. And they kind of got excited, and that made me excited".

*ii. Negative Affect*

Candie reflected on her experiences talking with others about her plans for after college: "I don't know, it's nerve wracking cuz a lot of my friends know already so it's nerve wracking cuz I know I wanna be successful and so when I hear that question, I feel sometimes like I'm behind, like I should know already". Similarly, Ben replied: "yeah, I definitely feel anxiety. There's been times that I don't wanna meet people for dinner just because we're gonna get into this whole, what are you gonna do? And, you need to be figuring that out. So that can be frustrating too, and I definitely feel some anxiety about it". When I asked what it felt like to relay to me her projected ten year plan, Aunnie noted "I'm feeling unsure, cuz I can make plans but there are different circumstances that could play, so you know. I'm feeling unsure; but I'm worried about the kind of job I might get…I'm sure that I will get one, but I just don't know if it will be good enough or if I will be enjoying it, so it's like, a lot of anxiety about it…I had a lot of

anxiety back in January, cuz I was like, oh wow, I'm graduating in four months, and I don't know what I'm going to do".

   B. *Attitude.* Attitude refers to an individual's general outlook on their future. This sub-theme is divided into two primary attitudes: approaching and avoiding.

*i. Approaching*

Those with an approaching attitude exhibited a willingness to take charge of their lives, and appeared to possess the ambition and drive to "put themselves out there". If these folks collectively had a personalized license plate, it might read something along the lines of: "No Risk, No Reward". In reflecting upon what she had done during her time in college that has moved her toward her goals, Kate spoke not only of academic and extracurricular involvements but also of taking the initiative to acquire additional knowledge on top of these commitments: "And also, just reading books on like business and business etiquette, and sales and advertising and stuff like that, just to learn as much as I can". Later in the interview, Kate indicated her sense of pride about developing as a life-long learner through college: "…reading books in my free time, and even spending 12 hours to put together a training session that I give to the staff just because I want to, and I like teaching and coaching too. And so, just going to training seminars and learning from other people; that's something I'm very proud of because I think that can get anybody really far". In responding to my inquiry about how she moved herself in the direction of her goals, Sue indicated: "Actually, any person that's given me a contact, I've gotten a hold of that person. I try to do everything because I feel like one of those…putting as much out into the universe as possible, something has to come back". Toward the end of my interview with Sarah, I commented that she seemed to exude a sense of readiness to more forward, to which she responded: "Definitely. I'm very ready to tackle it because I just want to see what I can do".

*ii. Avoiding*

Individuals with an avoidant attitude exhibited a tendency to shy away from change. They may have sought to put their future "on hold" while they grappled for a sense of direction related to their future. The personalized license plates for those with an avoidant attitude might be: "Why Do Today What You Can Put Off Until Tomorrow"? In recounting his experience of both wanting to continue in the Marine Corps as well as that of wanting to quit, Tom indicated that he copes with his indecision through avoidance: "You compartmentalize it, push it somewhere where it doesn't come to the forefront and just push on". In answering the question of how he will move himself toward his goals, Matt stated that his current low level of anxiety concerning his loosely-defined future plans would likely not persist after graduation: "I think that after graduation is when it's all gonna hit me and I'll realize that I'm done being a student and I have to find a career. It just hasn't hit me yet". Likewise, Richard exhibited an attitude of avoidance when asked about how he sees his life in 10 years: "I don't think ahead that far because I don't want to. I kinda like being this age right now". Given this response, it was not surprising when Richard expressed similar sentiment when asked about how he saw himself arriving at his destination: "I'm just hoping everything works out for me. And just, right now, I really don't wanna think about how that's gonna happen". When asked to reflect on his interview experience with me, Richard summarized his attitude toward his future: "…I really think right now, at this point, I'm not ready to necessarily ready to enter the workforce, except for the job I have right now. But an actual like, salary job, I don't really feel that I'm ready; not so much that I'm unprepared, I just don't wanna do it just yet".

*C. Development of Interests.* Ask a handful of individuals on the street what they are interested in, and you are certain to obtain a host of responses. People develop their interests in a

variety of ways (e.g., through first-hand experience or vicarious experience), and as such, interests may be well-informed (grounded in reality) or uninformed (based off of fantasy or imagination). If we apply the three components of the Trilateral Model of Adaptive Career Decision-Making (Krieshok et al., 2009) to the development of interests, it might be construed that individuals tap into both reason and intuition (internal processes) when determining their interests, with engagement (an external process) functioning as the center pivot in interest development (e.g., direct involvement in a potential area of interest serves to inform both the rational and intuitive internal processes). Noteworthy in the current study is the fact that I did not explicitly ask my interviewees about their interests, yet the majority of them managed to weave their interests into their interview responses in one way or another.

For Victoria, originally from outside the United States, personal interests and occupational interests were overlapping: "…what I want to do is economic development, specifically economic development for women in Islamic countries. So it's a very specific field, and kind of an incestual community that does that". The same was true for Diane, a self-proclaimed environmentalist and Geography major: "I went backpacking in Europe for a couple of months and that really spiked my interest. But I really only saw the touristy type of things, and I was interested in going back and staying in one place for a while. I knew I wanted to study abroad, I just didn't know where. So I've basically been to Western Europe and to Chile, and to Mexico. I do love it. I want to keep up my Spanish, and I'm learning Italian right now". Interests drove Rhea to pursue a degree in Architecture: "I'm really passionate about design and about making things". The same could be said for Jim, a fellow Architecture student: "I really am interested in artwork, and the sciences and trying to invent things".

Tye also merged his primary personal interest with his future career plans: "my sole interest is basketball, so I'd try to start a youth program, getting kids together and interacting with each other". Similarly, Matt articulated his goal of combining his recreational passion, music, with his vocational trajectory, engineering: "The only organization I'm in is actually the Acoustic Society of America. And I took a couple classes over there just because I do have that passion for music and art. So I took a couple classes in the Architecture school that I got credit over here, and they had the option to join that, so hopefully that will be an option for me once I graduate, to do something in acoustics; acoustic consulting or engineering or things like that". Candie, who lost her father due to hospital error, also held interests that overlapped personally and professionally: "I'm really interested in insurance and how the health care system works and how they apply it in certain situations with certain people".

True to form for what tends to be the case in many of the social science fields, several students with majors in this area expressed a personal interest in people in general. Ben compared his double majors: Economics and Psychology: "I really do enjoy Psychology though. So it's easy for me to tell people why, this is why I'm interested in Psychology. It's a lot more interesting to talk about over dinner than Economies of scale and that sort of thing". Sarah, a Sociology major, verbalized a similar overlap of personal and professional interests: "I love to people watch, I know that sounds creepy but you can tell so many things about a person from just watching them. I sit on [*a popular area to relax on-campus between classes*] and I see them fall or I see them try to talk to guys or guys try to get a girl, and it's just so interesting to me".

However, several individuals expressed personal interests that were not directly related to their choice of major or projected career path. Brett noted his passion for music when speaking of his involvement in the university band: "I'm all about music and the joy it brings people".

Dave recounted an interest that developed through coursework: "Through the classes I've taken to fill requirements, I've absolutely fallen in love with Environmental Studies, and I've always told my family and my wife that if I weren't in Architecture, I'd probably be in environmental studies just because it's really got my love. I'm really happy with Architecture and I love it, but there's this outside source of environmental studies that I also really enjoy. So I don't know where the line is of what I would do. And if I had all the time in the world, I would probably stay in school and study Environmental Studies, then probably being in that program, their requirements would probably get me interested in something else".

   *D. Self-Determination.* Individuals were deemed to possess self-determination when they expressed a desire to succeed, and also exuded drive or ambition in their stories about themselves. This sub-theme is organized differently than the other 17 sub-themes. Self-determination in general emerged as a sub-theme, and was examined through the lens of both occupational engagement status (as measured by the OES-S) as well as gender. Social responsibility serves as the sole category associated with the sub-theme of self-determination (unlike other sub-themes where there is a minimum of two associated categories), and was also examined through the lenses of occupational engagement status and gender.

   In reflecting upon jaw surgeries she had endured, Sue noted how persevering through difficult circumstances equipped her with a sense of self-determination: "…it was a really tough year last year, just being a 20 year old and having braces, and I just think realizing that, I've done really hard things, and I can continue to do hard things. Like, I've had two of these surgeries, and the first one helped me be like, if I've done this, I can do anything". When I commented that she did not seem to shy away from hard work, Sarah echoed a similar drive: "Bring it on. Throw anything my way. I will frickin show you up. I will do it". When asked about the skill or trait she

developed in college that she was most proud of, Barb stated: "I think that taking responsibility, being willing to go out of my way to get what I want, put in the time necessary to get to class, to do the homework, to go to work, to do everything", pointing to how possessing self-determination facilitated her in successfully juggling school and work simultaneously. When I inquired about his experience in being asked what his major was earlier on in his college career, Matt noted that it took desire and drive to stick with a difficult program of study: "And a few times I considered that maybe I should…maybe it would be easier to get the business degree. But I think just knowing it was gonna be a hard program and just making sure I stayed on top of it…I just kinda got the idea from everyone else that this is something you have to fully do, or you have to find something else to do". Victoria gave a nod to her past experiences of achieving success with the help of her own ambition: "…just seeing my hard work pay off; that positive affirmation of like, when I work hard, good things happen; so why not keep working hard"? Shortly after making this comment, Victoria more specifically described how self-determination is an asset for her, and how it can be for others as well: "I know what I wanna do, I know how to get there, and I'm willing to lose sleep for it. So, I feel like if you have those things; if you have the drive and the passion and the focus, then, again, the only loss is your own".

*i. Social Responsibility*

As a distinct category under the sub-theme of "self-determination", social responsibility was determined to exist in individuals who made comments reflective of their drive to help society in some manner. Victoria noted the importance of keeping her finger on the pulse of countries outside of the United States: "I mean, America is such a powerful country that now that I have my citizenship here, it feels like I could very easily shut the door and not care about the rest of the world anymore because, it's America; we don't have to leave. Which, so many people

unfortunately think that. But we're so influential abroad, and I feel like if I have this interest and I don't push myself to leave and to see what else is going on in the world that I'm not fulfilling my own potential". Jim asserted the importance of young people, including himself, assuming financial responsibility after college so as not to be a drain on society: "I know I can't stop working because I have 60 thousand dollars of debt that I have to pay off, and that's another reason I'm moving overseas. I've got this looming debt over my head, and I don't want to contribute to our problem that we have here by just like sitting in my mom and dad's basement, watching T.V. and eating Cheetos and not taking care of the problem".

Tye reflected the knowledge he accumulated through his time in college, and expressed a sense of responsibility to serve as a role model for youth growing up in his old inner-city neighborhood: "I'm not gonna be stingy with all this information I know. I wanna pass it on to other people through like, networking and connecting. Like, I know something, I'm gonna tell you, you know something, you should tell them. It's like spreading the word. And to me, I think that's like really important, like helping everybody. Because coming from a low status, low class neighborhood like mine, and come in here, and getting all my education, and then going back there and saying, this is my neighborhood; I grew up right down the street from you all; if I can do this, you can too. And like, the way that I did it; that's why I came back so I can help you all get to where I am". Tye went on to speak about his goal of infusing hope into the lives of people lacking optimism for the future: "I want to go into foster care, proving to the community that people out here actually care, like sending money over to Haiti, and helping out poor Africans and starving people in other countries, and Red Cross, and I mean, I do all that just because it's the other side of my interest, and with those two majors combined, being a role model is saying, I really can do this, I have hope that I can do it, and I'm gonna bring you all hope that this is not

your end; this is not your end of life decision. And I just wanna give all a chance; a chance to get on your feet so that you can help somebody else get on their feet. So that's my whole goal".

     *E. Self-Awareness.* For a comment to be classified as self-aware, the individual voicing that comment needed to portray an understanding about some aspect of themselves above and beyond what I would have expected as a typical response to an interview inquiry. More specifically, this deeper understanding could be retrospective, reflecting upon what they have learned about themselves through time and experience, or it could also be a present-day sense of awareness, gradually coming to light as they move closer to the transition of graduation. Self-awareness most frequently emerged in three domains: 1) academic or vocational; 2) personal; 3) arising out of the interview experience, or "in-the-moment".

*i. Academic or Vocational Self-Awareness*

     In order to successfully navigate through college, it is critical for an individual to develop a sense of scholastic or occupational purpose. For many students, one aspect of this understanding entails knowing when to step back when something "isn't right". Tom began college immediately following high school, but quickly realized the time was not right, and opted for the military: "I determined I wasn't mature enough for college…I didn't want to go to class. I enjoyed the personal, or the social aspect of college, like when I would party and have a good time, but I just didn't have my head on straight I'd say". Similarly, Barb expressed an understanding that her college graduation would mark the end of her formal education: "And going to grad school's not something that appeals to me at all, and I just think that it takes a really strong drive at that point in education, and you really have a passion for learning and for what you're doing, and I'm kind of at the point where I'm so burnt out that I wouldn't care enough about it". Academic or vocational self-awareness also translates into a deeper

understanding of "how I work", and the way this relates to interests and aspirations. In reflecting upon the reasons for selecting her major, Diane recalled listening to her gut feelings when ruling out potential options: "well, I like the creativity aspect of that [*a different area of study*], but I don't really have the drafting…it just didn't feel like me, I don't know how to describe it". Similarly, Matt associated his life-long way of looking at the world with his choice of major: "I think what draws me to engineering in general is that I've always had this problem solving, puzzle solving mentality".

*ii.  Personal Self-Awareness*

People often assert that they leave college a different person than when they began. College can provide individuals with a deeper understanding of the type of environment in which they thrive or fail to thrive, as well the type of people around which they function most optimally and find the greatest personal satisfaction. Sarah looked back on her experience living in an all-female residence hall during her first year in college: "When I was a freshman, I lived in [*an exclusively female dorm*], and, oh, too much estrogen for me, couldn't handle it, and my friends were all like, sorority girls, and after a month or so, I was like, this isn't me, I'm an artsy fartsy girl, it didn't feel right". Sue noted how having forthright conversations with her close friends enabled her to become aware of her strengths and limitations: "I think also, starting to realize my strengths through really good friendships; understanding that I do well with being able to talk to others or connect with others. I think that I've had very good friends who have been good at…I just have a really close, supportive group of friends and I think they're mature and we're able to talk about things like that; 'I think that you really bring this to a situation', and realizing that. And having those close friends that are able to tell you when you do something really well and

not; when you need to work on something. Having somebody that can be that honest with you is really, it's made me develop a lot".

Furthermore, being in college can spark a realization concerning personal values and a sense of priorities regarding what is important in life. Ben recounted how his value of earning a high income shifted as a result of taking a hiatus from college in the midst of progressing toward his degree: "I don't…that, to me, does not equal happiness the way it once did. So I guess I don't focus on that the way I once did, where I was very goal-oriented as far as achievement and career. But now there's so many other more important things to me". Later in the interview, Ben elaborated upon his changing values, noting how personal circumstances led to his heightened self-awareness, which in turn, ignited his passion for psychology: "I am definitely more empathetic now that I know I have limitations. I was a lot more arrogant before that. And just sort of seeing that, okay, sometimes life throws people things that are above them. I didn't understand that before. With the whole getting addicted to pain killers and not being able to stop just really; it made me appreciate that people really have some realistic struggles".

*iii. In-the-Moment Self-Awareness*

Several of the students I interviewed verbalized that they had gained a sense of self-awareness from the simple act of sitting down with me for thirty minutes working through the process of answering my questions. It should be noted that these assertions of in-the-moment self-awareness typically arose out of the final structured question in my interview protocol: "what has this interview experience been like for you?" Candie indicated that being asked to articulate her experiences and aspirations resulted in a more solid understanding of her plans: "It helps me as far as understanding myself more too cuz I don't ask myself these types of questions. So when someone else asks me, it helps me understand like, okay, actually saying it makes it

more real to me as well versus just thinking it, and I'm actually speaking and talking about it".

Similarly, Dave expressed a pleasant surprise in his ability to put his thoughts into words: "I feel like I've been elaborating on things more than I've thought about things. It seems like it's helped me to realize things I've been thinking but haven't been consciously thinking. Like I'm thinking deeper on some of these questions than I typically give myself time to, like, to give you better answers". Curt reported a similar line of thinking: "And I think it's good to talk about it…it kinda helps me, like every time I explain it and what I'm gonna do in the future, it almost solidifies that plan. Once you tell someone you're gonna do something, you think more about how you're gonna do it. You're explaining it, and the details kinda work themselves out".

## III. External Factors

Higher education in the United States tends to impress upon individuals that they alone are responsible for choosing their path in life. While there is much merit to this notion, it would be negligent to discount the people, events, and other outside circumstances that substantially impact the trajectory of any given individual. There are those people fortunate to have important others in their lives that provide support, and guidance. Others gain wisdom via their own involvements; actions they take at different points in life that influence them to pursue one path as opposed to another. Sometimes however, events that occurred randomly, via happenstance, can impact an individual more than they ever could have imagined. The following four sub-themes seek to provide a more complete understanding of the ways in which factors outside of an individual can grab the wheel and assist someone in realizing possibilities that may have otherwise remained unknown: 1) support; 2) influence; 3) important others; and 4) happenstance.

*A. Support.* This sub-theme was originally intended to encompass anything that aided or assisted an individual in progressing toward their goals (e.g., advice, money, etc.). However, the

process of analyzing my data pointed to interpersonal support, particularly parental support, as the heaviest hitter emerging from the responses of my interviewees. Therefore, this section will focus primarily on support provided from parents. In spite of this more focused discussion, it should be noted that the numbers provided in Table 1. reflect support in a broader, more general sense (e.g., advice, money, etc.).

Although the individuals I spoke with were in the process of transitioning out of college, several mentioned the support they received years ago when transitioning into college. Barb expressed gratitude for having a safety net in her parents when leaving home for the first time: "Not all people have to grow up in college, and I think it's a really awesome time to grow up because you can still rely on your parents and fall back on them without having to feel guilt. It's almost like when you're a kid and you can make mistakes and someone will pick you up and help you; that's what I feel like college is. You have the opportunity to grow, to try new things, to see if it works out, but you still have that security of home; I did anyway, not all people do".

Kate recalled how the support of the people closest to her in her life, particularly her parents, facilitated her in choosing her own path: "I've been really lucky where I have extremely supportive parents…and so, very…talking to me about these things, and my dad is always….my entire life he wanted me to go into psychology. I think it's really fascinating but I ended up in this other field. But, yeah, so that role…I'm very vocal with my family and friends about that, and my coworkers, and I think it's helped define more what I'd like to do". When probed about the role of her family in sharing her future aspirations, Sue noted how she has been able to take risks and branch out due to the unconditional support from her parents: "My parents, I'm super close with them and they've been super supportive of my crazy transition to, 'hey I wanna go have an unpaid internship, what do you guys feel about that?' So, that's been amazing; I wasn't

really sure if that was gonna happen, so they've been….my parents are always the most, like, I'm always the one that's wrong because they're just so thorough in their thought, so yeah, they've been wonderful and they're so easy to talk to about things like this". Tom also recounted feeling supported by his parents in taking risks, particularly one that could have cost him his life: "And they've always been in my corner with everything, especially with me joining the military, especially after 9/11. They knew I was joining the military in a wartime situation, through my deployment they were supportive of everything. And they've been supportive of me being so far away for so long and hardly ever seeing them. They've always been good parents".

   *B. Influences.* The term "influences" is broad by definition, and for the purposes of clarity in my analysis, I have elected to divide this sub-theme into four sections: 1) experiences growing up; 2) specific occurrence(s); 3) curricular experience; and 4) input from others. In general, I deemed something to be influential if it impacted an individual's choice to take one path over another path; in other words, if an experience growing up, a specific occurrence, a curricular experience, or input from others steered an individual in a particular direction, it was deemed to be influential.

*i. Experiences Growing Up*

   Any scholar with a developmental perspective would assert that early experiences impact an individual in profound ways. For Tom, something as seemingly trivial as watching a movie, to this day, impacts his aspiration of becoming a pilot: "seeing *Top Gun* as a kid made me want to be a pilot. I just wanted to be Maverick". For Victoria, being born in another country and experiencing a great deal of international travel influenced her occupational goal of working with the economic development of women in Islamic countries: "I'm actually not originally an American citizen. My family is from Austria. And I lived there until I was five. And we've been

traveling back and forth and doing things like that my entire life, so I've never had the chance to

not think about being international".

It is not uncommon for individuals to hear messages from important others while

growing up that exert a significant impact upon their life trajectories. Victoria recalled how her

previous long-standing plans of becoming a lawyer were set in motion by her parents: "my

parents have always, since the day we moved to the states, have always been like, you should go

to law school; women should get law degrees in this country. That's my parents' hard line

position. They are; they're even now saying that when I go back for the Ph.D., I should go for a

JD/Ph.D. because they think that having some sort of legal knowledge is the absolute most

important thing. So that was a really strong influence for awhile". Although individuals such as

Victoria end up taking another route in life, sometimes children who are influenced to proceed in

a particular direction turn into adults who do in fact occupy that role. Rhea recounted how her

early experiences playing with her father shaped her desire to become an architect: "well this is

kinda weird, but my dad, he's not in the construction field at all, but when he was in college, he

worked for a construction company and he was always making things. And I think I'm like that,

like my dad. We were just always building things when I was little. It was like, I wanna make a

shelf. And we would just make it. Or, I'm gonna make this really big dollhouse, and I would

make it. So yeah, I played with dolls a lot and I made little houses. I didn't play with the dolls

actually, it was more the houses". Likewise, Matt recollected how gaining exposure to computers

through his father's job exerted an early influence on his future career path: "I've always been

involved in computers. My father worked at, have you heard of the company, [*specific*

*company*], because he worked for their rival networking company, so that was just kind of

around me my whole life. I mean, I've been on computers and learning things on computers since I was really little".

## ii. Specific Occurrences

If an individual was to deeply contemplate the presence of a "crossroad" in their life, many would undoubtedly arrive at the conclusion that particular events or experiences, specific occurrences, have influenced them in critical ways. Diane recalled how direct contact with people in a field she was considering culminated in her opting for a different path: "…basically from that informational interview and just talking to people, I knew I wasn't a business type major". Conversely, Victoria pointed to encounters with prominent political figures as validation for her career aspirations: "Joe Biden was here, and Barack Obama went to Washington Days, and just all these major political influences really reaffirmed that this is what I want to do".

For other individuals, the specific occurrences that exert the most significant influence on their path are much more personal in nature. For Kate, a detrimental romantic relationship instilled her with the desire to pursue a career educating women: "Specifically, I had a really bad relationship last year that was emotionally abusive, and so, I was a hardcore feminist before that, but that really kinda opened my eyes to…just wanting to be that strong woman who's educated so I don't get in that situation again. So that's made me extremely…I don't know, it just…I guess it was like an eye opener in a way…". Likewise, Candie lost her father in a fluke occurrence at a hospital, influencing her desire to chase after a career in medicine: "…the experience with my father like how the hospital managerial side of it works. Like how you make decisions, like my experience with my father when he was diagnosed with [*a rare*] syndrome, I don't know if you've heard of that, but it's a pretty rare condition that he got all of a sudden, and he was paralyzed from the neck down, but since he was in the military, they didn't have, he was

at a veteran's hospital and they didn't have a personalized plan for that type of condition, so they put him with the spinal chord injuries for rehab purposes, but with that type of condition, his immune system was really, really weak, and he was getting better and was supposed to come home, but then he caught a cold from a neighboring patient and ended up passing from a cold. So it's like, with that type of situation, how does that work? I'm really interested in patient care and certain decisions and just understanding the health care process".

*iii. Curricular Experience*

Aside from the general education courses in which every college student is required to enroll, one aspect of higher education that many students enjoy is the freedom to choose which classes to take, ideally aiding them in selecting an academic major appropriate for their interests and/or future plans. For several of the individuals I interviewed, enrollment in specific courses resulted in selecting their major, which is currently reflected in their future occupational aspirations. Kate followed the advice of people who knew her, and ended up taking courses that drastically altered her professional trajectory: "And then a lot of people told me that I would really like Women's Studies classes, so…my first women's studies class completely changed my life, and; I also minor in Women's Studies and communications… as a woman, it's important for me to be educated in those certain issues that affect women specifically". Similarly, Richard listened to an outside source when pondering which classes to take, ultimately resulting in one of his two graduating majors: "And with Economics…someone told me once that I should think about that and [*a specific professor's name*], I enjoyed his class, ECON 104, so I decided to take ECON 144 and 142, micro and macro, and I got it so I decided to just stick with that". Tye took a beginning level course in what would become one of his two majors: "I took an introductory communication class and public speaking. And after that class, it just motivated me to like, 'hey,

I can stand up and talk to you all. My heart's not beating fast; I'm a little shaky but after the first minute or two, I feel confident, I feel alive and energetic'. I don't know how it happens, it just happens. I'm able to talk in front of large crowds, small crowds, a classroom setting". Taking a slightly different method, Kristen considered the attributes she desired in a major, and began taking courses based off of her preliminary understanding (ultimately resulting in her graduating major): "I felt like I wanted to deal with something more subjective; something that can be added to. And Psychology was that for me. It felt like something that's not black and white, and it's always changing and that was something I kind of wanted to get involved with. I took a course here that I was like, this is my favorite teacher and this class is awesome, so that's kind of how I got into Psychology".

*iv. Input from Others*

At most junctures in life, people close to us are quick to offer advice, opinions, and sometimes even criticism regarding the choices we make or are contemplating making. Ben recounted how he changed his major based on the input of other people, but ultimately changed it back after listening to himself: "I switched to Psychology. And then everyone was…a lot of people were like, you don't wanna do that, you don't wanna do that, you'll never do anything with a psychology degree. So I actually switched to Economics, did that for two years, then switched back to Psychology. I was just thinking, I can't stand economics". Sue received advice from an instructor that steered her away from a major about which she believed she was passionate: "I took a psychology class and I loved it and I was like, I'm gonna do Psychology, and then a professor I talked to said well, social work is more if you don't wanna do research, and I didn't even know what that meant freshman year, so I just went into Social Work because I liked the class structure, like all the classes were just better. I didn't even…I was just so clueless.

People were directing me, and I felt like I could just articulate what I wanted to do even though I didn't know what I wanted to do". Matt recalled how he absorbed the advice of a teacher regarding the reality of pursing a career in music and ultimately transferred from a specialized private school to a public university where he could follow an alternate interest: "…I was actually kinda talking to one of the teachers there, and they made it sound like, well, once you get into the field of music you do pretty good, but it's a really over-saturated market. I mean, that's how it is with music everywhere. If you get your break, you're good, but it's hard to get that break. So then I decided to transfer".

      *C. Important Others.* This sub-theme encompasses a specific person or group of people that have exerted a positive influence on an interviewee in some way. Two primary types of important others emerged during data analysis: 1) role models; and 2) mentors. These categories will serve as the organizing structure for this section.

*i. Role Models*

      A role model consists of someone the interviewee "looks up to" and expresses a desire to emulate in some fashion. It is important to note that a role model can either serve as an example for how to live life in general, or they can be someone the interviewee tries to model in an occupational sense. Victoria recounted a time early in her college career when someone she looked up to came to campus: "my first semester of college, Madeline Albright was here on campus, and she has been my absolute idol from like, birth basically. I mean, because she's an immigrant, she's a Holocaust survivor; she's a woman in a power position in the U.S. in foreign policy and all of it. I mean, I just feel so strongly connected to and driven by her story that, her being here…it felt like all the pieces fell together; everything I'm doing is right because I get to meet this person at this point in my life; such a pivotal moment". Later in our interview, Victoria

also cited her parents as being role models for her: "And I see my parents both being really successful in making the system work for them. My dad is now; he owns his own business and all of that, and still has the time to do astrophysics on the side; for fun in the basement; he's like the nutty professor. Like, so brilliant and so successful, total American dream story. My mom was the same way; everything she touches turns to gold, and she's a nationally recognized artist and all this stuff. So I feel like a have a lot, big footsteps to follow in already from their example". In discussing his strengths and shortcomings in his chosen field of study, Dave pointed to one of his professors as someone he identifies with on a professional level: "I believe the professor of the class you came to, I believe he's a project manager, but he's not a lead designer. And one thing he said at the beginning of the class was he knows he's not the best designer, but he loves to design. And I just felt like I was in his shoes. I don't feel like I'm the best designer but I love critiquing design, I love giving my input…I'm not sure exactly how he took his path of getting out of college and only being taught design to working his way into a firm and being more of the managerial side, but there are different ways to do it I guess".

*ii. Mentors*

A mentor was conceptualized as a person the interviewee looked to for more direct advice and guidance. Mentors, more so than role models, typically exert more influence over the interviewee occupationally as oppose to personally, however this was not made explicit for the purposes of data analysis. Kate cited regularly touching base with her instructors as a key component of how she intends to reach her occupational goals: "I've met with some professors, and I try to keep good relationships with some of my professors so I can get their advice". Victoria expressed great satisfaction with the mentoring she received during her time in college: "So yeah…really, really good mentoring from the [*a politically related on-campus institute*], and

really amazing mentoring in the Political Science Department and in Econ has just kind of guided me door by door by door to a path that makes sense".

Unfortunately, it was just as common for interviewees to indicate that they had once experienced effective mentoring, but have lost it for one reason or another. Diane lamented the loss of the mentoring she received earlier in her college career: "I had really good freshman and sophomore academic advisors, and that really, you know, you go in and you talk about all these major plans and it was amazing for me, and then after that, you transition to your major advisor or whoever you want really, and so that just didn't…I have sort of a faculty mentor but he's not the same sort of overall advisor. It's very much like, if you want to follow in my footsteps…this is what you've got to do, otherwise I'm not gonna advise you on anything… I wish that I still had a contact other than that". Rhea expressed a similar sentiment: "It's kind of unfortunate that the Architecture School has lost a lot of professors lately, so I've lost a lot of my really good mentors to [*a nearby metropolitan city*] and to other places. But I've tried to have a mentor the whole time, especially the faculty that are involved with [*her major's national organization*]. It's a good way to get their mentorship and just advice along the way I guess. And I hope that, well, I don't know how far I'm gonna go after graduation, but they're always there to help me with any questions I have, whether it's getting licensed and all of that stuff that's gonna happen in the next five years".

*D. Happenstance.* For the purpose of the current project, happenstance was broadly defined as something chance or unexpected. Three more specific categories of happenstance emerged in the analysis: 1) positive outcomes from negative or neutral chance events; 2) luck-of-the-draw instructors; and 3) marriage of chance and initiative.

*i. Positive Outcomes from Negative/Neutral Chance Events*

Several interviewees spoke of unplanned events or occurrences that they initially conceptualized as neutral, or even negative, that ended up materializing as a significant positive force in their academic or occupational development. Kate recounted signing up for what she considered to be a gateway position at the university newspaper, only to end up discovering her true calling: "I wanted to do the writing side. And then I applied for the [*university newspaper*], and I ended up applying for the advertising staff, thinking it was gonna help me to get my foot in the door to be a writer; I had no idea what I was doing. And it ended up being…and I believe everything happens for a reason…and it ended up being just a blessing in disguise, and the advertising/sales was just perfect for my personality and what I was good at". Similarly, Tye noted how his "last minute" double-major quickly morphed into a genuine area of interest and passion: "And Sociology was like kind of a last minute kind of thing because I didn't have enough junior and senior credit hours, and my communications counselor recommended Sociology to me. And after taking; I took Sociology in my second semester of my freshman year, and then after the reference to Sociology from the Communications advisor, I got into it; I started to like it. I started to learn more about race, class, gender, status, age, everything". Sue reflected on how a recent hardship resulted in her chasing after a long-time dream: "So this past summer, kind of an offshoot of that, I got jaw surgery and I was wired shut for a month, and that's just a lot of time; I'm pretty busy with just a lot of stuff I'm involved with, so I really haven't done a lot of thought process about what I really like and what I really wanna do so, I went through that and I started thinking, I really love movies and I love television. I feel like that's the stuff I retain, that's the stuff I think about a lot of the time. That's what I just love to do, my favorite thing, and why not do something to try to be a part of it on some level or in some area, and that's

just what I'm trying to do right now. And I might as well do it now or not at all I guess, so that's the plan".

## ii. Luck-of-the-Draw Instructors

Some interviewees expressed that the instructor they happened to get for a given course significantly impacted their pursuit of a particular path. In the case of Matt, his happenstance professor served to encourage his trajectory in engineering: "the past few semesters, microwave and radio frequency engineering has been kind of an interest. I took them to satisfy some electives, and they interested me a lot more than I thought they would…the professor that you visited also teaches the microwave and radio frequency classes, and he's a really good teacher. I think if it was somebody else teaching it, then I probably wouldn't be as interested as I am now in it". However, in cases such as Dave, a chance instructors instead dissuaded individuals from pursuing a particular path: "I took a first photography class and the teacher was fantastic and I loved it, but the second photography class, I absolutely butted heads with the teacher; didn't like it. And I don't know if that killed my interest in photography for the time being, cuz he was the only one who offered the next one, so then I didn't enroll in it because we didn't get along, so I don't know if the path would have been different if I didn't get along with my high school architecture teacher, if I would have wanted to do Architecture. If I would have had the will to put up with her and get the exposure and wanna do it. I don't know". Not only did Dave readily acknowledge the role of his instructors, but he also expressed that chance professors may have resulted in his willingness to remain with Architecture throughout his time in college.

## iii. Marriage of Mr. Chance and Ms. Initiative

It would be feasible for an individual to have an endless array of chance events thrown their way, and unless they take it upon themselves to capitalize upon these events, a phenomenon

referred to in the literature as "planned happenstance", they may reap few, if any, of the potential benefits of these unexpected occurrences. Several of my interviewees indicated that they had taken initiative to "put the wheels in motion" when something unanticipated came their way. Victoria recalled how fortunate she felt to be matched up with her roommates during her first year of college: "And I got like, ridiculously lucky with the roommates that I had my freshman year. I was a freshman, they were sophomores. All three of them were involved in [*a student political organization*], involved with the [*a campus political institute*], they were best friends with the president of the organization and, it was amazing. From day one, I was plugged in. And because of that, second semester freshman year, I was already president of [*the student political organization*], I was going to [*the campus political institute*] events every week, meeting ridiculously important people, and I was just blown away by all of it; just blown away by what was going on here". Sue recalled capitalizing upon information given to her by an instructor: "…actually, one of my biggest contacts is from a past professor, she just gave me a name off chance, and I've been talking with this woman for months now and she's been really helpful. Just random things. I feel like it's always, in life, it's the most random thing that works out". Jim recalled being placed overseas for a recent internship, noting particularly how his hard work paid off: "Last semester, I did a study abroad, slash, internship**…**and my professor placed us in all these firms and I ended up working on this really large project with one other guy and it went really well, and they want me to come back and work on the Arab Design Team, doing all the projects in Dubai....yeah, it was like a really random probability**.** And that was one of the reasons why I worked so hard over there because I knew that the jobs here…there's nothing".

## IV. Taking Action

Akin to the initiative mentioned in the previous section on happenstance, the meta-theme of "taking action" entails just that: initiative. Five primary categories of such initiative emerged during data analysis: 1) networking; 2) exploration of options/alternatives; 3) involvement in professionally relevant actions; 4) acquisition of world of work knowledge and 5) formulation of plans/goals.

*A. Networking.* The networking sub-theme encompasses actions taken by an individual in terms of maintaining or forging contacts that have been, are, or could be professionally beneficial. Perhaps Sue said it most succinctly when answering my question regarding how she intended to reach her future goals: "I think it's important for me to do what I've kinda done all through college, which is develop relationships. I think being able to develop and maintain relationships will get me to the place I need to be because at some point, they will come through and those connections will come together and something will come of it". More specifically, Sue indicated that she takes the time to keep in touch with previous instructors: "And I've also, some past professors I've had, I've really tried to stay in contact with them. Once or twice a month, I go talk with them and let them know where I'm going…". Similarly, Dave recalled his recent attempt at building a network through emails to university alumni working in a location in which he intends to relocate: "I've started seeking out and talking to professionals in firms in New York and just being able to bounce off questions of how to approach the market and how working in firms really works, and that's been a pretty good resource...I got the list of registered [*university*] alums that have something to do with Architecture, and I sent out a couple hundred mass emails to them and got a few responses back and was able to talk with some of them and meet with a

few of them and really see how larger firms work. Just over winter break, I met with a principle of a 20 person firm…".

Some interviewees reported being selected for a position through their networking actions. Rhea recalled how she had obtained her recent internship experience: "I've gotten a lot of connections through [*architectural organization*] because we do firm tours sometimes in [*a nearby metropolitan city*], and I'll meet professionals that way. But this lady contacted me from the HR office of the Dallas firm one day and was like, we're coming to [*home state of university*], one of their alums was coming to do a presentation about their firm because they wanted to hire someone from [*the university*], and they ended up hiring me. It was pretty cool; that was another connection I guess". Although Ben was not looking for a position at the time, he reported maintaining contact with a previous employer in order to give himself an advantage should he be looking to be employed at this place of business again in the future: "I've talked to them in the last six months or so, just thinking I might be in the job market, to re-establish that relationship so they don't get a call and say, 'oh yeah, he used to work for us and that was four years ago; we didn't even know he was still alive'". Toward the end of my interview with Ben, he went on to say how thinking through his answers to my questions had alerted him to the importance of maintaining connections for future use: "I didn't think about connecting with the people that I have…I actually now wanna do that a little bit more and…instead of talking to them twice a year I want to talk to them maybe once a month…just to see how things are going. Let them know what's going on in my life, what's going on in their life. I think, to me, that can lead to its own opportunity".

*B. Exploration of Options.* This sub-theme involves the interviewee demonstrating through actions that they are not prematurely foreclosed: essentially their continued

consideration of emerging alternate trajectories (or their expression of a willingness to do so should such alternatives emerge later on down the road). This sub-theme is divided into two categories: 1) submitting applications; and 2) getting my feet wet.

i. *Submitting Applications*

Although this sub-theme envelopes the following activities: job search, submitting applications, and interviewing for positions, the quotes used to illustrate this sub-theme will focus solely on submitting applications, as this emerged as the most prevalent exploration activity.

For many interviewees, exploration took the form of submitting applications for jobs, internships, or any other option they may wish to take for a test drive. Sue indicated that she had recently applied for various positions hoping to obtain a position, paid or unpaid, based on her desired location: "I'm applying for internships right now in New York, and hopefully those turn into…I've applied at [*well-known company*] for their casting agency, and, I've applied all these places, but we'll see what happens". Kristen noted that she had submitted an application for a program outside of her program of study: "I applied for Teach for America for the fall, so I'm waiting to hear back from that". Barb reported that she was willing to accept any position that would help her to get her foot in the door in a city in which she hoped to relocate: "I've used career builder sites and things like that. Just Googling and going to Denver classifieds; trying to find anything that's entry level-ish into publication that I can get into". Exploring in a more unconventional manner, Jim elected to submit an application for a contest completely outside of his area of study, but very much in line with his life values: "I signed up for this competition…basically if you can design a machine that removes CO2 and green house gases, they'll award you like 25 million dollars, but you have to implement that money and create a

global system, making sure it's economically viable, and then placing these little machines you invented all over the world to help slow down or stop; so that's kind of still pending, so I don't know. If I win that, I'll definitely not go to France cuz I foresee that as being more helpful".

ii. *Getting My Feet Wet*

Prior to taking the time to apply for positions, some interviewees elected to gain first-hand experience as a means of exploring potential options. For Candie, this took the form of an upcoming volunteer position: "…I haven't really gotten much exposure to health policy to know whether or not that's definitely what I want to do. Right now it's just kind of an interest, but I think once I do the volunteering I'm planning on doing…I'll know if this is me…". Similarly, Victoria reported that she would be trying her hand at teaching as a component of her upcoming summer internship: "I'll most likely also be teaching an econ class at the [*a major university on the east coast*] while I'm there. Which would be really cool; a little bit of teaching experience, a little bit of…just to see if I want to do it". Brett recounted how he had visited a place of employment similar to what he was considering for himself: "In [*a nearby metropolitan city*] I went to this chemical plant. I followed some of the guys around it was just, this is not what I wanna do…so I was trying to really narrow down my major. So I looked at some chemical engineers, some aerospace; tried some here and there and figured out what I didn't like". Dan noted a similar experience: "I've taken a couple tours…like a tour of Garmin…throughout the years, and places like that. And one other, I can't even remember the name; it must not have been too noteworthy. But Garmin I definitely remember taking tours of different campuses, and seeing what they do and asking people who are engineers now about their experiences; do they like the job, do they…just generic questions like that".

*C. Acquisition of World of Work Knowledge.* The transition from college typically entails entrance into an unfamiliar world. If further education is pursued, the plunge into this new sphere may be delayed, but the day will likely come when an individual must possess knowledge concerning the "next step" in their lives. Acquisition of World of Work Knowledge (AWOWK) entails an individual accruing information about the occupational realm they one day plan/hope to enter. For the 20 individuals I spoke with, AWOWK typically took the form of accumulating knowledge regarding required education and training in a field of interest.

In perhaps the most detailed display of AWOWK, I observed in any of the 20 interviews, Victoria was able to articulate with impressive specificity the training required to achieve her goal of working with the economic development of women in Islamic countries: "…there's five years of the foreign service, which is basically two tours, so two different countries. So six months of training, a two year assignment, six more months of training, another two year assignment, and then at that point, we can either decide to submit our portfolios for tenure or take our leave from the state department. She went on to explain the process involved in obtaining a position in the field: "I mean, you just apply directly to the bank, or directly to the INF, or to Oxfam, or to these major organizations. And what I'd be doing then; I wouldn't be applying to take the intro level positions anymore; it'd be like the regional co-director or the regional director or something like that. The Director of Egyptian World Bank Programming basically. And that's kind of the jumping off point to higher in the bank or back into the U.S. government someday. Because I feel like when you're in the machine, you never really leave". In even more detail, Victoria elaborated upon moving around to different positions within her chosen field: "If you start anywhere; like if you start at the World Bank or the Gramin Bank, or the INF or the USAID; all of those organizations get funding from different entities and they

work under different guidelines, but they all work together. So shifting from one to the other is not that difficult. I mean you see a lot of people who have a background of the bank to the INF to the bank to some sort of an NGO, to a think tank, and they're all kind of working in the same place; the same issues, just, what your business card says changes every time".

As she outlined the perks of being employed at a smaller architecture firm, it was clear to me that Rhea's AWOWK was advanced: "So at a smaller firm, you get to interact with all those parties more. Cuz if you're at an internship at a big firm, you end up just doing some drawings at a desk, but if you're at a smaller firm, you get to maybe go to those client meetings because a lot of times for bigger jobs, four or five architects are interning and trying to compete for that job. It's really very complicated, but then there's this whole process of meeting with clients and contractors once you are selected for that job. And the only way you can understand that full process is if you're going to these meetings and understanding the whole process". Similarly, Dave, another Architecture student, described the advantages of international employment: "And a lot of the parts of architecture that I like if you're managing the overall project would be if you're working with an international firm, there could be more opportunities since you're seeing the project through from the beginning phases to the end phases. That's typically a year and a half, three year deal for the entire project, or longer. It could require you to go overseas and be on-site for a decent amount of time…".

Tom outlined the training he would need to undergo during his quest of becoming a pilot in the Marine Corps: "And then I go through OCS in Virginia, which is ten weeks. From there I roll over into the Basic School, which is a six month; teaching me to be a basic Marine Corps officer. And after that if I successfully complete it, I'd go flight contract and I'd go to Pensacola Florida and I'd start flight school, which is about a year and a half or so. Then I'd be a pilot, and

then go squadron, and go through constant training, and doing deployments and a lot of stuff like that". Anticipating several years of education after college, Candie delineated the schooling necessary for one of the options she was considering (a career in medicine): "well, if I did the doctor side of it, I would go and get my masters for two years, and then get accepted to med school, and that's four years so that's six, and then in the four years of med school you're exposed to the different specialties of medicine and so you take your boards, and if you pass, you go to the specialty that you choose, like if it's pediatrics or OB/GYN like I would want to do, and then you go on to residency. And then it depends on which residency you choose for how many years you spend in it. So for OB/GYN, that's typically five years".

> *D. Involvement in Professionally Relevant Actions.* I considered this sub-theme to be, perhaps, the crux of my entire project. When an individual is involved in activities that are linked in some manner to their stated professional goals and aspirations, they are occupationally engaged in the sense that they are tacking action to acquire information and/or experiences that contribute to their sense of understanding regarding a given vocational trajectory. This sub-theme is divided into six categories: 1) curricular; 2) co-curricular; 3) volunteering; 4) internships; 5) employment; and 6) personal research.

*i. Curricular Involvement*

> Every college student must be enrolled in a certain number of courses in order to obtain the particular number of credit hours required to earn their degree. However, some individuals (due to interest, drive, or career preparation) elect to enroll in classes that they would not otherwise need to take in order to simply satisfy credit requirements. While almost all college students take "elective" courses as part of their program of study (classes they are allowed to choose as opposed to those that are required), "curricular involvement" was distinguished in that

interviewees cited such elective courses as professionally relevant or beneficial as opposed simply meeting credit requirements for graduation. Coursework was deemed to constitute involvement in professionally relevant actions if one of two conditions were satisfied: a) the course(s) were not required as part of the student's program of study and/or b) the course(s) were of the "self-help" brand, facilitating the student in preparing themselves for the world of work or for their projected path after college above and beyond what they could have achieved through their required coursework.

While many college students decide to complete most or all of their required coursework prior to enrolling in elective coursework, some individuals pursue non-required curricular opportunities as soon as they set foot on campus. Diane recalled a course she took her first year in college that pushed her to speak to professionals in her projected field of interest at that time: "…I guess I've done a lot of informational interviews and really searched all over for what I want to do…I did do it as part of a class as a freshman…through the Thematic Learning Community. It was called Preparing for International Careers". Barb also voiced an interest in international employment, and spoke of a course in which she enrolled at the time of our interview: "I'm taking an International Careers class right now, so that's also something that's kind of cool because if I could work for an American-based company that also deals internationally, that would be amazing". Later in our interview, Barb discussed how she had comprehensively enrolled in the coursework offered by her department throughout her program of study: "I've basically taken every English class that you could take. There's the creative and the traditional route, and I've got an emphasis in creative, but I've taken all the traditional ones too, so I've kind of done as much as I could with that. I've tried to take a lot of work shopping classes, reading other people's work, editing their stuff…you have your option of what you can

take, and you can take more of it if you'd like to, and I kind of went that route and tried to take it as seriously as possible and really put enough time into it and focused because I want to read other people's work and edit their stuff and things like that".

*ii. Co-Curricular Involvement*

Although some higher education students choose to utilize college solely for the purpose of taking the classes required to obtain their degree, others immerse themselves in activities outside of the classroom that believe will equip them with information or experiences related to their professional aspirations. Victoria related how her co-curricular involvements have been professionally motivating: "…a lot of it's been involvement through Young Dems, or involvement through the [ *political institute on campus*], or the Commission on the Status of Women, the Student Senate; these sorts of things that really…they take your motivation and really, make it into something more concrete. And that's been really motivational". Rhea relayed similar involvements: "…the AIAS is the student organization of it, so like, I've been president of that and on the board of that the whole time I've been in school, so I've been really involved in that". Diane recalled how her co-curricular involvements ultimately culminated in her choice of major: "I definitely got interested in environmentalism, and that led me to Geography through Environs…so that definitely, I joined that as a freshman and that's how that started. I also got a contact through that organization to live in the [*specific*] co-op; it's an environmental co-op, so I'm living there now…it led me to people who are big into environmentalism, and it sort of led me into Geography". She went on to speak about major-related trips she has taken through the university: "I've done a couple different Alternative Spring Breaks through ECM and through [*the university*]. On one, I went to Arizona to this national park and we did like, trail maintenance…and then for two years in a row I went to the Navajo reservation…".

*iii. Involvement through Volunteer Work*

Several interviewees indicated that they had donated their time for unpaid volunteer work as a means of gaining valuable professional information and experiences. Although other commitments resulted in reducing her hours volunteering, Diane continued to devote her time to this sort of work: "I've done a lot of volunteering too…for WTCS, the Women's Transitional Care Services. It's a women's shelter and, I used to spend more time doing that, but I spend like two hours a week now, it's not much. Similarly, Kate, who voiced an interest in women's issues, recalled her involvement in related volunteer work: "…this past year, one of my goals was to just get as involved as I can in women's organizations. And so, I joined the Commission on the Status of Women…I'm involved in that; I'm mentoring with Big Brothers Big Sisters, and then I just started volunteering with Women's Transitional Care Services…the domestic violence shelter. So all those things together have helped me go where I think I'm trying to go". Candie, who hopes to potentially have a career in hospital management indicated: "I'm really interested in insurance and how the health care system works and how they apply it in certain situations with certain people and I think this Health Care Access Clinic that I'm volunteering at will give me a lot of information on understanding that a lot better".

*iv. Involvement through Internships*

Undergraduate internships often provide a means for which college students can gain hands-on experience working in a field in which they have expressed interest. It is not uncommon for students to secure paid positions post-graduation with companies for which they interned while in school. Curt recounted a recent internship he held with an out-of-state architectural firm: "I was there for eight months and they basically said they couldn't promise me a job but they said I was the most eligible person since I had the most experience and they

would like to hire me". Kate noted the culture-shock she experienced in her internship

environment in comparison to the university atmosphere to which she had become accustomed:

"I had an internship at the [*major city*] Business Journal, and that was completely different,

where I went from an extremely informal college atmosphere to CEO's and three piece suits

everyday, and 40 year olds I'm working with everyday; so that was really a lot". Students such

as Barb reported that internships are challenging, noting that these positions are not to be entered

into simply to fill up time: "Then I went for an internship that wasn't necessarily fun, it was a lot

harder than what I was doing before, but I knew that I wanted to learn more about it, so I went

for it kind of thing**….**it was an HR internship. I did it for the experience, but also because I

legitimately wanted to learn more about it and kind of see behind the scenes in companies…".

Similarly Dave asserted that his internship provided him with more valuable knowledge than did

most of his formal coursework: "I would say the best thing I've done, and the thing that's given

me the most amount of information is my internship. I've learned a lot in the school of

architecture, but I've learned way more, hands down, at my job". Dan shared similar sentiments:

"And then also, doing internships over the summer; I've only had the one, but that was an

experience that I think was pretty important for me to actually be out there in the industry".

*v. Involvement through Formal Employment*

For many of the students I spoke with, maintaining paid positions during their time in

college was not only a means through which to earn money, also a channel through which to

explore the viability of potential career paths. Students such as Diane tested the waters in a

variety of on-campus positions in order to see where she might find her niche: "…a lot of my

work experience on campus has definitely changed me. I worked as an Academic Aide for

Disability Resources. I knew that I wanted to work with students one-on-one or in small groups;

I really like doing that…So that led me to working at the UAC, the Academic Advising Center, and I really liked that too…I've had a lot of interesting jobs where that's told me what I do or definitely don't wanna do". Conversely, Kate opted to stick with one on-campus organization, the university newspaper, and to try out different positions within this association: "And with the [*student newspaper*], I've really tried to immerse myself in education…I mean, I've had probably at least five different positions on staff, and I move my way up from the bottom to the very top; so I used to run the [*student newspaper*] too; two semesters; so I've had that managerial experience. I think I've had four semesters of managerial experience. And now I'm doing business, which is completely different from what I've ever done, because I have no clients, and I'm building my client base from zero and up; so that's a very different perspective. So just within the [*student newspaper*] as an organization, I've kind of tried to work with some different things".

While some college students may find it easier or more relevant to their professional goals to obtain employment on-campus, work experience does not have to be gained exclusively through the college or university. Aunnie, an international student, opted to gain some work-related experience while at home during her summer vacations from school: "every time we have summer break, I go back to Kazakhstan, and after my sophomore year, and after my junior year, I work part time, like for the entire summer break. I work for this organization, it's called Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The abbreviation is OSCE. And it's a European organization, and Kazakhstan is a member of this organization, and basically it like, deals with human rights, you know, social justice and stuff like that. And that's what I'm kind of interested in, because its like a mix of social work and law again. And I was helping organizing

conferences, roundtables, and it's…well it's actually more with criminal law stuff. But it's like still in social justice area. So I did that for two summers".

*vi.  Personal Research*

For some students, involvement in professionally relevant actions is actually "pre-involvement"; some individuals voiced the importance of closely looking into a potential opportunity before committing their time and resources. Aunnie recounted reading up on a potential major before coming to college, but asserted that in many instances, reading is a poor substitute for actually trying something for yourself: "I did read books about Social Work before I applied for my scholarship, and before I applied to [*the university*]; I read about social work in different countries, but reading is not…it's not the same; it's not the same as you are like hearing lecture from the teacher or have your practicum". For Tye, this took the form of locating information for specific companies: "I do research in the companies, I research what the job entails, what's the qualifications needed. Look at the background, the history, the environment, the education".

*E.  Formulation of Plans.* As anyone standing on the brink of college graduation can assert: life does not stop, after the diploma in your hand drops. Well-defined, ill-defined, long-term, or short-term, everyone must have a "plan" of some sort for after graduation (or the plan will make itself). For the 20 individuals I spoke with, post-graduation plans tended to crystallize in six sometimes overlapping categories, which will serve as the structure for this sub-theme: 1) specific plans for the months immediately following graduation; 2) a specific ten-year plan; 3) vaguely defined plans; 4) temporary plans or "placeholders"; 5) back-up plans; and 6) the family plan.

*i. Specific Plans for the Months Immediately Following Graduation*

The first question that I asked each of my interviewees was "What do you see yourself doing in the months right after graduation?". As I expected, individual answers varied according to detail and specificity, as well as how "concrete" the plan was (e.g., had the student already been accepted to graduate school, or did they simply have the intention of submitting an application?) Individuals such as Victoria outlined specific post-graduation plans that were already in motion: "I actually have a fellowship with the state department; kind of out of the blue. I'll be working in the state department in DC over the summer in the Israeli-Palestinian Affairs Office, so I'm really excited about that. So that's the summer, and then grad school after that". Brett also had a specific plan ready to go: "I got a couple offers and right after I graduate, pretty much immediately after I graduate, two weeks, I start at Cerna, so I feel pretty blessed, especially with the job market. So yeah, just working in the private sector; it's what I was hoping for.

Other students had a more liquid plan following commencement, oftentimes being more focused upon where they wanted to work as opposed to what type of work they wanted to do. Sue relayed her goal of securing an internship in a major city: "I just need to find an internship in some way, shape, or form. That's the plan; live in NYU housing this summer, so if I can get in, there's some difficulty with that, but those are just my initial plans for after graduation". Dave indicated that while he felt fortunate that his current boss agreed to keep him on board after graduation, dreams of moving to the east coast would likely take priority: "I would love to have a job right after graduation. I currently have one lined up here in [*town in which university is located*]. Which, I've been working at a firm for two-and-a-half years here in town, and my boss wants to keep me around for the summer if he can, but we're both under the understanding that if

I had a job offer…my wife and I both wanna move to New York, so if I have a job there in May, we'll go there in May, otherwise we'll wait out the summer here and keep applying. Come August and we still don't have jobs there, we're gonna hopefully take our savings and move there anyway and try to stick it out for two months and try to find jobs while losing a lot of money, and try to do it that way". Kristen echoed a similar sentiment, expressing her desire to relocate to a larger metropolitan area: "right after graduation, I'll stay in [*town in which university is located*] for May, June, and July, and at the end of July, I'm moving to Denver. I haven't found a job out there yet, but I just know that's where I wanna live, and my lease is up at the end of July…".

Post-graduation travel and recreation were at the forefront of the minds of several of interviewees. As Kristen noted: "…at the end of July, I'm going camping, and I'm going to a few concerts in Colorado and then driving up to Oregon and doing some camping out there and visiting the hot springs and going down to northern California to go camping and see the redwoods. So really, it's all travel for awhile". Richard voiced his intention to travel as well: "I'm gonna be vacationing…I know I'm planning a trip to Chicago and Denver and a few other road trips, but none of them will be more than a week long, probably five days".

*ii.  A Specific Ten-Year Plan*

A question often asked in interviews for school or work is "what do you see yourself doing in X number of years?" I asked my 20 interviewees to project themselves a decade into the future and to tell me about what they saw for themselves. Several students were able to articulate a well-thought out, relatively detailed ten-year plan. Victoria was able to verbalize several components she felt confident would appear in her future: "…hopefully a Ph.D. in something, who knows. I mean, my goal is to work for the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund,

or like a think tank that works in international development. And I'm really interested in gender issues and Middle Eastern studies and economic development and how that all factors in together. So I'd like to work on development programming. A lot of traveling. A lot of the Middle East. Probably back to DC or to New York or something like that. I mean it's all really vague, but kind of in that area. I don't see myself going and doing something dramatically different". While not entirely certain about her immediate post-graduation plans, Rhea described an ambitious 10 year plan: "honestly, I wanna work for a smaller firm starting out, and really learn how the architecture business works. I have a lot of friends that are not in Architecture, and, well I have a couple of friends from back home, and we kinda wanna start a design build firm, so using my friend's construction knowledge and my design knowledge, we could start a firm. So that's kind of my plan for 10 years. I have no idea what I'm doing in six months, but that's my plan".

Much like Victoria, Kate also expressed the vision of a graduate degree in her future: "well, hopefully I'll have my Masters degree by then, and possibly be working on my Ph.D. or have my Ph.D. But I'd really like to be a trainer for; I'd like to focus on organizational communication but with the gender…specifically with gender, like a gender context…because I'd like to train with women and help them be better business communicators so they can hold higher positions in the workplace; to advance women in the workplace. So that's like, hopefully, where I'll be. And just like really active in like, women's organizations and volunteering and stuff like that, and then be this trainer at the same time. So that's what I hope I'm doing in ten years". Kate was impressive in the amount of forethought she had put into the way in which her plan would unfold: "So basically, my whole for the next 10 years, or 20, or however long it takes me to get there is to build my credibility. And so I will probably start off working at a big

newspaper for a couple of years, and hopefully try to get them to pay for my Masters degree; and I'll get my Masters in Organizational Communication. And so, work for a couple of years, and see if they can help me; if I can get specific training and work with the training departments as much as I can, even if it's like, extra curricular. And just trying to get as much one on one, or whatever actual training as I can; and then work on my Masters degree while…I'd like to work and get my Masters at the same time, but that's probably super ambitious, I don't know".

*iii. Vaguely-Defined Plans*

It would be naïve to believe that every college senior holds a precise roadmap for the rest of their lives (or even the rest of their year). To that end, several individuals I spoke with articulated more general, vaguely-defined plans for their future. Although she couldn't say for certain, Diane, was able to indicate the type of work in which she eventually hoped to immerse herself: "I guess I'd like to do something that's international or multicultural type of work; something with a study abroad type organization, but I don't know what that would entail, but definitely something like that". Diane was unapologetic in stating the importance of taking a break after college: "I think I'll end up back in college. I think I'll end up back at the university long term. I don't know what I'll do in between. I'm a huge believer in taking this time between, transitional time if I have it, and traveling, maybe taking a break and doing what I can before I have to start paying off loans and all that…". Tom also stated his plans in the form of broadly-defined goals: "probably in the military, government jobs, something like that. If the whole Marine Corps officer and possibly pilot thing works out, maybe flying. I've set goals that are way up there, so we'll see". Aunnie articulated the importance of being able to apply the knowledge she had gained from her program of study in a future career: "So, I'm hoping to get something *in* social welfare, cuz it's like, where I want to be and it's like…I worked on this

degree for four years, and I really want to be able to apply whatever I've learned". In some instances, students verbalized the *type* of path they hoped to follow, or the *type* of work environment. Such was the case with Barb: "I hope that I can get a job in a place that I can work my way up and establish myself and hopefully be with them for a long time. I like that feeling of being secure in a company, so that's what I'm looking for". Likewise, Sue emphasized the importance of her occupational atmosphere, as well as finding enjoyment in her work: "I'd like to work with people that I really enjoy, that's the main thing. I want to work in an environment where I'm with people that build me up, or we're just a supportive network. I think that's the number one thing for me… I'd like to be in a career that I enjoy and that I, I think it would be described as, I could do something for 10 hours a day and not realize that 10 hours had gone by. It's more just, you're so absorbed in it all and it's fun and engaging. I think those are the main things".

*iv. Temporary Plans ("Placeholders")*

In several instances, students voiced an awareness that their initial plans for after graduation may serve as placeholders until such time that they can begin following their ideal path. Barb, who intended to relocate to a major metropolitan city, expressed no reservations for waiting tables while searching for a position in editing: "Ideally, I would move there in September. If I have something set up that's actually in what I want to do, great. If not, I think I'll just try to get something, anything, I mean, restaurant jobs; just something to get myself established there and work more towards finding something". Kristen indicated that, in spite of concern from her parents, she was applying for placeholder positions as well: "So I've just been applying at bars and restaurants and my parents are like, you're not gonna do that forever are you? And I'm like, definitely not". Kristen also spoke of a temporary career in pharmaceutical

sales, noting that it wasn't her true calling in life: "I feel like already, the possibility of doing pharmaceutical sales, that is really just something I thought about to get by for the time being because I know that they have job availability all over the country, and they train you and you're doing just sales basically. Business; I mean, you're going to doctors, but it's the same thing. And I could never see myself being like, a passionate, you know".

Ben indicated his intention of applying for a temporary job as a gateway position into another line of work: "I've also talked with somebody at the Census Bureau. Hopefully something takes off with that, I don't know. The disadvantage to that position is that it would only be for a short period of time when they do the 2010 census, but I thought that might be a good way to get involved with the government and get a little more established, then maybe change to the social security administration". Matt voiced his intention of maintaining his current position until he decides which path is right for him: "I've had a part time job since the summer of 2005 at [*a nearby community college*]; I work in computer labs over there, so it's enough to get me by until I figure out exactly what I want to do".

*v. Back-Up Plans*

The conscientious individual is never without a "Plan B". Several of the students I interviewed expressed the existence of a back-up plan should their initial or desired course of action fall through. Given her knowledge of the economy, Rhea indicated her intention of working overseas (in a professionally-related area or not) should she be unable to secure employment in the United States: "So my plan is to get a job, but the economy is really bad for architects right now. If I don't do that, I have some really weird options. I studied abroad last year in Copenhagen Denmark, and I stayed with a host family, and they kind of want a nanny, so if I don't find a job here, I might nanny for them and search for an internship there. So that's my

plan right now; it's really all up in the air". Also an Architecture major, Curt noted a plan in the reverse-order of Rhea's: an intention of working abroad, with a back-up plan of remaining in the United States: "well, I'm hopefully gonna be doing an internship in Germany, Eutin, through the sister city program we have. And I'm hoping to do an architectural internship, and they're still trying to set that up. If not, I guess I'm doing something with the urban planners there, so something related to Architecture hopefully. And that's like a six week program, but I don't know if that's gonna extend or what I'm gonna do after that". Tye outlined what was perhaps the lengthiest and most comprehensive "Plan B": "after graduation, my first thought is; well, I'm going to St. Louis to do an internship with the FBI or the CIA; I'm looking for a government job. If that don't work out, I'm gonna come back for grad school here at [*current university*] or [*alternate university*], and go to grad school. If that don't work out, I'm gonna get my passport to go overseas to play basketball over there.  And if that don't work out, I'm gonna move back home to Chicago and just get a full time job and just be stuck in the working class [*Tye stuck his lower lip out here to make a sad face*].

*vi. The Family Plan*

      While I didn't explicitly ask my interviewees about their plans for more personal aspects of their lives, several individuals spontaneously offered such information. Aunnie indicated a vision of marriage and children in her future: "And I also plan like, to settle down my personal life, you know just get married and maybe have children within like three, four years. Barb noted taking potential future family obligations into account when planning her career and thinking about what she would be doing in ten years: "hopefully married. I really love kids and want to have a family. I think that the reason I want to get into editing and publishing is that I want to do something that I feel like can make you a little more independent. I wanna work for a job where

I'm not necessarily sitting in an office, but that I can work from home if I want to and do things like that". Some males I interviewed mentioned family and career in the same breath. Richard noted: "I guess I'd see myself being married and having kids maybe. That's a long time from now; I really don't like thinking that far ahead. I guess being settled down and having a job, a career I guess at that point". Ben indicated: "I'd like to feel more established; maybe have six, seven years of actual job experience. Be in a career as opposed to just going from job to job if that makes sense. A family would be nice too…".

**Research Questions #2 and #3: Group Differences Based on Occupational Engagement Status and Gender Differences**

In the current project, my second and third research questions sought to examine any differences emerging between students obtaining a high score on the OES-S versus students obtaining a low score on the OES-S, as well as differences between males and females. The organizational structure for this section of the chapter will consist of a re-examination of each of the four meta-themes, associated sub-themes, and categories relative to group membership based on OES-S score as well as gender. The "meat" of qualitative research lies in the direct quotes of the participants, and the previous section of this chapter (addressing my first research question) was saturated with quotes in order to provide a "flavor" for the interviews. Conversely, this portion of the chapter will assume a more comparative approach in which I will attempt to tabulate "tallies" of high-scoring versus low-scoring individuals as well as males and females in each meta-theme and sub-theme. Instances where a particular sub-theme is primarily comprised with quotes from one individual (or a very small number of individuals) will be delineated so as not to paint an inaccurate picture of the scope of the prevalence of any given phenomenon. Moreover, the number of individual's making statements in any given theme or category will

also be defined. In addition, in sub-themes where an interaction may be present (e.g., in the discussion of high versus low scorers for any particular sub-theme, the number of statements are heavily weighted in one gender or another), this will be briefly touched upon, and re-visited in greater depth in Chapter V. It is also important to note that many of the coded statements made by interviewees were cross-coded, meaning that the same statement could feasibly appear under more than one sub-theme or category.

As a precursor to this portion of the current chapter, I have provided a "roadmap" in the form of an abbreviated table containing each of my 18 sub-themes and accompanying categories as divided according to my four meta-themes. The centered, boldfaced headings are the four meta-themes. The left-aligned, italicized headings are the 18 sub-themes. The capitalized headings in the center of the left-most column are the categories of the sub-themes.

The first number contained in each cell concerns the number of related statements for each sub-theme or category according to both occupational engagement status (HOES = high scorers on the OES-S; LOES = low scorers on the OES-S) and gender (females and males). The parenthetical number listed in each cell concerns the number of individuals (0 – 10) making one or more related statements. I hope that this table will provide the reader with some initial clarity regarding the chapter that will ensue thereafter.

For ease of reference, the following acronyms will be employed: HOES = high-scorers on the OES-S; LOES = low-scorers on the OES-S; HSF = high scoring females; HSM: high scoring males; LSF = low scoring females; LSM = low scoring males.

## Table 1: Interviewee Statements Based on

## Occupational Engagement Status and Gender*

|  | HOES | LOES | Females | Males |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **On (and Around) the Fence** | | | | |
| *Ambivalence* | 8 (3) | 19 (7) | 15 (5) | 11 (5) |
| *Uncertainty* | 16 (5) | 30 (10) | 22 (7) | 24 (8) |
| *Decidedness-Undecidedness* | | | | |
| DECIDED | 12 (6) | 8 (3) | 9 (4) | 11 (5) |
| UNDECIDED | 12 (4) | 27 (8) | 22 (7) | 17 (5) |
| *Openness to Differential Trajectories* | 19 (8) | 29 (9) | 24 (8) | 25 (9) |
| **Internal Processes** | | | | |
| *Affect* | | | | |
| POSITIVE | 16 (6) | 9 (4) | 13 (5) | 12 (5) |
| NEGATIVE | 8 (5) | 32 (8) | 26 (7) | 14 (6) |
| *Attitude* | | | | |
| APPROACHING | 38 (9) | 29 (9) | 44 (9) | 23 (9) |
| AVOIDING | 1 (1) | 12 (4) | 3 (2) | 10 (3) |
| *Development of Interests* | 24 (8) | 18 (8) | 27 (8) | 15 (8) |
| *Self-Determination* | 18 (8) | 10 (4) | 22 (8) | 6 (4) |
| SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY | 10 (5) | 3 (3) | 6 (6) | 7 (2) |
| *Self-Awareness* | | | | |
| ACADEMIC/VOCATIONAL SELF-AWARENESS | 11 (4) | 20 (9) | 21 (7) | 10 (6) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PERSONAL SELF-AWARENESS | 6 (5) | 9 (3) | 10 (5) | 5 (3) |
| IN-THE-MOMENT SELF-AWARENESS | 1 (1) | 7 (4) | 2 (2) | 6 (3) |
| **External Factors** | | | | |
| *Support* | 13 (7) | 10 (5) | 16 (8) | 7 (4) |
| *Influences* | | | | |
| EXPERIENCES GROWING UP | 10 (4) | 2 (2) | 6 (3) | 6 (3) |
| SPECIFIC OCCURRENCES | 4 (4) | 5 (2) | 6 (4) | 3 (2) |
| CURRICULAR EXPERIENCES | 4 (4) | 5 (5) | 5 (5) | 4 (4) |
| INPUT FROM OTHERS | 2 (2) | 4 (4) | 2 (2) | 4 (4) |
| *Important Others* | | | | |
| ROLE MODELS | 10 (7) | 3 (2) | 6 (4) | 7 (5) |
| MENTORS | 4 (4) | 0 (0) | 4 (4) | 0 (0) |
| *Happenstance* | | | | |
| POSITIVE OUTCOMES FROM NEGATIVE OR NEUTRAL CHANCE EVENTS | 7 (4) | 0 (0) | 6 (3) | 1 (1) |
| LUCK-OF-THE-DRAW INSTRUCTORS | 1 (1) | 2 (2) | 1 (1) | 2 (2) |
| MARRIAGE OF MR. CHANCE AND MS. INITIATIVE | 4 (3) | 2 (1) | 5 (3) | 1 (1) |
| **Taking Action** | | | | |
| *Networking* | 12 (5) | 9 (4) | 15 (7) | 6 (2) |
| *Exploration of Options/Alternatives* | | | | |
| SUBMITTING APPLICATIONS | 6 (5) | 13 (5) | 14 (6) | 5 (4) |
| GETTING MY FEET WET | 6 (5) | 7 (5) | 6 (5) | 7 (5) |
| *Acquisition of World of Work Knowledge* | 19 (5) | 16 (9) | 19 (6) | 16 (8) |
| *Involvement in Professionally Relevant Actions* | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT | 4 (2) | 14 (7) | 13 (5) | 5 (4) |
| CO-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT | 10 (3) | 1 (1) | 10 (3) | 1 (1) |
| INVOLVEMENT THROUGH VOLUNTEER WORK | 2 (2) | 4 (1) | 6 (3) | 0 (0) |
| INVOLVEMENT THROUGH INTERNSHIPS | 10 (6) | 7 (3) | 6 (4) | 11 (5) |
| INVOLVEMENT THROUGH FORMAL EMPLOYMENT | 11 (7) | 8 (6) | 10 (6) | 9 (7) |
| PERSONAL RESEARCH | 3 (2) | 2 (2) | 2 (2) | 3 (2) |
| *Formulation of Plans* | | | | |
| SPECIFIC PLANS FOR THE MONTHS RIGHT AFTER GRADUATION | 17 (9) | 5 (5) | 12 (7) | 10 (7) |
| SPECIFIC TEN YEAR PLAN | 11 (6) | 1 (1) | 9 (4) | 3 (3) |
| VAGUELY-DEFINED PLANS | 12 (6) | 23 (10) | 20 (8) | 15 (8) |
| TEMPORARY PLANS (PLACEHOLDERS) | 0 (0) | 6 (4) | 4 (2) | 2 (2) |
| BACK-UP PLANS | 6 (5) | 2 (2) | 5 (5) | 3 (2) |
| THE FAMILY PLAN | 1 (1) | 4 (4) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) |

*n of statements (n of participants contributing statements)*

**I.  On (and Around) the Fence**

    *A.  Ambivalence*

i.  <u>High versus Low Scorers:</u> LOES exhibited over twice as many statements reflective of

ambivalence (n = 19) than did HOES (n = 8). In particular, LSF's comprised the majority of

ambivalent statements (n = 14).

ii.  <u>Gender:</u> Females displayed more comments regarding ambivalence (n = 15) than did males (n

= 11), although this difference was slight. In addition, only one ambivalent statement was made

by a HSF, and nine of the ambivalent statements made by LSF's were from one individual.

    *B.  Uncertainty*

i.  <u>High versus Low Scorers:</u> LOES displayed nearly twice as many statements deemed to be

indicative of uncertainty (n = 30) than did HOES (n = 16). While all LSF's and LSM's were

represented in this sub-theme, only two HSF's and three HSM's exhibited uncertain comments.

ii.  <u>Gender:</u> Males reported slightly more comments pointing to uncertainty (n = 24) than did

females (n = 22).

    *C.  Decided – Undecided*

i.  <u>High versus Low Scorers:</u>

    a.  Decided: HOES displayed more comments illustrate of being decided (n = 12) than

did LOES (n = 8).

    b.  Undecided: LOES articulated over twice as many statements pointing to indecision (n

= 27) than did HOES (n = 12).

ii.  Gender:

a.  Decided: Males conveyed a slightly greater number of decidedness statements (n = 11) than did females (n = 9). The two decidedness comments made by LSF's came from the same individual.

b.  Undecided: Females noted more statements indicative of indecision (n = 22) than did males (n = 17). It should be noted that out of the 17 undecided statements made by males, only two came from HSM's. Furthermore, only three out of five HSF's were represented in this category, with one HSF articulating seven statements capturing indecision (out of ten total indecision statements made by the three HSF's). Moreover, out of the twelve undecided statements made by LSF's, seven came from one LSF individual.

D.  *Openness to Different Trajectories*

i.  High versus Low Scorers: LOES exhibited more comments pointing to being open to different trajectories (n = 29) than did HOES (n = 19).

ii.  Gender: Males and females were relatively comparable in the number of statements they made indicating their openness to different trajectories (n = 25 and n = 24 respectively).

II.  **Internal Processes**

A.  *Affect*

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a.  Positive: HOES exhibited a higher number of positive affect statements (n = 16) than did LOES (n = 9).

b.  Negative: LOES displayed four times as many negative affect comments (n = 32) than did HOES (n = 8). It is important to note that 17 of these comments were made by one LSF.

ii.  Gender:

   a.  Positive: Females exhibited slightly more positive affect statements (n = 13) than did males (n = 12). For males, ten out of twelve positive affect statements came from HSM's.

   b.  Negative: Females exhibited nearly twice as many negative affect statements (n = 26) as males (n = 14). Again, 17 of these comments were made by one LSF.

   *B.  Attitude.* Overall, my 20 interviewees as a whole displayed far more statements indicative of an approaching attitude than an avoiding attitude. This was true across both occupational engagement status as measured by the OES-S as well as gender.

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

   a.  Approaching: HOES displayed a greater number of comments indicative of an approaching attitude (n = 38) than did LOES (n = 29).

   b.  Avoidant: LOES reported far more statements pointing to an avoidant attitude (n = 12) than did HOES (n = 1). However, eight of the twelve comments from LOES came from one LSM.

ii.  Gender:

   a.  Approaching: Females displayed nearly twice as many approaching attitude statements (n = 44) than did males (n = 23).

   b.  Avoidant: Males exhibited far more avoidant attitude statements (n = 10) than did females (n = 3). Again, eight of the ten comments from the males came from one LSM.

   *B.  Development of Interests*

i.  High versus Low Scorers: HOES articulated more comments outlining the fit of their interests with their vocational aspirations (n = 24) than did LOES (n = 18). It should be noted that in all four groups (HSF's; HSM's; LSF's; LSM's), four out of five individuals were represented.

ii. Gender: Females articulated more comments outlining the fit of their interests with their vocational aspirations (n = 27) than did males (n = 15). It should be noted that of the 17 related comments from HSF's, nine came from one individual, and of the ten related comments from LSF's, six came from one individual.

   *D. Self-Determination*

i. High versus Low Scorers: HOES verbalized almost twice as many comments indicative of possessing self-determination (n = 18) than did LOES (n = 10). I would like to add that of the ten self-determination statements made by LOES, only one was made by a LSM. It is also important to note that six out of the nine self-determination statements verbalized by LSF's came from one individual.

ii. Gender: Females made nearly four times as many self-determination statements (n = 22) as males (n = 6).

   a. Social Responsibility

i. High versus Low Scorers: HOES exhibited over three times as many comments outlining a sense of social responsibility in their anticipated occupational work (n = 10) as did LOES (n = 3).

ii. Gender: Males exhibited slightly more comments outlining a sense of social responsibility in their anticipated occupational work (n = 7) as did females (n = 6). It should be noted that all related comments from males were from HSM's.

   *C. Self-Awareness*

i. High versus Low Scorers:

   a. Academic or Vocational Self-Awareness: LOES exhibited more comments related to self-awareness regarding work or school (n = 20) than did HOES (n = 11). It is important to note

that out of work or school related self-awareness comments from HSF's, six out of eight came from one HSF.

    b.  Personal Self-Awareness: LOES made more comments reflective of self-awareness regarding their personality (n = 9) than did HOES (n = 6).

    c.  In-the-Moment Self-Awareness: LOES made more statements indicative of gaining self-awareness through their interview with me (n = 7) than did HOES (n = 1)

ii.  Gender:

    a.  Academic or Vocational Self-Awareness: Females reported over twice as many self-awareness comments concerning work or school (n = 21) than did males (n = 10).

    b.  Personal Self-Awareness: Females reported twice as many personality related self-awareness statements (n = 10) as did males (n = 5). It should be noted that all five related comments stated by LSF's came from one individual.

    c.  In-the-Moment Self-Awareness: Males made more comments indicative of gaining self-awareness through their interview with me (n = 6) than did females (n = 2).

**III.  External Factors**

    *A.  Support*

i.  High versus Low Scorers: HOES made more comments reflective of receiving outside support (n = 13) than did LOES (n = 10).

ii.  Gender: Females articulated more comments indicative of receiving outside support (n = 16) than did males (n = 7). It is important to note that out of the four support statements made by HSM's, three were made by one individual. Also, out of the seven support statements made by LSF's, four were made by one individual.

*B. Influences*

<u>i. High versus Low Scorers:</u>

a. Experiences Growing Up: HOES exhibited five times as many comments indicative of influential experiences growing up (n = 10) as did LOES (n = 2). It is important to note that for HSF's, four out of the five comments were made by one individual.

b. Specific Occurrences: LOES exhibited slightly more comments signifying influential specific occurrences (n = 5) than did HOES (n = 4).

c. Curricular Experiences: LOES verbalized slightly more statements pointing to the influence of curricular experiences (n = 5) than did HOES (n = 4).

d. Input from Others: LOES indicated twice as many comments indicating that their paths had been influenced by input from others (n = 4) as opposed to HOES (n = 2).

<u>ii. Gender:</u>

a. Experiences Growing Up: Females and males displayed an equal number of comments pointing to influential events experienced growing up (n = 6 for both genders).

b. Specific Occurrences: Female articulated twice as many comments pegging specific occurrences as influential (n = 6) than did males (n = 3). It is important to note that with LSF's and LSM's, all related statements were made by only one individual in each group (three and two comments respectively).

c. Curricular Experiences: females verbalized slightly more statements pointing to the influence of curricular experiences (n = 5) than did males (n = 4).

d. Input from Others: Males indicated twice as many comments indicating that their paths had been influenced by input from others (n = 4) as opposed to females (n = 2).

*C. Important Others*

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a.  Role Models: HOES displayed over three times as many comments illustrative of the presence of role models (n = 10) as did LOES (n = 3).

b.  Mentors: HSF's were the only group to indicate the presence of mentors (n = 4). It is important to note that these four statements were issued by four separate HSF's.

ii.  Gender:

a.  Role Models: Males exhibited slightly more statements pointing to the existence of role models (n = 7) than did females (n = 6). However, it is important to note that for males, the number of statements was split relatively equally between HSM's (n = 4) and LSM's (n = 3), whereas for females, the number of statements was loaded solely on HSF's (n = 6), as LSF's did not display any statements outlining the existence of role models.

b.  Mentors: Again, HSF's were the only group to indicate the presence of mentors (n = 4), and these comments were split across four different individuals.

*D. Happenstance*

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a.  Positive Outcomes from Negative/Neutral Chance Events: Statements illustrating positive outcomes from negative/neutral chance events were articulated solely by HOES (n = 7).

b.  Luck-of-the-Draw Instructors: LOES articulated slightly more statements pointing to the impact of happenstance instructors (n = 2) than did HOES-S (n = 1).

c.  Marriage of Mr. Chance and Ms. Initiative: HOES verbalized twice as many statements indicative of capitalizing on a chance event (n = 4) as males (n = 2). It should be noted that no LSM's made such comments.

ii.  Gender:

a.  Positive Outcomes from Negative/Neutral Chance Events: HSF's verbalized a much greater number of comments pointing to positive outcomes stemming from negative/neutral chance events (n = 6) than did HSM's (n = 1). It should be noted that the six statements made by HSF's came from three different individuals.

b.  Luck-of-the-Draw Instructors: Males were found to make more comments illustrative of happenstance instructors (n = 2) than were females (n = 1). It should be noted that both comments from males were from LSM's, and the comment from the female was from a HSF.

c.  Marriage of Mr. Chance and Ms. Initiative: Females made far more statements indicative of capitalizing on chance events (n = 5) than did males (n = 1). Again, the one related statement made by a male was from a HSM.

**IV.  Taking Action**

*A.  Networking*

i.  High versus Low Scorers: HOES exhibited more comments indicative of utilizing networking to get themselves ahead (n = 12) than did LOES (n = 9). It should be noted that all twelve comments coming from HOES-S were from HSF'S, and that all five HSF's were represented in these comments.

ii.  Gender: Females made more statements pointing to their use of networking to further themselves occupationally (n = 15) than did males (n = 6). It should be noted that all six comments from males were from LSM's, and that five of these six statements were from the same individual.

*B.  Exploration of Options*

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a. Submitting Applications: LOES made over twice as many statements related to submitting applications, interviewing for positions, and more general job search activities (n = 13) than did HOES (n = 6).

b. Getting My Feet Wet: LOES made slightly more statements pointing to gaining first-hand or vicarious experience in a field (n = 7) than did HOES (n = 6).

ii.  Gender:

a. Submitting Applications: Females made nearly three times as many comments indicative of submitting applications, interviewing for positions, and more general job search activities (n = 14) than did males (n = 5).

b. Getting My Feet Wet: Males made slightly more statements pointing to gaining first-hand or vicarious experience in a field (n = 7) than females (n = 6).

*C. Acquisition of World of Work Knowledge*

i.  High versus Low Scorers: HOES displayed more statements indicative of AWOWK (n = 19) than did LOES (n = 16).

ii.  Gender: Females displayed more statements indicative AWOWK (n = 19) than did males (n = 16).

*D.  Involvement in Professionally Relevant Actions*

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a. Curricular Involvement: LOES exhibited over three times as many statements indicative of curricular involvement (n = 14) as HOES (n = 4). It should be noted that all comments made by HOES were from HSF's, and thatthree out of the four related comments made by HSF's were made by one individual.

b. Co-Curricular Involvement: HOES made more comments reflective of co-curricular involvement (n = 10) than did LOES (n = 1). It should be noted that all ten comments made by HOES were from HSF's, and that the solitary LOES comment was from a LSM.

c. Involvement Through Volunteer Work: LOES verbalized twice as many statements pointing to volunteer involvement (n = 4) as HOES (n = 2). All statements were made by females, all four comments from LSF's were made by one individual.

d. Involvement Through Internships: HOES articulated more statements reflective of involving themselves through internships (n = 10) than did LOES (n = 7). It should be noted that both of the two statements made by LSF's were from the same individual. In addition, four out of five related comments made by LSM's were from the same individual.

e. Involvement through Formal Employment: HOES exhibited more comments indicative of work experience (n = 11) than did LOES (n = 8).

f. Personal Research: HOES articulated slightly more comments indicating that they had conducted personal research in an occupational area of interest (n = 3) than did LOES (n = 2).

ii. Gender:

a. Curricular Involvement: Females exhibited almost three times as many statements indicative of curricular involvement (n = 13) as males (n = 5). It is important to note that all five statements from males were from LSM's.

b. Co-Curricular Involvement: Females made more comments reflective of co-curricular involvement (n = 10) than did males (n = 1). Again, all comments from females were from HSF's, and the sole male comment was from a LSM.

c. Involvement Through Volunteer Work: Females verbalized more statements pointing to volunteer involvement (n = 6) than did males (n = 0).

d. Involvement Through Internships: Males made almost twice as many comments indicative of involvement through internships (n = 11) as females (n = 6). It is important to note that four out of the six comments made by HSM's were from one individual.

e. Involvement through Formal Employment: Females exhibited slightly more comments indicative of work experience (n = 10) than did males (n = 9).

f. Personal Research: Males articulated slightly more comments indicating that they had conducted personal research in an occupational area of interest (n = 3) than did females (n = 2).

*E. Formulation of Plans*

i. High versus Low Scorers:

a. Specific Plans for the Months Immediately Following Graduation: HOES exhibited over three times as many statements indicative of specific post-graduation plans (n = 17) than did LOES (n = 5).

b. A Specific Ten-Year Plan: HOES verbalized many more comments outlining their specific ten year plan (n = 11) than did LOES (n = 1).

c. Vaguely-Defined Plans: LOES expressed nearly twice as many statements pointing to vaguely defined immediate or future plans (n = 23) than did HOES (n = 12). It is important to note that all five LSF's and all five LSM's were accounted for in this category, opposed to three out of five HSF's and three out of five HSM's.

d. Temporary Plans (AKA: "Placeholders"): LOES articulated far more comments illustrating the existence of temporary plans (n = 6) than did HOES (n = 0).

e. Back-Up Plans: HOES noted three times as many statements indicative of a back-up plan (n = 6) as did LOES (n = 2).

f.  The Family Plan: LOES verbalized more statements relating to foreseeing a family in their future (n = 4) than did HOES (n = 1).

ii.  Gender:

a.  Specific Plans for the Months Immediately Following Graduation: Females exhibited more statements indicative of specific post-graduation plans (n = 12) than did males (n = 10). It should be noted that all five HSF's were accounted for in this category, and that four out of the five HSM's were present as well.

b.  A Specific Ten-Year Plan: Females verbalized three times as many comments outlining specific 10 year plans (n = 9) than did males (n = 3). It is important to note that the vast majority of related comments came from HOES (with only one comment articulated by a LSF).

c.  Vaguely-Defined Plans: Females expressed more statements pointing to vaguely defined immediate or future plans (n = 20) than did males (n = 15). It should be noted that five out of the seven related comments coming from HSF's were stated by one individual.

d.  Temporary Plans (AKA: "Placeholders"): Females articulated twice as many comments illustrating temporary plans (n = 4) than did males (n = 2). It is important to note tat all related comments from both genders were from LOES.

e.  Back-Up Plans: Females noted more statements indicative of a back-up plan (n = 5) as did males (n = 3). It should be noted that all statements from males were from HSM's.

f.  The Family Plan: Males verbalized more statements relating to foreseeing a family in their future (n = 3) than did females (n = 2). It should be noted that both comments from females were from LSF's.

**Summary**

       The results of the current study were presented in this chapter. The first research question was addressed via interviewee quotations deemed to be most pertinent to each sub-theme and category. The second and third research questions were addressed via numerical comparisons concerning both the number of statements emerging in each sub-theme and category in addition to the number of individuals (between zero and 10 for HOES, LOES, females, and males) making these statements. The following chapter will encompass a discussion of these results, attending to each of the three research questions and offering tentative interpretations and explanations of these findings.

# Chapter V

## DISCUSSION

The previous chapter outlined the results that emerged through the process of data analysis. Four meta-themes emerged: 1) On (and Around ) the Fence; 2) Internal Processes; 3) External Factors; and 4) Taking Action. These four meta-themes were broken down into 18 sub-themes, some of which were further split into defining categories (e.g., the sub-theme entitled "attitude" was divided into two categories: "approaching" and "avoiding"). In the current chapter, I seek to explain how I have tentatively interpreted the results of my data analysis. It is important to remember that qualitative research is subjective by nature. While I believe I took every feasible precaution to limit my biases from impacting my data analysis (e.g., recruiting co-coders), the following interpretations of my data are solely my own. As the primary instrument in the interpretation of my results, I made every attempt to outline the manner in which I believe my experiences and viewpoints may have impacted my interpretations. Whenever possible, I linked my findings back to the existing literature as a jumping off point for interpreting these results through empirically-established lenses. For the sake of clarity, my interpretation portion of this chapter will be spatially organized similarly to the previous chapter: via meta-themes, sub-themes, and related categories. Although explicitly stated in Chapter IV, the definitions of each sub-theme will again be provided throughout the current chapter for ease of reference.

Prior to delving more deeply into a discussion of the findings of the current study, I would like to offer another snapshot of my results, similar to the aforementioned Table 1. The following table (Table 2) examines the meta-themes, sub-themes, and categories from the vantage point of the four groups of interviewees: HSF's, HSM's, LSF's, and LSM's. Similar to Table 1, Table 2 will consist of "tallies" of both total number of related comments for any given

sub-theme and category, as well as parenthetical notations of the number of individuals within

each interviewee group making such statements (between zero and five for each respective

group).

## Table 2: Interview Statements

## Based on the Four Interviewee Groups*

| | HSF's | HSM's | LSF's | LSM's |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **On (and Around) the Fence** | | | | |
| *Ambivalence* | 1 (1) | 6 (2) | 14 (4) | 5 (3) |
| *Uncertainty* | 8 (2) | 8 (3) | 14 (5) | 16 (5) |
| *Decidedness-Undecidedness* | | | | |
| DECIDED | 7 (3) | 5 (3) | 2 (1) | 6 (2) |
| UNDECIDED | 10 (3) | 2 (1) | 12 (4) | 15 (4) |
| *Openness to Differential Trajectories* | 7 (4) | 12 (4) | 17 (4) | 13 (5) |
| **Internal Processes** | | | | |
| *Affect* | | | | |
| POSITIVE | 6 (2) | 10 (4) | 7 (3) | 2 (1) |
| NEGATIVE | 4 (3) | 4 (2) | 22 (4) | 10 (4) |
| *Attitude* | | | | |
| APPROACHING | 24 (4) | 14 (5) | 20 (5) | 9 (4) |
| AVOIDING | 0 (0) | 1 (1) | 3 (2) | 9 (2) |
| *Development of Interests* | 17 (4) | 7 (4) | 10 (4) | 8 (4) |
| *Self-Determination* | 13 (5) | 5 (3) | 9 (3) | 1 (1) |
| SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY | 3 (3) | 7 (2) | 3 (3) | 0 (0) |
| *Self-Awareness* | | | | |
| ACADEMIC/VOCATIONAL SELF-AWARENESS | 8 (2) | 3 (2) | 13 (5) | 7 (4) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PERSONAL SELF-AWARENESS | 5 (4) | 1 (1) | 5 (1) | 4 (2) |
| IN-THE-MOMENT SELF-AWARENESS | 1 (1) | 0 (0) | 1 (1) | 6 (3) |
| **External Factors** | | | | |
| *Support* | 9 (5) | 4 (2) | 7 (3) | 3 (2) |
| *Influences* | | | | |
| EXPERIENCES GROWING UP | 5 (2) | 5 (2) | 1 (1) | 1 (1) |
| SPECIFIC OCCURRENCES | 3 (3) | 1 (1) | 3 (1) | 2 (1) |
| CURRICULAR EXPERIENCES | 3 (3) | 1 (1) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) |
| INPUT FROM OTHERS | 1 (1) | 1 (1) | 1 (1) | 3 (3) |
| *Important Others* | | | | |
| ROLE MODELS | 6 (4) | 4 (3) | 0 (0) | 3 (2) |
| MENTORS | 4 (4) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| *Happenstance* | | | | |
| POSITIVE OUTCOMES FROM NEGATIVE OR NEUTRAL CHANCE EVENTS | 6 (3) | 1 (1) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| LUCK-OF-THE-DRAW INSTRUCTORS | 1 (1) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 2 (2) |
| MARRIAGE OF MR. CHANCE AND MS. INITIATIVE | 3 (2) | 1 (1) | 2 (1) | 0 (0) |
| **Taking Action** | | | | |
| *Networking* | 12 (5) | 0 (0) | 3 (2) | 6 (2) |
| *Exploration of Options/Alternatives* | | | | |
| SUBMITTING APPLICATIONS | 4 (3) | 2 (2) | 10 (3) | 3 (2) |
| GETTING MY FEET WET | 3 (3) | 3 (2) | 3 (2) | 4 (3) |
| *Acquisition of World of Work Knowledge* | 10 (2) | 9 (3) | 9 (4) | 7 (5) |
| *Involvement in Professionally Relevant Actions* | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT | 4 (2) | 0 (0) | 9 (3) | 5 (4) |
| CO-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT | 10 (3) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 1 (1) |
| INVOLVEMENT THROUGH VOLUNTEER WORK | 2 (2) | 0 (0) | 4 (1) | 0 (0) |
| INVOLVEMENT THROUGH INTERNSHIPS | 4 (3) | 6 (3) | 2 (1) | 5 (2) |
| INVOLVEMENT THROUGH FORMAL EMPLOYMENT | 7 (3) | 4 (4) | 3 (3) | 5 (3) |
| PERSONAL RESEARCH | 1 (1) | 2 (1) | 1 (1) | 1 (1) |
| *Formulation of Plans* | | | | |
| SPECIFIC PLANS FOR THE MONTHS RIGHT AFTER GRADUATION | 10 (5) | 7 (4) | 2 (2) | 3 (3) |
| SPECIFIC TEN YEAR PLAN | 8 (3) | 3 (3) | 1 (1) | 0 (0) |
| VAGUELY-DEFINED PLANS | 7 (3) | 5 (3) | 13 (5) | 10 (5) |
| TEMPORARY PLANS (PLACEHOLDERS) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 4 (2) | 2 (2) |
| BACK-UP PLANS | 3 (3) | 3 (2) | 2 (2) | 0 (0) |
| THE FAMILY PLAN | 0 (0) | 1 (1) | 2 (2) | 2 (2) |

*n of statements (n of participants contributing statements)*

**I. On (and Around) the Fence**

      *A. Ambivalence.* For the purpose of this study, ambivalence was defined as difficulty occupying a firm position in any particular area (e.g., committing to graduate school, beginning a full-time job, leaving college, or even their feelings about something), or more generally as sitting atop the fence.

i.  High versus Low Scorers: LOES exhibited over twice the likelihood of expressing ambivalent comments as HOES. From the vantage point of the OES-S, LOES possess less information and experience through engagement activities, it seems plausible that they would experience more difficulty in committing to a "side", as they don't necessarily possess a full understanding of what any particular option entails. In their qualitative investigation of the college-to-career transition, Murphy et al. (2010) found that it was typical for their participants to express ambivalent reactions toward work in general. However, "ambivalence" as presented by Murphy et al. (2010) seems to be in reference to their sample as a whole (e.g., one person displayed positive reflections about work, a different person exhibited negative reactions about their job, etc.), whereas "ambivalence" as it was defined in my study concerned a polarity of affect or expression *within a single individual*. Nonetheless, future researchers may wish to more explicitly investigate the construct of ambivalence, particularly as it relates to the source from which it arises (e.g., plans, "growing up" in general, moving far away, etc.).

ii.  Gender: While females expressed ambivalent statements more than males, it is important to examine the source of these ambivalent statements. One such comment was made by a HSF, whereas 14 comments came from LSF's, a very large discrepancy. Again, given that LOES in general are likely less equipped with information and experience acquired through engagement experiences, this is not a surprising finding. The stark difference in sheer number of comments

may point to a possible interaction between gender and occupational engagement status in the capability of college females who are occupationally engaged to "pick a side" and feel confident about it.

While males (HSM's versus LSM's) were somewhat comparable in sheer number of ambivalent statements, HSM's expressed ambivalent comments nearly twice as often as LSM's. I deemed this to be a noteworthy discrepancy, particularly since I would have expected LSM's to convey higher levels of ambivalence given the aforementioned rationale. This finding may be partially explained through longstanding societal expectations for young men to establish themselves vocationally so that they can eventually assume the role as the breadwinner in a partnership and financially support a family. It seems possible that HSM's may have been socialized in this fashion through their engagement experiences (e.g., perhaps career-related part-time jobs or involvement in major-related clubs exposes HSM's to fellow HSM's with similar "go-getter" attitudes, instilling HSM's as a group with a sense of "this is our role".) Due to this socialization, HSM's may be placing more pressure on themselves to "pick the 'right' side" (and experience ambivalence as a result of this pressure) so that they can fulfill their role as provider more so than LSM's, who may not be as aware of societal expectations due to their limited outside involvement and socialization with ambitious young men.

*B. Uncertainty.* Interviewees were deemed to possess uncertainty (as opposed to undecidedness) if they were planful and if their post-graduation plans were contingent upon a particular occurrence (e.g., hearing back from a graduate school about admission).

i.  High versus Low Scorers: LOES exhibited comments indicative of uncertainty nearly twice as often as HOES. This result may be partially explained via the limited engagement experiences of LOES, leaving them questioning whether or not being "planful" would suffice in light of the

paucity of information and experiences they had accrued. Conversely, it is likely that HOES acquired more occupationally related information and experiences through their engagement, perhaps providing them with a better "feel" for what it takes, (hence, eliminating much of the uncertainty they might otherwise feel).

Perhaps more important is the pervasive nature of uncertainty amongst LOES: all five LSF's and all five LSM's were represented within this sub-theme, while only two HSF's and three HSM's exhibited uncertain statements. This finding may indicate an over-riding sense of doubt amongst LOES concerning their ability to "cut it" in post-college plans, pointing to the importance of occupational engagement as a means of instilling confidence in young adults.

In absorbing these tentative interpretations, the reader is encouraged to keep I mind the logic offered by Gelatt (1989), who argued for the importance of positive uncertainty: "…reality is a subjective creation in a personal frame of reference. The new decision strategy uses the whole brain, accepts uncertainty, and asks for flexibility" (p. 253). From the standpoint of Gelatt, uncertainty is beneficial to the individual submerged in the career decision-making process to the extent that it affords them with an open mind to more effectively navigate whatever their occupational trajectory has in store for them. In this sense, perhaps those individuals possessing more uncertainty (as opposed to undecidedness) are, due to their flexibility, better equipped to navigate the post-collegiate career landscape. It may be fruitful for future researchers to investigate the presence of positive uncertainty in college seniors as an adaptive trait.

ii. Gender: While males emerged as exhibiting more uncertainty statements than females, this difference was slight (24 statements versus 22 statements respectively). This may indicate that uncertainty cuts across gender, hinging much more heavily upon engagement experiences. In this instance, the argument offered by Luzzo (1995) may be at play. Unlike women, perhaps men

possess a general lack of awareness of potential life-role obstacles they would need to overcome (e.g., the interface of work and family roles). Luzzo conjectured that, as a result of this awareness, women are more likely to be planful in their career development process, exploring ways in which to navigate potential barriers. Men, according to Luzzo, do not seem to place a high value on such planning and exploration, resulting in a sense of uncertainty regarding what comes next. Future researchers may wish to further investigate the prevalence of uncertainty based on gender in order to determine if the relatively comparable levels achieved in the current study hold with a larger sample, while simultaneously attending to the previously discussed logic offered by Gelatt (1989).

   *C. Decidedness-Undecidedness.* In the current study, decidedness entailed a *deliberate* commitment to a particular course of action or way of being. However, decidedness is not synonymous with engagement, as some individuals who come across as "decided" may have arrived at their decision without much forethought or exploration (premature foreclosure). The manner in which an individual arrived at their state of decidedness (e.g., exploration versus foreclosure) was not distinguished in the present study, but may serve as a fruitful area for future researchers. Opposed to uncertainty, which is both planful and contingent, undecidedness is conceptualized as aimless or directionless; there are no plans in the works, and ideas about potential paths to follow are ill-defined at best.

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

   a.  Decided. HOES emerged as more likely to make decidedness comments than LOES. One possible explanation of this is that engagement experiences provided HOES with valuable information and experiences that facilitated them in being able to make a deliberate commitment to a given course of action. However, given the literature on career adaptability, as

well as that regarding the notion of positive uncertainty by Gelatt (1989), perhaps "being decided" should not be conceptualized as the gold-standard way of being for college students approaching graduation. "As many advisors and counselors have witnessed, many so-called decided students need as much assistance with academic and career planning as the admittedly undecided students" (Gordon, 1998, p. 391).

     b. Undecided. LOES displayed undecidedness comments over twice as often as HOES. The lack of engagement experiences acquired by LOES likely places them in a position of not having a clear idea of what they like or want (or even a clear idea concerning the available options or opportunities), resulting in their higher levels of undecidedness. This finding is further intensified by the fact that seven out of the ten indecision comments from HSF's came from one individual, possibly pointing to an outlier in this group of HSF's, (and even more discrepant results). SCCT may provide a partial explanation for these results. It seems likely that many of the individuals who expressed undecidedness related to their plans may do so as a result of their lack of knowledge of the possibilities available to them, as well as a muddy understanding of what they want in their future career (or even life in general). According to Feldt and Woelfel (2009), the inclusion of specific career outcome expectations into the SCCT model may serve to increase our understanding of career indecision, as such an inclusion may highlight career outcome expectations valued by the undecided individual, lending direction to their occupational considerations. Therefore, one explanation for the much higher levels of undecidedness in LOES could be that they have not taken the time to consider what they want out of a career (as well as other facets of their life), and the ways in which the options available to them either fit or fail to fit with their values.

ii. Gender:

a. Decided. Males emerged as more likely to make decidedness comments than females, yet this difference was slight. However, the two decidedness statements from LSF's came from the same individual, possibly indicating an outlier (in which case the results would be more discrepant). It may be useful for future researchers to investigate the relationship between decidedness and gender through the lens of occupational engagement. In their study of career decision status, Wanberg and Muchinsky (1992) discovered that "decided-confident" students expressed the belief that they possessed control over their lives, harbored positive feelings about themselves, exhibited confidence in their decision-making abilities, and placed a high importance upon their future career. Anecdotally, these four tenets seem to be more widely prevalent amongst males, perhaps as a result of the widely accepted (traditional) societal expectation that males are more career-oriented than are females, leading them to concentrate their focus on developing vocationally (as opposed to socially, familially, etc.), whereas the more relational focus of females may cause non-vocational tasks (e.g., marriage and childbearing) to compete for their limited attention and focus. This argument is up for speculation, and in need of empirical validation from future researchers. In either case, it is important to remember that students (male or female) presenting as "decided" may not be as favorably positioned for their futures as they would otherwise lead the casual observer to believe: "Although they may feel confident, knowledgeable, and satisfied with their current choice, most individuals will be making other career-related decisions in the future. Admittedly, some very decided students may have made their decisions prematurely or may not be aware of their lack of information" (Gordon, 1998, p. 392). In this instance, the construct of occupational engagement would emerge

as critically important for obtaining the valuable information and experiences that could lead to informed decidedness, irrespective of gender.

b. Undecided. Females as a group appeared to be more likely to make statements indicative of undecidedness than males, yet it is important to note that one individual HSF made seven out of the 10 total undecidedness statements articulated by HSF's as a group. Moreover, out of the 12 undecided statements made by LSF's, seven came from one LSF individual. These two individuals could serve as outlier females, possibly indicating that levels of undecidedness are comparable between genders. Given these considerations, it may make more sense to conceptualize indecision about future plans under the lens occupational engagement status (high versus low) as opposed to gender. In either scenario, it is important to note the findings of Wanberg and Muchinsky (1992) that students who were "seriously undecided" exhibited under-developed vocational identities, and lacked self-esteem. Perhaps of most relevance to the current study, seriously undecided individuals were also found to possess low levels of knowledge concerning school or work alternatives. It may be fruitful for future researchers to more explicitly examine undecidedness in graduating college seniors according to gender, attending to differential levels of both vocational identity and self-esteem in males versus females.

*D. Openness to Differential Trajectories.* This sub-theme concerns an individual's demonstrated or projected willingness to consider more than one potential post-graduation path. i. High versus Low Scorers: LOES as a group made more statements indicative of being open to pursuing a variety of paths than did HOES. This finding could relate to what was previously discussed concerning higher levels of decidedness amongst HOES as a group, and higher levels of undecidedness amongst LOES as a group. It may therefore be that HOES are less open to differential trajectories because they have already committed to a particular course of action, and

that LOES are more open to differential trajectories because they are undecided (aimless), and could "do anything".

ii.  Gender: Both genders exhibited comparable levels of openness to differential trajectories, possibly indicating that engagement status is the driving factor when it comes to this sub-theme. Future researchers may wish to further investigate openness to differential trajectories amongst a larger sample in order to determine if this apparent similarity across gender holds up on a broader scale.

## II. Internal Processes

*A.  Affect.* In the current project, affect was defined broadly as anything an interviewee stated pertaining to emotion or mood. More specifically, most affect statements were categorized as either positive (e.g., excitement, pride, hope, etc.) or negative (e.g., anxiety, insecurity, lack of preparation, etc.).

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a.  Positive. HOES expressed more positive affect statements than did LOES. The reasons behind this finding could be varied, however, the higher levels of decidedness statements amongst HOES as a group may serve as a driving force for the display of positive affect comments, particularly since the final year of college is a time when decidedness seems to be expected or encouraged. Gelatt (1989) discussed the benefits of being positive in the face of uncertainty: "Positive uncertainty…involves ambiguity and paradox…it will help to realize that one does not know some things, cannot always see what is coming, and frequently will not be able to control it. Being positive and uncertain allows one to be able to act when one is not certain about what one is doing" (p. 255). The act of transitioning out of college is likely to instill virtually every senior with some sense of ambiguity. Perhaps it is the tolerance of such ambiguity

(or in the case of positive uncertainty, the embracement of ambiguity) that results in the capability of HOES to maintain largely positive affect in the face of an uncertain future.

        b.  Negative. LOES displayed more negative affect statements (four times as many) than did HOES. Again, one reason for this could be the interaction of affect with decidedness: The higher levels of undecidedness displayed by LOES as a group could be a major driving force on their display of negative affect, as chronic indecision could likely cause a great deal of stress. One caveat to these results is a potential outlier LSF, who made 17 out of the 22 negative affect statements, tipping these findings in a manner that is somewhat skewed. Nonetheless, one possible explanation could be that LOES (at least during the time of their transition from college), lack the capacity to embrace ambiguity, exhibiting negative affect statements far more often than their more highly engaged counterparts (as measured by the OES-S). Future researchers may do well to examine the most prevalent sources of negative affect in students approaching this major life transition.

ii.  <u>Gender:</u>

        a.  Positive. The display of positive affect was comparable across gender, with females exhibiting slightly more positive affect statements than males. However, out of the 12 positive affect statements from males, 10 came from HSM's, pointing to a possible interaction between gender and level of occupational engagement. Traditionally, males are socialized to be more career-oriented than females, and while this paradigm is shifting, it takes time for deep-rooted beliefs about the occupational responsibilities of men and women to change dramatically. Therefore, it may be that LSM's experience greater susceptibility to negative affect given their general lack of engagement (as measured by the OES-S) with their career development process, coupled with the "career = identity" mindset that is often ingrained in males from a young age.

b.  Negative. Females exhibited more negative affect statements (almost double) than males, although it is important to examine the source of these statements. Concerning comments indicative of negative affect, HSF<LSF, and HSM< LSM. However, it should be noted that out of the 22 negative affect comments made by LSF's, 17 came from one individual. If this person was removed from the analysis, LSF's would be comparable to both HSF's and HSM's in their expression of negative affect, with LSM's exhibiting twice as much as the other three groups of interviewees. Again, it may be the case that LSM's as a group are more susceptible to experiencing negative affect due to the combination of lower levels of occupational engagement and a higher likelihood of defining themselves according to their careers.

B.  *Attitude.* Attitude as it was referred to in the current project encompassed an individual's general outlook on their future. This sub-theme is divided into two primary attitude types: approaching and avoiding. As was stated by Gelatt (1989): "Attitude is important in winning games, getting a job, recovering form illness, and climbing a mountain. Therefore, it is not surprising that attitude is important in making decisions" (p. 255).

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a.  Approaching.  HOES as a group made more statements indicative of possessing an approaching attitude than did LOES. This finding could be expected, as being occupationally engaged requires individuals to "approach" opportunities on their own accord, diving head-first into experiences that equip them with knowledge concerning what they're "in for" or "up against". In addition, this finding seems to be consistent with the findings of Ferrari et al. (2009), in that students high in campus engagement reported greater mastery orientation and performance goal orientations. While performance goal orientations include both

performance-approaching (seeking positive results) and performance avoidance (avoiding negative results), it may be that highly engaged students possess the motivation (even motivation to evade negative consequences) absent in students not displaying such engagement. Future researchers may wish to examine the reasons that HOES provide for their occupational engagement, specifically achieving positive outcomes (e.g., first-hand knowledge and experience) versus avoiding negative outcomes (e.g., making sure they are not eliminated from the consideration pool of graduate school applicants via involving themselves to boost their resume).

              b.  Avoiding. LOES surfaced as more likely than HOES to make comments reflective of an avoidant attitude (12 statements to one statement respectively). It makes sense that individuals who avoid engaging themselves in their environment (as was measured by the OES-S) would also be avoidant across other areas of their lives (e.g., seriously thinking about their future plans). However, the caveat to this finding is that two-thirds of the avoidant attitude comments from LOES were stated by one LSM. If this individual was removed from the analysis, LOES would still emerge as more avoidant, but the margin of difference would be much smaller, and would be more weighted on LSF's than LSM's. Given my results, coupled with the interesting findings by Ferrari et al. (2009) that all three goal orientations (mastery, performance-approaching, and performance avoiding) increase with greater campus engagement, future researchers may do well to investigate avoidant attitudes and behaviors in both HOES and LOES, as the pervasiveness of avoidance may be comparable across both groups of students, but for different reasons.

ii.  Gender:

a.  Approaching. Females reigned as "approaching attitude champions", displaying nearly twice as many comments as males in this realm. In pondering explanations for this result, my mind traveled back to my pre-college school days. I distinctly recall a pervasive culture where it was "cool" for girls to involve themselves in a variety of activities (e.g., clubs, theatre, sports, student council, etcetera.), but that it was only "cool" for boys to participate in athletics (lest they place themselves in a position to have their sexuality questioned for doing otherwise). While college is not the same as grade school or high school, it seems plausible that this mindset regarding what is "cool" may pervade into higher education as well, possibly accounting for the higher number of approaching attitude statements from females.

b.  Avoiding. Males were more likely to make comments indicative of an avoiding attitude than were females, stating over three times as many avoiding attitude comments. Nevertheless, the same caveat must be addressed: avoiding attitudinal statements were weighted heavily amongst the LSM's, concentrated on one individual in particular. Therefore, these findings must be interpreted with caution. Regarding an explanation for this finding, I would offer the same tentative interpretation that I provided in the previous section concerning what is "cool" for males versus females, as that line of logic would appear to apply in this instance as well.

B.  *Development of Interests.* People develop their interests in a variety of ways (e.g., through first-hand experience or vicarious experience), and as such, interests may be well-informed (grounded in reality) or uninformed (based off of fantasy or imagination). If we apply the three components of the Trilateral Model of Adaptive Career Decision-Making (Krieshok et al., 2009) to the development of interests, it might be construed that individuals tap into both

reason and intuition (internal processes) when determining their interests, with engagement (an external process) functioning as the center pivot in interest development (e.g., direct involvement in a potential area of interest serves to inform both the rational and intuitive internal processes).

i.  High versus Low Scorers: HOES emerged as more likely than LOES to express interest statements in line with their academic major and/or projected future occupation. Interestingly, it should be noted that I did not explicitly pull for interests through my interview protocol, yet in each group of interviewees (HSF's, HSM's, LSF's, and LSM's), four out of five individuals made interest-related statements. One way these findings may be conceptualized is in accordance with the interest model in SCCT. This model postulates that an individual's environment exposes them to a variety of activities which may lay the groundwork for future occupational options in adulthood. Interests develop as young people are encouraged to pursue and excel in certain activities over others, developing self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations concerning particular areas, thus promoting further practice and skill refinement. While interests may stabilize by early adulthood, Lent (2005) argues that they are not set in stone, and that it is important for people to gain exposure to experiences that facilitate the expansion of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations. Through the lens of the current project, this exposure is achieved through occupational engagement, promoting the acquisition of experience and information that can facilitate the individual in discovering where their true interests lie, fostering a sense of where they "fit" occupationally.

ii.  Gender: Females were almost twice as likely as males to spontaneously convey interest statements consistent with their major or career track. It should be noted that one HSF made nine out of 17 related statements for HSF's as a group, and that one LSF made six out of 10 related statements for LSF's as a group. Nevertheless, this seems to be a noteworthy finding, and may be

at least partially explained via SCCT. According to this theory, females, particularly those in non-gender traditional majors and career tracks (e.g., Victoria, Rhea, Kate and Candie), from an early age may receive more encouragement to pursue and excel in certain activities over others (e.g., Rhea recounted how she grew up building toy houses with her father). Perhaps partially as a result of major grants such as the National Science Foundation to sponsor studies aimed at implementing programs for women in STEM fields, females may receive more encouragement regarding the value of their performance in non-gender stereotypic fields than males, whom are not typically encouraged to pursue non-gender stereotypic fields. According to SCCT, the receipt of such positive feedback sparks further interest, propelling the individual to practice and refine their skills in a given area, thus advancing the development of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations necessary for continued involvement and success.

For example, the movie *Meet the Parents* illustrates the resistance of traditional men (Robert De Niro's character, Jack) to males pursuing careers in traditionally female fields, Ben Stiller's, character (Greg), who plays a male nurse. The audience witnesses Greg repeatedly harassed by the men in his girlfriend's family over the fact that he chose to go to nursing school opposed to medical school, going so far as to endure accusations of lying about taking the medical school entrance exam (which we find out later that he passed with flying colors). Conversely, in the sequel to this movie, *Meet the Fockers*, we meet Greg's parents, a couple of free-spirited individuals who take pride in their son's smallest of accomplishments (we all remember Jack's mockery of Greg's childhood awards displayed by his father: "I didn't know they made 9th place ribbons"). From this example, we can observe how easily the interests of an individual can be enhanced or diminished through the feedback they receive (positive versus negative) from important others regarding their ability in a given area or the value attached to

pursuing a particular path. Perhaps if Greg had been raised by Jack, his human agency to follow

his interest in nursing may have been extinguished through environmental factors (e.g., a father

who mocks his child's interests due to unfounded personal embarrassment).

     *C. Self-Determination.* Individuals were deemed to possess self-determination when they

expressed a desire to succeed, and also exuded drive or ambition in their stories about

themselves. This sub-theme is organized differently than the other 17 sub-themes. Self-

determination in general emerged as a sub-theme, and was examined through the lens of both

occupational engagement status (as measured by the OES-S) as well as gender. Social

responsibility serves as the sole category associated with the sub-theme of self-determination

(unlike other sub-themes where there is a minimum of two associated categories), and was also

examined through the lenses of occupational engagement status and gender.

i.  High versus Low Scorers: HOES made nearly twice as many self-determination statements as

LOES. It makes sense that individuals scoring high in the construct of occupational engagement

(as measured by the OES-S) would have the self-propelled desire to achieve, coupled with the

necessary drive to realize their dreams. As was discussed in the review of the literature, SCCT

posits that human agency (akin to the self-determination discussed in the current study) plays a

critical role in the career development process. As Lent (2005) asserted, a variety of both

personal and environmental influences can enhance, diminish, or prevail over human agency;

self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals can serve to foster human agency.

For example, Victoria was encouraged by her parents to pursue and excel in high school debate.

While I did not deliberately ask her if she experienced success, her longstanding (and current)

involvement with debate through her own competition and her coaching duties are strong

indicators of such success. It is likely that Victoria experienced positive feedback concerning her

debate skills, sparking her to develop self-efficacy in this area, and prompting her to set personal goals that would lead to the outcomes she desired (e.g., mastery over arguing a topic). In college, her parents rigorously encouraged Victoria to pursue a degree in law, and this served as a strong environmental influence for some time. However, Victoria's exposure to learning experiences (e.g., international travel) compelled her to exercise her human agency (self-determination) to instead pursue a career in international business and economics, a field toward which she expressed much interest and passion. Again, while human agency will not always prevail in terms of occupation selection due to a variety of person and environmental factors, it is an important component of gaining exposure to potentially valuable career-related information and experience, and HOES appear to have a leg-up when it comes to exercising human agency and possessing self-determination.

ii. <u>Gender:</u> Females made nearly four times as many statements conveying self-determination as males. This number was concentrated most heavily amongst HSF's, making 13 out of 22 self-determination statements from females. However, it should be called to attention that out of the nine related comments coming from the LSF's, six were stated by one individual. Still, if this outlier was removed from the analysis, females would continue to reign supreme in terms of self-determination. Again referencing SCCT, Lent (2005) posited that the learning environments to which girls and women are exposed can serve to limit or expand the career options that they eventually come to pursue, as such exposure facilitates the development of self-efficacy beliefs in a particular area. As was noted by Hackett and Lent (1992), sex differences in self-efficacy often emerge in studies with general samples of students regarding gender stereotypical tasks/fields (e.g., nursing for women, firefighting for men). However, when differences are less likely to surface with student samples comprised of individuals (both male and female) who had

similar self-efficacy building experiences with gender differences in self-efficacy beliefs for non-gender stereotypic tasks. This argument was clearly illustrated in the current study with Victoria and Rhea, both of whom were fostered and encouraged (by their fathers) in non-gender stereotypic activities growing up (mathematics/physics and construction/building respectively), presumably leading to their college majors (economics/political science and architecture respectively), and projected career aspirations. Therefore, it may be that females are a unique in receiving such early support and cheerleading in non-gender traditional fields, whereas males do not receive such encouragement in traditionally female fields, hence, exhibiting a failure to engage in such fields. This could be due to widespread societal views regarding the appropriateness of certain jobs for females versus males, and future researchers may do well to explicitly examine occupational engagement in individuals pursuing non-gender stereotypic college majors and career tracks.

One possible reason for this finding is that young women, (particularly those who are high-achieving or who hold ambitious aspirations) must contend not only with furthering their careers, but also with the potential demands of child-rearing (which in and of itself can be a full-time job). Given this awareness of their prospective dual-roles, it seems plausible that females as a group would possess more self-determination to proceed full-speed ahead occupationally so as to get a jump on laying the groundwork for the family they may one day have.

a. Social Responsibility. When an individual made comments reflective of a drive and desire to "help" society in some manner, they were said to possess social responsibility.

i. High versus Low Scorers: HOES emerged as three times as likely as LOES to express statements conveying a sense of social responsibility in their occupational plans or aspirations. While the reasons for this finding are up for speculation, it might be construed that individuals

high in occupational engagement (as measured by the OES-S) are likely different in fundamental ways (e.g., their outlook on life, their values, etc.) than individuals low in occupational engagement. Future researchers may wish to explore this discrepancy in more depth, focusing primarily on the perceptions of young people regarding their principal roles and/or functions in life.

ii.  Gender: Males were slightly more likely than females (a difference of one social responsibility comment) to express a sense of social responsibility in their future work. Given the sectors of jobs traditionally held by men versus women (e.g., the classically service-oriented work performed by women in the way of nursing, teaching, etc.), I would have expected women to make more related statements than men. This finding also runs counter to the research conducted by Gati, Osipow, and Givon (1995) concerning gender differences in career decision making: "…more women than men preferred providing mental help and community service…and working in the fields of culture and service…men's preferences are compatible with the traditional business and technology orientation, whereas women's preferences are compatible with the traditional female social and humanistic orientation" (p. 213). However, given that my definition of social responsibility did not specifically entail occupational titles or trajectories, these results must be interpreted with caution. Future researchers may do well to investigate gender difference in the desire to serve society through formal employment versus a more general yearning (or even obligation) to contribute to society through any medium (e.g., unpaid volunteer work on the weekends).

     *D. Self-Awareness.* For a comment to be classified as self-aware, the individual making that comment needed to portray an understanding of some aspect of themselves above and beyond what I would have expected as a typical response to an interview inquiry. More

specifically, this deeper understanding could be retrospective, reflecting upon what they have learned about themselves through time and experience, or it could also be a present-day sense of awareness, gradually coming to light as they move closer to the transition of graduation. Self-awareness most frequently emerged in three domains: 1) academic or vocational; 2) personal; 3) arising out of the interview experience, or "in-the-moment".

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a.  Academic or Vocational Self-Awareness. LOES emerged as more likely to make statements indicative of work and/or school self-awareness. Moreover, out of the related comments from HSF's, six out of eight statements came from one individual, who, if removed from the analysis, would further widen the gap between LOES and HOES. I would have anticipated HOES to secure a landslide victory in this category simply by way of their occupational engagement behaviors. Explanations for this finding are up for speculation. It may be the case that the apparent school/work self-awareness exhibited by HOES is an underestimate, as perhaps their high level of occupational engagement has infused HOES with the realization that "the more I learn, the more I realize I don't know", and that this insight was reflected in their sparse number of comments relative to academic or vocational self-awareness. Future research is needed to clarify the unexpected finding in the current study that LOES possess more awareness regarding school and work than do HOES.

b.  Personal Self-Awareness. LOES were found to be more likely than HOES to verbalize self-awareness regarding their personality and how that fits with the world of work. Again, I would have expected HOES to possess more personal self-awareness, as one of the functions of occupational engagement is to increase one's knowledge regarding not only the world around them, but also of themselves in the world (Krieshok et al., 2009). Future research is

needed in order to further examine the lower levels of personal self-awareness in HOES detected in the current project, potentially aimed at interventions to increase this self-awareness if it is in fact found to be lacking in a larger sample.

              c.  In-the-Moment Self-Awareness. LOES emerged as more likely than HOES to make statements indicating that their interview with me had served to enhance their self-awareness about either who they are, their values, or the world of work in general. One possible explanation for this finding could be that, theoretically (Cox, 2008), HOES would be more likely than LOES to discuss their career planning process with important others in their lives (e.g., family, friends, faculty, advisors, etc.). If this tenet is true, it would make sense that HOES would have already gained self-awareness from their conversations with others, whereas LOES (who are not as likely to have conversed with important others regarding their career planning process) would not have taken the time (or had the opportunity) to gain such self-awareness in the past, allowing for the interview experience with me exert a greater impact. The reader should be directed to the final question in my interview protocol: "What has this interview experience been like for you?". It can be seen that my inquiry was quite general in that I did not explicitly inquire as to the *impact* of the interview. Therefore, interviewee statements relative to in-the-moment self-awareness could be said to have been spontaneously generated by my interviewees (in this case, mostly in the in the interviewees with low levels of occupational engagement as measured by the OES-S). It may be useful for future qualitative researchers to design an intervention study, grounded in the literature concerning the utility of narratives in the career planning process, aimed at increasing self-awareness in college students.

<u>ii. Gender:</u>

a. Academic or Vocational Self-Awareness. Females were more than twice as likely as males to make comments reflective of school and/or work self-awareness. While I can only speculate the reason(s) behind this finding, it may be that women as a whole are more introspective than men, leading women to possess more self-awareness in general (transcending that of self-awareness related to school and work). Future research is needed to in order to determine if males and females differ in fundamental ways concerning their academic or vocational self-awareness, or if the simply differ in their more general awareness of themselves.

b. Personal Self-Awareness. Consistent with the previously mentioned findings concerning gender differences in school/work self-awareness, females were also twice as likely to verbalize self-awareness comments regarding their personality and how their personality fits with the world of work. Again, it may be beneficial for future researchers to investigate the differential presence of personal self-awareness amongst males and females, as this finding may be an off-shoot of the anecdotal notion that women are more introspective as a group then are men.

c. In-the-Moment Self-Awareness. Lying in opposition to the previously mentioned findings concerning gender and self-awareness, males emerged as more likely to indicate that their interview with me had served to enhance their self-awareness about either who they are, their values, or the world of work in general. One potential explanation for this finding could concern differences in the tendencies of males versus females in talking about their plans with important others. It may be the case that, due to their more relational nature, women are more likely than men to be more open with their friends, family, advisors, etcetera regarding their career development and planning process. If this conjecture were true, it would seem

plausible that females would be less likely to indicate that they had gained self-awareness from sitting down with me for thirty minutes and discussing their path and plans (as they are already quite accustomed to doing this with others in their lives). Several of my female interviewees noted that they frequently discussed their plans with others, further validating my argument (e.g., as was reflected in Diane's response to my final structured interview question: "It's good, I do this a lot"). In this case, males, who may be more likely to keep their aspirations and plans to themselves, would be more apt to verbalize that they had gained in-the-moment self-awareness simply because they are relatively unaccustomed to discussing such matters with others. Again, it may be useful for future qualitative researchers to design an intervention study grounded in the literature concerning the utility of narratives in the career planning process, particularly regarding the differential effects of gender on the effectiveness of narratives.

**III. External Factors**

A. *Support.* This sub-theme was originally intended to encompass anything that aided or assisted an individual in progressing toward their goals (e.g., advice, money, etc.). However, during the process of analyzing my data, interpersonal support, particularly parental support, emerged as the heaviest hitter amongst the responses of my interviewees. As the reader may recall, interviewee statements reflective of parental support served as the focus in the discussion of the results in Chapter IV. However, it should be noted that for the purposes of Table 1 and Table 2, all supportive comments were tabulated.

i. High versus Low Scorers: HOES make more comments indicative of receiving outside support more so than did LOES. This finding is consistent with SCCT, as an individual who is encouraged to pursue and excel in a given activity or on a given trajectory is granted the support (e.g., guidance, time, funding, transportation, etc.) necessary to facilitate them in practicing that

activity. If the individual experiences success in their pursuit, positive feedback is provided instilling the individual with self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, sparking further practice, skill refinement, and goal setting. When this theoretical logic is worked backwards, it would make sense that the tendency of HOES to engage in their environment (as measured by the OES-S) may have developed through the early support that they received (particularly parental support).

Alternately, social support was demonstrated by Polach (2004) to facilitate the transition to adulthood. Polach asserted that lowered well-being, self-esteem, and general adjustment can result from a lack of social support during this critical time of transition. In the current study, it may be the case that HOES are better prepared to effectively navigate their transition to adulthood due to receiving social support. Future researchers may do well to explicitly examine the perceptions of college students nearing graduation regarding the type or amount of support they have received along their academic/occupational trajectory, particularly as it has influenced their choice of college major and projected career path.

ii.  Gender: Females were more likely to make statements reflective of receiving outside support than were males. One caveat to this finding concerns the fact that three out of four support comments from HSM's came from one individual, as did four out of seven support statements from LSF's. Nonetheless, this finding may be interpreted from the lens of SCCT in that females, particularly those pursuing non-gender stereotypic majors and careers (e.g., Victoria, Diane, Rhea, Kate, and Candie) may receive more outside support than males pursuing non-gender stereotypic careers. This hunch may be partially validated in the examination of programs and areas of research devoted women in science, mathematics, engineering, and technology (STEM) fields, as there does not appear to be a counterpart area of study for males in stereotypically

female fields. Future researchers may wish to investigate whether males and females pursuing fields that are traditionally construed to be non-gender stereotypic receive comparable outside support.

   *B. Influences.* The term "influences" is broad by definition, and for the purposes of clarity in my analysis, I have elected to divide this sub-theme into four sections: 1) experiences growing up; 2) specific occurrence(s); 3) curricular experience; and 4) input from others. In general, I deemed something to be influential if it impacted an individual's choice to take one path over another path; in other words, if something steered a person in a particular direction, it was influential.

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

      a.  Experiences Growing Up.  HOES were more likely than LOES to make comments indicating that experiences they encountered growing up exerted an influence on their path. In spite of the fact that four out of five such comments from the HSF's came from one individual, these results would continue to hold strong even if this person were removed from the analysis. While an empirically-validated explanation for this finding has yet to be discovered, the reader may do well to fall back on the argument offered by Krumboltz (1998): "No one can legitimately claim that his or her life was self-managed in its entirety unless we can find someone who chose his or her own parents, place of birth, and mother tongue" (p. 391). Perhaps then, the question is not whether or not HOES versus LOES were influenced by their experiences growing up, but rather, whether or not they are aware of the impact of such experiences; in other words, perhaps an interaction exists between self-awareness and influences.

      b. Specific Occurrences. LOES were slightly more likely than HOES to state that specific occurrences exerted an influence on their occupational path in some manner. The

difference in statements between these groups was slight (one statement), and should be interpreted with caution, particularly because all five comments from LOES came from one LSF and one LSM (as opposed to the three comments reflective of influence from specific occurrences from HSF's coming from three separate individuals). It may be that, by nature of their limited engagement as measured by the OES-S, LOES must rely more heavily upon one-time events to inform their perceptions about what they would like to do, what they believe they would be good at, etcetera. Future researchers may wish to examine the influence of specific occurrences in greater depth in order to gain a more complete understanding of the interplay between one-time (or limited-time) events and levels of occupational engagement.

c. Curricular Experience. LOES emerged with a slight edge over HOES in the number of statements reflective of the influence they attributed to experiences they encountered via coursework. Again, the difference between the two groups was a matter of one statement, and results must be interpreted with caution. Similar to the influence of a specific occurrence, it may be that LOES's limited occupational engagement in activities outside the classroom sets them up to be more heavily influenced by the information and experiences gained in coursework, (as their co-curricular involvement is likely to be minimal or absent). However, I did not deliberately probe my interviewees for the impact of required versus elective or extra coursework, and future researchers may wish to examine the differential influences of these categories of curricular experiences.

d. Input from Others. LOES were more likely than HOES to make statements indicating that what they heard from other people regarding coursework, faculty, or the desirability of a given major or career path exerted an influence on their beliefs or actions. The premise behind SCCT seems to validate these results in that children and young adolescents who

are encouraged to pursue and excel in certain arenas will receive positive or negative feedback (input) from others regarding their performance, leading the individual to intensify their involvement in an activity or to eventually terminate participation and practice. In the current study, input from others was not examined according to positive versus negative input. It may be that HOES received less overall input, but that the feedback they did receive was mostly positive in nature. Conversely, perhaps LOES received more overall input, but the majority of their feedback was generally negative, discouraging further pursuit. In this case, it is not the amount of input that is important, but rather the type. Future researchers may wish to further categorize input from others in a manner reflective of type of input in order to investigate differential effects.

In addition, given the similar results that emerged in the previous two categories of this sub-theme (specific occurrences and curricular experiences), it makes sense that individuals lacking engagement experiences do not feel as confident in "listening to themselves", and instead rely upon input from other people (whom they may perceive as more knowledgeable or experienced on a given issue) to inform their decisions. Future qualitative researchers may do well to specifically investigate the messages both LOES and HOES received from others regarding their major, their projected career path, or even the manner in which who they are perceived to be as a person fits or fails to fit with their future aspirations.

ii. Gender:

      a. Experience Growing Up. Gender differences did not appear to emerge in interviewee statements reflecting the influence attributed to experiences growing up. However, these results should be interpreted with caution because if the individual stating four out of the five related comments for HSF's was removed from the analysis, males would surface as being

more heavily influenced by experiences they encountered when growing up. It may be that males and females are equally inclined to be impacted by earlier life experiences, and it may be important for future researchers to examine in greater depth the interplay of gender with experiences growing up.

b. Specific Occurrences. Females conveyed more statements indicating that their path or aspirations were influenced by specific occurrences, making twice as many comments as males. The reason for this finding is up for speculation, however the logic of Krumboltz (1998) may be applicable, and this finding may be more of a question of awareness on the part of the individual than a question of actual influence. If females are more introspective than males, they may be able to draw upon specific influential events or occurrences more readily. Future research is needed in order to more accurately determine the differential effects of gender upon the influence of specific occurrences in the career development of college students approaching graduation (perhaps while controlling for differences in self-awareness should an interaction exist).

c. Curricular Experience. Females were slightly more likely than males to make comments reporting that their path or aspirations were influenced by experiences acquired via coursework. However, the margin of difference between genders is quite small (one related comment), and this finding must be interpreted with caution. Repeating the current study with a larger sample may indicate an absence of the differential effects of gender, which would point to an evenly-dispersed influence of classroom and coursework experience on both males and females.

d. Input from Others. Males emerged as more likely than females to make statements indicative of being influenced by input from others regarding their path or aspirations.

It may be that certain personality traits (e.g., independence), as opposed to gender, mediate the relationship between level of engagement and likelihood of being influenced by others. Future researchers may do well to examine the interplay between personality traits and susceptibility to the opinions of other people.

   *C. Important Others.* This sub-theme encompasses influence exerted by a specific person or group of people upon the path or aspirations of this sample of college students approaching graduation. Two primary types of important others emerged during data analysis: 1) role models; and 2) mentors. These two categories will serve as the structure for the following discussion.

i. High versus Low Scorers:

    a. Role Models. HOES surfaced as three times as likely as LOES to make comments indicative of having had (or as currently having) role models. While the driving forces behind this finding are speculative, it might be conjectured that the high level of occupational engagement in HOES (as measured by the OES-S) developed partly as a result others in their environment modeling engagement behavior for them throughout their childhood and adolescence. Future researchers would do well to qualitatively examine the presence of role models at different stages of life (e.g., childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood), paying particular attention to the perceived impact that role models exert upon the occupational engagement levels college students in transition.

    b. Mentors. HSF's were the sole group of interviewees to spontaneously make statements conveying that mentorship had been an important factor in their career development (as I did not explicitly inquire about this topic in my interview protocol). It is also important to note that four out of five HSF's were represented in these related statements, pointing to the pervasive nature of the perceived importance of mentorship for highly engaged females in my

sample (as measured by the OES-S). This mentorship may serve as one of the powerhouses behind possessing a sense of being "prepared" for the next step after college, as it is commonplace for mentors to provide advice, guidance, and overall encouragement to their mentees (e.g., Nora & Crisp, 2007; Ullah & Wilson, 2007; Hall et al., 2008). It makes sense that HOES, by nature of their overall high levels of occupational engagement, would exercise this engagement in a variety of contexts, including seeking out mentors. The reasons behind the apparent absence of mentorship in HSM's is up for speculation, and future researchers may wish to investigate this issue in greater depth.

ii.  Gender:

a.  Role Models. Males emerged as slightly more likely than females to articulate statements conveying the presence of role models (by a difference of one related comment). However, it is important to note that for males, the number of statements was split relatively equally between HSM's (n = 4) and LSM's (n = 3), whereas for females, the number of statements was loaded solely on HSF's (n = 6), as LSF's did not display any statements outlining the existence of role models. Therefore, an interaction may be present for females concerning gender and occupational engagement status (although this argument is speculation, and may be the result of the particular sample utilized in the current study). The reasons behind this finding are unclear. It may be of particular interest for future researchers to examine the relationship between gender of role model and gender of student, investigating whether gender emerges as a pivotal factor in the level of influence a role model is able to exert upon males versus females, as well as whether or not there is a differential impact based on gender of role model (e.g., are students more greatly influenced by role models of the same sex or of the opposite sex?).

b.  Mentors. As was previously stated, HSF's were the lone group of interviewees to articulate the presence of mentors in their career development. This finding may be partially explained by Gilligan (1982), who noted that women depend heavily upon social connections. Gilligan went on to explain that the achievement of females rests largely upon social relationships, which not only aide in defining their identity, but also influence their attitudes toward learning. On the other hand, men tend to value autonomy, maintaining boundaries between social relationships and academic achievement. While the findings of Gilligan date back nearly thirty years, the underlying concept appears to make sense in terms of the current results. Therefore, it seems plausible that females (particularly highly engaged females as measured by the OES-S) would exhibit an inflated amount and quality of mentorship due to their combination of being both occupationally engaged to seek information, and socially motivated to foster relational connections. This may serve as an interesting area for future researchers wishing to explore the differential effects (or existence) of mentors for college students.

*D.  Happenstance.* For the purpose of the current project, happenstance was broadly defined as an unexpected or chance events that impacted an individual's career development in some manner.

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

a.  Positive Outcomes from Negative/Neutral Chance Events. HOES were the exclusive group of interviewees to indicate that a favorable outcome had resulted from initially negative or neutral unplanned events. Per the argument offered by Krumboltz (1998), it may be the case in the current study that all 20 interviewees were influenced by chance events, but that only HOES were aware that either A) the occurrence was unplanned, or B) that an a chance event altered their course of action. As was stated by Krumboltz (1998): "Whether an event is

chance or deliberate, planned or unplanned, depends on the view of each participant" (p. 390).

Given the relatively high number of such happenstance comments amongst HOES (n = 7),

particularly in light of the fact that I did not explicitly ask any of my interviewees about

unplanned events (all comments were spontaneously generated), it may be fruitful for future

qualitative researchers to deliberately encourage interviewees to reflect upon their career

development, attending specifically to any influential chance events that come to mind.

      b.  Luck-of-the-Draw Instructors. LOES emerged as slightly more likely than

HOES to make statements indicating that the chance event of having a particular teacher for a

particular course (either in high school or in college) influenced them to either 1) become more

invested and passionate in an area about which they were initially more neutral, or 2) abandon a

previously desired area of study due to a teacher-student rift. One potential explanation for this

finding could be that LOES, given their paucity of work-related information and experience by

nature of their occupational engagement status, have a smaller well from which to draw career-

related information, exaggerating the impact of one particular instructor in their career planning

and development. It may be that HOES, given their wider range of information and experiences

due to their higher occupational engagement, are less susceptible to the influences of one

particular instructor.

      c.  Marriage of Mr. Chance and Ms. Initiative. HOES emerged as twice as likely

as LOES to make statements outlining their use of personal initiative in capitalizing upon

unexpected occurrences. "Serendipity is not merely waiting for a fortuitous event to happen.

Serendipity requires action on the part of the recipient—action to create favorable circumstances,

action to recognize opportunities when they arise, and action to capitalize on unplanned events in

a timely manner" (Krumboltz, 1998, p. 392). By very nature of their high level of occupational

engagement (as measured by the OES-S), HOES have grown accustomed to being proactive in their quest for learning about both themselves and their world, and it would seem natural for such proactive behavior to generalize across most situations (expected or unexpected). It may be the case that occupational engagement allows HOES (as opposed to LOES) to take full advantage of being at the right place at the right time.

ii. Gender:

a. Positive Outcomes from Negative/Neutral Chance Events. The reader is asked to recall that in their interviews with me, this sample of LOES did not indicate experiencing favorable outcomes from events that were initially perceived to be negative or neutral in nature. Therefore, the current results will be discussed exclusively in terms of HSF's and HSM's. Data analysis indicated that HSF's were much more likely than HSM's to specify positive outcomes from negative or neutral chance events (a ratio of 6:1 comments respectively). It should be noted that three different HSF's were represented in this category, pointing to the pervasiveness of this phenomenon amongst my sample of females high in occupational engagement. It may be conjectured that an interaction exists between gender and occupational engagement status in terms of achieving favorable outcomes from negative or neutral chance events, with females high in occupational engagement being the most likely group to benefit from such happenstance.

b. Luck-of-the-Draw Instructors. Males exhibited a greater likelihood than females of making statements indicating that an instructor they happened to get for a particular course influenced them to either 1) become more invested and passionate in an area about which they were initially more neutral, or 2) abandon a previously desired area of study due to a teacher-student rift. The relatively small number of related comments (2:1 respectively) should encourage the reader to interpret these results with caution. Furthermore, it should be noted that

both comments from males were from LSM's, and the comment from the female was from a HSF. While the interpretation of these results is up for interpretation, it may be useful to employ the argument offered by Luzzo (1995) concerning the widespread failure of men to consciously engage in career planning. In this case, males may be more likely to let outside forces (e.g., a random instructor) do the planning for them in order to relieve their cognitive burden. Future researchers may wish to further investigate this claim in order to supplement the argument with empirically validated evidence.

c. Marriage of Mr. Chance and Ms. Initiative. Females emerged as far more likely than males (5:1 related comments respectively) to make statements reflecting their use of personal initiative in capitalizing upon unexpected occurrences. The explanation of this finding is up for interpretation, but it may be that the argument offered by Luzzo (1995) applies in this instance as well. Females, by way of their heightened awareness of barriers in the career development process, could foreseeably enhance their exploration and planning behaviors in this realm, increasing the likelihood that they will find themselves in the right place at a time (simply by nature of being in more places more often) during which they can capitalize upon chance with their own initiative. However, this explanation is speculation, and would need to be empirically validated by future investigators.

**IV. Taking Action**

*A. Networking.* The networking sub-theme encompasses actions taken by an individual in terms of maintaining or forging contacts that have been, are, or could be professionally beneficial.

i. High versus Low Scorers: HOES were more likely than LOES to make statements indicating that they had utilized networking in order to further themselves academically or occupationally.

It is interesting to note that HSM's made no such statements related to networking; HSF's carried the day in the realm of networking capabilities. Setterson and Ray (2010) pointed to the importance of networking: "Relationships with adults other than parents are also important in opening opportunities and resources by connecting young people to the larger and loosely connected social networks in which these adults are embedded" (p. 33). It may be that the tendency of HOES to be occupationally engaged (as measured by the OES-S) extends into the arena of fostering and maintaining such relationships with non-familial adults with the potential to lend them a hand in the future. I would have predicted HSM's to be displayed in these results as well, and the reasons for their absence is up for speculation (particularly since LSM's made statements conveying their networking behavior). This may serve as a fruitful area of future research for scholars interested in the occupational networking of college students.

ii.  Gender: Females emerged as more likely than males to make statements reflecting their use of networking skills in college. Further exacerbating this difference is the fact that all six networking comments from males were from LSM's, and that five of these six were comments were stated by one individual. If this person was removed from the analysis, the differences between genders concerning the use of networking would be even more pronounced. One potential explanation for this finding could be that, at least traditionally, the achievement of women was thought to be largely dependent upon social relationships (Gilligan, 1982). These relationships aide in the definition of a woman's identity and how she sees herself in relation to others and to the world around her. In this sense, females (who are overall more relationally oriented than males) would do well to exercise their social capabilities (e.g., networking) in order to further themselves in their careers. Of course, by its very nature, networking initiates a host of social relationships, with one connection branching off into another, and then into several more,

etcetera. If the old adage is true, and "it's not what you know, but who you know", networking may be one of the most valuable forms of occupational engagement, and future researchers may wish to investigate how to foster networking capabilities in males.

   *B. Exploration of Options.* This sub-theme involves the interviewee demonstrating through actions that they are not prematurely foreclosed, and that they continue to consider alternate trajectories as they come along (or express a willingness to do so should they come along later).

i. High versus Low Scorers:

   a. Submitting Applications. LOES emerged as over twice as likely as HOES to make statements reflecting their submission of applications to jobs or graduate/professional schools. Upon first glance, this seems to be an unexpected finding. However, it must be kept in mind that my interviews with these 20 individuals took place during their final semester of their senior year of college, between late February and early March. Given that many application deadlines (particularly for graduate or professional schools) are in December and January, it would seem plausible that individuals considering submitting such applications (e.g., presumably HOES) would have done so at a much earlier date, and would not be as likely to spontaneously bring this up in their interviews with me as those individuals currently navigating the job search and application process. In this sense, it would make sense that those individuals exhibiting lower occupational engagement throughout their college career would be scrambling around at zero-hour to explore their options (hence, submitting applications to the few places where deadlines had not already expired). However, this argument is speculation and should be received with caution, particularly given my inclusion of interviewing for jobs or

graduate/professional schools within this category, which could have very well been occurring within the time period in which I conducted my interviews.

b. Getting My Feet Wet. All four categories of participants (HSF's, HSM's, LSF's, and LSM's) conveyed comparable levels of exploring their options via first-hand experience, with LOES having an edge of one statement over HOES. This finding is somewhat surprising, as I would have expected HOES to emerge as the leader for this category given their elevated levels of occupational engagement as measured by the OES-S. One possible explanation is that "getting my feet wet" is second-nature for HOES (something they have become accustomed to doing for some time) but novel for LOES (perhaps initiated during their final year of college after a frantic visit to their school's career center). In this case, first-hand exploration would likely be more at the forefront of the minds of LOES (and they may be more likely to mention each and every way they have attained such exploration) as opposed to HOES, for whom exploration may be a part of their daily lives, seemingly not worth mentioning. Future qualitative researchers may wish to deliberately extract from interviewees a list of each instance where they have engaged in exploring their options via first-hand or vicarious involvement.

ii. Gender:

a. Submitting Applications. Females surfaced as almost three times as likely as males to make statements indicating that they were exploring their options via searching for jobs, submitting applications for employment or further schooling, and interviewing for these positions. The reason(s) behind this finding are unclear. The argument cited by Luzzo (1995) could serve as one possible explanation in that for women in particular, an awareness of barriers (e.g., sex discrimination in hiring practices, stiff competition in graduate schools, etc.) "…may

serve as a motivating force for career planning and exploration" (p. 321). Future researchers would do well to further investigate gender differences this method of exploration.

        b. Getting My Feet Wet. Males emerged as slightly more likely to have commented that they had explored their options via first hand or vicarious involvement (a difference of one related statement), a result which should be interpreted with caution given the small magnitude of difference. From a theoretical stance, SCCT attends to the psychosocial effects of gender upon career development. As was noted by Swanson and Gore (2000), gender differences in self-efficacy beliefs may partially account for gender differences in occupational consideration. If, according to SCCT, exposure to compelling learning experiences is critical in developing strong self efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, women preferring gender-traditional trajectories may face additional hurdles to gaining such exposure. Specifically, as I think about my own experiences with "getting my feet wet" in the field of Counseling Psychology (which seems to have become a predominantly female field), I am reminded how difficult it was to secure such experience. As in a host helping professions (to which many women aspire), confidentiality contracts and HIPAA regulations prohibit curious students from gaining an inside-look at a day-in-the-life of a particular helping professional (e.g., it was not possible for me to sit in and observe a therapy session). Oftentimes, these individuals must rely on what they read or what they are told from others in the profession in order to make career-related decisions, as opposed to observing it in-vivo for themselves. The 10 females I interviewed possessed a mix of gender-traditional and non gender traditional majors and career aspirations, and it may be useful for future researchers to investigate the differential levels of "getting my feet wet" in students from both gender traditional and non-gender traditional majors.

*C.  Acquisition of World of Work Knowledge.* Acquisition of world of work knowledge (AWOWK) consists of an individual acting to accrue specific information relative to their projected future path. With these 20 interviewees, the AWOWK typically took the form of accumulating knowledge regarding required education and training in a field of interest.

i.  High versus Low Scorers: HOES were more likely to make statements indicative of AWOWK than were LOES. Given their elevated level of occupational engagement as measured by the OES-S, HOES would likely be better equipped with a plethora of work-related information and experience, making it almost second-nature for them to engage in the AWOWK. Therefore, HOES are not likely to exhibit the "random choice of a profession" (Shashkova, 2010, p. 28) that likely serves to define the trajectory of a large proportion of LOES, and as a result, HOES are able to avoid the weak motivation to learn and the low levels of knowledge afflicting those who have not engaged in the AWOWK. Given the quickly shifting nature of the vocational landscape (Blustein, 2006), the observed capability of HOES for the AWOWK (coupled with my hypothesis that they will have a higher tendency to continue to do so throughout their working years; exhibiting career adaptability) may be of particular importance: "…facts rapidly become obsolete…what one knows for sure today may not be so tomorrow. The rapidity of change in today's society makes the tenure of knowledge very capricious" (Gelatt, 1989, p. 254). Future qualitative researchers would do well to validate these findings via explicit inquiry regarding the AWOWK.

ii.  Gender: Females were more likely to make statements indicating that they had acquired knowledge of the world of work than were males. While I cannot be absolutely certain of the reasons behind this finding, it could be speculated that females may be more proactive in the AWOWK due to their anticipation of barriers they may encounter along their career trajectory

(e.g., the prevalence of sex discrimination in certain occupational sectors). This may equip females with a more thorough understanding of what they may need to navigate, whereas for males: "…this lack of awareness may help explain the dilemma that many graduating men experience—the realization that they have no idea what comes next" (Luzzo, 1995, p. 322). Future researchers may wish to empirically validate this speculation through a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the AWOWK of men and women graduating from college.

       *D. Involvement in Professionally Relevant Actions.* I considered this sub-theme to be, perhaps, the crux of my entire project. When an individual is involved in activities that are linked in some manner to their stated professional goals and aspirations, they are presumably occupationally engaged in the sense that they are acquiring information/experiences that contribute to their sense of understanding regarding a given vocational trajectory.

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

       a.  Curricular Involvement. LOES emerged as three times as likely as HOES to make statements indicating that they had consciously enrolled in "extra" courses in their area of study. Curricular involvement most often assumed one of two forms: 1) courses an individual believed to have provided them with a deeper knowledge of their field or that acted to further their projected occupational trajectory in some fashion, or 2) "self-propelling" courses in which they verbalized acquiring "skills" of some sort, (e.g., general job search activities, or more field-specific tactics for securing employment, etc.). Of particular importance within this category was that all curricular involvement comments from HOES were stated by HSF's, three out of four of which were from one individual. If this individual was removed from the analysis, these results would be even more discrepant. While this finding is somewhat unexpected, it may be that HOES simultaneously hold several commitments (e.g., club membership/leadership, volunteer

work, study abroad, etcetera.), and that their more "hands-on" engagement in co-curricular areas prohibits them from taking more coursework than is necessary (in the case of "extra" classes), and/or that they choose to learn about their area of study in domains outside of the classroom. Of course, this argument is speculative, and future researchers may wish to investigate this notion in further depth.

b.  Co-Curricular Involvement. HOES were more likely than LOES to make statements reflecting involvement in campus activities outside of the classroom. Given the nature of the items on the OES-S (e.g., "I am actively involved in groups or organizations", "I volunteer in an area that I find interesting", etcetera), it makes sense that students scoring high on this measure would report higher levels of co-curricular involvement in their interview responses than students scoring low on this measure. It is interesting to note the possible interaction between gender and engagement status when it comes to co-curricular involvement: all 10 related statements from HOES came from females, and the sole statement from LOES was made by a male. This caveat may serve as an interesting area of investigation by future researchers. The findings of Ferrari et al. (2009) seem to lend support to this result, as students with high campus involvement emerged as more motivated by mastery or goal achievement than students with little to no campus involvement. It may become a question of which comes first: do students become engaged because they are more oriented toward mastery or performance, or do students become more oriented toward mastery/performance as a result of their engagement? Future researchers may do well to investigate this line of inquiry as well.

c.  Involvement through Volunteer Work. LOES emerged as twice as likely as HOES to make comments reflecting their involvement in professionally-relevant volunteer work. However, three caveats must be acknowledged in the interpretation of this finding: 1) the overall

number of volunteer-involvement comments was slight (a ratio of 4:2 respectively); 2) all volunteer-involvement statements from both LOES and HOES were made by females (LSF's and HSF's respectively); and 3) all four volunteer-involvement comments from LSF's were stated by one individual. If this LSF was removed from the analysis, HOES (HSF's specifically) would have emerged as the sole group occupying this category. Therefore, the reader would do well to interpret this result with caution. Explanation for this finding is up for speculation; it may be fruitful for future researchers to examine the incidence of volunteer work amongst college seniors exhibiting both high and low levels of occupational engagement as measured by the OES-S.

      d. Involvement through Internships. HOES surfaced as more likely than LOES to make comments reflecting involvement by way of internship. It should be noted that both of the two statements made by LSF's were from the same individual, and that four out of five internship-involvement comments made by LSM's were from the same individual. If these two individuals were removed from the analysis (particularly the outlier LSM), these results would be even more pronounced. However, four out of the six related comments from HSM's were stated by one individual which, if removed from analysis, would tilt these results in the opposite direction, giving LOES an edge in this category. Taken at face-value, this finding seems predictable given what we are discovering about the behavior of individuals who are occupationally engaged. More specifically, it seems plausible that HOES are naturally (or have been conditioned by themselves or their environment to be) proactive in experientially informing themselves about different fields of interest in their career decision making process. Particularly in fields where volunteer work is difficult or impossible to obtain due to the nature of the work (e.g., some helping professions), an internship can provide an ideal medium for "getting my feet

wet" in a given occupational area. Future researchers may wish to examine the perceived utility of volunteer work versus internships versus formal employment in students exhibiting high levels of occupational engagement in order to determine the most effective means of obtaining professionally-relevant experience.

e. Involvement through Formal Employment. HOES were more likely than LOES to make statements indicating that they had previously or currently held a professionally-relevant employed position. It makes sense that occupationally engaged individuals would be proactive in seeking first-hand experience in a field of interest via the process of employment—what better way to gather work-related information and experience than actually working (even marginally) in the field? Future researchers may wish to examine the differential nature of internships versus part/full-time jobs, paying particular attention to how each medium of engagement differentially serves the student.

f. Personal Research. HOES surfaced as slightly more likely than LOES to make statements indicating that they had conducted their own research in a given field of interest, academic trajectory, or specific position. Given the more proactive nature of HOES in terms of career planning and development, this finding might be expected, although the small number of personal research comments (3:2 respectively) should encourage the reader to interpret this finding with caution. It makes sense that individuals high in occupational engagement (which by its very definition entails the acquisition of both information and experiences) would seek out as much information as possible in order to further their understanding regarding the specifics of a particular field of interest.

ii. Gender:

a. Curricular Involvement. Females made statements reflective of their involvement in professionally relevant coursework nearly three times as often as males. Of particular note was that all five curricular involvement comments from males were stated by LSM's. This caveat makes sense according to the aforementioned logic concerning LOES exhibiting more professionally-related curricular involvement than HOES. Perhaps this finding is indicative of an interaction between gender and occupational engagement status, where males who are low in occupational engagement are the most likely group to involve themselves through coursework. The reasoning behind this speculation is unclear, and future researchers may do well to conduct a follow-up study in which students are deliberately asked about taking such coursework (as I did not explicitly inquire about this in the current project).

b. Co-Curricular Involvement. Females made more comments indicative of their involvement in co-curricular activities than males (a ratio of 10:1 statements respectively). Again, it is important to note that all female comments were from HSF's, and the lone male comment was from a LSM. The reason for this finding is up for speculation, and may serve as a fruitful area of inquiry for future investigators interested in the co-curricular involvements of college students.

c. Involvement through Volunteer Work. Females emerged as far more likely than males to make comments indicating that they had involved themselves in professionally-relevant volunteer work. The findings of Gati, et al. (1995) may provide at least a partial explanation for these differential results. In their investigation of gender differences in career decision making, these authors examined within-aspect preferences, or the desirability of certain career-related attributes (e.g., relationships with people, prestige, etc.) as perceived by the

individual. It was found that men exhibited an orientation to business and technology, where as

women were geared more toward social and humanistic types of work. The overarching nature of

volunteer work seems to be largely service-oriented (e.g., hospitals and homeless shelters), so in

this sense, it is not surprising that females were much more likely than males to engage

themselves in volunteer work, as it would be more likely to be professionally-relevant for

women than for men (as volunteer opportunities in traditionally-male fields are likely to be

sparse). This interpretation is up for speculation, and future researchers may wish to investigate

whether or not an interaction between gender and occupational engagement status exists in terms

of professionally-relevant volunteer work.

     d.  Involvement through Internships. Lying in opposition to the findings related to

professionally relevant volunteer work, males were nearly twice as likely as females to make

statements indicating that they had involved themselves through interning in a field of interest.

This tentative explanation may complement the argument offered for the higher number of

females engaged in volunteer work. Through either work orientation (e.g., business versus

human services), availability of volunteer work versus internships in a given orientation, or a

combination of both of these factors, perhaps it is the case that the most effective vehicle by

which to occupationally engage oneself differs according to gender. This rationale is speculative,

and future researchers may do well to empirically test and validate this conjecture.

     e.  Involvement through Formal Employment. Females emerged as slightly more

likely than males to make statements outlining their involvement in professionally-relevant

employment (a ratio of 10:9 comments respectively). Given my findings regarding the

prevalence of volunteer work and internships for both genders, this result seems unexpected, as

would have hypothesized that males would dominate this category. This is particularly true given

the findings of Gati et al. (1995) that, in terms of the employment aspects deemed to be most desirable, "…income was more important for men, whereas relationships with people was more important for women" (p. 207). While the link between the desirability of certain aspects in employment versus the desirability of certain aspects in engagement experiences can only be speculated, it may be plausible that the work values of men, primarily income, are reflected in their choice of engagement experiences, possibly displaying a greater propensity toward "paid" experience than females. Although, this logic runs counter to the actual findings, the reader would do well to keep in mind the ratio of related comments, recognizing that the scale may have been tipped more heavily in one direction or another with a larger sample. Future researchers may wish to further investigate the prevalence of relevant paid work experience amongst both males and females in order to gain a more clear understanding of any emerging differences.

f. Personal Research. Males were slightly more likely than female to make comments reflective of conducting their own research in an area of professional interest. However, the small overall number of personal research statements (3:2 respectively) should encourage the reader to interpret these results with caution. I might have expected these results to be in the opposite direction given the argument offered in the study of gender differences and career maturity by Luzzo (1995): "…many of the men lack a realization of the utility of planning. They do not seem to make the conscious effort to design intermediate and long-range career goals" (p. 322). It goes without saying that planning in the absence of research regarding the specific nature of those plans may be doomed to fail (or doomed to remain stagnant), which is essentially Luzzo's argument. In spite of the fact that the results I obtained in this category run counter to the tentative explanation offered above, I would remind the reader again of the relatively small number of personal research comments, noting that if a larger sample had been

utilized, these results may have been more pronounced in one direction or another. Future research is needed in order to clarify the differential prevalence of personal research in the occupational engagement behaviors of males and females.

     *E. Plans/Goals.* For the 20 students I spoke with, post-graduation plans tended to crystallize into six sometimes overlapping categories, which will serve as the structure for this sub-theme: 1) specific plans for the months immediately following graduation; 2) a specific ten-year plan; 3) vaguely defined plans; 4) temporary plans or "placeholders"; 5) back-up plans; and 6) the family plan.

i.  High versus Low Scorers:

     a.  Specific Plans for the Months Immediately Following Graduation. HOES were much more likely than LOES to make statements outlining specific plans immediately following graduation (verbalizing three times as many related comments). The pervasive nature of such comments amongst HOES should be noted, as five out of five HSF's and four out of five HSM's verbalized related statements. Given that HOES likely acquired significant information and experiences through their occupational engagement in college (as assessed by the OES-S), this finding might be expected. As was noted by both Black (2006) and Krieshok et al. (2009), occupational engagement enhances an individual's knowledge of both themselves and of the world around them. In terms of the current project, HOES are likely better equipped with an understanding of the way in which the world of work "works", as well as how they fit into this new world outside of their undergraduate experience. It would seem then that the knowledge these individuals have gained would effectively inform their immediate post-collegiate decision-making and career-planning, enabling them to effectively articulate specific plans for the months immediately following graduation.

b. A Specific Ten-Year Plan. HOES were more likely than LOES to make comments outlining specific plans for the next decade of their lives (by a ratio of 10:1 related comments). Given that HOES have exhibited an investment throughout college regarding the acquisition of information and experiences aimed at providing them with a solid sense of what they do (and do not) want in a career and in life in general, this finding might be expected. Therefore, it makes sense that HOES would be better equipped upon graduation from college to employ specificity in their future plans than would LOES, although future researchers may wish to empirically validate this claim with a larger sample of participants.

c. Vaguely-Defined Plans. LOES were nearly twice as likely as HOES to make vague statements regarding their immediate and/or future plans. It makes sense that, at least in part, by their lack of occupational engagement, LOES lack the information and experience that is critical in making well-informed and definitive career plans. Therefore, those individuals failing to exhibit occupational engagement in college would appear to be more likely to restrict their planning (both immediate and long-term), to vague outlines of rough ideas concerning what they would like to see occur in their short-term and long-term plans. Alternately, perhaps the logic offered by Shashkova (2010) is at play in this instance, and these individuals entered college under the assumption that they would one day find themselves on track to obtain a position in a socially-coveted, yet highly competitive, professional field (e.g., medicine, law, etc.). However, neglecting to take the steps necessary to place themselves in a favorable position to turn their visions into a reality (e.g., joining related clubs/organizations, networking with faculty that could write letters of recommendation, etc.), these students now find themselves without a plan at all, having not obtained the academic credentials or experiences that would make them competitors, nor having the foresight formulate alternate plans. Future researchers may wish to investigate the

plans of students entering college (via retrospection or a longitudinal analysis), and compare them with the plans articulated upon completing their program of study.

d. Temporary Plans ("Placeholders"). LOES were more likely than HOES to make statements indicating the existence of "placeholder" plans that would serve the purpose of helping them to get by financially or to work their way up until such time that their target position could be attained. It might be hypothesized that since HOES were more likely to acquire the information and experience to inform their academic and vocational decisions, they are better-equipped to "dive into" their desired trajectory, experiencing less of a need for temporary positions due to the possibility that their engagement behaviors shaped them into strong competitors in the markets for jobs or for spots in graduate/professional programs. Anecdotally, I can attest to the assertions of Shashkova (2010), in that a large percentage of the incoming students I have taught over several semesters of a career and life planning course aspire to high-powered, competitive careers. It seems plausible that, as the college experience unfolds, and students come to exhibit various levels of occupational engagement, LOES are more likely to endure "bubble-bursts" regarding their initial career aspirations from either academic advisors, faculty, or perhaps rotten scores on the MCAT or LSAT, and to quickly arrive at the understanding that they are not likely to pass through the gateway to their desired profession right away (or even at all), leading them to construct placeholder plans until they can either build their credentials or figure out an alternate path to which they may be better suited.

e. Back-Up Plans. HOES emerged as three times as likely as LOES to make comments reflecting the presence of back-up plans. This finding may be at least partially explained via the results of the current study concerning the networking behaviors of HOES versus LOES. As was previously discussed, I found that, amongst my sample of interviewees,

HOES were more likely than LOES to indicate that they had exercised their networking capabilities to further themselves academically or occupationally (or articulated their assumption that their networking behaviors could potentially serve to further them in their future endeavors). Given their wider web of connections, it seems plausible that HOES would be equipped with at least one (if not several) "Plan-B's" (e.g., offers of temporary employment, someone-who-knows-someone who works in their desired field, etc.), providing them with a sense of security should their anticipated course of action not immediately (or ever) come to fruition. However, this argument is speculative, and future researchers may wish to empirically validate such claims.

       f.  The Family Plan Although I did not deliberately inquire about non-work related plans in my interview protocol, LOES were more likely than HOES to spontaneously make statements discussing their plans for marriage and children. Taking into account the research of Settersten and Ray (2010), this finding hardly comes as a surprise: "For young adults with fewer prospects ahead of them—those with the least education and lowest incomes—children often come before marriage" (p. 31). While their research dealt with young adults from the United States in general (where as the current study examined a small sample of college seniors, already members of a privileged group simply by way of their educational attainment), the premise behind their statement may be relevant in the current project as well. Young adults today postpone marriage and childrearing until much later ages than did young adults 50 years ago. However, based on my conversations with these 20 individuals, I would hypothesize that, within the sector of young adults privileged enough to attend higher education, there is an additional shift. More specifically, individuals who have been occupationally engaged in college, gaining exposure to a variety of experiences that have provided them with a strong occupational

knowledge base, depart from their undergraduate careers with a sense of purpose and direction, most likely having well-defined plans for immediate employment or for furthering their education in graduate or professional schools. Based on the interview responses I received, I would presume that these individuals would intend to take a few years after college to establish themselves in their careers or to finish their education, postponing marriage and childrearing until such tasks are completed. On the other hand, individuals who have not demonstrated occupational engagement in college are more likely to be floundering in terms of what to do next. Without a clear map outlining their post-college trajectory, these individuals may turn to another set of life tasks present in young adulthood, (marriage and childrearing) as the roadmap for achieving matrimony and parenthood is more explicitly defined (although not necessarily more easily obtainable). In short, LOES may be more likely than HOES to verbalize marital and family plans due to their lack of direction in the occupational sphere, although future researchers may wish to validate this claim amongst a larger sample of transitioning college seniors.

ii.  Gender:

a.  Specific Plans for the Months Immediately Following Graduation. Females were slightly more likely than males to make statements expressing specificity in their immediate post-graduation plans (a difference of 12:10 related comments). This finding is consistent with that of Luzzo (1995) who found in his investigation of gender differences in career maturity that: "…undergraduate women seem to be much more planned in the career decision making process than undergraduate men. One reason for this difference might be women's perception of the need to overcome the variety of other life-role obstacles they face…the perception of barriers may serve as a motivating force for careful career planning and exploration. It may be that without the perception of such barriers, many of the men lack a

realization of the utility of planning" (p. 321). Future researchers may wish to further investigate the differential effects of gender on the specificity of post-graduation plans, explicitly attending to the female versus male perspective regarding the breadth of roles they hope to fulfill in their futures.

b. A Specific Ten-Year Plan. Females emerged as three times as likely as males to make statements regarding their plans for the next decade that were specific in nature. An interaction between gender and occupational status appeared to emerge, as eight out of nine related statements were verbalized by HSF's as opposed to LSF's. The capability of females (particularly those who were occupationally engaged in college as measured by the OES-S) to outline their ten-year intentions with specificity may be partially due to the traditional second-rate place of women in the workforce. As was noted by Danziger and Ratner (2010), "…more young women have come to expect that their own employment and earnings will be important in their own right, not secondary to those of their husbands…" (p. 145). These authors went on to discuss the trend amongst young women to postpone marriage and childbearing (or to abandon these once-expected milestones altogether) in favor of building their careers. Furthermore, Luzzo (1995) indicated that women's perception of potential barriers may motivate them to exhibit more maturity in their career development process, which, in the case of the current study, may be illustrated via specificity in long-term plans. Therefore, it may be postulated that women are more likely to lend careful and thorough forethought to their extended future employment plans given that only a short time ago, the workforce was not a "woman's place", and young women today have likely been exposed (either via familial experience or vicariously through friends or the media) to the harsh realities of the ever-climbing divorce rates, instilling them with an internal drive to build a career through which they can financially support themselves.

c. Vaguely-Defined Plans. Females were more likely than males to make statements outlining vaguely defined immediate and future plans. It may be noteworthy that five out of the seven comments from HSF's were from one individual (who potentially serves as an outlier), possibly pointing to an interaction between gender and occupational engagement status. While the reasons behind this finding are speculative, it may be that women tend to mature more rapidly than men, including the vocational maturation cited by Luzzo, 1995, and that females on the brink of completing their formal education may experience a shifting mindset to life tasks other than school/work (e.g., marriage and childbearing) at an earlier stage than males. "Becoming an adult has traditionally been understood as comprising five core transitions—leaving home, completing school, entering the workforce, getting married, and having children" (Settersten and Ray, 2010, p. 20). Even if this shift is an unconscious one, females may be more intent on locating a suitable partner and procreating at an earlier age than males (potentially due to more limited fertility in females), and fail to develop well-defined academic and/or occupational plans possibly as a result of their expectation to soon assume the roles of wife and mother. This argument is speculative, and future researchers would do well to empirically test such conjectures regarding the differential effects of gender upon the specificity of immediate and future plans.

d. Temporary Plans (AKA: "Placeholders"). Females emerged as more likely than males to make statements outlining the presence of temporary plans. It should be noted that the four related statements from females, as well as the two related statements from males, were all articulated by LOES. The reasons behind this possible gender difference are up for speculation, but may be at least partially explained via the lingering effects of women's traditionally second-rate status in the realms of both education and employment. Danziger and

Ratner (2010) cite the "…improved economic status and educational attainment of young women relative to young men…" (p. 141). It has been suggested that over the past 30 years, changes have ensued concerning the manner in which women conceptualize education and employment. No longer is it typical for women to work exclusively out of financial necessity for their family, but rather, women seek employment for reasons traditionally thought to belong to their male counterparts: work both shapes women's most basic identity and provides them with a sense of social worth. In light of these recent developments, it may be that the "work as identity and self-worth" mindset is a more novel concept for women, and hence, more at the forefront of their consciousness and planning than for men, driving them to take steps to ensure that they are not without a plan for achieving employment (hence the higher incidence of placeholder plans amongst females). However, this argument is speculation, and future researchers may wish to explore these apparent gender differences in greater depth.

e. Back-Up Plans. Females were more likely than males to make statements outlining the existence of back-up plans. Similar to the back-up plans of HOES versus LOES, one partial explanation for this finding may concern the findings of the current study relative to networking behaviors. As was previously noted, females outshined males in their assertions regarding their use of networking to further themselves academically or occupationally. In this sense, the larger networks possessed by females has potentially equipped them with one or more connections to potential employment opportunities should their projected plans fall through for whatever reason. Future researchers would do well to more thoroughly investigate the differential existence of back-up plans in newly minted college graduates, specifically probing for why and how such plans are (or are not) in place.

f.  The Family Plan Males spontaneously expressed a greater number of statements regarding a future with marriage and/or children than did females. The reasons for this finding are up for speculation. Given the rationale I offered for HOES versus LOES regarding this category of the plans/goals sub-theme, it may be fruitful for future researchers to explicitly investigate males and females scoring low in occupational engagement in order to examine the differential effects of gender on familial plans.

**Paint-By-Numbers: Highlights According to Individual Cases**

To reiterate, the current study aimed to address three research questions. First, this project investigated the experiences of college seniors approaching graduation, with special attention to the manner in which occupational engagement played a role in that transition. Second, this study sought to identify any differences in the experience of this transition between students exhibiting high levels of occupational engagement versus students portraying low levels of occupational engagement (as measured by the OES-S). Third, this project examined gender differences in the experience of this transition from college.

The reader is asked to recall that Chapter IV, (and up until this point, Chapter V) focused primarily upon "comment-bulk", delineating which group(s) (HOES, LOES, females, males) expressed the most comments reflective of any given thematic realm. I would now like to shift the focus of this discussion to "person-bulk", examining the results of the current project solely from the vantage point of the individual number of cases in each sub-theme and category. I feel that this examination will serve to provide the reader with a more clear sense of the emergent qualitative differences between different groups of interviewees in the current study, based on the "bulk" of individuals from any given group within any given theme or category. The following discussion will not be a comprehensive one, but rather, will highlight the "person-

bulk" findings I deemed to be the most discrepant or otherwise noteworthy based on the expertise I acquired through my extended submersion in the data. The three aforementioned research questions will serve as the guiding structure for this discussion.

Concerning the first research question (the transition experience of these 20 individuals nearing graduation), I would like take a step back and examine my results from the broadest of vantage points: the four meta-themes. While these four meta-themes have provided an organizational structure for the emergent sub-themes and categories, they have thus far stood in the shadows in terms of discussing the results of the current study. Examining these meta-themes through the "person-bulk" lens, I would argue that, while each meta-theme is valuable in its own right, these four overarching themes are not equally weighted in terms of explaining my findings. Large discrepancies between groups materialized where I never would have expected, and noteworthy differences failed to appear in places in which I would have initially bet money. Therefore, I will now attempt to "weight" these four meta-themes according to the amount of impact I believe they exerted upon the transition experiences of these 20 individuals.

*Meta-Theme #4 — "Taking Action":* Using quantitative terminology, I worked to conduct a "mental factor analysis" of my meta-themes, seeking to explain the variance that emerged between different groups in the current study. I believe that the fourth meta-theme, "Taking Action" accounts for the largest amount of variance in the experience of the transition of these 20 individuals. In particular, the sub-theme entitled "Formulation of Plans" seemed to carry the day in terms of discrepancy based on occupational engagement status. In each of the six categories associated with the planning sub-theme under the "Taking Action" meta-theme, the number of individuals making related statements in one group (HOES versus LOES) was close to twice as many as the opposite group. For example, while nine out of 10 HOES were able to

articulate specific plans for the month right after graduation, only five out of 10 LOES were able to verbalize such plans. Similarly, while six out of 10 HOES outlined specific 10 year plans, only one out of 10 LOES exhibited this same capability. There did not appear to be striking differences between females and males in the realm of forming plans, and I would argue that the level of occupational engagement of the individual (as measured by the OES-S) accounted for a significant portion of the variability in the nature of post-graduation plans for this sample of 20 individuals.

Continuing with the "Taking Action" meta-theme, substantial between-group discrepancies (HOES versus LOES) based on number of individuals cases presented themselves in two of the categories under the "Involvement in Professionally Relevant Actions" sub-theme. Specifically, seven out of 10 LOES made comments indicative of "Curricular Involvement" as opposed to only two out of 10 HOES. Conversely, six out of 10 HOES noted that they had involved themselves via internship placements, whereas only three out of 10 LOES could make the same assertion. It might be conjectured that, when it comes to being proactive in taking action to involve themselves, HOES as a group are willing to exert more effort than LOES, as it takes more initiative and energy to secure an internship than to enroll in a course.

*Meta-Theme #1 — "On (and Around) the Fence":* When examined from a "person-bulk" vantage point, the first meta-theme, "On (and Around) the Fence" seemed to account for a substantial portion of variance between groups of interviewees as well. Other than "Openness to Differential Trajectories", each sub-theme and category within this first meta-theme boasted a significant "person-bulk" discrepancy for HOES versus LOES (with one group having twice as many individual cases as the other). For instance, while six out of 10 HOES displayed decidedness statements, only three out of 10 LOES voiced such comments. Similarly, only four

out of 10 HOES made undecidedness statements as opposed to eight out of 10 LOES. Within the "ambivalence" sub-theme, seven out of 10 LOES made statements reflective of ambivalence while only three out of 10 HOES articulated such comments. The "uncertainty" sub-theme unveiled similar findings: 10 out of 10 LOES made comments reflective of uncertainty as opposed to only five out of 10 HOES. My tentative conclusion regarding the meta-theme "On (and Around) the Fence" is that LOES are more likely to experience a general sense of "floundering"—not quite knowing what to think about their impending transition, and not quite feeling "ready" to leap over the fence into the backyard of the future. HOES, on the other hand, are less ambivalent, less uncertain, and more decided—perhaps these tendencies provide HOES with a springboard from which to catapult themselves over the fence. HOES may end up slightly snagging their clothing on the barbed wire at the top, but they seem to be able to clear the fence with only minor injuries.

While the findings of the current study (as examined from number of individual cases) do not lead me to believe that the second and third meta-themes ("Internal Processes" and "External Factors" respectively) accounted for as much between-group variance as the first and fourth meta-themes, I would be remiss not to mention the sub-themes and categories within the second and third meta-themes that seem to account for some between-group discrepancy.

*Meta-Theme #3 — "External Factors":* Relative to "External Factors" (the meta-theme I believe accounted for the most variance after the 1st and 4th meta-themes), seven out of 10 HOES noted the presence of role models as opposed to only two out of 10 LOES. Similarly, while four out of 10 HOES spoke of the existence of mentors (all of them HSF's), none of the LOES made such assertions. Through the lens of gender differences, eight out of ten females noted being supported in some fashion (e.g., parentally, interpersonally, monetarily, etcetera) whereas only

four out of 10 males voiced support statements. I believe that HOES (by way of their heightened levels of engagement with their environment) and females (due to their traditionally relational nature), are more likely than either LOES as a group or males as a group to tap into and take advantage of external factors in their environment to facilitate them in reaching their goals.

*Meta-Theme #2 — "Internal Processes":* Concerning "Internal Processes", four out of 10 LOES made statements indicative of an "avoiding" attitude as opposed to only one HOES. Furthermore, eight out of 10 HOES made comments reflective of possessing "self-determination", while only four out of 10 LOES articulated such statements. From the vantage point of gender, eight out of 10 females commented on their self-determination as opposed to only four out of 10 males. An even larger gender difference was detected in the "social responsibility" category of the "self-determination" sub-theme, with six out of 10 females making statements indicative of feeling a sense of social responsibility as opposed to only two out of 10 males. Therefore, it might be conjectured that, as respective groups, HOES and females possess more "positively-oriented" internal processes during this transition from college than do LOES and males as respective groups.

**Conclusions**

At the close of any project, and particularly an investigation that is qualitative in nature, it is imperative to critically inspect not only the quality of the craftsmanship with which the study was conducted, but also the quality of the writing conveying the findings of the project. As such, the following section will include a discussion of the credibility, generalizability, reliability, and validity of the current study.

**Credibility**

"Credible means that you have presented convincing evidence for each major conclusion" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 265). According to these authors, credibility in qualitative research can be attained in a variety of ways. In qualitative research, the proof is in the pudding so to speak: "First-hand evidence is stronger than second-hand evidence" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 266). Therefore, as much as possible, I attempted to quote conclusions directly from interviewees (e.g., as Tye noted: "I love answering that question now. I just tell them the whole list of things I have brainstormed") so as to minimize the possibility of distorting the results to match any preconceived notions I might have held (also known as fudging the data). Also, I attempted to demonstrate the experiences underlying the answers of the interviewees (e.g., as was stated by Victoria: "I'm actually not originally an American citizen. My family is from Austria. And I lived there until I was five. And we've been traveling back and forth and doing things like that my entire life, so I've never had the chance to not think about being international"), which served to enhance credibility due to the fact that the inclusion of identifying information was prohibited for the purposes of confidentiality. Furthermore, I tried to convey patterns in interviewee responses when such patterns seemed to readily present themselves, primarily via "clusters" of interviewee quotations for each sub-theme and category in the first part of chapter four of the current manuscript. As was noted by Rubin and Rubin (2005), credibility is enhanced when "…despite such differences, all provided compatible and overlapping answers" (p. 266). Although I provided tentative interpretations of the data earlier in the current chapter, conclusions about details that could not possibly be accurately inferred were not offered, per the advice of Rubin and Rubin (2005). Finally, I worked to enhance the credibility of the current project in the methods section of this manuscript via a thorough

explanation of the manner in which I gained access to my participant pool, chose my interviewees, and specifics surrounding the interview situation (e.g., location, time, etcetera).

According to Kvale (1996), generalizability, reliability, and validity "…have reached the status of a scientific holy trinity" (p. 229). In his book *InterViews*, Kvale argues that these three concepts must be conceptualized in ways that are relevant to qualitative research.

## Generalizability

When examined from a postmodern approach, generalizability in qualitative inquiry must shift from generalization to contextualization. Kvale (1996) offers three forms of generalizability: naturalistic generalization, statistical generalization, and analytical generalization. The current project rests on the latter from of generalizability: analytical. In the discussion of my data analysis and the presentation of the emerging results, I worked to provide evidence by way of direct quotations from interviewees, and to alert the reader to instances in which I believed that the results or interpretations offered should be interpreted with caution. "By specifying the supporting evidence and making the arguments explicit, the researcher can allow readers o judge the soundness of the generalization claim" (Kvale, 1996, p. 233).

## Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of the findings of empirical study (Kvale, 1996). In the current study, I worked to attain reliability in a variety of ways. Transcription checking was utilized to ensure that the data collected did not contain any obvious mistakes. The memo file created during data analysis served as a reminder of the original definitions of concepts and themes, and was frequently consulted so as to avoid unintentional definitional drift in coding (so that the meaning of the codes did not shift substantially over the course of the project in a way that I did not intend). In addition, having more than one person engaged in the analysis (e.g., my

two independent raters) simultaneously allowed for the comparison of the coding between the three of us, which served to reduce bias and ensure consistency inter-rater reliability. Code cross-checking (with the pre-agreed upon set of codes) refers to checking the coding of one independent rater against the coding of another independent, with both individuals utilizing the same data. Agreement between independent raters regarding what a concept represents is the primary aim of code cross-checking (Gibbs, 2008). The introduction of multiple instruments of data collection (e.g., a team of researchers) could feasibly introduce inconsistency into the data, as the idiosyncrasies of each individual may exert an influence upon not only the data that is collected (e.g., the information that surfaces during the interviews), but also upon the emergent "hard" data: the transcriptions. Different researchers may attend to an audio-record of an interview in different ways, picking up more keenly upon certain information while simultaneously glossing over other types of information. I believe that the reliability of the current project was enhanced by the fact that I alone conducted and transcribed all 20 interviews. Furthermore, interviews and transcriptions were completed within what I consider to be a relatively short period of time (approximately three weeks) given the time-consuming nature of qualitative research, further increasingly the likelihood that I was systematic in my method of data collection and transcription.

**Validity**

According to Kvale (1996), validity entails truth and correctness. "In a broader concept, validity pertains to the degree that a method investigates what it is intended to investigate…within this wider conception of validity, qualitative research can…lead to valid scientific knowledge" (Kvale, 1996, p. 238). He (1996) outlines the attainment of validity in qualitative research in seven stages: thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing,

analyzing, validating, and reporting. Concerning thematizing: "the validity of an investigation rests on the soundness of the theoretical presuppositions of a study and on the logic of the derivations from theory to the research questions of the study" (Kvale, 199, p. 237). Several existing empirical theories served to inform the current study (e.g., Social Cognitive Career Theory, the Theory of Planned Happenstance, the Theory of Career Adaptability, and perhaps most importantly, the Theory of Occupational Engagement). Although these theories did not deliberately inform the process of data analysis (given the grounded theory approach utilized in the current project), they were collectively taken into account when constructing the three research questions, which were intentionally kept broad due to the paucity of qualitative scholarship on the topic of occupational engagement. In terms of designing, "…a valid research design involves beneficence—producing knowledge beneficial to the human situation while minimizing harmful consequences" (Kvale, 1996, p. 237). As a burgeoning vocational psychologist with experience studying, teaching, and practicing career-related scholarship, it is my belief that the line of inquiry pursued in the current study is of great value to not only the multitude of students navigating the transition from college every year, but also to the future employers of these individuals, and to higher education system as a whole. If we can effectively determine what types of experiences and behaviors position a young person for success (e.g., networking, acquiring world of work knowledge, etc.), perhaps institutional changes can be made that facilitate these individuals in achieving satisfactory academic and employment experiences, foreseeably benefiting society as a whole.

Kvale (1996) commented on interviewing validity, noting that it "…pertains to the trustworthiness of the subject's reports and the quality of the interviewing itself, which should include a careful questioning as to the meaning of what is said and a continual checking the

information obtained as a validation in situ" (p. 237). I believe that my training as a counseling psychologist primed me to conduct these 20 interviews in a manner in which I was constantly "checking" what I believed I had heard from my interviewees, particularly in instances where I was unsure as to the meaning they were attempting to convey through their responses. There were multiple occasions over the course of these 20 interviews in which an individual would respond to one of my interview questions, I would attempt to paraphrase what I had heard them say, and they would "correct" me in my paraphrasing, saying something along the lines of "no, not really like that, but more like this". For example, after Diane spoke of learning about architecture from what I thought sounded like an internship or a part time job, I stated: "…that was something you learned from actually trying it", to which Diane responded: "well, I never actually tried it. I learned from shadowing; I worked around him and stuff". As a whole, this group of twenty graduating seniors seemed to be forthright in their responses, leading me to believe that I was able to effectively achieve validity at the interviewing stage.

Validity at the transcribing stage entails "…what constitutes a valid translation from oral to written language" (Kvale, 1996, p. 237). As I noted in Chapter III of the current manuscript, my method of transcription was relatively exhaustive—I refrained from paraphrasing the words of my participants, transcribing literally each and every one of their spoke words verbatim. Again, I believe that the fact that I alone transcribed all 20 interviews lends validity to my project in that I did not have to contend with the confounds that would be introduced through the employment of multiple transcribers. Analyzing validity refers to the soundness of the interpretations (Kvale, 1996). I believe that my recruitment of two co-coders at this stage of the project facilitated me in achieving analyzing validity in that these individuals worked to keep any biases I was bringing into the process of data analysis in check. Such constant comparative

analysis was used as a means of checking the consistency and accuracy of the codes developed. The process of comparison was iterative: as codes were developed, the data was scanned for other occurrences of the code. The original code was compared with new occurrences of the code to check for consistency (Gibbs, 2008). Initial codes were revised as necessary based upon this method of constant comparison.

Validity at the validating stage in part concerns "…a decision on what the appropriate community is for a dialogue on validity" (Kvale, 1996, p. 237). I believe that my reliance upon members of both the Vocational Psychology Research Team of which I was a part (e.g., my two co-coders), as well as two members of my dissertation committee (e.g., my advisor/chairperson who is an expert on the construct of occupational engagement, as well as an expert in qualitative inquiry) facilitated me in maximizing validity at this juncture of my project. Finally, validity at the reporting stage "…involves the question of whether a given report is a valid account of the main findings of a study, as well as the role of the readers of the report in validating the results" (Kvale, 1996, p. 237). I employed direct interviewee quotations to facilitate the reader in gaining a flavor of how the ideas of occupational engagement are expressed by the individuals in the current study in *their* original language and dialect (Gibbs, 2008), a tactic I believe validates the main findings of my project. In addition, throughout the discussion of my findings earlier in the current chapter, I encourage the reader to interpret my results with caution for a variety of reasons (e.g., small numbers of individual comments and/or cases, seemingly contradictory findings, multiple explanations for a particular result, etc.). I also worked to delineate what I believed to be ripe areas of future inquiry for the interested vocational scholar considering empirical study on the current topic.

Kvale (1996) asserted that validity in qualitative research entails observations, conversations, and interactions. The idea of knowledge as socially constructed reality champions conversation as the medium through which knowledge is achieved: "in a postmodern conception of knowledge, the very conversation about and the application of knowledge become essential aspects of the construction of a social world" (p. 251). Kvale offered implications for the validation of qualitative study. First, the qualitative scientist must emphasize falsification of results as opposed to verification of results. In other words, while it is the responsibility of the qualitative scholar to defend the claims made in their research (presumably via information obtained through observation, conversation, and interaction), these claims must be falsifiable— we must be able to prove them not true should contradictory evidence present itself. In the current study, I presented my findings in a tentative light—I noted possible explanations for my results while simultaneously indicating that that the nature of my findings may differ for a variety of reasons upon empirical replication (e.g., differences in sample size, demographic makeup of the sample, geographic region from which the sample was recruited, etc.). In this sense, the reality that was constructed in the current study with the particular sample of 20 individuals from a particular institution in a particular geographic region during a particular moment in time may not be the reality that emerges if the conditions of the study were to shift— lending falsifiability to my tentative claims. This quality of craftsmanship (Kvale, 1996) is of critical importance in working to establish validity in qualitative inquiry.

Another implication for validation in qualitative research noted by Kvale (1996) concerns the communication of socially constructed knowledge. "Method as a guarantee of truth dissolves; with a social construction of reality, the emphasis is on the discourse of the community" (p. 240). Given that I alone conducted and transcribed all 20 interviews, it was of

paramount importance for me to build scholarly discourse into the process of data analysis. I believe that my recruitment of two co-coders familiar with the construct of occupational engagement to assist me in theme construction, as well as my regular dialogue with members of my committee throughout the course of the current project have facilitated me in the consideration of alternate explanations: "Consensual validation is, at base, agreement among competent others that the description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics of an educational situation are right" (Kvale, 1996, p. 246). More specifically, Kvale argued that selecting members of the proper community to provide insight regarding what is truthful and valuable is of critical importance, including "…a committee to examine a doctoral candidate" (p. 247). I am confident that the members of my dissertation committee are competent in this regard, lending further validation to the results of the current project.

**Identity Memo**

According to Maxwell (2005) the purpose of an identity memo "…is to help you examine your goals, experiences, assumptions, feelings, and values as they relate to your research, and to discover what resources and potential concerns your identity and experience may create (p. 27). This memo could include prior connections to the individuals and settings relative to the desired area of study, the thoughts, feelings, and assumptions of the researcher about these people and places, and the goals that the investigator hopes to accomplish through their scholarship. The discussion that follows is my identity memo relative to the current study.

According to Gibbs (2008), reflexivity in qualitative investigations refers to the understanding that the product of research is reflective of the background and biases of the researcher. A self-critical focus is necessary to obtain legitimacy, as no researcher is value-free, and it futile to attempt to eliminate the effects of the researcher. In the current study, I made

every attempt to be explicit about my personal preconceptions (e.g., personal background and experiences in the topic of occupational engagement). I critically assessed the data via the discussion of any problems that arose (e.g., failure of being blind to interviewee group membership), explaining the justification for how my data were interpreted, presenting rival explanations when applicable. The complexity of the data was illustrated via the presentation of multiple and/or contradictory descriptions provided by interviewees (Gibbs, 2008). As a scientist, I was obligated to attend to potential biases that may have been inadvertently impacting my analysis: "As you refine your definitions, you need to double-check to make sure you *really* understand the concept the way the interviewees use it rather than the way you define it using your own cultural lens" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 218).

In any form of research, but in qualitative inquiry in particular, the personal feelings or biases of the researcher can lead to a distortion in how the data is initially and/or finally interpreted. Rubin and Rubin (2005) argued that "…rather than pretend to have no biases, it makes more sense to examine your preconceptions and work out how you feelings might slant the research…" (p. 82). As a doctoral student in my final year of graduate study, I can reflect back upon my years in higher education and see the linear nature of my own path. Majoring in Psychology as an undergraduate, I "formally" declared only one major, and I graduated with honors in exactly four years. I began my graduate study in a related field, Counseling Psychology, immediately following my undergraduate education, finishing my Masters degree in the typically projected two years. My doctoral studies continued at a new institution, but in the same field, Counseling Psychology, and I will finish my current program in four years time, which is on target with what is typically expected.

In spite of the linear nature of my own educational path up to my current position (or perhaps due to my curiosity of those who follow non-linear paths), I have elected to concentrate my research in the area of Vocational Psychology, and I believe I have acquired significant knowledge and experience in this realm of scholarship. Not only have I spent the past three years working closely under my academic advisor who is a well-respected scientist in the area of Vocational Psychology, particularly as it relates to occupational engagement, but I have also taken two graduate-level courses in career development and Vocational Psychology, I have taught four semesters of a Career and Life Planning course for freshman and sophomore undergraduate students, I have served as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for my academic advisor for his course in Vocational Psychology, and I have completed a semester-long field experience at the University Career Center in which I was trained to handle the various needs of college students related to majors and careers. In reflecting back on these experiences and the knowledge I have attained from them, I feel confident that I am equipped with a solid understanding of the wide range of variability in the career development and decision-making of college students, which has undoubtedly served to offset the initial preconceptions I held concerning the typicality or superiority of linear academic/career progression. In fact, I believe that strictly and/or blindly adhering to a linear path of study may be indicative of premature foreclosure, hampering adaptive career decision-making and optimal vocational preparation and development. In sum, I believe that the knowledge and experiences I have acquired in my graduate studies have served to keep check my biases related to optimal career development, minimizing the adverse impact of such biases on the interpretation of the current results

**Limitations and Implications:**

No empirical investigation is without shortcomings, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to be forthright about the weaknesses of their project so that the reader can critically examine the emergent findings, and so that future researchers can seek to avoid (if possible) any flaws in design, methodology, or data analysis. Furthermore, at the close of any scientific study, it is imperative to provide the reader with practical implications that the current findings may hold for research, practice, or the realm(s) of society associated with the topic of the study in general (e.g., in the case of the current project, higher education and employment). Although certainly not exhaustive, an outline of possible limitations and implications will be provided in the section that follows.

*Limitations:* Several limitations must be taken into consideration by the reader in assessing the findings and tentative interpretations offered in the current project. Perhaps the most flagrant of these limitations concerns the fact that, throughout my process of coding, I was never blind to participant membership (HOES versus LOES). This blunder was likely due to the rapid pace with which the current study was undertaken and completed. More specifically, I uploaded all 20 interview audio-files myself, electronically labeling each file under participant initials, gender, and occupational engagement status (high versus low OES-S scores). Realizing the mistake I had made, I attempted to at least partially correct for my gaffe by ensuring that the data I provided to my two independent raters were de-identified in terms of occupational engagement status. I believe that this correction was effective in preventing these two individuals from formulating biases regarding participant occupational engagement status, and that their un-biased input aided in checking and correcting for any of my biases during our process of coding and theme formation.

Generalizeability (briefly discussed above in the context of validation) could also serve as a significant limitation in the current study. Due to participant selection by convenience sampling (based on OES-S scores), I was unable to utilize random assignment, allowing me little control over the distribution of interviewee demographics. Whenever feasible (e.g., when the OES-S scores of two individuals were equal), I selected participants with demographics outside of what is typically the most common in social sciences research in a university setting: young, European-American females. As a means of avoiding the over-generalization of the results of the current project, qualifiers (e.g., "some of"; "more than half"; etc.) were used in the final write-up to ensure that the findings of the current study were not inadvertently applied beyond the groups/setting examined (Gibbs, 2008). In spite of this assertion, it should be noted that at the most basic level, my sample of 20 interviewees consisted of college seniors graduating in May 2010 (in the midst of a nation-wide economic crisis), from a large Midwestern university, who volunteered to be contacted and followed through with the in-person interview. It is highly probable that these 20 individuals differ in important ways from a number of different samples that could have been collected at a different point in history (even five to 10 years prior to when the current study was conducted), or from a different geographic location. However, given that I utilized grounded theory in the current study, the reader is asked to keep in mind the words of Rubin and Rubin (2005): "…because grounded theory is about theory building rather than testing theory, it is less focused on finding the limitations of a study or the extent to which the results can be generalized" (p. 241). Nonetheless, future researchers may wish to replicate the current project at an institution of higher education located in an area of the United States outside the Midwest (and potentially after the chaotic economic climate settles down) in order to see if these results hold up under differing circumstances.

Additionally, I did not work to deliberately counterbalance the order of my interviews in terms of student scoring high versus low on the OES-S or in terms of gender. However, I believe that the simple act of scheduling interviews according to the convenience of my interviewees enacted a natural balance in that the occurrence of interviews with males, females, high OES-S scorers and low OES-S scorers were not intentionally clustered together. This randomness may have served to at least partially offset the limitation that I was not blind to the category membership of my interviewees. Moreover, I did not counterbalance the order of the questions in my interview protocol, potentially leading to order effects. However, changing the order of my interview questions would have made the flow of the interview non-sequential (e.g., it would not make sense to first ask "what has this interview experience been like for you"?), which would have been detrimental as opposed to beneficial.

Continuing in the discussion of limitations, it should be noted that interviewer fatigue can be problematic if interviews are scheduled too close together. "During an interview, your level of concentration is high, you are listening hard, trying to extract themes, deciding what to follow up and how, and asking for explanations and examples" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 80). Given the time-sensitive nature of my study (it was imperative to schedule interviews prior to spring commencement given that many participants would be re-locating soon after graduation), I found myself in a situation where several interviews were often scheduled back-to-back, or very close in time. Per the advice of Rubin and Rubin (2005), I made every attempt to create a psychological space between interviews as a means of separating one from another. I tended to create this space through checking emails, eating lunch, or briefly chatting with a friend or colleague in between interviews. Overall, I found this tactic to be helpful in reducing any fatigue I experienced as a result of multiple interviews close in time. However, my rapid interview

schedule may have impacted my data analysis in the sense that I had very little time between interviews (often not even 24 hours) in which to engage in transcription and conduct a preliminary analysis. "You cannot keep up a pace of two to three interviews a day, looking them over, transcribing them, and preparing for the next one, and still have time or energy to think about what you are doing" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 80). Future researchers should consider undertaking a slower-paced interview schedule, which would afford the time to engage in more thorough data analysis earlier in the project.

It is also important to note that several of the questions on the interview protocol in the proposed study (e.g., what have you done over the course of your college career to move you in the direction of your goals?) required interviewees to engage in retrospection to arrive at their responses. Peering into the past to recount motives and feelings associated with certain points in time carries with it the possibility of distorting reality, as was noted by Krieshok (1998) in his discussion of an anti-introspectivist view of career decision making: "…people don't think; they only think they think" (p. 218). However, the very nature of qualitative investigation often entails the need for individuals to reflect back upon events or processes that occurred in the past, resulting in retrospection as an unavoidable limitation.

Finally, I would be remiss not to address my own place in time as a potential limitation of the current study. The current study was conceptualized, conducted, analyzed, and written over the duration of my final year of formal graduate study. The morning of the day that I began conducting interviews, I discovered that I had been "matched" to a pre-doctoral internship program at a location thousands of miles away. While I was elated to hear of my placement, the process of writing about transitions in the wake of my own major transition has been an interesting and complex one. While I cannot consciously pinpoint any major effects that my own

transition process may have exerted upon the manner in which I conducted, transcribed, or

analyzed these 20 interviews, the psychologically-minded part of me feels the need to address

that such an impact may have occurred on an unconscious level. Perhaps I over-identified with

those interviewees speaking of re-locating to a place far away after graduation, encouraging them

or probing them in ways I was not aware of, and/or in a way I did not encourage/probe other

interviewees not making such assertions. Any number of potential influences outside of my

awareness may have come into play over the course of the current study, and while I cannot

explicitly discuss these influences due to their unconscious nature, I wanted to alert the reader to

my vantage point as a potential confound or limitation in the current study.

*Implications:* It is my hope and belief that the findings of the current study have rendered

valuable information concerning the transition experiences of college students approaching

graduation, particularly through the lens of occupational engagement. These results may begin to

help future researchers understand the manner in which occupational engagement (or lack of

occupational engagement) manifests in individuals nearing this important milestone, facilitating

the development of more pointed questions concerning the engagement behavior ideal for

success in life after college. I am optimistic that the findings of the current project can begin to

shed light on important differences between college students who possess high levels of

occupational engagement versus those who possess low levels of occupational engagement (as

measured by the OES-S), hopefully serving as another step in validating this measure. In

addition, differences between males and females (and potential interactions between

occupational engagement status and gender) appeared to emerge in the current study, and it is my

hope that these tentative differences will serve as a springboard for further study concerning the

manifestation of occupational engagement in different populations at varying developmental stages.

The results of the current study may hold implications for the practice of career counseling. Although I did not employ an intervention in this project, I encourage the reader to be mindful of the assertion of Christensen and Johnston (2003): "Listening to client career stories is an avenue for counselors to participate with clients in authoring more meaningful work narratives" (p. 159). The findings of the current project may assist future researchers in exploring the use of career narratives in counseling as a means of boosting occupational engagement. If telling the story of where you have been, where you are going, and how you will get there highlights the importance of occupational engagement, it seems plausible that career counseling interventions aimed at fostering occupational engagement may be developed for college students in their freshman and sophomore years—a time ripe with possibilities for involvement and exploration.

**Take-Home Message**

Over the course of the current study, I have lived and breathed my interviews with these 20 individuals, sifting through hundreds of pages of transcripts searching for some semblance of meaning. I have thought about their stories from more angles than I ever could have imagined possible at the inception of this project. Some days I was left scratching my head, wondering how I could possibly piece together a coherent "collective story" about the experiences of these 20 young adults. The interview audio-files were there if I wanted to listen to them yet again; the transcripts boasted rich conversation for me read through repeatedly; my manuscript in-progress served as a reminder of emergent patterns and discrepancies—of a story unfolding before my eyes. The reader may wonder, with all of this rich information, why the itchy scalp? Reflecting

back upon what I have learned about the *process* of qualitative research, I believe that it is precisely the enormous volume of robust data that makes qualitative research so special that also makes it so difficult. Never in my many, many years of higher education have I found writing to be so incredibly frustrating and gratifying in the same moment. Never have I experienced so many roadblocks and victories within the same 24-hour period. Never have I found myself to be completely clueless in one moment, and feeling like a true qualitative scholar in the next.

This project has consumed me for months on end—sometimes in a good way, other times in a not-so-good-way. Nonetheless, I feel confident in stating that over the course of this project, I have developed an expertise of sorts with these 20 individuals at this particular point in their transition. Therefore, I believe I am qualified at this juncture to step away from the audio-files, mounds of transcripts, tally tables, and tentative interpretations and to offer my "from the gut" conclusions.

I believe this group of graduating seniors was a representative one. Although I did not explicitly ask my interviewees about their family structure, socio-economic status, or religious beliefs, I was blown away with the level of spontaneous self-disclosure offered by many of these individuals within the short 30-minute time frame of the interview. I believe I attained a sample exhibiting diversity in just about every way I could imagine; not only personal diversity, but diversity within their transition experiences as well. These students displayed a vast array of emotions relative to their transition: fear, excitement, angst, jubilation, and anything else the imaginative reader can think of—sometimes expected affective reactions, sometimes not. What I was able to discern in my time with these 20 students is that this time in their lives is a big, big deal. Things are changing for these individuals, and there seemed to be a sense of "get ready, or get out of the way" amongst this group. Those that felt prepared and had plans (mostly the

HOES) were "ready" to leap forward onto the next adventure; those that felt lacking in readiness almost seemed to recede into the background—focusing on their upcoming summer travel plans or on their ambitious (yet vague) long-term aspirations without much insight as to how they would work toward actually achieving these goals.

It would be interesting to follow these 20 individuals throughout the next several decades of their lives—gaining a peek into the experiences they will encounter, perhaps partially as a result of the experiences they have thus far accrued. If I were a gambler, I would put my money on the HOES to most effectively arrive at their destination (even if they have yet to discover exactly where that will be). I will add to this prediction that it is not simply the score these individuals attained on a 14-item measure that holds the cards for their future (although I was delighted to find some seemingly substantial between-group differences based upon the behaviors assessed by this brief questionnaire)—I believe it is also the *confidence* gained through occupational engagement behaviors (and perhaps through early encouragement from others to be engaged with their environment) that propels certain individuals to hop aboard the fast track to their futures, leaving their more passive counterparts in the dust. I would also venture to predict that, if these 20 young people were followed longitudinally, the apparent differences between the HOES and LOES would become more discrepant as the years and experiences roll past. Some readers may have heard the old adage: "the rich get richer". It is my prediction that the same holds true for engagement: "the occupationally engaged become more engaged". Through engagement behaviors such as networking, involvement in professionally relevant actions, and seeking mentorship, the engaged individual becomes (in the words of one of my interviewees: Victoria) "plugged in"—with each experience broadening their network of people and options that can serve as resources that may lead them to their next engagement experience.

However, this is not to say that LOES are forever doomed to live in stagnant disengagement. Quite to the contrary, I believe many of the assertions made by the LOES I spoke with to be indicative of their attempts to "turn it around", even as late in the game as their final semester of their undergraduate careers (e.g., the assertion of Ben that he had recently increased his networking behaviors in case he finds himself in need of future position). That being said, optimal levels of occupational engagement may be most effectively facilitated in an environment in which such experiences are plentiful (e.g., a college or university setting). Nonetheless, I believe that individuals who fail to fully take advantage of the engagement experiences offered at the higher education level may be able to shift their behavior to accommodate the utility of being occupationally engaged (thus, exhibiting career adaptability) later on in their life trajectory. As was noted in the discussion of implications of the current study, it may be the case that career counseling efforts can be restructured to target young people with varying degrees of aimlessness, ideally instilling them with the skills to engage themselves in the world around them, optimizing their career adaptability.

In sum, the voices of my interviewees have haunted my dreams, as well as my waking hours, and I have grown quite attached to the 20 stars of this movie about transition and growing up. The televised trailer to every movie has an associated theme song; a tune that captures the essence of the film—the soul of the story. While listening to my iPod at the gym one day during the course of this project, I experienced a moment of clarity. The song *Unwritten* by Natasha Bedingfield came up on my workout playlist, and in spite of the fact that I had listened to this tune hundreds of times before, on that particular day I experienced the lyrics in a way that was completely novel to me. Continuously pondering the words of my interviewees from different angles for months on end (whether I was consciously aware of it or not), I believe I was primed

to make the remarkable connection between this song and the collective story of the 20

individuals I believe I have come to know and understand so deeply.

Music means something different to each of us, and the way one person understands a

song may be completely different than the interpretation of a different individual. From my

vantage point, *Unwritten* is about starting the next chapter in life, a task we must all undertake at

various points along our path, and a task imminent to each of the 20 leading actors in this tale of

transition. For the reader unfamiliar with this song, I will let the lyrics speak for themselves:

*I am unwritten, can't read my mind, I'm undefined*
*I'm just beginning, the pen's in my hand, ending unplanned*
*Staring at the blank page before you*
*Open up the dirty window*
*Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find*
*Reaching for something in the distance*
*So close you can almost taste it*
*Release your inhibitions*
*Feel the rain on your skin*
*No one else can feel it for you*
*Only you can let it in*
*No one else, no one else*
*Can speak the words on your lips*
*Drench yourself in words unspoken*
*Live your life with arms wide open*
*Today is where your book begins*
*The rest is still unwritten*

I believe these words effectively capture the most basic plot of the story told by these 20 young

people. While each of these individuals experience this time of transition in their own unique

way, none of them can escape the fact that, for better or for worse, their lives are about to change

forever in ways they likely cannot fully grasp in the present moment.

Some of these folks have emerged as better positioned to navigate this impending

transition than others, displaying varying levels of being "undefined". As we observed in the

discussion of the results of this study, the "pages" of some of these young people are more

"blank" than others. The "pen" is tightly gripped in some hands, while other sets of fingers clumsily fumble with this writing device, perhaps dropping the pen altogether at some points in the writing process. All 20 of these leading actors are "reaching for something in the distance"— what differs is the magnitude of that distance. While some of these individuals have been able to pry open the rusty hinges of the "dirty window" into the next chapter of their lives, "illuminating" what the future has in store for them, others continue to struggle with the latch— for the time being, possessing a muddied view of what lies on the other side of the glass pane. Some individuals are comfortable with a blank page and a dirty window, others experience ambivalence, negative affect, and take assume a general attitude of avoidance when their future is not clearly laid out in front of them.

In sum, the ideal prototype that has emerged in the current story of transition is that of the young person who acts to "drench" themselves in experience; engaging with their environment in ways that enable them to connect-the-dots between who they are, where they have been, and where they are going—greeting their future with "arms wide open". To some extent, the future is always "unwritten" for all of us; the unexpected will always occur, and new twists and turns in the path will seemingly materialize out of thin air. Nonetheless, it is up to each of us to make sure we are stocked up on office supplies so that when the inspiration hits us, we can put a brand new pen to fresh white paper and let the next chapter of our book "begin".

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# Appendices

Appendix A: Introductory Letter

Dear Dr. _____,

My name is Abby Bjornsen, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counseling Psychology doctoral program at the University of Kansas. As part of my dissertation work, I am administering a very short measure designed to assess how involved students have been in their own career decision making process. This screening tool will ultimately lead me to 20 graduating seniors scoring at the extreme high and low ends of this measure that I will conduct qualitative interviews with. As the director of [*specific department*], I was hoping you might be able to point me in the direction of some of your faculty who teach classes likely to be comprised of seniors graduating this May (2010), as it is imperative that I have students from a wide variety of undergraduate programs in my study. Any assistance you could provide would be most appreciated. Please don't hesitate to let me know if you have any questions. Thank you, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Sincerely,

Abby Bjornsen

*Abby L. Bjornsen, M.A.*
*Doctoral Candidate*
*Graduate Teaching Assistant*
*Counseling Psychology*
*637 Joseph R. Pearson Hall*
*University of Kansas*

Appendix B: Informed Consent

I am conducting a study on occupational engagement for my doctoral dissertation at the University of Kansas. The University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

I am interested in learning about the ways in which your career development has been influenced by your experience or lack of experience. I will be asking you to complete a short questionnaire, and then to potentially participate in an interview. Your interview will be audio recorded for the purposes of my data analysis. These records will be stored in a locked personal office, and will be destroyed at the end of the project. It is estimated that completing the questionnaire and consent form will take no more than five minutes of your time, and that the interview will take no more than 30 minutes of your time. Students selected to participant in the interview portion of my project will be provided with a small gift card for a free movie rental to show my appreciation for your time and effort.

The content of the questions concerns the impact of your academic and personal experiences upon your career development. It is unlikely that you will experience any discomfort or harm from participation. Although participation in our study will not directly benefit you, we believe that the information will be useful as a means of exploring the extent of the importance of occupational engagement, as well as potentially informing policies concerning educational requirements.

Your participation is solicited although strictly voluntary. I assure you that your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings. All participants will be assigned pseudonyms. It is possible, however, with internet communications, that through intent or accident someone other than the intended recipient may see your response.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is complete, please feel free to contact me by phone or e-mail.

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385 or write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email mdenning@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

_____          _____
     Type/Print Participant's Name                        Date

_____
          Participant's Signature


[If signed by a personal representative, a description of such representative's authority to act for the individual must also be provided, e.g. parent/guardian.]

Researcher Contact Information:

**Principal Investigator:**           **Abby Bjornsen, M.A.**

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Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

**Name**: _____     **Years in Undergrad:** _____

**Gender**: _____     **Major:** _____

**Age**: _____     **Course Title**: _____

**Graduation Date**: *Month* _____ *Year* _____     **Hometown/State:** _____

Race/Ethnicity:

- ☐   Black or African-American
- ☐   Asian or Pacific Islander
- ☐   White or European-American
- ☐   American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐   Middle Eastern
- ☐   Hispanic or Latina/Latino
- ☐   Biracial
- ☐   Multiracial
- ☐   Other

Phone: _____     Email: _____

Do you already hold an undergraduate or graduate degree?

What are your immediate post-graduation plans (e.g., working; traveling; internship, etc.)?

Are you willing to be contacted for an interview?

If yes, what is the best way to contact you? (Phone vs. Email)

Appendix D: Occupational Engagement Scale – Student (OES-S)

**Occupational Engagement Scale – Student**

How well does each statement describe you? Please mark the appropriate number in the space to the left of each statement.

| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Not at all** | | **Somewhat** | | **Very much** |
| **Like Me** | | **Like Me** | | **Like Me** |

1.\_\_\_\_\_I talk about my career choices with family or friends.

2.\_\_\_\_\_I am actively involved in groups or organizations.

3.\_\_\_\_\_I have contact with people working in fields I find interesting.

4.\_\_\_\_\_I gain hands on experience that I might use in the future.

5.\_\_\_\_\_I volunteer in an area that I find interesting.

6.\_\_\_\_\_I attend lectures, exhibits, and community events.

7.\_\_\_\_\_I take part in a variety of activities to see where my interests lie.

8.\_\_\_\_\_I ask people in social settings about what they do for a living or
what they are interested in doing.

9.\_\_\_\_\_I visit places I'm interested in working at so I can learn more about them.

10.\_\_\_\_I attend presentations or talks related to a career I might find interesting.

11.\_\_\_\_I pursue opportunities in life because I just know they will come in handy.

12.\_\_\_\_I work with teachers or staff on activities other than coursework
(committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.).

13.\_\_\_\_I do lots of things that are interesting to me.

14.\_\_\_\_I have meaningful conversations with students of a different ethnicity.

Appendix E: Request for an Interview

Dear ___,

My name is Abby Bjornsen, and I am a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at the University of Kansas. A short time ago, I visited your class (___), and you filled out a short questionnaire about your occupational engagement. I greatly appreciate your help with my study, and I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to allow me to conduct a short interview with you (also part of my study). The purpose of this interview is for me to learn from you more in depth about what events in your life have led you to this point with your school/career, as well as how you are feeling about your current academic/career path as you approach graduation.

This interview is voluntary, and you would be compensated with a free movie rental to thank you for your time. This interview would only require approximately thirty minutes of your time, and I can meet you at a time and place of your convenience (preferably over the next couple of weeks, prior to spring break). Please email me back at your earliest convenience and let me know if you would be willing to allow me to interview you so that I can learn about your experiences. Please don't hesitate to let me know if you have any questions. Thanks so much ___, and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Abby Bjornsen

*Abby L. Bjornsen, M.A.*
*Doctoral Candidate*
*Graduate Teaching Assistant*
*Counseling Psychology*
*637 Joseph R. Pearson Hall*
*University of Kansas*

Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. What are you doing in the months right after graduation?

2. Tell me about what you see yourself doing ten years from now

3. Walk me through the story of how you'll get there

    a. As you tell this story, how do you feel?

    b. What was it like for you when you were asked "What is your major"?

    c. What is it like for you when you get asked "What are you doing after graduation?"

4. What have you done to move yourself in the direction of your goals?

5. What skill/trait/attribute have you developed in college that you are most proud of or that you believe will be the most useful to you in your life after graduation?

6. How has this interview experience been for you?