

Late Transition to Technical College: Perspectives from Males Approaching Adulthood

Gary C. Lindeman, Ph.D.

Abstract

This study focused upon the personal experiences of working class adult males who enrolled in a large Midwestern technical college. The participants all left home and high school several years ago, with no apparent goals toward continuing their education. The rationale for including only males was based upon current reports that fewer males are enrolling in post secondary institutions.

The purpose of the study was to better understand how or why working class males found themselves able to reengage their education; despite being disconnected from formal schooling for several years. The study specifically addressed the internal and external factors that facilitated the transition of males situated in the early adulthood stage; from work to school or concurrent engagement in school and work. Life stage development provided a conceptual framework related to the transition process and phases of exploration and stabilization that characterize movement towards our conception of what it means to be an adult.

Qualitative research methods were consistent with seeking to interpret the meaning of human experience from the subjective view of participants. Following a set of semi structured questions; the participants were asked to reflect upon experiences after they left high school and up to the present time. The interview questions were designed to elicit an open dialogue about factors perceived to facilitate or hinder college transition. Several themes emerged from the thick descriptions included in the individual written profiles, and a cross case analysis was chosen to highlight the key themes.

Introduction

For many young adults, high school was their last experience with any type of formal education program. An increasing number of students are leaving high school without the necessary occupational, academic, or social skills needed to succeed in the workplace, or in educational settings (Rosenbaum, 2001). It is widely accepted that some preparatory training beyond high school is needed to obtain jobs that pay enough to adequately sustain oneself. Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the so called “forgotten half,” despite the advanced warnings that came from such organizations as the William Grant Foundation (1988) who published, *The forgotten half: Pathways to success for America's youth and young families*.

The demand for education and training has increased dramatically over the past decades. According to researchers with the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy, fewer young adults are entering full time work before their early twenties, and a growing number are entering work toward the end of their twenties (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). Recent economic and social changes have resulted in the delay of work and the extension of schooling, and family transitions are occurring a decade or so later than in the past.

As adolescence emerged as a distinct life stage a century ago, early adulthood is now emerging as a unique period characterized with new psychological identities and social affiliations (Arnett, 2004).

This study focused upon working class adult males who left home and high school several years ago, with little or no educational or occupational goals. The rationale for including only males was based upon recent reports that fewer males are enrolling or succeeding in post-secondary institutions (Marklein, 2005; NCES, 2004; Tyre, 2006).

Life stage development provided a conceptual framework related to the transition process and phases of exploration and stabilization that characterized movement towards our conception of adulthood (Levinson, 1978). As much as adolescence emerged as a distinct life stage a century ago, early adulthood is now emerging as a unique period characterized by new psychological identities and social affiliations (Arnett, 2004; Settersten, 2005). Other pertinent literature centering on adult and career development was examined in order to learn more about psychosocial factors that facilitate or hinder growth and development such as: Lewin, 1953; Erikson, 1968; Rogers, 1977; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Bandura, 1986; and Super, 1990.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were consistent with seeking to interpret and understand the unique meaning of lived experience from a unique group of participants who were situated on the threshold of adulthood. Borg & Gall (2003) stated that reality is constructed from the perspectives of participants who are best suited to describe their own perceptions of reality. The emphasis is on the social processes and the meanings that participants attributed to social situations (p.p. 386-387). Following a set of semi-structured questions; participants were asked to reflect upon experiences after they left high school and up to the present time. The interview questions were designed to elicit an open dialogue about factors perceived to facilitate or hinder transition (Glesne, 1999). The 90-minute interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and initial coding was accomplished with the assistance of a qualitative analysis computer software program. Several themes emerged from the thick descriptions included in the individual written profiles, and a cross case analysis was chosen to highlight key themes.

Findings and Discussion

Emerging themes were organized under two broad areas, exploration and stabilization, that categorized experiences in early adulthood (Levinson, 1978). A third area named “intermediary bridging” helped describe the connection between exploration and stabilization. The exploration period contained the following phases or experiences of the participants in this study: separation from family and independence, work experiences, peer relationships, schooling attempts, and at risk behaviors including substance abuse. The stabilization phase included the following: sustained college enrollment, family reconnections, enhanced peer relationships, and goal clarification. Intermediary bridging was the link between exploration and stabilization, caused by personal reflection upon significant events and a heightened vision of future life.

Findings suggest that we take a closer look at developmental factors within three broad areas that influence the transition process of males approaching adulthood. All participants left home and school, and entered into early adulthood with varying degrees of discontinuity that affected their decision-making, goal orientation, and rate of growth and development. One

participant summed up this unique and lasting transition period as follows: “We should realize we’re in a situation almost like a river, it’s carrying you and you have to decide whether you want to swim over to the bank and pull yourself out or keep on going.”

Personal change that affected adult and career development relative to certain psychosocial factors was found within three areas of focus: (1) Family (2) Workplace and (3) Lifestyle. The degree of internalization and reflection upon experiences within the three areas influenced movement toward a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Low quality workplace experiences had a negative effect upon the participants. Individual lifestyle was closely associated with peer relationships and at risk behaviors (especially substance abuse). Sustained enrollment in technical college was seen as a stabilizing factor resulting in some degree from personal reflection and perspective transformation.

Conclusion

The information gained from this study may better inform policy makers and educators seeking to help this population move toward occupational and educational attainment. The study also brought to the forefront, recent data indicating that fewer males than females are enrolling or completing post secondary educational programs.

A better understanding of the transition process and life stage development may enable families and others to function in a supportive and helping role. Discussion of new program initiatives within the workplace and other social settings may also help find ways to reach out to this neglected and growing segment of our population.

A major gap in the research was the predominant focus upon adolescents and younger adults in “school to work transition.” This study focused upon “work to school” transition as a specific area within the larger context of life transitions occurring at a specific age and time. A smaller body of research explored how emerging adults entering or going through the transition period view themselves and affect perspective transformation.

The study also brought to the forefront, the importance of recent data indicating that fewer males than females are enrolling or completing post secondary educational programs. Perhaps most important was being able to bring life to the voices of those less likely to succeed “emerging adults” who gave their voice to this study. Accordingly, our hope is for a lasting transformation and better life for all of the study participants and the countless others like them.

References

- Arnett, J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: the winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: a social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Borg, W. & Gall, M.D. (2003). *Applying Educational research: A practical guide*. New York: Longman.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Levinson, D. (1978). *Seasons of a mans life*. New York: Random House.

- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Marklein, M.B. (2005, October 20). *USA Today*, p. 01.
- Rogers, C. (1977). *Carl Rogers on personal power*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Marsick, V. & Watkins, K. (1990). *Informal and incidental learning in the workplace*. New York: Routledge
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2004). *Trends in educational equity of girls and women*. (NCES Publication ERN3781P). Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.
- Rosenbaum, J. (2001). *Beyond college for all: Career paths for the forgotten half*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Settersten, R., Furstenberg, F., & Rumbaut, R. (Eds.). (2005). *On the frontier of adulthood: theory, adulthood, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Super, D. (1990). Life span, life-space approach to career development. In D. B. L. Brooks (Ed.), *Career choice and life development: Applying contemporary theories to practice* (pp. 197-261). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Tyre, P. (2006, January). The trouble with boys, they're kinetic, maddening, and failing at school: How educators are trying to find new ways to help them succeed. *Newsweek*, 147, 44-52.
- William Grant Foundation (1988). *The forgotten half: Pathways to success for America's youth and young families*. Washington, DC: The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship.

Gary C. Lindeman, Ph.D., Researcher, Office of Continuing & Professional Development, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine & Public Health, 4270 Health Sciences Learning Center, 750 Highland Ave, Madison, WI 53705, gclindeman@wisc.edu.

Presented at the Midwest Research-to Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, October 4-6, 2006.