ABSTRACT

WITCHGER, ROBERT JAMES. Adult Career Changers in Community College Career Technical and Education Programs: The Influence of Unplanned Events on Career Pathways. (Under the direction of Dr. Carol E. Kasworm and Dr. Leila González Sullivan.)

Using Social Learning Theory of Career Development and Planned Happenstance Theory this descriptive case study illuminated individuals’ perceptions of the influence of unplanned events in their career pathways.

This study examined the career pathways of adult career changers enrolled in community colleges and employed participant-constructed visual representations of each individual’s career path together with guided interview questions to better understand how unplanned events informed their career decisions. Participants were enrolled in nursing and allied health programs in various community colleges in North Carolina. The average age of participants was forty-one and each participant had held an average of six jobs since high school. All participants were in the lower to middle income bracket.

The study confirmed the work of previous researchers who had found the personal traits of flexibility, curiosity, persistence, optimism, and risk taking were beneficial in interacting with unplanned events. This study elicited two additional traits, spirituality and a need for job security that were used in interacting with unplanned events. These seven traits were deemed as internal contextual factors that facilitated learning around the events.

External contextual factors were also identified. These were labeled as financial support, emotional support, and logistical support and were found to have considerable influence on the participants’ interaction with unplanned events and their career choices. Unplanned
events were clustered in categories that were labeled family related, health related, work related, education related and unplanned events of an interpersonal nature.

Events were labeled as pivotal unplanned events when participants changed career goals. Unplanned events were labeled as non-pivotal when the participants continued on the same career path in many cases with a more focused or enhanced goal as a result of interactions with unplanned events. Learning took place through both pivotal and non-pivotal unplanned events. Participants described unplanned events that were both positive and negative. There was interplay between internal and external factors that both facilitated or prevented movement in the participants’ career paths.

Conclusions of this study included: adult career changers experienced unplanned events that affected their career pathways; unplanned events were either pivotal or non-pivotal in relationship to career direction; and contextual factors, both internal and external, influenced participants’ interactions with unplanned events.
Adult Career Changers in Community College Career and Technical Education Programs: The Influence of Unplanned Events on Career Pathways

by
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Adult and Community College Education

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DEDICATION

To the 850,000 students, many career changers, enrolled in courses in the 58 colleges in the
North Carolina Community College System.
BIOGRAPHY

Bob began his career as a job placement counselor at Saginaw High School in Michigan, after receiving a Baccalaureate Degree from St. Bernard College in Alabama. Bob attended Central Michigan University and Michigan State University and received his MA in Occupational Education from the University of Michigan in 1978. While working for Saginaw Public Schools, Bob served as a coordinator for the Neighborhood Youth Corps, Placement Coordinator and Acting Supervisor for Career Planning and Placement. Bob’s assignment with the school district included career counseling, providing related work experience for high school students, and supervising for adult evening vocational education programs. With the help of a staff of 15 professionals, he worked with area businesses to develop and implement programs of assessment, training and placement for welfare mothers and dislocated workers at an adult lifelong learning center and at the UAW-GM joint training and relocation center.

Bob continued his work experience with the North Carolina Department of Labor as Director of Pre-Apprenticeship and Workforce Development Programs in 1989 with a staff of 30 professionals across North Carolina. Activities included grant writing, development and implementation of workforce strategies such as work experience, customized training, and on-the-job training for economically disadvantaged youth and adults through pre-apprenticeship programs. He then served as Assistant Bureau Chief for Apprenticeship where he oversaw the ISO 9000 certification for the Apprenticeship Bureau and provided the day-to-day certification of adult apprenticeship programs as developed by 24 apprenticeship field
consultants. Bob collaborated with the department of education to begin a youth apprenticeship program for high school students.

In 2001, Bob joined the staff of the North Carolina Community College System. He currently serves as Associate Director for College Tech Prep and works with academic deans, career technical education directors and consortia of high schools and community colleges in North Carolina implementing Title II programs of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education to improvement act.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

During the past 30 years the world has undergone accelerated change fueled by a bewildering combination of technical, economic, social, and cultural forces. Many people now worry about the security of their current jobs and the future of the United States in the world economy (Gordon, 2005, 2009; Lee & Johnson, 2001). Globalization, a new socio-economic reality in the twenty-first century, has brought new challenges in a fast changing workplace characterized by much uncertainty (Chen, 2003). The effects of globalization, corporate performance expectations, the end of the employer-employee social contract and the explosion of technology are all converging to influence the future of work (Gordon, 2005, 2009).

With technological, social, economic, and cultural change, it is no longer common for workers to stay employed at one company for twenty or more years, continuing along the same linear career path. It is no longer efficacious for individuals to plan their careers by simply taking interest and ability assessments and receiving a career plan that will last for most of a lifetime. The traditional model of a worker expecting to be employed by the same company, performing basically the same tasks until awarded a gold watch upon retirement seems anachronistic (Billett, 2006). In today’s world of work, there is less employment stability and more uncertainty (Kotter, 1995). The career path of the future will have many forked pathways of chance and change. To benefit from this evolving work environment, workers will have to be adept at recognizing opportunity in chance events and leveraging change for career enhancement and/or job satisfaction.
Career pathways are lifelong and subject to forces from within and outside the self. As the individual searches for meaning and purpose, choices will be made that involve compromise between individual desires and what is possible, and between the ideal and the real (Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, Peterson & González, 2000). Navigating this pathway in the twenty-first century is a lifelong process of getting ready to choose and continuing to choose from many occupations available in our society. This process of engagement and reengagement calls for an individualized set of career development skills to construct meaning and gain knowledge.

Foundational career development theory in the late twentieth century aimed to have the process of assessment, matching, and selection of an individual’s career pathway completed by early adulthood (Betz, Fitzgerald, & Hill, 1989). This process of identifying work values, crystallizing a vocational identity, learning about opportunities, and applying reasoning to select a career direction was often aided by career development counselors. Further, career changers sought out career counseling to reassess their interests, skills, and abilities and determine a new occupation to pursue. Individuals sought counseling to solve the problem of indecision and the selection of a career. This process was rooted in the early twentieth century work of Frank Parsons (Patton & McMahon, 1999). More recently theories of career development have been expanded due to the recognition that occupational choice along one’s career pathway is a lifelong process of decision making and not a single terminal decision (Ginzberg, 1972; Patton & McMahon, 1999).

Parsons (1909) is credited with being the founder of vocational guidance, the precursor to career development. In his work, Choosing a Vocation, Parsons (1909) outlined
his method of matching personal traits to job characteristics. Career selection began as a process of understanding oneself, understanding the world of work, and matching individual traits with work factors (Reardon et al., 2000; Youst & Corbishley, 1987). This Parsonian career development model began when the nation was moving from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy and needed a method to improve the hiring, training, and retention of workers. This model is seen as the cornerstone of career development theory (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989). Twentieth century career theorists such as Kuder (1977), Super (1957a), and Holland (1985) have incorporated this approach into their instruments and built much of their theory of assessment and career choice on the Parsonian model (Betz et al., 1989). Most career counseling and career development methods are still structured around the three classic elements of self-knowledge, knowledge of the world of work, and “true reasoning on the relationship of these two groups” (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 2).

The Parsonian model worked well in a manufacturing economy where the social mores and expectations concerning job fulfillment were stable over time. In that era, most job tasks were more clearly defined and job duties were more narrowly focused. A career path during most of the twentieth century was typically in one occupational field, working for one company, receiving one or two promotions, and then retiring after 25 to 30 years of service.

As the twenty-first century begins, the workforce paradigm is shifting. The career path of a full-time worker with one organization and occupation, paid health insurance, incremental cost of living increases, and a sense of employment security for a job well done is eroding. The concept of the full-time permanent job is rapidly being replaced by what labor economists call stints. These stints, eighteen to twenty-four month assignments, come
with high wages, limited fringe benefits, and the absence of job security and longevity (Hiemstra, 2006). In this time of uncertainty as a result of economic and global change, the career development process calls for the individual to continuously learn and build a portfolio of skills, certifications, competencies, and abilities. The definition of career development now must expand to include the lifelong process of getting ready to choose, choosing, and continuing to make career choices throughout one’s life. Career development must now be seen as the “total constellation of economic, sociological, psychological, educational, physical, and chance factors that combine to shape one’s career” (Reardon et al., 2000, p. 6). This definition of career development is now expanding to incorporate on-going learning from unplanned events that happen throughout a worker’s life.

While twentieth century methods of career planning should not be dismissed, these models can now be seen as foundational and not the terminal point in career development. In the twenty-first century complex, dynamic, and less predictable career pathways characterize work and affect both current and prospective workers (Chen, 2003). Therefore, some career development theorists are proposing that an additional set of skills should be identified and honed to assist clients in taking advantage of chance and change. These skills would assist the individual in gaining knowledge and constructing meaning through everyday life experiences. These are skills that may assist clients in recognizing and learning from unplanned events over a lifetime. This new effort acknowledges the value of chance events in career pathways and recognizes serendipitous and unplanned events as a legitimate career change impetus. This strategy is called Planned Happenstance and is an outgrowth of the Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making.
The Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making examines decision making and career development from a new perspective (Krumboltz, 1998). Career decisions are based on the individual’s learning through the environment, genetic influences, and unplanned events. In that context, Planned Happenstance is practiced when the client’s perspective is one of self-reliance, planfulness, and open mindedness. Unplanned events are seen as a normal and beneficial part of life. Planned Happenstance Theory, first introduced by Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz (1999), advocates recasting unexpected events into opportunities for learning. These theorists hypothesize five skills that may assist individuals in recognizing, creating, and using chance events to create career opportunities. The five skills are: 1) Curiosity, to explore new learning opportunities; 2) Persistence, to exert effort despite setbacks; 3) Flexibility, to deal with changing attitudes and circumstances; 4) Optimism, to see new opportunities as possible and attainable, and 5) Risk Taking, to take action in the face of uncertain outcomes. The theory calls for individuals not only to react but also to generate learning opportunities throughout their lives and also develop skills that will enable them to learn from these unexpected events. The theory maintains life is filled with unexpected events and opportunities and proposes that those individuals who possess happenstance skills are in a position to recognize and capitalize on unplanned events. Planned Happenstance Theory describes the purposeful on-going process by which individuals build a more satisfying and fulfilling work life in a work world bombarded with change.

Blustein (1997) also recognizes a world of constant change and suggests the individual be encouraged to maintain an open mind, tolerate ambiguity, and develop an
exploratory attitude toward career change that encourages growth and fosters self-definition. For Mitchell et al. (1999), Planned Happenstance Theory encourages exploration to generate chance opportunities and the development of personal skills to recognize and benefit from such opportunities while increasing one’s quality of life. Today’s labor market necessitates an unprecedented level of adaptation and change in people’s career paths. Integrating the concept of planning for and recognizing opportunities in chance events in one’s career pathway is beneficial. Williams, Soeprapto, Like, Touradji, Hess, and Hill (1998) as well as Neault (2000) have shown positive outcomes of unplanned events occurring in the lives of successful academics and telecommunication workers. Even with the expectation that careers should follow a planned and logical path, “many prominent people attribute their success to luck, although they seem genuinely surprised that luck could play a role” (Mitchell et al., 1999, p. 121).

In most career pathways, some success can be attributed to planning and some success can be attributed to chance. Career development practices need to expand to incorporate the generation of unplanned opportunities and to provide encouragement for individuals to hone skills that will enable them to seize and learn from those opportunities. In an era of technological, social, and cultural change career development that supports capitalizing on one’s curiosity when exposed to chance or serendipitous events can go beyond luck, or simply being in the right place at the right time.

Krumboltz’ (1996) Learning Theory of Career Development called for indecision to be viewed as necessary and desirable to motivate learning activities. In addition, Krumboltz insists that this new theory of career development reflected the current nature of the world of
work, with its demands that people prepare for changing work tasks and not rely on static occupations. Historical success in career development involved the reduction of indecision and the increase in congruence between individual traits and occupational factors. Building on the work of Mitchell, Jones, and Krumboltz (1979), Mitchell et al. (1999) hypothesized that Planned Happenstance skills acknowledge constant change in the world of work and help people to benefit from chance events.

Researchers of career development strategies focus on measurement, matching, and prediction to reduce indecision (Mitchell et al., 1999). Planned Happenstance Theory opens up areas for researchers to advance knowledge. One possible research area would question the extent to which people attribute their current and past occupational choices to unplanned events and how these attributions differ among career changers.

Researchers of Planned Happenstance Theory indicate the skills of curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism, and risk taking may help people benefit from chance events. These five proficiencies were also identified by Williams et al. (1998), along with other characteristics or factors such as low tolerance for boredom and being unconventional, hard working, motivated, self confident, alert, and stable. They asked “what skills can be confirmed as distinguishing those who generate and profit from chance events from those who do not” (Mitchell et al., 1999, p.122).

Not all chance events are positive. Examples of negative chance event are accidents, illness, and rejections. Some people react to negative events with discouragement and inaction while others are challenged to exert even greater effort. Williams et al. (1998) identified not only changes in career direction but also an altered self-concept as a possible
outcome of an encounter with an unplanned event. Certain types of chance events revitalized some while others had no effect or discouraged the person involved. She asked: “What kinds of chance events have what kinds of outcomes on which type of individual” (Mitchell et al., 1999, p. 122)?

Williams et al. (1998) acknowledged planfulness and chance as important in career development and called for additional research in the area of chance events and with other populations beyond her study of prominent academic women. In this unpredictable world it is important for us to understand how people can take advantage of unplanned events and weave together the planned and unplanned events in their lives.

Neault (2000) called for a study of contextual variables among career changers and further suggested that researchers listen to individuals tell their own stories which might offer insights into chance occurrences that might have already had an impact on their careers. These studies support the need for the proposed research and served as the foundation for the present study.

**Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study was to examine the career pathways of adult career changers to better understand how unplanned events have informed their career decisions. The two research questions were based on the Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making and, within that framework, Planned Happenstance Theory. The questions were:

1. What are adult career changers’ perceptions of the influence unplanned events have had on their career?
2. What are the contextual factors or domains adult career changers used to recognize and interact with unplanned events?

**Definition of Unplanned Events**

Unplanned events are unexpected life situations that some may call luck, while others, fate. Examples might be a parent you have come to know through your child’s school who calls to say she has started a new company and then offers a job, or a plane delay that leads to a conversation with a fellow passenger while waiting at the gate, in turn prompting a new career interest. Unplanned events can also be known as happenstance events. Sometimes unplanned events can present new and exciting opportunities. They also can be tragic situations such as the death of a loved one. Unplanned events can be positive or negative. Unplanned events are at times referred to as serendipitous event, such as meeting a person one was not expecting to meet. In the best scenario, unplanned events create situations where a person turns curiosity into an opportunity for learning and/or a change in a life pattern, job, or career.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is rooted in Social Learning Theory as presented by Bandura (1977) and assumes that adults are intelligent human beings and problem solvers, rather than individuals controlled passively by their environment. This theory has its roots in the behaviorist notion that human performance is determined by learning and posits that people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling. Individuals also learn from their environment. This learning is influenced by the individual’s self-estimated competence in interactions with others (Bandura, 1977).
Krumboltz (1979) extends Bandura’s work through the Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (SLTCMD). This theory provides the conceptual framework of the current study and describes how countless learning experiences combine to shape a person’s career path. SLTCMD stresses the importance of behavior and cognition in making career decisions. The theory recognizes that individuals are problem solvers and promotes teaching individuals career decision making strategies and helping them use these techniques to effectively select career alternatives and deal with unexpected events (Krumboltz, 1979; Sharf, 2006). SLTCMD supports active participation in the career planning process and encourages the individual to capitalize “on all kinds of events and resources to maximize their learning” (Mitchell et al., 1999, p. 117).

The second component of the conceptual framework is Planned Happenstance Theory as proposed by Mitchell et al. (1999) and Williams et al. (1998). In coining the phrase Planned Happenstance, Mitchell suggests individuals should be planful and open-minded in order to benefit and learn from serendipitous or unplanned events in their lives.

Career exploration activities generate chance opportunities for more intensive learning, and unplanned events can be transformed into learning opportunities. Further, individuals can develop skills that enable them to recognize and benefit from these events. Mitchell et al. (1999) hypothesize five skills to help individuals recognize, create, and capitalize on chance or unplanned events. These five skills or proficiencies are defined as follows:

- Curiosity: exploring new learning opportunities;
- Persistence: exerting effort despite setbacks;
• Flexibility: dealing effectively with changing attitudes and circumstances;
• Optimism: viewing new opportunities as possible and attainable; and
• Risk Taking: taking action in the face of uncertain outcomes. (Mitchell et al., 1999, p. 118)

Williams et al. (1998) investigated contextual factors surrounding chance events and career choice by studying the career paths of prominent academic women in counseling psychology. Building upon the Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making, these researchers suggested individuals look beyond chance as a source of error and examine the role of unpredictable influences in one’s career development and career choice. They identified the contextual factors supporting learning from unplanned events and categorized them in four domains. These domains are: timing of the event, stage in career development, internal readiness factors, and external readiness factors.

The first domain, timing of unplanned events, is viewed in relationship to one’s career pathway. The first factor occurs early in the participant’s career before receiving an advanced degree. The second factor occurs later in the person’s career after entering the field of work, for example, at the end of a doctoral program (Williams et al., 1998).

The second domain is stage in career development. This stage includes five categories: First, individuals unsure of their career, dissatisfied with their job or stalled in their career at the time of chance events; Second, individuals seeking change, exploring career options or looking for a job; Third, individuals not searching for change or exploring career options; Fourth, individuals who have chosen their path, are committed to their choice or are not ready for a change or a different job; and Fifth individuals feeling career pressure
or who are discouraged because of job rejections, or pressured to choose the best fit in order to survive in a competitive environment (Williams et al., 1998).

The third domain includes internal readiness factors, five groups of internal traits or career development skills that people described in taking advantage of chance events: First factor is risk taking, flexibility, adventurousness, and unpredictability; Second factor is competence, hard working, motivation, and persistence; Third factor is self-confidence, optimism, and the preparedness to take advantage of opportunities; Fourth factor is feeling comfortable, stable, and secure in encountering unplanned events; and Fifth factor is the individual’s ability to reflect on and use self-knowledge to his or her advantage (Williams et al., 1998).

The fourth domain includes external readiness factors. Three factors describe the way the external world helps participants take advantage of chance events: First factor is a strong support system, typically composed of colleagues, friends, peers, partners, children, significant others, advisors, mentors, and other faculty members; Second factor is personal and cultural events that may help the individual take advantage of certain chance events; and Third factor is being free from external barriers (Williams et al., 1998).

This study will draw upon these contextual factors of Williams et al. (1998) and Mitchell et al. (1999) in exploring the role of unplanned events in the career paths of adult career changers.

**Significance of the Study for Research and Practice**

This study extends the research of Mitchell on Planned Happenstance by examining the career pathways of adult career changers to better understand how unplanned events have
informed their career decisions. These findings could provide data related to the question (Mitchell et al., 1999) posed: “What skills can be confirmed as distinguishing those who generate and profit from chance events from those who do not” (p. 122)?

This study extends the work of Williams et al. (1998) by exploring ways in which people make sense of chance events in their lives, the ways they incorporate chance events into their career paths, and the factors that help them take advantage of those events. Further, this research will extend the work of Neault (2000), who calls for individual career changers to tell their own stories and recall their perceptions of chance occurrences in their career paths.

Finally, this study may have implications for the practice of career counseling and guidance for adult career changers who seek to improve career options through community college career and technical programs. This study could provide information and insights and raise awareness of the influence chance events can have in the lives of individuals by providing a view of serendipitous events in the lives of postsecondary career and technical education students. In addition, this research could raise the awareness of the importance of some internal factors that can assist adult career changers to learn from everyday unplanned events as they develop their careers.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has suggested that in the postmodern world, change is the only constant. Career development as practiced in the twenty-first century needs to embrace chance and change with an unprecedented level of adaptability and openness. The chapter offers a conceptual framework for examining the career pathways of adult career changers to better
understand how unplanned events inform career decisions. Through the lenses of the Social Learning Theory of Career Development and Planned Happenstance Theory, the study will seek to discover career changers’ perceptions of the influence of unplanned events on their careers. It will examine the contextual factors career changers use to recognize and interact with unplanned events. Finally, the study addresses calls for further research by John Krumboltz, Kathryn Mitchell, Roberta Neualt, and Elizabeth Nutt Williams.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will present a thoughtful discussion of related literature used to build the conceptual framework for this research, the purpose of which is to examine the career pathways of career changers to better understand their perceptions of how unplanned events have informed their career decisions. The research questions are based on Planned Happenstance Theory, an extension of Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (SLTCDM).

In conceptualizing the problem, the literature review begins by examining the changing role of work, from the early twentieth century to work at the present time. Attention will be given to the role career development plays in workforce development. This time period was chosen as theorists (Hall, 1986; Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989; Savickas & Lent, 1994) indicate that career development, primarily a western phenomenon, was founded in the work of Frank Parsons (1909) and continues to be refined to this day.

The second area of the literature review is Career Development Theory. This section will review western literature from professional journals, textbooks, speeches, and handbooks to provide a historical perspective and describe various approaches to career development from the time of Frank Parsons (1909) to the present. In taking a critical look at current career development theory, Edgar H. Schien (1978) notes career development theory is a relatively young field within the social sciences.

A third area of the literature review will study the emergence of Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making, SLTCDM, a theory that looks at the individual and the
environment and stresses action, knowing, and thinking in lifelong career development (Krumboltz, 1979). Krumboltz published two theories at different times; some conceptualize his work as one theory with two parts. “Part one is SLTCM that explains the origins of career choice and part two is the Learning Theory of career counseling which explains what career counselors can do about many career related problems” (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996, p. 233). For this study the researcher will look at part one, or SLTCDM.

The final area in the literature review is the theory of Planned Happenstance. The review will look at Planned Happenstance Theory from it early beginnings. Mitchell et al. (1999) indicate unplanned events can be an opportunity for learning and have an important role in everyone’s career.

**The Workforce**

This study is set in the world of work and education at a time when we have seen a technological revolution impact our economy and every aspect of our lives. Over the past thirty years, unprecedented technological advances have changed how people live and work (Ridderstale & Nordstrom, 2004). These changes include the increasing numbers of corporations seeking an economic advantage through globalization. The competitive edge in emerging-economy countries is also expanding due in part to cheap labor, available resources and limited environmental regulation (Pepitone, 2002; Levin, 2001; Gordon, 2005, 2009). Globalization is rapidly moving from an era during which company-to-company strategies grew the economy of the twentieth century, to a strategy where the individual-as-entrepreneur sets the pace in the twenty-first century (Friedman, 2008). These are some of
the factors that are influencing people to change careers (Bridges, 1994; Kolberg & Smith, 1992; Mitchell et al., 1999).

Globalization changes the way we work, as companies operate beyond their domestic base. CEOs strive to meet performance expectations imposed on their companies by shareholders and market analysts. The implicit social contract, that employee loyalty will be reciprocated with leadership loyalty, has all but disappeared (Gordon, 2000). As the workforce shifts, employees are seen as a commodity rather than a human resource to be developed; their individual contributions appear to be valued less. Some employees begin to look to emerging companies for their career options, and others look inward to become entrepreneurs in the global world of work (Friedman, 2008).

Workers who have not upgraded skills or sought other career options are the first to be considered for dislocation, as low skill jobs continue to disappear (Bridges, 1984; Pepitone, 2000). The interplay of the job market, workforce development, and career planning is complex and dynamic. Workforce development professionals and career counselors must therefore develop ways to synthesize labor market information, offer skill assessments, and write career plans into digestible sound bites for easy consumer consumption (Grulke, 2001; Ridderstale & Nordstrom, 2004). Nevertheless, it appears these career planners all but ignore the role that unplanned events play in the context of adult career pathways. Instead, assessment, planning, and placement are still predominant in the name and mission of units that assist workers with career transition.

There is a paradigm shift in the workforce, as lifelong job security is replaced with uncertainty and transience. The solid foundation of manufacturing in America, where
workers once labored for thirty years or more at one company and then retired, has been replaced with a shifting global labor force that work stints - one to three year assignments at a time (Hiemstra, 2006). Companies in North Carolina reflect what is happening across North America as once well-paying, manual, repetitive production jobs move offshore and more technologically sophisticated production work begins to meld with service and knowledge-based employment. Corporations now compete on a global level, with the ever-present pressures of performance improvement driving global corporate decisions, leaving workers responsible for their own career development and resiliency (Payne, 1996; Pepitone, 2002; North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2007). There is an emerging feeling that in a flat world economy whatever can be done will be done, by someone, somewhere on the globe, as economic competition guiding employment opportunities moves from the corporate level to an individual level and workers compete globally for jobs in companies anywhere in the world (Friedman, 2008).

Continually evolving technology is another major driver in the future world of work (Adler, 1992; Marginson, 2000) as the fields of nanotechnology, biotechnology, and mechatronics emerge (Grulke, 2001; Hiemstra, 1999) and growing capabilities in information and communication technologies drive the market (Drucker, 1998). The increasing connectivity provided by the Internet, with bandwidth doubling every nine months (Geldenhuys, 2004), is creating a flatter and smaller world with a global workforce that has more information at its fingertips than people ever dreamt was possible (Drucker, 1998; Friedman, 2007). It thus becomes clear that communication and information technologies such as the Internet, laptops, handheld computers, cellular phones, and wireless applications
Unplanned Events

will have an ever-increasing impact on the way the workplace is organized (Koschmann, 2000). The convergence of these power technologies causes even more complexity. Add to this the increasing changes in societal institutions and values, and one has a new world of work with vastly different rules and expectations (Ridderstale & Nordstrom, 2004).

For decades North Carolina relied on its traditional light manufacturing industries to keep the state in the economic forefront. Now, as the nation’s economy is changing, so is North Carolina’s economy. More and more, technological occupations dominate the economic landscape. One key transformation involves the state’s shift from a traditional labor force in the agriculture and manufacturing economy to a new economy driven by knowledge-intensive business services. Companies are changing their products or production processes and offering expanded services as they adopt new technologies (Department of Commerce, 2007a). With this shift comes upheaval in the traditional workplace. Within the milieu, healthcare and specifically nursing emerge as fields of interest and a demand area for workers seeking stability (Guillory, 2006).

A six-year North Carolina Department of Commerce study of the workplace reported that during the period of January 1, 1999 to June 30, 2001, 45,155 workers lost their jobs due to plant closures and layoffs. These layoffs were principally in the textile and apparel industries, furniture industry, and light electronic manufacturing (Watt, 2002). The State of the Workforce report showed an even more dramatic picture with the loss of 72,008 manufacturing jobs in textile, apparel, furniture, and electronic products in the three-year period from 2002-2005 (Department of Commerce, 2007). In contrast, a January 2003 report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources analyzed the nursing shortage in
the nation and issued a warning that if the current workforce crisis is not addressed and if
trends continue, the shortage of nurses is projected to grow by 29 percent by 2020
(Association of American Medical Colleges, 2003).

A recent analysis of allied health opportunities across North Carolina shows that, in the past ten years, the allied health and social assistance industries of which allied health is a subset, added more than 160,000 jobs to the state economy. The demand for allied health professionals is likely to increase over time as the state’s population continues to grow and the median age increases. In contrast to traditional manufacturing industries, allied health jobs represent a stable and growing employment sector (Guillory, 2006).

Another recent North Carolina study concluded that all workers possess out-dated skills to some degree (Department of Commerce, North Carolina, 2007b). Many workers in today’s labor force possess a different knowledge and skill set than is required by companies competing in the twenty-first century global economy (Lugar, Gorham, & Kroppi, 1999). In light of this Lugar et al. (1999), made the following recommendations for education and job training:

1. Programs should be restructured and more flexible;

2. Community colleges should offer fast track certifications and entrepreneurship training;

3. New training courses should be available and consistent with the changing needs of industry developing the competitive advantage for each region in the state. (p. 24)
The twenty-first century worker will need new skills for work, as well as career management skills to guide his or her own career development while navigating the career path.

A primary mission of the American community college is to educate and train students for the world of work (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In the twenty-first century the skill set and work tasks a person needs to survive will be constantly changing (Pink, 2006; Gordon, 2005). With multiple missions and competing priorities in a rapidly changing economy, community colleges will find themselves training future workers in skill sets for jobs that do not yet exist (Grubb, 1996, 1997; Grubb & Associates 1999; Levin, 2001; Jacobs, 2011). Community colleges across the nation are affected by the demand to retrain individuals to deal with a new work-life and a future where constant change is the norm. Career development and worker preparation will be continuous and ongoing in a world characterized by technological innovations, unprecedented change, abundant information, and endless new opportunities in a global economy (Cooper, Basson & Schaap, 2006).

Workforce development will involve new configurations of education and training programs with multiple entry and exit points; workers will need to know when to enroll and when to leave education as they continually upgrade their skills. If future community college training is to be relevant and vibrant, colleges will need to emphasize entrepreneurship, creativity, and flexibility (Grubb, 1997). In conjunction with community colleges and other learning organizations, workers will need to renew, enhance, and even change their career planning and core workforce skills (Bridges, 1994; Gordon, 2005).

In the twentieth century most workers were able to complete a basic interest assessment, develop a plan, map career goals, and set their career compass in one direction
on a linear path for twenty or more years applying a basic set of academic skills learned in
high school. Most manufacturing and even basic health care workers in the twentieth century
were able to learn necessary skills on the job with minimum training or certification
(Bridges, 1994). Twentieth century community college and university graduates likewise
completed interest assessments when entering college, chose college major, gained
knowledge, and developed many specialized skills. They then linked their education with on
the job training and continued in their chosen occupational field for twenty to thirty years
with little worry about turbulence in the workplace.

Workers in the twenty-first century will experience a new reality. The emerging
workplace will require flexibility, skill specialization, and lifelong learning. Future work will
require radically innovative behavior, be relationship focused, and involve greater diversity
among workers. In many cases, a workplace will be virtual as work is dispersed across the
globe (Cooper, Basson, & Schaap, 2006). With this background information, one can assume
workers in the twenty-first century will need continually upgraded, flexible skills to do the
work, skills to get along at work, and skills to navigate their lifelong career.

Skills for the twenty-first century worker will include: (a) a core set of technical skills
that each individual worker can enhance continually through lifelong learning as he/she stays
in tune with the technical workforce (Bridges, 1994); (b) employability skills, described by
human development professionals as team work, problem solving, synthesis, and continuous
learning (Bolles 2001; Bolles, 1978, 2003, & 2011); and (c) career development skills to
navigate and take advantage of employment opportunities in the twenty-first century
McDaniels & Gysbers, 1992).
Career Development

Career development is viewed primarily as a western phenomenon. The second area of the literature review looks at western literature from journals, textbooks, speeches, and handbooks to provide a historical perspective. It notes the growth and various approaches to career development from the time of Frank Parsons’ Trait Factor Theory to the present Social Learning Theory of John Krumboltz. Career Development research is relatively new in the field of social sciences. Career development is addressed in three fields of study: sociology, anthropology, and occupational psychology, but does not have a firm place in any of the three (Schein, 1986). Career development theory has two different schools of thought. One emphasizes testing and predicting who will enter a career and succeed, and the other provides career information on what it is like to be a doctor, lawyer, teacher, or production worker (Schein, 1986). The first is more of a managerial approach and human resource approach to career development, while the second emphasizes labor market information and predictive models (Hall, 1986). For this study the literature review will confine itself to a historical look at the evolution of career development theory in the twentieth century.

Osipow and Fitzgerald (1983) provide a historical perspective of career development in their work, *Theories of Career Development*:

Since the earliest memories, humans have been required to earn their daily bread…western society at least possesses an element of choice concerning the activity with which we will occupy ourselves. Though our options of work vary from broad to narrow, one of the most highly prized freedoms in our culture is the right to
decide what kind of work we do, and for whom and when. (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996, p. ix)

The oldest theoretical construct is known as Trait Factor Theory (Betz et al., 1989). This approach to career development provides a straightforward matching of individuals’ abilities, skills, and interests with occupational opportunities to solve the problems of career choice. Parsons (1909) provided some of the earliest testing and matching as the foundation of this theory. The early movement of career development grew to include other theories and instruments such as the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, which predicted job satisfaction of the person to the extent that the person had interests similar to those people already employed in the occupation (Betz et al., 1989). The Kuder Preference Record (KPR) postulated that job satisfaction was related to the extent to which the job content included the kind of activities a person liked to do and did not emphasize disliked activities (Kuder, 1966). The Differential Aptitude Test is a general cognitive ability test that defined the capacity for inductive and deductive reasoning and the ability to discover patterns and interrelationships (Betz et al., 1989). These trait factor theories and instruments were the beginnings of career development in the western world.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, Darwis and Lofquist (1974, 1984) developed one of the most comprehensive trait factor theories, describing the key components of the individual and the work environment and specifying how the correspondence between the two related to subsequent outcomes. Work adjustment theory postulates that individuals have requirements or needs of a work environment, and a work environment in turn has needs or requirements of a worker. The worker may need good
working conditions, money and a sense of self worth while on the job. The work environment may need certain work skills. It is where the interaction is mutually satisfying that correspondence is reached. It is the ideal state when the worker and work environment are co-responsive. Elements such as achievement, advancement, security, social status, and variety are known as reinforcers use to maintain or increase the rate of behavior and satisfy individual’s needs. Individuals and environments act in order to have their needs met. The application of this theory of work adjustments relies on career counseling and the matching process first articulated by Parsons (Patton & McMahon, 1999).

John Holland’s (1985) personality theories were refinements of the matching of various individual traits with occupational factors. It is recognized as both a Trait Factor Theory and a personality theory and will be addressed in the personality section.

As career development entered the second half of the twentieth century, sociological and developmental models of career development began to appear. The sociological model held that societal factors beyond the control of the individual contributed significantly to career choice. Importance was given to factors influencing levels of aspiration as one coped effectively with the environment. Within this school of thought, Gottfredson (1981, 1996) introduced theories of career development. Gottfredson’s work in career development highlights conscription and compromise as the individual’s self-concept develops. The concepts of conscription, a process where youth eliminate alternatives they feel are not available to them, and compromise, in which young adults give up alternatives they may like for ones that are more accessible to them, were key parts of this theory. Gender role
stereotyping and prestige guide the adolescent’s career choices as he/she develops a view of
the world with cognitive maps of occupations.

Developmental theories of career development grew out of the work of Buehler
(1933), Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrod and Herma (1951), Super (1957b), and Dudley and
Tiedeman (1977). These approaches hold to the central thesis that:

1) Individuals develop more clearly defined self concepts as they grow older although
they vary to conform with the changes in one’s view of reality as correlated with age;
2) People develop images of the occupational world, which they compare with their
self image in trying to make career decisions; and
3) The adequacy of the eventual career decision is based on the similarity between
individuals’ self-concept and the vocational concept of that career. (Osipow &
Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 9)

In the developmental stage, Buehler (1933) viewed the individual’s career
development in distinct stages: the growth stage, birth to age fourteen; the exploratory stage,
age fifteen to twenty-five; the maintenance stage, age twenty-five to sixty-five; and the stage
of decline, age sixty-five and older. Ginzberg, Axelrod, Super and Dudley an economist,
psychiatrist, sociologist, and psychologist, combined their work for a developmental
approach that sought to explain the individual’s career choice through four factors: 1) the
reality factor, one’s choice arises by responding to pressures in the environment; 2) the
educational factor, enhances or limits the individual’s career choices based on the amount
and kind of education; 3) the emotional factor, providing career concomitants through one’s
intuition, personality and emotions; and 4) individual values that influence the quality of choices made (Ginzberg, et al., 1951).

Super’s (1957a) early work cited three development aspects of career development. The first was that each person had the potential for success and satisfaction in a number of occupations. The second aspect stated that vocational self-concepts develop on the basis of childhood observations of, and identification with, adults involved in work. The third saw the individual’s adjustment at one period of life as likely to be predictive of techniques used in later periods of life. Super (1957b) posited that individuals go through stages in which self-concept is successively refined. The likelihood that the individual will select and be happy with a given occupation is related to the similarity in the interests and abilities of that individual compared to individuals happily employed in a similar occupation.

Dudley and Tiedeman (1977) viewed career development as a function of the developing self. Self-concept played a role in negotiating the development stages in career decision making. Decisions were a process of exploration, crystallization, choice, clarification, induction, reformation, and integration.

The fourth approach to career development has been identified by some as the personality approach. Hoppock (1957) provides an elaborate list of needs inherent in the process of vocational choice. Holland (1973, 1985, 1997) provides detailed personality types that match careers. Roe (1957) predicts satisfaction based on personality characteristics, life-styles, and specific needs of workers.

Hoppock (1957) expanded the personality needs approach to career development, viewing occupational choice as based mainly on the use of occupational information to build
on personal needs. The adequacy of occupational choice improves as people are better able to express their own needs and the individual’s needs are satisfied by a particular occupation. Career satisfaction results from meeting the individual’s needs today or the promise to meet those needs in the future.

Roe’s (1957) work in predicting occupational selection is based on individual biological, sociological, and psychological differences. The theory proposes that every individual inherits a tendency to expend energies in a particular way and this, coupled with childhood experiences, molds the general style that individual develops to satisfy needs. This career development theory tries to make predictions based on parent-child interactions and implications for career behavior.

Holland identified six occupational fields and corresponding traits:

- Realistic: emotionally stable, practical, hard-headed, orientated toward the concrete;
- Investigative: self motivated, intellectual, abstract, logical, scientific, personal;
- Artistic: independent, impulsive, esthetic, sensitive, impersonal;
- Social: idealistic, friendly, supportive, socially sensitive, warm, nurturing;
- Enterprising: optimistic, persuasive, socially sensitive but exploiting and aggressive;
- Conventional: precise, conforming, logical, systematic, detail and systems oriented. (Holland, 1997; Sharf, 2006)

Holland’s theory is one of the most studied career development theories in history (Savickas & Lent, 1994). Holland’s theory has inspired studies on interaction between hierarchy and
personality, typology and personality orientation, congruence, personal orientation, relations between types, parental influences, vocational and educational choices, occupational stereotypes, indecision, persistence, and interests (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996).

Recent approaches to career development reflect interest in observing individual interactions with and learning from the environment. This approach expressed in Social Learning Theory will be discussed in the next section.

Career development practice over the last century has mirrored the needs of the workplace. From its beginnings in the early twentieth century, career development practices provided employers with information about their potential workforce. Through assessments and job-matching services for a fairly stable United States-based manufacturing economy and emerging health care system, employers were able to select workers and channel them into jobs that met identified needs in the workforce.

In its early stages, career development services often underwritten by employers, assessed the individuals’ abilities, skills, and interests, matched these skills to occupations and charted a course for the individual on a predictable, well-mapped career path of twenty or more years in the same occupation. This was at a time when the nation was emerging from an agrarian economy and needed to quickly identify individuals’ skills and abilities and match them to jobs and training programs that prepared them for work in an industrial economy and helped guarantee employers increase in productivity.

As the career development field began to grow, theorists built on the trait factor approach and developed additional models to meet employer needs and the needs of individuals eager to find stable work well-suited to their interests and abilities. The
emergence of developmental, stage, and personality theories and most recently learning theories of career development are examples. As work continues to hold an important place in human behavior and society, how men and women choose work in western culture will continue to attract the interest of social and behavioral scientists.

Parsons' work on job matching was appropriate for an emerging industrial nation. Floundering job placement activities in the emerging industrial economy were addressed with Parsons’ instruments that matched individuals to occupations and predicted success in training individuals for work based on their interests, skills, and abilities. In the early 1900s, when America was moving from an agrarian to manufacturing economy, most workers remained in the same job for years. There was a need to match people to work, reduce training time, and quickly gear up a developing industrial economy. The trait factor approach met that need.

But, trait factor theories have limitations. Individuals concerned about finding a job fast may not use true reasoning in their career choice. Predicating career choice on a single event or a single test in time does not account for variables that impinge on the occupational decision career making process (Brown, 1990).

The trait factor approach, a static assessment process rather than a dynamic process of assessment and matching, offered a limited view of variables in career choice. Insufficient attention is given to gender, race, and socio economic background. Thus trait factor theories may have had an adverse impact on minority groups with fewer hired (Gottfredson 1981, 1996; Walsh & Betz, 1985; Betz et al., 1989). Trait factor theory does not take into account individual growth or the broad range of individual differences in every occupational group.
(Isaacson & Brown, 2000). It is a deceptively simple process that is not sophisticated, it allows for speedy assessments so that counselors can test and report back to clients quickly yet, it does not take into consideration the whole picture. Trait factor assessments typically measure the individuals’ interest, skills, and abilities then match them to similar factors in occupations. Further, most trait factor theories do not specifically address self-concept. Herriot (1984) postulates that self-concept is more predictive of occupational outcomes than personality or trait factor assessments and calls for empirical attention in the study of developmental theories.

In the middle of the twentieth century, stage and developmental theories emerged addressing growth and change, as well as ways individuals dealt with careers over a lifetime. These developmental theories focused on the biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors inherent in career choice. Developmental theories tended to be complex in the number of constructs used.

Super’s work is one example. He embarked on a longitudinal study to identify the development stages individuals pass through in their career development. Super’s Life Span model (Super, 1957a) is based on fourteen propositions, such as the individuals’ abilities, personalities, characteristics, and vocational preferences. As a model it addresses the life stages of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline in a sophisticated and well-studied matrix, which provides the career counselor with a wealth of data on the individual throughout the stages of life (Dalton, 1989). But such theories are difficult to implement in practical ways. Career development professionals, when working with clients across a variety of occupations in a various economic settings, are challenged by the time it
takes to administer these complex assessments and the many variables to interpret in a short
counseling session. Trait factor theories have thus maintained their primacy in measuring
individual factors quickly and accurately then offering career development specialist a
speedy report back for that point in time.

In addition, in reflecting on the growth of career development and its many theories,
Sue and Sue (1990) and Baruth and Manning (1991) indicate that most of the modern
theories, including those in training and development programs for professional counselors,
are culturally oppressive since they are rooted in Eurocentric beliefs. The individual’s
independence is seen as the primary driver of career development. This Western European
view of the world and career development is positioned against the collective group concept
of career development found in Native American, Hispanic, and Asian American cultures
(Sue & Sue, 1990; Baruth & Manning, 1991). Imel (2002) cites career development and its
quest for a meaningful life in the workplace as a middle-class, individual-oriented process
with western cultural values. She further notes the concepts addressed by literature, in career
development and career satisfaction, have not acknowledged gender, class, or race.

As career development grew and matured as a profession, the move was toward more
holistic approaches. The Social Learning view of human behavior is based on reinforcement
theory and observational learning. Self-efficacy, the perceived judgments of one’s capacity to
successfully perform a given task, is part of the basis of Social Learning Theory. The
individual’s personality grows from learning experiences (Bandura, 1977). Mitchell and
Krumboltz used Bandura’s model as the basis of their own Social Learning Theory of Career
Decision Making, which will be examined in the next section.
Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making

In developing a theory of how individuals make career decisions, Krumboltz (1986) emphasizes the importance of behavior, action, and cognition (knowing or thinking) in such decisions. The Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (SLTCDM) addresses the genetic and socially inherited attributes people bring to their work. These attributes and the work environment itself interact to produce self-views that influence a person’s work and related behavior (Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976). In contrast to other early career development theories, SLTCDM allows for modifications by future events.

The social learning approach to career development outlined by Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) focuses on the self and emphasizes behavior and cognitions in making career decisions. According to Krumboltz, four factors interact to produce movement along one’s career path:

1. Genetic endowment: the aspects of the individual that are innate or inherited;
2. Environmental conditions: generally out of the control of the individual, including social, cultural, political, and economic factors;
3. Learning experiences: the hundreds of times a day one is exposed to and gains knowledge from instrumental and associative learning; and
4. Task approach skills: goal setting, values clarification, generating alternatives, and obtaining occupational information. (Krumboltz, et al., 1976, p. 71-72)

Osipow and Fitzgerald (1994) indicate:

One of the most significant developments in career theory is the recent application of Social Learning Theory to career decision making based on Social Learning Theory
as espoused by Bandura (1963, 1977). Bandura highlighted the roles that “vicarious, symbolic and self-regulatory processes” play in significant part determining behavior, as emphasis is placed on clear specifications of treatments and outcomes. (p. 167)

SLTCDM assigns a prominent role to reflection (thoughts about one’s thoughts) and self-reference (thought in human functioning). By operating on what they know, people can derive knowledge about things that extend beyond their experiences and generate innovative courses of action.

SLTCDM proposes that environmental influences and personal factors influence individual change. Central to SLTCDM is the concept that the person must believe in his or her capability to act. The career changer must possess a positive expectation for performance, and this behavior must outweigh the negative expectations. Because the expected results are screened through a person’s expectations or perceptions of being able to perform the behavior in the first place, the self-concept is believed to be the single most important characteristic that determines a person’s behavior change (Bandura, 1982).

Life events, a basis of social learning, can be planned or unplanned. In the SLTCDM, Krumboltz indicates learning is either instrumental or associative. Instrumental learning involves discovering the manner in which personal skills can be used to influence the environment in order to produce certain consequences. “The individual operates on the environment directly with observable outcomes” (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 68). Associative learning can be a reaction to a set of environmental stimuli based on earlier observations or experiences. “The individual observes relationships between events and is able to predict contingencies” (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 68).
Clausen observed, “people often demonstrated marked change due to the development of individual traits and the interaction with unexpected environmental contingencies” (Cabral & Salomone, 1990, p. 7). Krumboltz and Thoresen (1976) note: Interactions lead to new goals and new self-images for some individuals and the dissolution of goals for others. A key to occupational selection is not the life events themselves but rather the learning process these events create for later behavior. (p. 7) Furthermore, Cabral and Salomone, also note: Career development is the dynamic interaction between a changing individual and many different contexts. The wide variety of individual career patterns is caused by this interaction and, in large part, influenced by the ability of the individual to control, cope with and learn from unexpected changes, either internal or contextual. (p. 9) Career development models of the past have emphasized many versions of assessment, planning, and placement in career choice. The model was quite effective in the twentieth century, but is no longer adequate to address today’s complex job market. The basic three-step process of matching the name of an occupation to the current client characteristics may have sufficed for the beginning for the twentieth century but it is insufficient for the twenty-first century (Mitchell et al., 1999). Instead of matchmaking as in the trait factor theories, SLTCDM stresses the ongoing lifelong learning process (Krumboltz, 1996). Clients preparing for and participating in work should be prepared for unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in the nature and setting of work; this trait is called adaptability (Savickas, 1997). In addition, Krumboltz (1998) recommends that practitioners be open to the possibility of serendipity. As a logical
extension of his SLTCDM, unplanned events and serendipitous situations also influence a client and become part of her or his own reality. Rather than following the path of true reasoning, Krumboltz suggests that when clients refuse to predict their own future, practitioners should encourage the idea of open-mindedness rather than labeling them undecided or indecisive. He further recommends teaching that unplanned events are a normal part of the career process even to the point of encouraging individuals to understand their part in creating serendipitous events (Peterson & Gonzales, 2005, p. 226).

A look at the concept of associative learning experiences as part of career decision making shows that attractive pictures, commercials, and words, when associated with certain occupations or businesses, can create desirable images in the eyes of observers. Yet, for some occupations that would guide one toward or away from a given career, the images are contradictory. For others the images are far too complex to find a simple representative image of a given occupation. The challenge for the individual is learning to filter through complex combinations of associated learning experiences involving values, prestige, financial reward, variety, and economic security. Learning experiences do not have an automatic outcome. Learning experiences are interpreted differently by each individual (Krumboltz, 1994): therefore, exploratory career behavior is critical for the individual in making a career decision. This can be a daunting process for the individual career changer.

Early trait factor theories and more recent social learning theories have some similarities and comparable concepts. The self-knowledge used to identify personality traits in Holland’s Self Directed Search (SDS) are similar to the self-observation generalizations in Krumboltz’ SLTCDM. These concepts of self-knowledge and self-observations could also be
matched to some degree to Super’s understanding of self-concept in his developmental career theory.

Gottfredson (1981) pointed out that individuals must compromise their aspirations with the reality of the job market, a process the Krumboltz’ SLTCMD designates as a task approach skill. These two career development theories present a picture of the individual developing increased sophistication and finer discrimination over a period of time. As a result of learning experiences, people generate a set of acceptable occupational aspirations, some of which may or may not be realized (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1994).

What makes the difference in theories rooted in Social Learning Theory and those rooted in Trait Factor Theory is that Learning theories are not so much concerned about the role of factors such as interests, skills, and abilities in the career decision making process. Rather, they focus on learning that can lead to an awareness of things such as new occupations and self-awareness and how these impact the career decision making process.

Learning Theory extended the work of Holland and Super in its description of how people learn about their interests and abilities in relation to existing occupations and in describing how different interests and skills develop from learning experiences . . . social learning theory of career decision making emphasizes the role of learning in explaining how individuals develop the combination of interest orientations depicted in Holland’s hexagon model. (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 84)

Theories concerned with developmental stage theory differ from learning theories because learning theories hold that many factors surrounding the career decision making process are learned. Therefore, theorists need to take note of these processes; these learned
behaviors are important to the career decision making process (Isaacson & Brown, 2000). “Social Learning Theory is significant to the development of career theory because it recognizes the importance of a wide variety of influences on career choice rather than focusing on a single influence” (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 61). This can be challenging for the career development professional when individuals come seeking a quick fix to their career dilemma and are encouraged instead to seek a variety of learning experiences.

The last career development theory to be explored in the next section of this literature review is a key part of the conceptual framework, Planned Happenstance. Planned Happenstance may be considered an amendment to the Learning Theory of career counseling which was an expansion of the SLTCDM (Krumboltz, 1996, 2009).

**Planned Happenstance Theory**

Explorations to generate chance opportunities for increasing the quality of life, and the development of skills to enable people to seize these chance opportunities are key concepts of Planned Happenstance Theory. Unpredictable social events, educational opportunities and occupational conditions, as well as one’s genetic endowment, influence people’s lives and career planning, according to Krumboltz (1998). As career theory evolves, Planned Happenstance Theory offers a new dimension in the decision making model (Mitchell et al., 1999). Magnuson, Wilcoxon, and Norem (2003) viewed unexpected events and alternative explanations for individuals’ interactions with their environment as learning opportunities to be embraced. The concept of creating and transforming unplanned events into opportunities for learning is foundational to Planned Happenstance Theory (Hagrik, 2000).
Miller (1983) acknowledged the phenomenon of happenstance in career development when responding to one of his students on the question of his personal career choice. He noted that he formulated his response to fit neatly into a respected theory of career development such as that of Super, Holland, or Roe. On reflection, he noted later:

Now, however, I realize that my pause was more accurately the hint of confusion that I was stymied by not knowing exactly what self or environmental agents affected my present vocational choice. This may not be a common realization for most. The role of happenstance in many career decisions seems commonplace. (Miller, 1983, p. 16)

In their seminal article on “Planned Happenstance: Constructing Unexpected Career Opportunities,” Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz (1999) emphasize that chance plays an essential role in everyone’s career. Mitchell suggests that traditional career development strategies are no longer sufficient to prepare individuals to respond to career uncertainties. She suggests that unplanned events are inevitable and desirable and can become opportunities for learning. By integrating the theory of Planned Happenstance into their practice, counselors help clients recognize and incorporate chance events into their lives. Mitchell sees Planned Happenstance as positive and encouraging (Krumboltz & Levin, 2004).

Career indecision is not viewed as the person being unable to commit to a linear career path; rather, it is viewed as open-mindedness, offering the client a number of paths and chances they might take. It offers the client time to carefully explore the options, incorporating a set of specific skills into his/her life. In Planned Happenstance Theory, five
skills are identified as helpful for the individual in dealing with chance opportunities, including: curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism, and risk taking (Mitchell et al., 1999).

Planned Happenstance Theory advocates that counselors working with clients initiate a learning process that encourages curiosity and helps the client take advantage of unplanned events. Clients are to normalize Planned Happenstance in their lives while transforming curiosity into opportunities for learning. The importance of desirable unplanned events and overcoming blocks to action are all components of this action theory (Mitchell, 2003).

Planned Happenstance Theory therefore offers some radically different advice for career development. It is normal and desirable for unplanned events to influence one’s career. When career indecision is seen as a state of planful open-mindedness, it allows individuals to benefit from unplanned events in the future. Individuals should see unplanned events as opportunities for new activities and prepare themselves to take full advantage, to develop new interests, to challenge old beliefs, and to continue lifelong learning. Unplanned events are inevitable throughout life and can be beneficial with initiation and action on the part of the individual (Mitchell et al., 1999).

Since career paths do not follow a logical linear trail, being open to the role chance plays in a career is a strategy for finding and doing what one loves when faced with many options (Krumboltz & Levin, 2004). In her book, The Unplanned Career, (Mitchell, 2003) encourages individuals to develop skills to recognize, create, and plan for chance events in career opportunities. The theory of Planned Happenstance calls for a paradigm shift, a movement away from the linear ideas toward a conscious and purposeful capitalizing on chance events in one’s life (Basson & van der Merwe, 2004; Chien, Fischer, & Biller, 2006).
Nevertheless, happenstance is not passively waiting for accidental events to happen. This serendipity requires action on the part of the recipient, action to create favorable conditions, action to recognize opportunities when they arise, and action to capitalize on unplanned events in a timely manner (Krumboltz, 1998). Bandura (1982) suggested that:

Neither personal proclivities nor situational imperatives operate as independent shapers of the course of lives. Chance encounters affect life paths through the reciprocal influence of personal and social factors. The skills and interests people cultivate determine the circles in which they move and hence the kinds of social encounters they are most likely to experience. (p. 750)

Bandura also spoke of “personal agency” and suggested that competence, self-efficacy, and self-direction enable individuals to create and maximize both planned and chance events (Magnuson et al., 2003, p. 50).

Connecting theory and practice is difficult because career theory is abstract while career practice is concrete (Osipow, 1996). Career development theorists argue that the nature of the work environment is no longer compatible with a kind of straightforward trait factor, rational planning approach that has traditionally helped clients make decisions and plan their future (Gelatt, 1989; Mitchell et al., 1999). Lee and Johnson (2001) cite evidence that most people report chance, luck, or happenstance played a major role in their career development. Betsworth and Hansen (1996) cite the significant role of unknowable instances of coincidence, happenstance, and chance factors in career opportunities. The role of chance has also been cited in the lives of academic professionals (Williams et al., 1998). Lee and Johnson (2001) advocate that counselors promote all kinds of exploration as a means of
exposing the individual to the world, since the very act of exploration will expose one to useful chance events. This approach of constantly learning through life is radically different from the static trait factor assessment and matching to an occupation found in Trait Factor theory.

Learning theories offer a variety of approaches to career development. Krumboltz and Levin (2004) advocate a variety of life experiences, early on in the career search process and throughout life, to expand opportunities for unlikely events to occur and present opportunities to learn from such events. Mitchell (2003) proposes reframing undecidedness as open-mindedness, encouraging clients to actively engage in exploration and to become more comfortable with ambiguity.

Gelatt’s (1989) concept of positive uncertainty supports Planned Happenstance Theory and offers another alternative to linear decision making. Gelatt argues that the nature of rational decision making does not fit our contemporary environment and is not consistent with the nature of human experience and decision making. Gelatt advocates for flexibility as an important skill to possess in today’s world of work. Lee and Johnson (2001) indicate one might conclude if you always know where you are going, you may never end up somewhere else. Keeping an open mind and consistently planning for unplanned events ensures a process of constantly becoming (Gelatt, 1989).

Thus, chance--defined as unforeseen, uncontrollable events or encounters--is seen as inevitable and plays an important role in shaping career decisions. This according to those theorists who recognize adult development is a form of reciprocal causality between individuals and environment (Cabral & Salomone, 1990). Krumboltz and Thoresen (1976)
have applied Social Learning Theory in offering a fresh look at career development, based on the principle that life events create learning opportunities for individuals and happen at both the cognitive and affective levels of career selection. Mitchell and her colleagues (Mitchell, et al., 1999), took this theory one step further to arrive at the career development theory of Planned Happenstance, built on Social Learning Theory of Career Development (Krumboltz et al., 1976; Krumboltz, 1994), serendipity (Díaz de Chumaceiro, 1999), and positive uncertainty (Gelatt, 1989).

“Social Learning theory is offering a fine-grained analysis of learning processes and complements the more coarse-grained concepts in theories such as those of Holland and Super” (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 83). It appears that each career development theory focused on a different aspect of the overall career development map (Krumboltz, 1994). Darwis and Lofquist, see Learning Theory that now stops at the career entry, could be a more comprehensive theory and “despite the breath of career development theory, there are still areas that are significantly underdeveloped” (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 87).

**Other Happenstance Studies**

Williams, Soeparapto, Like, Touradji, Hess, and Hill, in *Perceptions of Serendipity: Career Paths of Prominent Academic Women in Career Psychology*, (1998) examined contextual factors surrounding chance events. Their results suggested chance events affected career choices most often by changing women’s career paths altogether. Their work suggested internal characteristics such as the ability to take risks, self-confidence, optimism, planfulness, and self-knowledge as well as external factors such as a support system, personal and cultural events, helped women take advantage of chance opportunities.
Williams et al. (1998) acknowledge qualitative research is useful for examining an issue or experience from the point of view of the participant without making judgments in advance as to what resource may be found. “Counseling psychologists have a long history of examining critical issues in the area of vocational development as well as focusing on the ability of individuals to adapt in positive ways to their environments” (p. 387). They call for additional research on serendipitous events with different groups. There is a need for empirical and theoretical work to provide a better understanding of how people take advantage of chance opportunities and weave together the planned and unplanned events in their lives. They call for research to learn how to help people in different life stages to develop readiness to cope with chance events.

In Research on Career Paths: Serendipity and Its Analog (1999), Diaz de Chumaceiro seeks to extend the research of Williams et al., (1998) in its application to both sexes and in explorations of individuals’ career paths in different fields and domains. Chien, et al. (2006) found chance plays a significant role in people’s lives. By consciously influencing the students’ thinking and affective states through metacognitive strategies, people can turn chance events into planned happenstances that become meaningful rather than unavoidable occurrences.

Finally, in Enjoyment and Happenstance – Central Themes in Career Happiness, Henderson and Oliver (2000) found participants taking part in a six-week counseling group workshop were encouraged to explore their role in creating significant moments of enjoyment and happenstance in their personal and working lives. Post assessments found that the participant’s recollections of past moments of enjoyment and happenstance produced
marked changes in participant’s perceptions of their personal qualities and self-efficacy in their job search behavior.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has examined the literature on changes in the modern world of work, the history of career development, Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making and Planned Happenstance Theory. The chapter highlighted the beginnings of career development in the United States and the theory building process related to career development that occurred in the twentieth century, concluding with Social Learning Theory and its adaptation to career development theory, in which individuals are seen as thinking human beings who learn from their environment in a world of chance and change. It concludes with Planned Happenstance Theory of career development, where individuals are encouraged to be open-minded and develop a set of skills to better engage with their environment as they continuously learn from unexpected events that can shape their careers. The next chapter will outline the design of the study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the career pathways of adult career changers to better understand how unplanned events have informed their career decisions. This research study drew on the conceptual framework of Planned Happenstance Theory, an expansion of the Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making. The study sought to answer two research questions: What are adult career changers’ perceptions of the influence unplanned events have had on their careers? What are the contextual factors or domains adult career changers used to recognize and interact with unplanned events?

This chapter describes the design of the study, including case study methodology, sampling, participant selection, participant pool, data collection, and data analysis. It also discusses trustworthiness, validity, reliability, ethics, and researcher bias.

Case Study Methodology

This qualitative research study used a multiple descriptive case study methodology to explore individual career changers’ perceptions of the influence of unplanned events in their career pathways. Case studies provide researchers with an understanding of social phenomena while acknowledging the holistic and meaningful characteristics of everyday events (Yin, 1994, 2003). Case studies provide rich evidence for understanding the meanings constructed by individuals around a particular social phenomenon. Thus, case studies are valuable tools for understanding human behavior (Stake, 1995).

Case studies are one category of qualitative research, which is a distinct methodological tradition represented by a process of inquiry for understanding the social or
human condition. The researcher builds a holistic picture, analyzing words and reporting
detailed views of participants who serve as the source of data. Qualitative research studies
are typically conducted in a natural setting and data analysis is conducted inductively, with
attention given to participants, their perspectives, and their meaning making (Creswell, 1998;
additional characteristics of qualitative research. Lastly, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and
Merriam (1998) acknowledge that, in case study research, data are collected as words and
pictures, with rich thick descriptions and emphasis on the process as the outcome of research
rather than the product.

This study provided for in-depth exploration of the perceptions career changers
ascribed to their career decision making process. “By concentrating on a single phenomenon
or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors
characteristic of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29).

This qualitative approach emphasized the unique strengths of the case study “that is
exploratory or descriptive, that accepts the value of the context and setting, and that searches
for a deeper understanding of the participants’ lived experiences of the phenomena under
study” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 55). This research used interviews, quotes, resumes
and visual representations of career paths as documentation. The study provided information
to add to the reader’s experience and understanding of the career decision making process
and added new meaning, extending the reader’s experience in a heuristic way. It was
particularistic in that the study looked at the adult career changer in-depth, reported a detailed
description in order to understand the interactions of individual career changers, their
environment, and the unplanned events they experienced, so as to provide a deeper understanding of the happenstance phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

**Sampling**

Merriam (1998) indicated there are typically two levels of purposeful sampling in a case study. In this research the first level of sampling was the site selection. The second sampling level was participant selection. Marshall and Rossman (2006) indicated:

A realistic site is where a) entry is possible; b) there is a high probability that a high mix of the processes, people, program interactions, and structures of interest is present; c) the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relations with the participants in the study; d) the study can be conducted and reported ethically; and e) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured. (p. 62)

The site selected for this descriptive case study was the community colleges located in North Carolina that offered programs for adult career changers in the allied health field of nursing. Most of these programs were set up in the evening and on weekends to attract adults who are working full-time and desire career change.

The intent was for the researcher to gather data on the career pathways of career changers enrolled in a nursing program at a community college. In identifying these research sites, colleges were selected that allow for easy access to participants in order to reduce time and expenditures for data collection and offer the potential to build trusting relationships. Therefore community colleges in the Piedmont and Coastal regions of North Carolina with appropriate programs and within a reasonable commuting distance from the researcher were
chosen. Site identification began by contacting the presidents at the community colleges that have nursing cohorts for adult career changers.

In each location the researcher contacted the college president by phone and followed procedures set up by that college to gain permission to interview students for research purposes. In introducing the study to the president, the researcher shared the nature of the study, as well as the conceptual framework, and indicated the study would follow procedures for research within the local community college as well as the guidelines of the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for study of human subjects. The purpose of this initial contact was to secure permission to conduct the research, determine procedures to follow at that college and identify the program director or cohort instructor to assist in the identification of adult career changers.

The second level of the sampling was participant selection. After gaining permission to conduct the research at each community college, the researcher contacted the allied health program director and/or cohort instructor to provide an overview of the study.

This study explored experiences of adult career changers; therefore the sample was limited to programs that had a higher probability of enrolling those students. Efforts were made to select a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, and background within the pool of nursing program enrollees. Adult male students were included in a proportional ratio while recognizing that women currently make up over 92 percent of the people working in the field. A 2010 Board of Nursing Report indicated 83,937 women and 6,839 men were registered nurses in North Carolina. Community college educated registered nurses comprise
forty-three percent of working registered nurses with 36,343 currently working in the field (NC Board of Nursing, 2010).

The researcher interviewed adult career changers who had returned to their local community colleges and enrolled in allied health and nursing programs. On average participants had worked in six different occupations at the time the interview took place. These adult students had rich work histories and encountered unplanned events in their careers, providing information needed for the study. Nursing cohort students in Allied Health Departments were the first choice for participants in this study, with adult career changers enrolled in other allied health programs as the second tier if sufficient numbers of nursing students were not found.

In an initial phone meeting with the allied health director/cohort instructor, the researcher conveyed information about the study and students’ potential contributions through field interviews with the researcher. The allied health program director or cohort instructor explained the research to students and asked for volunteers. Participants were then selected based on the participant selection criteria below and invited to take part in this study.

The selection criteria for adult career changers in this study were as follows:

- Participants must be at least 18 years of age;
- Participants must be changing a career/making a new career choice;
- Participants must be enrolled in a Nursing Cohort Program or in an Allied Health program;
- Participants must have experienced one or more unplanned events in their career or work life;
• Participants’ are willing take part in an interview held on the participants campus.

The researcher followed up this initial phone meeting with the program director/cohort instructor with an e-mail to the instructor (APPENDIX A) outlining the specifics discussed, including student research subject criteria.

The allied health director/cohort instructor provided student names and phone numbers to the researcher. This procedure was repeated with community colleges in North Carolina until the sample pool was large enough to provide at least twelve students for interviews [the final number of participants was fifteen] or until saturation of key categories and themes was reached (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; 1989).

Research Pool

After the allied health director/cohort instructor identified the students and provided the researcher with names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses, the researcher contacted the identified individuals regarding their participation in the study.

The initial screening interview was conducted by phone. Participants resided throughout the college service area and the phone-screening interview was an effective and efficient method to make this initial contact. The researcher called each college-identified student and talked with him/her outlining the research project and determining if that individual had encountered unplanned events that had influenced his/her career. The design required that if participants did not identify any such events in their career path, the student was to be thanked for his/her time and dropped from the participant list. The initial phone-screening interviews also allowed for the collection of basic demographic data to assist in selection of students for the pool. Data included: name, phone number, e-mail address. This
initial conversation allowed the participant time to ask questions, to better understand the purpose of the research and to opt in or out of the interview pool with the understanding that their participation in the study was not a requirement of their academic program, and participation or lack thereof did not impact their standing in the program.

During the initial phone-screening interview, participants who met the basic criteria were asked if they would take part in the study. If their response was yes, the researcher proceeded to explain the process of the interview including the process of outlining their career pathway during the first segment of the research interview and relating stories of their career journey during the second segment of the research interview. If, at the end of this initial phone-screening interview, participants wished to volunteer for the study, they were scheduled for an interview. The researcher worked out an agreed upon time and location at each participant’s college for the meeting. Additional community colleges and students were added to the pool until sufficient numbers of participants were reached.

The researcher was flexible in meeting with students at their convenience. The time limitation of community college students was taken into consideration when working out their scheduled interviews. Phone follow-up and reminders were built into the plan, but did not have to be conducted.

Data Collection

The goal of this qualitative study was to examine the career pathways of career changers to better understand how unplanned events informed their career decisions. Interviews and participant documents were the two strategies used for collecting the study data. Merriam (1998) indicates interviews are an effective way of obtaining information
when events have passed. “The interview is a purposeful conversation between two people sometimes directed by one in order to get information from the other” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 93). A research interview guide (APPENDIX C) was used to facilitate this semi-structured interview with reference to Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making and Planned Happenstance Theory. Questions of career planning and career decision making revolved around career changers’ perceptions of the influence unplanned events had on their career directions and the contextual factors used to recognize and interact with these unplanned events.

There was one primary research interview per participant lasting from one to two hours. This research interview was conducted at a personal level with great efforts made to treat each person with dignity, respect, and understanding. The approach was that the participant had the information and the researcher had come to learn. The goal was to get each subject to feel relaxed and able to open up and talk about their career paths in a meaningful way (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The research interview was divided into two segments. In the first segment the researcher emphasized that the purpose of the interview was to examine career pathways of career changers to better understand the influences that had affected their career decisions. Each person was asked to sign the informed consent form and was reminded that his/her participation in the study was optional. Each participant was told if at any time he/she felt uncomfortable there was the option to withdraw from the study with no negative repercussions. After that each participant was invited to construct a timeline of his/her work, educational and personal histories from high school to the present day. These timelines were
constructed on a plain sheet of white paper and were called visual representations of the participant’s career pathway. In the second segment, the researcher conducted open-ended research questions. Each interview took from one to two hours.

This visual representation (APPENDIX B) of the career path depicted the individual’s personal and career path and included the individual’s occupations in the path, educational experiences, volunteer work, hobbies, other personal landmarks, and significant events in the participant’s life. Individuals were asked to recall unplanned events that influenced their career path and to mark them on the visual representation. This visual representation served as a guide in the interview process and helped with triangulation as the research progressed.

In the process of constructing this visual representation, the researcher guided the participant to identify key decision points along the way for further investigation. Participants referenced the visual representations numerous times during the interview. These documents were electronically captured, and redrawn by the researcher for consistency of symbols, educational markers, work markers, unplanned event markers and career goal markers, across the individual’s work life dating from high school to the present time. These drawings were maintained in a secure location and were used during the analysis phase of research. It was anticipated that participants might also e-mail additional supporting materials to be used in the analysis, but none did.

The second segment of the process was the semi-structured interview guided by the open-ended research questions (APPENDIX C). The interviewer asked for clarification when the respondent mentioned something that seemed unclear. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) note the importance of capturing the understanding of the interview rather than holding rigidly to
the goal of getting all the questions answered. The second segment of the research interview continued by inquiring about the extent to which unplanned events informed change, the person’s recognition and reflection on unplanned events, and the contextual factors and skills used to recognize and interact with such events in the participant’s career pathway.

A research journal was kept by the researcher to enhance learning and reflection, and to guard against bias. The journal supported the process of turning the research experiences into learning, as it was a place where events and experiences were recorded, processed and reflected upon (Boud, 2001). Schoen (1983) notes that through reflecting, that is, pausing to take stock of what we are doing, one is able to process the ongoing experience and learn from it, a vital attribute of professionals in practice.

This journaling process by the researcher assumes that learning is grounded in prior practice and builds on existing perceptions and frameworks to connect what is new and what already exists. The journal was used to record thoughts and notes in anticipation of research interviews, to consider how to make the most of upcoming interviews, and to reflect after the interviews were conducted (Boud, 2001). The journaling process played a similar role during the data analysis portion of this research.

Ortlipp (2008) addressed bias in a reflexive approach to research where researchers are urged to talk about themselves, their presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process. It is through reflective journaling that researchers can make their experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible and recognize when personal bias may be influencing the process or product.
Keeping and using reflective research journals can make the messiness of the research process visible to the researcher who can then make it visible for those who read the research and thus avoid producing, reproducing, and circulating the discourse of research as a neat and linear process (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 704).

With the participants’ permission, interviews were audio recorded on an Apple iPod® as well as backed up using a portable Apple, MacBook® laptop using Apple Garageband® recording software. The researcher and his assistant transcribed the interviews into written text. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a code and given an alias.

At the end of each interview participants were asked follow-up questions to ensure consistency in topics covered and to provide further clarification of certain responses. There was an agreed upon option to conduct follow-up interviews of participants by phone but none was contacted since all clarifications needed were dealt with during the initial interview.

Data Analysis Methodology

Marshall and Rossman (2006) indicate the goal of data analysis is to bring order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data. It is a challenging process to determine where description begins and analysis ends, or where analysis becomes interpretation (Wolcott, 1994). The process of data analysis began with the career changer interview. Notes were made in the researcher’s journal and on the visual representations following each interview and used during the early stages of analysis.

This descriptive case study presented an account of the unplanned events under study. Interview transcripts were transcribed from digital recordings by the researcher and another graduate transcriptionist. The initial analysis of the interview transcripts was done with open
coding in searching for career changers’ descriptions of unplanned events and factors that they had used to recognize and interact with these unplanned events. This inductive analysis allowed for descriptors to emerge from the data, the purpose of which is to display these factors of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002).

The conceptual framework was the center in managing and reducing the data; it served in the data reduction process as the researcher identified and listed common patterns, created codes, then extracted patterns or themes from coded pieces of information. Themes and patterns blended into categories (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Crabtree and Miller (1992) note in their continuum of data analysis, qualitative research is the balance between a prefigured technical analytic style and an intuitive immersion style. This balance between styles sets the stage for coherent interpretation, with the research interview questions serving as a guide for data analysis and data reduction.

Immersion in the data continued with additional readings of the transcripts and further identification of unplanned events as these began to come into focus. Cross-referencing the visual representations (charts drawn by the participants during the interview process) with the transcripts assisted in gaining a more complete understanding of the transcript narratives of the participants. Thoughts and reflections were noted in transcript margins and on the visual representations maps during review and these were later summarized. Continued readings of the transcripts allowed for identification of additional unplanned events and factors participants identified as they described their career paths. Unplanned events were then summarized on a separate sheet of paper for each interview. Contextual factors were also identified on separate sheets of paper for each interview.
In the iterative process of reading, re-reading and coding, themes began to emerge. Eventually categories evolved as the researcher continued to reflect on the data. Stake (1995) identifies this process as an “aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class” (p. 74). A data matrix was finally developed to assist in data management. Miles and Huberman, (1994) suggest that techniques such as placing the evidence in a matrix of categories, creating flowcharts, and data display be used to facilitate analysis.

In seeking a fuller understanding of the data, the researcher challenged the ideas put forth in the proposal, searching for negative instances or patterns as new categories and patterns in the data became apparent (Merriam, 1998). As alternative explanations emerged, the researcher identified and described them. Categories were developed taking into consideration guidelines set forth by Guba and Lincoln (1981), including the “number of people who mention the concept, the credibility the interviewees give to the concept, the uniqueness of the concept, and areas of inquiry not otherwise recognized”(p. 95).

Analysis continued using the conceptual framework as a guide while transcripts, visual representations and coding matrixes for unplanned events and contextual factors were continually reviewed and updated. Throughout this analysis of data process, coding schemes were revised and codes were added, eliminated, and/or collapsed.

**Trustworthiness, Validity, Reliability, and Ethics**

The integrity of the qualitative research process is in the consistency and accuracy of observations, the records, and the report of findings. This research sought to demonstrate a logical plan for data collection, as well as allow time to build relationships with the subjects (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). During the initial part of the interview process time was taken
to introduce the researcher and determine common ground. As the data collection proceeded, a positive foundation was established to ensure consistency and soundness of data collected. In addition, time spent in constructing the visual representation of the career path allowed for interaction between the researcher and participant before the in-depth interview took place.

Examining internal validity, external validity, and reliability assisted in determining the trustworthiness of the research. Maxwell (2005) addresses validity and trustworthiness through a checklist of strategies, including long-term involvement, rich data, respondent validation, triangulation, and comparison. He pointed out that validity depends on the relationship of the researcher’s conclusions to reality and acknowledges that there is no method that can completely assure that this is captured.

Stake (1995) calls for triangulation and member checks to ensure validity and reliability by asking such questions as:

Do we have it right? Are we generating a comprehensive and accurate description? Are we developing the interpretations we want? Common sense is working for us, telling us when to look again and where to ask for clarification, but common sense does not take us far enough. In our search both for accuracy and alternative explanations, we need discipline; we need protocols. We do not depend on mere intuition and a good intention to get it right (Stake, 1995, p. 107).

Researchers have the obligation to minimize misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and inaccurate transcribing of materials (Stake, 1995). Member checks through participant review of interview transcripts were built into the design of this research and were conducted to ensure the accuracy of data. Member checks took place by having the transcripts e-mailed
to participants at a secure e-mail address and they responded with additions and corrections. Further, triangulation of data was accomplished by comparing the visual representations of the career paths each participant drew with interview transcripts. This additional triangulation process produced generally converging conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Notes, memos, participant resumes, audio recordings, and transcripts worked together to ensure internal reliability and consistency.

**Ethics**

Bogdan and Biklen (1998, 2003, 2008) put forth four ethical issues to be addressed in research: Voluntary participation, participant understanding of expectations, confidentiality, and truth in reporting findings. For this study participants were contacted by their instructor, and told of the study and presented with the option to take part voluntarily. When the researcher made initial contact by phone for the screening process it was again emphasized that participation was voluntary and that at any time participants were free to withdraw from the study with no negative repercussions to their standing in their respective academic programs. In addition, they were told of the proposed work of a visual representation of their career path as part of the interview process. All participants were assigned a code and an alias as discussed in the methodology, and participants had an opportunity to review transcripts to ensure truth in reporting.

**Research Role and Bias**

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) discuss professional and personal bias as well as researcher interests that affect the choice of study questions, the choice of participants, and the choice of methodology. Qualitative research by its nature is subjective, interpretive, and
naturalistic. Since the qualitative research is naturalistic, it engages the researcher in natural settings to capture the subjects’ perceptions and subjectivity. The following statement is provided so that the reader may determine the perspective of the researcher and how it might affect the study.

The researcher states the following as possible biases related to this research. I strongly believe in optimism and a positive outlook on life. My personal outlook on life is one that embraces opportunity, rewards curiosity, stresses a positive mental attitude, and is practical in daily living. Growing up in a large family, I was taught the value of getting along, not making waves, being seen and not heard, as well as fixing, repairing, and mending; there was no room for extravagance. A German work ethic was imbued in the four oldest of eleven children (of which I am the eldest). We had daily to-do lists and were reviewed on the quality of completion and timeliness through a large wall chart with colored dots. Keeping busy, working to improve oneself and others was stressed. There was little time for reflection.

I believe a healthy positive self-esteem is an important trait, and one which plays a role in my study. However, more importantly, I believe there is more than one way to approach any given task and I seek to understand the attitudes and approaches of my subjects whether or not they employ an optimistic outlook.

In reflecting on my work-life I have had some opportunities that were a result of unplanned events. My initial work after graduating from college was in a local school system working with at-risk youth. My belief in the positivistic frame of career development comes from my early work with inner-city youth as a job and career counselor. In this job I followed
then-accepted practices and tested abilities, skills, and interests of high school students and matched them to jobs. This work in career development and job placement was based on the work of Parsons (1909), a traditional trait factor model. I found certain aspects of this model to be inadequate for the needs of my clients.

It was by luck that I learned about and applied for the University of Michigan Certificate program in Manpower Development. I was working with a federal job training program in the school district, enrolled in graduate school working for a vocational certification when this opportunity “came out of the blue.” I applied for a scholarship and graduate school, and I was able to transfer to University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School where I was enrolled in a cohort program in the college of education. An influential instructor, Dr. Judith Miller, introduced us to the work of John Holland and Donald Super. This traditional trait factor model of career planning enhanced my early work and was incorporated into my career planning and counseling work for many years. In my later work life, I was heavily influenced by What Color is Your Parachute, by Richard Bolles (1985). Subsequently I studied with Bolles and this experience influenced my view of job counseling and career development methods. I was swayed from a positivistic method to a more holistic learning process of career development.

In the late 1980’s, while working with students and parents on employability skills, I took the chance when one of the parents in the audience suggested we develop a program for them (primarily autoworkers who were beginning to get laid off from local auto plants and allied industries). This request just happened to fit the goals of a newly established life-long learning center that had been established within the school system. This chance event
developed into an adult assessment, training and placement program in the Saginaw, Michigan, School District and later the opening of a UAW GM joint project, a center for dislocated workers.

A year later as we began a job search looking to move to a different part of the country, my wife ran across a name with a similar phone number as our Michigan home phone number and called as a lark. This provided a lead that spearheaded a job search and my move to the North Carolina Department of Labor. So, in my own work life, I have experienced unplanned events that have influenced my own personal pathway.

In my early work life, I believed in and employed the Trait Factor Theory of career development. My life was influenced by advanced studies in the constructivist frame of vocational education and the career development work of John Holland’s typology. It was a practical way to work with dislocated workers. It helped them overcome their grief of job loss while offering hope through enrollment in retraining and education programs along a somewhat linear career path. If we did our teaching and learning properly, dislocated workers were sent on their way, with renewed hope and a new set of work skills.

It was not until later in life that I discovered and reflected on the important role of unplanned events and forked career pathways in my own career life as well as the lives of clients I had worked with. As I have come to work with clients from many walks of life, I have seen how often chance encounters have informed their career decisions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has focused on the qualitative method and tools used to examine the career pathways of career changers to better understand how unplanned events have informed
their career decisions. The chapter outlined the design of the study, including case study methodology, sampling, site and participant selection, participant pool, data collection, and data analysis. It also discussed trustworthiness, validity, reliability, ethics, and researcher bias that could inform or influence the study. The next chapter will summarize data found in the study.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This qualitative case study examined the career pathways of adult career changers to better understand how unplanned or happenstance events have informed their career decisions. This study was undertaken in the twenty-first century, a time in which career changers no longer work in the same job for twenty to thirty years. Instead, the typical adult now switches jobs five to ten times throughout his or her work-life. In this century cultural movements, technological forces and unplanned events accelerate change in career paths.

The two guiding research questions for the study were: 1) What are adult career changers’ perceptions of the influence unplanned events have had on their careers? 2) What are the contextual factors adult career changers used to recognize and interact with unplanned events?

A purposeful sample of adult career changers was selected to gain insight into evolving career pathways of adults. These selected individuals provided rich work histories and had encountered numerous unplanned events in their careers. The purposeful sample focused on adult career changers who had returned to community college and enrolled in a program that would lead to a new occupation. Through interviews, the researcher explored the experiences of these participants, who were enrolled in allied health programs. These programs were often targeted as a viable new career option for dislocated workers.

During interviews with the researcher, the participants shared life-work stories and recalled events from their education, work and personal lives created visual representations of their path and as they recognized factors that influenced their career paths. All of these...
adult career changers experienced unplanned events along their career paths and made meaning of these events by examining and reflecting on their work-life. Research suggests that meaning making from such experiences is a primary source of adult learning. Merriam and Heuer (1996) stated the importance of adult meaning making as part of learning and development, noting that meaning is made through one’s own unique frame of reference. In particular, Mitchell et al. (1999) advocated that individuals should plan for and learn from happenstance events in life through an open-minded approach to career planning. Thus, these happenstance events were potentially significant meaning making opportunities that influenced the individuals in their careers. Throughout the current research, the individuals shared their career paths, how they felt, and what they learned from unexpected and happenstance events.

This chapter will present the findings of the study. Part one will set the stage with the profile of the individuals taking part in the study. Part two will present internal factors participants described as influencing their interaction with unplanned events along their career paths. Part three will present the external factors that participants described as facilitating or preventing action in their careers.

**Profile of Research Sample**

For this study, fifteen adult career changers were interviewed. At the time of the interviews all participants were enrolled in health occupations programs at one of seven different community colleges in North Carolina. Fourteen of the fifteen were enrolled in nursing cohort programs while one participant was enrolled in a radiology program.
The research sample consisted of twelve females and three males ranging in age from 24 to 55 years. The average age of participants was forty-one years. Collectively the fifteen study participants worked at 94 different jobs or an average of six different work experiences by the time they enrolled in their allied health degree program. Each participant had held at least five different jobs before he/she took part in the study. Five participants were high school graduates, two had completed an associate’s degree, and eight had completed a four-year university baccalaureate degree prior to enrolling in the community college allied health or nursing program. Fourteen of the study participants were Caucasian and one was African-American. Participant profiles are summarized in Table 1.
Table 4.1

Profile of Research Participants

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Unplanned Events

The Nature of Unplanned Events

Overview

Chance plays an important part in everyone’s career life. Unplanned or happenstance events, often described by adults as “chance events” are defined in this study as events that occur without planning or intention on the part of the individual. These unplanned events are inevitable and can be opportunities for learning. Their influence can range from having little effect on one’s chosen career path to radically changing the individual’s career direction. All individuals in the study experienced unplanned events at various times during their lives. These adult career changers collectively identified eighty-nine happenstance events in the time frame studied. Forty-seven of the happenstance events identified by participants resulted in a change of job and/or career goals. As the individuals recalled their career pathways, many came to realize that unplanned events had played a major part in their changing career goals. These happenstance events frequently provided an opportunity to gain knowledge and helped individuals make sense of their lives by supporting current goals or offering opportunities to explore new directions.

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of unplanned events in the career pathways of adult career changers. This study identified two types of unplanned events: 1) pivotal events in which the participant changed career direction and 2) non-pivotal events in which the participant continued on the same pathway. In examining the nature of both pivotal and non-pivotal unplanned events reported by the participants, five categories emerged: 1) family; 2) health; 3) interpersonal; 4) work; and 5) education. An analysis of the interviews and the participants’ descriptions of their work histories showed that
understandings of unplanned events along career paths coalesced around these five areas. The participants noted that their career plans were also influenced by internal and external factors that both facilitated and prevented action.

**Types of Unplanned Events**

**Pivotal Events.** In this study, unplanned events have been classified as pivotal when they influenced participants to change their career direction and non-pivotal when they did not alter the individual’s career path. In a pivotal event that occurred by happenstance, the individual’s career goal changed and took a new direction. This was in contrast to a non-pivotal unplanned event where the individual, even after recognizing and learning from an unplanned event, continued along the current career path. Typically after an unplanned event, there was time for the participant to reevaluate and reflect. Depending on internal and external factors surrounding the event the individual might seek a change in career, continue in the same direction, or delay action.

The following are two different examples of pivotal unplanned events. The first example is Temeka, a single mother enrolled in the first year of a two-year allied health program at the community college. An interpersonal problem caused Temeka to lose childcare, which in turn caused her to give up her part-time night job, drop out of college and search for a higher paying job in order to care for her family. She reported:

I worked here, [pointing to the quick-mart notation on her career visual representation] on the night shift . . . she [her mother] stopped keeping her [Temeka’s baby daughter] so I had to quit this job . . . Well, I was still in school [college] then. I had to drop out to work full-time.
This loss of childcare was a pivotal point in her career. Temeka changed from a full-time health occupations student with the goal of becoming a nurse and working part-time to a full-time manufacturing worker in a higher paying job. This change allowed her to support herself and her daughter. The loss of childcare was an unplanned pivotal event, as a result of which her educational aspirations to become a nurse were put on hold and she pivoted in a new career direction.

A second example of a pivotal event was Megan’s major car accident. This unplanned event caused Megan, a straight ‘A’ high school senior with aspirations to study business, to lose her scholarship at a major four-year university due to her hospitalization and recovery at the beginning of what was to be her first semester in college. Megan tells her story:

I was in a car wreck. The car wreck was actually the last day of [high] school . . . I was in the hospital for about two months . . . after the car wreck [as a result of her experience with health care workers] I thought maybe healthcare would be the way that I would go . . . I thought there is no better thing to do than to try to help people.

This car accident stopped Megan’s forward action in her educational path due to the loss of her four-year college scholarship. This event gave Megan time to think and talk with other people about different career options. It also gave her an opportunity to learn about nursing through first hand observation and interaction during her hospitalization. Megan switched from a goal of a four-year degree in business to a two-year degree in nursing. In summary both Temeka and Megan experienced pivotal unplanned events, which caused them to change career direction.
Non-Pivotal Events. The second type of unplanned event is non-pivotal in nature. In this instance the individual does not change his/her career goal, yet many times the event helps to affirm the individual’s current career goal and/or provides information or realization that may inform or influence future changes for that individual. A non-pivotal event typically enhances or fine-tunes the individual’s current perception of the career goal. The following are two examples of such non-pivotal events.

William had recently graduated from college with a baccalaureate degree in chemical engineering. He began work as an environmental engineer and was working in that career field when the bottom fell out of the citric acid market, which was a key by-product of a chemical manufacturing process in the facility where he worked. He recalls, “They didn’t see it coming and I was the last one in; therefore, I was the first one out.” William was laid off for two months during which time he reflected on his options and decided that he wanted to stay in his chosen career of chemical engineering. He tried numerous job search strategies, and finally became gainfully employed again in his career field as an environmental engineer. “I heard they were hiring, someone told me they were hiring and I put in [an application].” This unplanned event, the layoff and job search resulted in William continuing to work as an environmental engineer.

The second example is Ray, who is a nursing student enrolled in a two-year program. Ray was working as a certified nursing assistant when an unplanned event occurred that enhanced and solidified his career goal of becoming a nurse. On his first day of clinical practice, Ray received an unexpected call from his supervisor. Ray was making a bed and
Unplanned Events

cleaning the hospital room when his supervising nurse called to him. He was invited to
witness a woman who was near death. He related his perception of this unplanned event:

‘Ray, Ray, come with me!’ I went in the hallway. She [Ray’s supervisor] says ‘I
want you to see a woman die.’ Ray recalls, ‘This is not exactly what I signed on for.’
We walked in there and observed her [the patients] breathing pattern, her skin tone,
her color . . . we stayed there for a few minutes and she [the supervising nurse] let me
observe and I checked [the patient’s vital signs] and all that and that was kind of odd.

Since then, Ray has been able to assist with three other patients in their final days.
This event was meaningful to Ray, and gave him a chance to experience an event that
reinforced his goals and enhanced his commitment to his chosen career. The unplanned event
provided an opportunity for him to take a risk by breaking out of his comfort zone and
broadened his nursing skills. This was a non-pivotal event in that his career goal did not
change.

Summary

Unplanned events have been identified as pivotal for persons who change their career
direction and non-pivotal for those who continue on the same path. The loss of childcare
pulled Temeka out of an education pathway in healthcare to full-time work in plastics
manufacturing. On the other hand, Ray’s unplanned experience enhanced his career goal in
the field of health care. These types of unplanned events occurred in many categories of life
as an interplay and interaction among the events and factors was noted.
Categories of Unplanned Events

To better understand and describe happenstance in career pathways, this study identified categories of unplanned events, which included both pivotal and non-pivotal experiences, across five categories: 1) family, 2) health, 3) interpersonal, 4) job, and 5) education related events. These five categories of unplanned events occurred across participants’ educational lives, personal lives, and work lives, resulting in both pivotal learning and action and non-pivotal learning and meaning making as to their career goals.

Category 1. Family related unplanned events

The first category encompassed events that involved the participants’ families or personal lives. Of the fifteen individuals interviewed, eleven had experienced unplanned events in this category. Some had experienced more than one family related event in their adult lives, for a total of twenty-two unplanned events. Ten of these events were pivotal in that individuals changed jobs or career goals as a result of perceiving and acting upon new opportunities presented to them by their changed family circumstances. Twelve of the twenty-two events were non-pivotal. Nevertheless, in many of these non-pivotal events, participants reported gaining knowledge that supported their chosen career paths or was instrumental in future changes.

These family related unplanned events involved changes in family structure or circumstances such as: separation, divorce, reconciliation, conflict at home, spousal abuse, a spouse’s job transfer, falling in love, marriage, pregnancy, and difficulties with childcare. These events caused people to move, find work in a new town, change jobs, join the military, seek support from friends, or make other changes that affected their career pathways. Some
events impacted careers by freeing individuals from oppressive relationships and allowing them to become open to change. Some participants expressed that the particular event opened up the possibility to enroll in college and pursue new careers, while others became engaged in new supportive relationships and saw possible new career options. Conversely, one participant described the unplanned event, as “hitting a pothole” in her career and feeling her current career goal could no longer be a reality. A few felt a desire for change, but circumstances obligated them to continue in existing career paths. Several enrolled in college, while others sought support for their current career goals.

Ruth spoke of a family-related unplanned pivotal event. She was enrolled in her local community college with plans to transfer to the university with the vague intention of becoming an English teacher. She was, however very clear about her goal of marrying her high school sweetheart and raising a family. During her second year in college her boyfriend broke up with her. Ruth stated, “It was a crippling experience being from a small town. I was running into him [her former boyfriend] and his new girlfriend all the time and it was too much . . . I needed to go somewhere [else] . . . I joined the military.” Ruth fell back to following the acceptable career path established by her family. She needed freedom from her hometown and support from her family. The military provided both. This was a pivotal point in her career as her goal shifted from being an English teacher with aspirations to marry and begin a family following college to a pathway into the military as a journalist.

Melissa’s story represents a second example. Melissa graduated from high school during an unplanned pregnancy. She delivered her baby in July and put the infant up for
adoption. In August she moved to an out-of-town university and began classes toward her goal in the medical field. Melissa recalls:

Yeah, I got pregnant, that’s one of the unplanned events in my life. I got pregnant and gave the baby up for adoption . . . the baby was born in July and I moved away for the first time in August. I hit a pothole . . . this is your unexpected life event and it affected me, it affected me hard. Yeah, I’m trying to get through it and move on . . . my mom was helping me a ton, she knew I just wanted to get into a different town and a different scene.

This unplanned pregnancy was a pivotal event. Melissa moved away from her family and former boyfriend to a new town to begin college. Because of this pivotal experience, she changed her career goal from retail sales to a college student seeking pre-requisite courses in order to apply to nursing school.

The third example in the family category was a non-pivotal event in Phyllis’s life. Phyllis left an abusive marriage with very low self-esteem and continued working as a secretary for a local furniture company. She was wooed by her new boyfriend to move to a town 90 miles from home where she found a new job working as a secretary. This relationship ended and she moved back home to live with her brother and sister-in-law. It was a place where she was comfortable and she also sought out a job that was familiar to her working as a secretary. Throughout the breakup of the marriage, the interim relationship, and the return home, she did not change her career goal but continued working as a secretary for various businesses.
The majority of the unplanned events in the family category were of a personal nature. They were divided evenly between pivotal and non-pivotal unplanned events.

**Category 2. Health related unplanned events**

Health-related unplanned events was the second category that influenced the participants’ interactions with happenstance occurrences. Of the fifteen individuals interviewed, eleven experienced an unplanned event in the health area that affected their career paths, and some individuals experienced more than one event. In total, sixteen unplanned events were categorized as health related. Six of these were pivotal events in which individuals changed jobs and careers after they experienced a health related unplanned event, processed the information and made meaning of the insights they gained through these often-traumatic experiences. Ten of these events were non-pivotal since the individuals continued with their same career goal.

The health category included incidents such as serious automobile crashes, a broken ankle, unanticipated surgery, serious illness, and sports accidents. It also included miscarriages and the death of a parent or loved one. There were five reported experiences of the death of a parent or a child. Other incidents involved hospitalization and significant interactions with the health care system. Individuals found many instances in the health category were both traumatic and life altering. After the experience of an unplanned event in the health category, six individuals ultimately made the decision to seek a new career.

JoAnn represents an example of a pivotal health related event. JoAnn, a life coach for a handicapped adult, survived a horrific fall when her boyfriend, who was high on methamphetamines, dropped her from a second floor motel balcony. She was airlifted to a
regional medical center where she was hospitalized for six months. She recalled her experience as follows:

They didn’t know if I’d be able to walk without a cane . . . I would go to every therapy session I could. I even went on weekends . . . I came home and weaned myself off my crutches and here I am . . . that [experience] made me want to become a nurse.

JoAnn’s original career goal had been to earn a degree in English with plans to teach. When she completed her degree she was unable to find a teaching position, and she took a job as a life coach. This was the job she held at the time of her traumatic injury, after which she made the decision to enroll in nursing school.

Annette’s story is another example of the influence of a health related pivotal event. After the arrival of her the second child, combined with the pressures at work, Annette became ill. She experienced shaking and paralysis. One morning while at work she found she couldn’t move. After two weeks in the hospital her medical team discovered she had Guillain-Barré Syndrome. Following several months of recovery, she attempted to go back to work but had to quit because continuing pressures on the job impacted her health. She thought back over her fifteen years as a textile supervisor and decided to retire from this stressful work. She made a career change to full-time mother.

Both of these pivotal events in the health category gave the participants opportunities to rethink their lives and begin different careers. JoAnn, following her accident and rehabilitation in the hospital, changed from personal coach to nurse. She admired the care she received from the hospital staff and was determined to walk again and help others in a similar
capacity. Annette changed from textile supervisor to full-time mother. After years in management she had two children at home and her bout of ill health made her realize she needed to stop working outside the home, regain her strength, and concentrate on her family.

Non-pivotal events were also present in the health related category. Early in her career, Melissa, a high school senior who was enrolled in the health occupations program was diagnosed with scoliosis of the spine. After a week in the hospital for surgery and one year of recovery, she focused her career path on nursing. Her perception of the event was as follows:

I would have never made it through without the nurses. They influenced me. I watched what they were doing and then how helpful they were and I liked what they were doing, so that influenced me. [A year after surgery] I would meet with different doctors and surgeons and they would help me give presentations to the community about scoliosis, about early detection and screening. Yeah, there were tons of opportunities with that and also that probably influenced my decision to be in nursing school as well.

This event was non-pivotal to Melissa’s career path in health as she was already in a health occupation program at the time she was diagnosed with scoliosis. She continued in the health occupation program following this unplanned medical event with the reaffirmation that she had chosen the right career.

A second example of a non-pivotal unplanned event in the health related category was Kathy. Kathy was on the fast track in a graphic arts and marketing degree program when
she became chronically ill. She grew excessively tired in a continuing cycle of illness over several months. The doctors thought it was a type of cancer. She recalls:

I thought part of what brought me to the nursing field you know . . . I was tired all the time. And [before that time] I got sick all the time . . . I thought it was because I was taking a full-time class load and working 35 hours a week, but it turned out I had a thyroid disorder. I had to go on medication. But once that was straightened out, it was fine. But it was scary to be, what was I, 20 years old and told you might have cancer. That was a little freaky.

Kathy indicated that this event got her thinking about health care as a career. The treatment she received and her feelings of vulnerability heavily influenced this college student. However, at this time, she chose to go back and concentrate on college and finish her degree in marketing and graphics communication. Kathy continued working in the graphic arts field for 15 years. This experience, while non-pivotal in its immediate aftermath, planted a seed that informed Kathy’s career change years later.

Category 3. Unplanned events of an interpersonal nature

The third category was unplanned events of an interpersonal nature. Nine individuals reported experiencing unexpected personal contacts that affected their careers in some way. Some individual or friend initiated the unplanned interpersonal events, some by making off-handed comments in conversations, others with the intent to offer information about a new job opportunity, share a specific job lead with the individual or make a job offer to hire that person. Six of the events were non-pivotal, supporting or enhancing the current career direction. Twelve interpersonal contacts were pivotal events that influenced the individuals to
change their career direction. Some participants reported more than one unplanned event in this category.

These interpersonal events included many different happenstance encounters such as receiving a phone call with a suggestion to consider a new job lead or unexpectedly meeting a friend at a conference or a colleague on the street where that person introduced them to someone who had information on a new job. Unexpected interpersonal contacts happened at various times in each participant’s life and in various places. Unplanned events of an interpersonal nature called on participants to critically examine their chosen career paths. The majority of the nine reported events were unexpected leads for actual job openings and direct job offers.

Tracy described her pivotal interpersonal unplanned event, which centered on an unexpected job offer. She had gone from a paperwork clerk and assistant at a small chiropractor’s office to a clerk and receptionist at a drug rehabilitation center. One evening Tracy received a call from her boyfriend’s aunt offering her a job as a social worker in a small nursing home. She thought over the offer and took the new job, dramatically changing career direction. Tracy recalls:

She called me up and she was like, ‘Tracy we’ve got this job here and I think you’d be really good at it.’ So I was still at [a drug counseling center] and I was really nervous and I was, like, how do I go to a nursing home because, you know, it smells and everyone is sick and how do you go there to work? So I really tossed about it, but then I decided, you know, yes, I’m going to go because it had good benefits and good pay and [now] I’ve been there for three years. The only reason I got this job is
because I’ve been dating the same guy . . . since I was 12. That is the only reason. No
ad in the paper, no nothing, but it is my life calling.

Tracy went on to comment that this was completely random, since she never had prior
contact with the aunt [who offered the job]. “I never spoke to her before she called. So then
she called me out of the blue one day [with the offer].” This unplanned event was pivotal in
that it changed her career goal from a desk clerk at a substance abuse counseling center to a
social worker in a nursing home.

The second example of a pivotal unplanned event in the interpersonal category was
Karen. Karen worked in a furniture factory as a procurement clerk. Six months after her
divorce, Karen visited her brother on an army base and was introduced to his best friend.
There was little interest at first, yet after a week-long vacation and several months of
correspondence, she married her brother’s friend. She recalled, “[I said to myself] This is a
nice guy. He has a good job. I think I will marry him.” Her career immediately changed from
a procurement clerk for a furniture company in the Southeastern United States to a wife and
mother establishing a family and later operating a sustainable farm in the Northwestern
United States.

Karen observed that if she not taken the trip with her mother to visit her brother, she
would not have met this guy and fallen in love with him and gotten married. In that case, she
might still be a procurement clerk at a furniture factory in western North Carolina. This
interpersonal interaction was a pivotal unplanned event that altered her career direction.

Unplanned non-pivotal events of an interpersonal nature also occurred in individuals’
lives. For example, after failing nursing school, Megan worked for three years as a video
store manager, then seven years as a call center manager. Megan recalled that one evening she saw one of her old classmates at a party. They started talking about jobs and she learned of a two-year surgical technician training program at a community college. She recalled “I understand the program [surgical technician] was easier [than the nursing program]…if I complete the program there are great opportunities ahead for me.” Based on this unplanned meeting at a party and a chance conversation, Megan applied for and was granted admission to the surgical technology program. She recalls this experience as follows:

You know . . . so I asked her and she told me all about it and it sounded really interesting and I thought, wow, surgery that sounds like great fun. I asked her how to get into it, so I went to the other college this time because I didn’t want to show my face [at the college where I failed] and it was like, sure come right in.

Though Megan learned from this unplanned event and even took action toward a career change, ultimately, after she completed the surgical technology degree, she had second thoughts about the change. She cited the need for security in a job. She was familiar with the call center company where she had continued to work part time during the pursuit of the surgical technology degree. Her loyalty to the company and appreciation for the way her boss worked with her while she was in school and during her unplanned pregnancy was instrumental in her decision to stay in her existing job. In addition, she was promised a promotion and raises if she stayed with the company. Megan continued as a full-time telecommunications call center section supervisor. This was an example of a non-pivotal interpersonal event, because Megan continued in the same career pathway even after her training to be a surgical technician.
Karen’s experience offers another example of a non-pivotal unplanned event. Karen was raising her children, operating a sustainable farm and helping out at her children’s school. One day she was approached by the principal and asked to work as a teacher’s aide. Karen recalls “I enjoy working [volunteering] at the school where my children are, I was there helping already, why not continue there with pay?” In this example there seemed to be a clear distinction in Karen’s retelling of events between what she viewed as a job and how she would define a career. While she did accept the job, it was only because it was convenient and it provided additional income for her family. It did not unduly interfere with what she believed was her career in sustainable farming and caring for her family. She subsequently took the paid position of teacher’s aide but stayed in her career path as mother and manager of her sustainable farm. This event was classified as an interpersonal non-pivotal unplanned event since she did not change her career as homemaker/farmer.

The majority of events in the interpersonal category were pivotal. Twelve events caused individuals to change careers following the unplanned event. The remaining six events reported by individuals in this category were non-pivotal in nature. Though participants may have reported learning and making new meaning from their experiences, they stayed on the same career path.

**Category 4. Work related unplanned events**

The fourth category of unplanned events is work related. This category involved activities at and around the individual’s employment. Of the fifteen individuals interviewed, twelve reported unplanned events that were related to work. There were eleven pivotal events
where individuals changed their career paths. Another eleven reported events were considered non-pivotal because the participants continued in the same line of work.

Unplanned events in the work category included forced resignations, conflicts on the job, layoffs and business failures. The majority of unplanned events in this category were layoffs resulting in people changing jobs and also changing their career goals. The following are examples of unplanned events in the work related category.

Ruth had recently completed a baccalaureate degree. She followed her boyfriend to a new town and worked as a marketing manager for several apartment complexes for five years. Ruth perceived she was consistently outperforming other workers in her suburban marketing position. She asked for a transfer to a new division. But while she was in this division, the company’s overall position in the market dropped, affecting her individual performance. She was unexpectedly laid off. “It came as a shock . . . I got laid off . . .. I decided to go back to school.” Soon after this unplanned event, she did return to school, and this time she entered the health area. Ruth changed career direction from marketing and sales to health care, prompted by this unplanned event.

A second example of a pivotal unplanned event in the work category was the career pathway of Temeka, who was laid off after working eight years in manufacturing. She indicated that she was somewhat prepared for the unplanned event. She realized there was a slowdown in business and had started to go back to college, working on her pre-requisite skills. However, the abrupt nature of the initial layoff was unexpected and unsettling. “One day they came in and [the plant superintendent] said ‘we are closing the doors.’ I was sad and disappointed.” Temeka was able to go from a full-time manufacturing worker and part-time
college student to full-time college student after she was accepted into a health care program. As a reaction to this pivotal unplanned event Temeka moved from the manufacturing field to the health care field. The company closure, layoff, and Temeka’s change of status from full-time project supervisor in manufacturing to full-time student in health care was a major change in her career trajectory.

There were also non-pivotal events in the category of work. William provides an example of a non-pivotal unplanned event in the work category. William was a graduate with a baccalaureate degree in environmental engineering. He experienced an unplanned event, a layoff, which came suddenly and caught him off guard. William related, “The Company just cut back their workforce. [His reaction was] I’ll find another job.” He reasoned he had the degree in environmental engineering and practical work experience so he started looking for similar work in his chosen career field. William used a job search firm to locate other companies in the area that were hiring environmental engineers. His dislocation was non-pivotal because he pursued and found work in the same field.

A second example of an unplanned event that was non-pivotal came from Ray. Ray was initially successful in his start-up of a greenhouse business. During the first year, the business ran well. “I built a greenhouse because I went to college. I got the knowledge [of] how to do it. [I was an entrepreneur]. I went into massive debt . . . in the second year in the business, [the] collection of bills owed me became a daily battle.” Ray lost over $20,000 and shut the business down. According to Ray’s business goal, this was an unplanned event. Ray had anticipated growing the greenhouse business for the next ten years and eventually passing the business on to his son. He was then forced to close the business. Ray took time to
consider his options and eventually started a new business. He continued in his career path of remaining a small businessman. The closing of the business and regrouping his resources to begin another small business was considered a non-pivotal event.

Individual reactions to unplanned events in the work related category were both pivotal and non-pivotal. Ruth switched from marketing to health care, while Temeka switched from manufacturing to health care. Both had worked in their jobs for more than five years, and neither had plans to switch careers at this juncture. Both suffered layoffs with the consequence that they changed career directions. William, a college graduate, continued to seek work in his field of environmental engineering and was successful in finding work even after a second layoff. Ray, a military retiree, started a business that failed after the second year of operation. He took a break to consider his options and eventually started a second business. Both William’s and Ray’s experiences of the unplanned event were non-pivotal to their career direction.

In summary, this study found twenty-two unplanned events that took place in individuals’ work lives, evenly divided between pivotal and non-pivotal events. The majority of unplanned events in participants’ career path in this category were caused by unexpected layoffs.

Category 5. Education related unplanned events

The fifth category of unplanned events in participants’ career pathways relates to educational experiences. Seven of the fifteen participants described a total of eleven unplanned events in their education pathway. Eight events were pivotal, as students switched majors, dropped out of college, enrolled in college or went to work full-time as a result of the
encountering with the event. Three were non-pivotal events since the identified event did not change the individual’s career path.

Education related changes involved unplanned events while an individual was enrolled in a degree or training program. Unplanned events included scheduling problems (such as learning that all classes in the individual’s academic major were full), enrolling in the wrong class, unexpectedly encountered a professor who inspired them in a new way.

Judy, as a pre-med nursing student suggested a pivotal unplanned education event in her career pathway. Judy selected a particular four-year university program curriculum, based on the reputation of its nursing program. After she enrolled she ran into scheduling problems. She recalled her unplanned event as follows:

I couldn’t get Anatomy and Physiology the next semester . . . then I started taking economics classes just as electives and found that I was pretty good at it and I rather enjoyed it. Quite honestly . . . I thought maybe this is just a sign. This [economics] is what I’m supposed to do.

Judy switched her major to economics and business when faced with the unexpected unavailability of required classes and her enjoyment of classes that she happened on by serendipity. She interpreted this situation as an unplanned event causing her to revise her initial career plan.

The second example of a pivotal unplanned event in education happened with Megan, who described herself as an “A” student in high school. She was enrolled in a nursing program at her local community college, studying moderately as she had done in high school and also continuing to spend time having fun with her friends. At the end of the first semester
of nursing school she suddenly realized she did not have the required grade point average to continue. She hadn’t studied sufficiently for the grades required by the nursing school. She failed her first semester in nursing school and as a result lost her position in the class and was forced to drop out. She reflected on this unplanned event as follows:

Things came a little easy to me in high school, doing what was required of me as far as the work was concerned. The material was never an issue. But nursing [at the community college] was a completely different beast. Nursing, looking back now, is mostly logic and it’s mostly common sense and at 18 years old that’s the hardest thing anyone can teach you.

This sudden academic failure caused her to change her career goal from nursing to a series of retail sector jobs. Over the next several years she worked in sales, clerking, retention, and then manager of a video store.

An example of an educational non-pivotal event was reported by Kathy. Kathy was a high school journalist who edited her class yearbook and was interested in going to college. She was one of five children and her parents did not have the money to finance her college education. She was accepted at three major universities but lacked the money for tuition and room and board. Kathy had accepted this fact. The yearbook company that published her high school yearbook also published a local university yearbook. The yearbook company representative knew of Kathy’s skills and learned of her career goal and her financial need. In a chance conversation one afternoon, he [the company representative] passed along information about a work-study scholarship opportunity at a nearby university.
Kathy pursued more information, applied and was offered the work-study job as the marketing director of the college yearbook. When choosing her educational path, this unplanned event (the work-study scholarship opportunity at a local university) helped facilitate her decision to stay on her career path with a goal of working in marketing and graphic communications. The unplanned opportunity for financial support along with her strong desire to work in the graphic arts field supported her career goal and enhanced her chances for college and the scholarship. This was an example of an unplanned non-pivotal event in the field of education.

Annette reported the second example of a non-pivotal unplanned event in education. She was attending a small business college to study Information Technology. Annette recalls: “My parents always thought [with] computer science you’re never going to run out of work. That’s the way to go. That’s the new thing. You’ll make plenty of money and be happy.” With this guidance from her parents firmly in mind, Annette enrolled at her local college. At the end of her first year of college she was failing. Her brother, living in a college town some 800 miles away, offered her a place to stay and offered to help tutor her with her studies in Information Technology. “And since I was having problems, my brother said, ‘Why don’t you transfer to [the local university] and I can help you?’ This unplanned situation of low grades coupled with the unexpected offer from her brother provided Annette an opportunity to continue in her major in computer science despite a setback.

Participants in the education category reported a total of eleven events. Eight of these events were pivotal causing a change in career paths or goals. In the remaining three
instances participants reported using what they learned from their encounters with unplanned events to reflect on their choices and opted to stay on the same path.

**Contextual Factors Influencing Career Paths**

All participants described contextual factors that facilitated or prevented movement in their career paths. For this study, the lens through which the contextual factors were viewed was adult career development, as the individual lived, grew, and experienced change within his/her career path. The context was the circumstances within and around the adult career changers. These contextual factors were categorized as internal and external. Adult career changers used these internal and external factors to recognize and interact with unplanned events along their career paths.

**Internal factors influencing career pathways**

For this study, internal factors were considered to be traits within the individual. The word trait is frequently indistinguishable from personal characteristics, behaviors or attitudes. Further, it is now accepted that traits, can be learned through recognition, encouragement, and teaching (Mitchell et al., 1999). Participants used internal factors or traits (in the broadest sense) to recognize and interact with unplanned events in their career pathways.

Seven traits were identified as internal factors that participants used to interface with unplanned events: flexibility, curiosity, optimism, persistence, risk taking, spirituality, and the need for job security. The first five internal factors have been identified by other researchers when studying unplanned or happenstance events in ones career (Krumboltz & Levin, 2004; Mitchell et al., 1999; Neualt, 2001; and Williams et al., 1998). In addition to
these five traits, in this study it was also found that spirituality and the need for job security were often cited as internal factors used in interacting with unplanned events.

These internal contextual factors were traits the individuals themselves said they possessed and which they believed had influenced and informed their interactions and decisions around unplanned events. Participants typically identified internal factors that influenced their career pathway such as an openness to change and flexibility to try new skills and take action, eagerness to explore new areas with curiosity, persistence in spite of setbacks, a positive attitude or optimism, and a readiness to take action in the face of uncertain outcomes. In addition, a number of individuals reported some aspect of spirituality and the need for job security as influential in their career decisions. The following sections explore each of these internal factors.

**Flexibility.** The first internal factor described by participants was flexibility, which was defined as the ability to adjust to a situation and benefit from it. Flexibility can further be defined as adapting to new, different and changing circumstances and conditions with tolerance and accommodation and willingness to compromise. Fourteen of the fifteen participants described actions that reflect flexibility as they faced unplanned events in their career pathways.

Individuals described flexibility with phrases such as: “I’m willing to take other work” and “I was willing to do whatever it took to get the job done.” Further, flexibility in one’s career path was indicated through comments such as “I couldn’t find a job within my field of exercise physiology, so I got a job as a marketing director,” and “I was always very flexible about what I would do.”
Participants in this study suggested a variety of circumstances and actions regarding their use of flexibility in their career paths. Tracy, who was balancing two jobs, suggested that she was flexible as she adjusted to her new job and kept her old job during the transition.

When I found the new job at the nursing home, he [the manager of DWI counseling] kept me on. . . I did that work from home and that was good. [I spent] three to four hours a day once I went home [from my new full-time job as a social worker].

Tracy was concerned about the transition to her new job and was flexible in managing both jobs until she was sure she could master her new assignment as a social worker.

The second example of flexibility was Antonio. He recalls, “You have to be flexible, I mean just in my life in general you have to be moving, shaking, switching things around to get things done. You know, you do what you have to do.” After quitting a job in Washington, D.C., Antonio came home to North Carolina and was in between jobs working as a bartender when his father fell and injured himself in a construction accident. Antonio was flexible enough to work his bartending job as well as assisting in his father’s construction work. He kept the small construction company operational during his father’s recovery. Antonio balanced two part-time jobs while continuing to explore new career options.

Judy described her perceived trait of flexibility when recounting that after her husband’s transfer to a new town, she could not find a full-time job comparable to the one she left. She was flexible enough to find two part-time jobs and balance this work as she continued within her career pathway. She explained as follows:

I loved the training and standing up in front of a group and doing my [aerobics] training for everyone. It gave me flexibility to continue to do my [telecommunication]
teaching . . . that’s one thing. I can tell you right now . . . you’ve got to be flexible; you’ve just got to … especially in the workplace, more so than personality probably, [you have to] give a little more in the workplace. You have to be there, you have to make it work.

These three examples characterize the individuals’ perceptions of flexibility in their careers when encountering unplanned events that changed their career pathways. Due to their trait of flexibility, these individuals were able to adjust to new situations in beneficial ways that helped their careers.

**Curiosity.** The second internal factor identified by many of the participants in discussing their career path was curiosity, the ability to exhibit inquisitive behavior and exploration. The individuals who self-identified as possessing this trait exhibited a strong desire for discovery, an eagerness to know, and enthusiasm to learn.

In recalling the events in their work, education and personal lives, individuals offered comments such as “I love learning new things” “It’s natural [to want to know] how it works and why it works,” “It gave me an opportunity to see [explore] before you get out there,” and “[in the] thirst for knowledge you have to be curious.” This trait of curiosity was mentioned or implied by thirteen of the fifteen participants when talking about personal traits that influenced how they interacted with events in their career paths.

Melissa’s perception of her own curiosity when she encountered an unplanned event (unplanned pregnancy) in her personal life was one example:
It’s like I am trying to figure out something. I want to know . . . Even when I was pregnant I was doing research on adoption agencies . . .. What is your policy on this?

How are you going to handle the situation through my pregnancy?

Melissa’s trait of curiosity was also noted in her process of selecting of a nursing school and later in her selection of a college. She reported asking many questions during the selection process. “[By asking around] I found out that one community college nursing program had so many applicants that your chances of getting a seat in the program was much smaller.” As a result, she selected a smaller community college in a rural community.

Pam utilized curiosity during the job search between unplanned layoffs: “So I always believed I could learn and I always had an interest . . . I was very curious and I always . . . loved learning new things. So if I’d never done something before, that was a good criteria [sic] for me to apply for the job.” Early in her career this trait of curiosity opened the door for jobs as a pastry chef and as a Habitat for Humanity project manager.

Karen also demonstrated curiosity and a passion for discovery. She described her trait of curiosity as follows: “[My father always said] I want you to be able to find it [The answer to the a question]. The only way to find it is you go at it from every direction.” She recalls a childhood of being encouraged by her parents to ask questions and to look at life from many points of view. Her father took her on hikes in the forest and taught her how to discover various plants on the forest floor by careful observation. She identified this trait, which her father taught her as curiosity and believed it stayed with her. For Karen, curiosity is “a chance to see what’s out there . . . I just wanted to know more . . . I have always wanted to
know more.” Karen alluded to this trait of curiosity as a learned behavior, and one that was taught her at an early age.

William provided a fourth example of curiosity being utilized when interacting with an unplanned event in his career pathway. In the beginning of his career he chose a co-op program while in college. He saw this program as a chance to explore various jobs in his field. “It was good money and it was a chance to see what was really out there.”

William, whose initial career goal was mechanical engineering, switched to organic chemistry. He felt limited in his career options in engineering and saw this college work experience program as a chance to explore new interests. Enrolling in a co-op learning experience was beneficial in his career. He recalls, “Co-op was good. It showed me some things. I knew that I didn’t want to do just environmental. Once I got done with that, you know, it taught you [me] some things.” William’s curiosity prompted him to take action to explore career options. Later in his career this same trait of curiosity would be employed when William explored medical careers.

Thirteen of the fifteen participants interviewed described their possession of the trait of curiosity with phrases such as “a thirst for knowledge,” “a spirit of discovery,” “constantly asking questions,” and “always wanting to know or learn something new.” It appears that the trait of curiosity was an important influencer in the individuals’ responses to unplanned events in relation to their career pathways.

Persistence. The third internal factor or trait was persistence. Persistence was defined as determination and hard work in spite of difficulties and opposition or as continuing the course in spite of obstacles. It was described by some participants as moving with a firmness
of purpose despite obstacles that arose. Of the fifteen participants, thirteen described themselves as persistent in their efforts when encountering unplanned events.

In recalling events in their personal, work, and educational lives, these career changers described persistence with phrases such as: “It made me want to go to school harder and study harder and work harder,” “I applied everywhere within a 100 mile radius,” “I’m very hard-headed and I can be very determined. Don’t tell me I can’t do something because I’ll do it.”

Persistence was viewed as an important contextual factor in career decision making when dealing with unplanned events. Megan, who was involved in a horrific and crippling car accident, provides a compelling story of her persistence as she sought a career. After the accident she enrolled briefly in a community college nursing program but was dropped from the program due to low grades. When she was fully recovered from the accident, she started working in a video store. She describes persistence in this job: “I went from general employee to assistant manager, then I handled all the collections . . . So they named me the collections manager.” Megan was subsequently promoted to store manager. During her work stints at the video store, Megan continued to think about her original career goal of becoming a nurse. Ultimately she went back to the allied health field and is now enrolled in a nursing program.

Temeka also described persistence and hard work in her career path. After losing her child care provider, she was forced to find a new job that paid enough to support herself and her child [later children]. As a result of losing that essential support she had to drop out of
college and postpone her goal of becoming a nurse. She describes her persistence in pursuing full-time employment:

I went and filled out an application. I called the man [her next employer] every day . . . He finally called me in for an interview and he said, ‘[Temeka] you called me every day.’ I said, ‘I did because I really need the job.’ [I got hired] so first I started out as a line worker, then I advanced up to machine operator, then I advanced up to team leader, wherein you run a shift and make sure all the machines run for the whole shift.

Temeka was persistent in her job search and once employed, she was determined to advance on the job despite obstacles. She was not satisfied with just coming to work and putting in the time. She was persistent and motivated to improve her position and her pay.

JoAnn was the third example of persistence in interacting with unplanned events. She recalled how she exhibited persistence following a traumatic injury she received when her drug-addled boyfriend dropped her off a second story balcony. She was severely injured and hospitalized for months. Here she recalls her persistence during her recovery period:

Well, I have an uncanny ability to persist and push on and be able to go into new things without being afraid. The hospital thing, the whole stint in the hospital, made me aware of my bravery and I keep that in mind when I have to do something new and scary.

JoAnn’s determination allowed her to push on following her hospitalization. She noted her resolve to get through nursing school despite barriers in her career path.
Annette provides the fourth example of persistence among career changers. She suggested: “It’s probably a combination of everything, you know. I study 24-7, just about. If I am not running the trucking company, or helping the kids, I am studying.”

Antonio, when learning from a friend of the career possibilities in radiology, demonstrated persistence in his application process. Antonio discovered that he needed remedial work and a foundation of core classes. He spent a year taking classes and working to improve his test scores to prepare his application for admission.

‘Cause to get into this program, surprising or not, I wasn’t able to do it the first time because they had a standard. You had to have these classes . . . I went and retook [the test] and, well, took a bunch of the classes to make my application look better for this school. And then I got in.

In balancing education, work, and family while overcoming obstacles in their paths, it was persistence that kept the adult career changers moving forward despite setbacks and challenges. This trait of persistence, a skill that was self-identified or exhibited by actions in thirteen of the fifteen participants when interacting with unplanned events in their career pathways was shown to be an important attribute in predicting a beneficial outcome to encounters with both pivotal and non-pivotal unplanned events.

**Optimism.** The fourth trait described by participants was optimism, which is defined as the ability to express hopefulness or a positive outlook. Individuals manifested optimism by viewing new opportunities as possible and attainable. Many described the importance of maintaining a positive attitude and confidence about the future. Nine of the fifteen
participants pointed to optimism as a trait that was a major influence in their interaction with unplanned events in their career pathways.

In recalling unplanned events in their personal, work, and education lives, some participants described optimism as Gelatt’s (1989) “possibility thinking.” During the interviews, phrases such as: “I try to find the positive in it,” “I like people, I like laughing, I like having fun,” and “rainbows and sunshine move on us.” all denoted an optimistic spirit in participants’ lives. This positive attitude was self-identified by eleven of the fifteen participants interviewed when they described aspects of their career journeys and their interactions with unplanned events they encountered along the way.

Examples of the trait of optimism are described by participants Karen and Megan in the stories of their career journeys. Karen, in talking about her personal philosophy as it pertains to her career path, described her optimism as follows:

People call me Pollyanna . . . I tell my kids whenever we go out in the world, you can find bad if you’re looking for bad. Why don’t you look for good because you can find it, too? That’s my basis.

Megan discussed how the trait of optimism informed her personal work philosophy and influenced her encounters with unplanned events. After a serious car accident she went through a series of jobs, but reported that she felt the urge to go back to college in the health care field to provide more caring service to others. She reflected on the experience and her future in health care:

I need to be allowing people to see things can be better. I just want to give the world a coke, and a smile. Everything is rainbows and puppy dogs.
Karen, with her optimistic spirit and Megan with her stated desire to help other people see the brighter side of life are examples of the trait of optimism which helped participants to recognize the possibilities for their careers when encountering unplanned events. Nine of the fifteen individuals ascribed the trait of optimism to themselves and cited it as a factor in their interaction with unplanned events along their career pathway.

**Risk Taking.** The fifth trait identified by career changers as being influential in their interaction with unplanned events was risk taking. This trait was defined as exposing oneself to a situation with unknown outcomes, taking a chance, and into which the individual proceeds with the knowledge that there is a chance for a negative outcome. Risk taking was perceived by individuals as taking action where there was a chance something could go wrong.

In reflecting upon their interactions with unplanned events, individuals provided examples of risk taking behaviors and tendencies in their career paths with phrases such as: “All new jobs are a risk,” “It was a risk just going to work, not knowing what to expect,” and “I did not know a soul in that town . . . I was nervous the first time.” Risk taking was self-described or apparent in the actions of eight of the fifteen participants.

There were numerous participant recollections of encounters with unplanned events involving risk-taking. Annette was a college graduate in textiles when she secured a job in textile management in rural North Carolina in the 1980’s. She was the lone female supervisor among eight male supervisors in a small mill town. She described relocating to this rural setting and working in management in a male dominated textile company as risky:
The first couple [of] weeks on the job, I was terrified. I was the only female manager . . . and everyone else was older than me. So here I was, a young female . . . you can feel the tension. You know they would test. You know they would try to see what I knew, what I didn’t know.

Ray described investing in his first business after retiring from the military as a risky proposition. He went to college for a year, gaining business and horticulture skills. He then opened a greenhouse and landscaping business as a first time entrepreneur. Ray invested a sizeable portion of his military retirement money and savings to start the business. Ray describes the risk in this way, “I built a greenhouse because I had been in college. I got the knowledge of how to do it and we went into massive debt to build the buildings … [it] was a little $20,000 adventure.”

As a third example, Kathy described how she recognized that she was taking a risk by going into business for herself. “I was nervous the first time I told the regional phone company I was leaving to go do my own accounts because I really thought about ‘What am I giving up?’ [The security of the Bell System].”

Eight of the fifteen participants described risk-taking as a factor that influenced their interaction with unplanned events. Each of the eight took a risk and gained experience and skill in their career pathways. Several of the participants mentioned the inherent risk of entering nursing school because the coursework is rigorous and demanding and the possibility of failure is high. Over half of the participants interviewed expressed the factor of risk-taking as a major influence on their career paths.
**Spirituality.** In the delineation of internal factors that participants felt had influenced their career paths, ten of the fifteen participants noted the trait of spirituality as influencing or informing their career choices. Spirituality as expressed by the participants was not tied to a specific religion but rather was described as an internal feeling. Examples included: “I feel it’s my calling,” “I’m where I’m meant to be, I’m very blessed,” and “the Good Lord made it happen.” Participants perceived the factor of spirituality as a profound sense of the calling of a higher power, a mission, or a purpose in one’s career. This sense of spirituality affected the human spirit and worldview of participants and was therefore an important trait that influenced participants in their interaction with unplanned events. Ten participants in the study expressed some form of dedication to a higher meaning, or a greater purpose in life; thus, spirituality was a factor that influenced action in their careers.

Four individuals provide examples which illuminated spirituality, a personally significant internal factor. The first example of a strong urge toward a particular career direction came from Temeka. She describes the influence of the spiritual in very strong heartfelt terms:

I feel like that’s my calling [nursing]. That’s just my calling, what I’m supposed to do. I can do anything with God’s strength in me. I feel like everything has its season. . . . I just feel like it was a blessing from God, that She gave it to me... I just feel like it’s my calling. It is. It really is.

Temeka continued her clinical practice at the hospital and classes in nursing school with this belief firmly in her mind. It was clearly a heavy influence on her career path.
Judy provided a second example of the trait of spirituality, an important trait for her in meeting and reacting to unplanned events. Judy had two miscarriages, which brought her into close contact with nursing professionals and other in the health care field. After a period of reflection, she concluded, “I am not where I am supposed to be.” She left her work as an insurance representative and enrolled in a nursing program. The influence of and interaction with nurses in her life caused her to reflect and become informed and open to this career change. She felt called to this new work. This was further solidified during the final stage of her training when she experienced this unplanned event, which reaffirmed her choice to change careers:

My last clinical rotation was in a nursing home and we were doing kind of acute care . . . and the minister, the one who officiated at my wedding, was in the reception area there and his wife was a patient there, and she had just come in the same week I started my rotation. And there she was, and there I was to take care of her, and I just kind of went, “I’m meant to be doing this right now.” You know? It made me feel huge, it was so reassuring . . . This was my calling, where I am supposed to work. Judy, like nine other participants, expressed the impact of spirituality, a sense of interconnectedness, in her career path. This trait gave these participants the assurance they were making good decisions, they were on the right career track, and/or they were doing some special work they felt called to do.

Spirituality was also an influential factor for Karen, a mother of five children, who managed the family while her husband was in the military. She worked as a school aide while her children were in school, managed a small family farm, and later took up cake
decorating to help her son as he started a restaurant business. She described her whole life in a spiritual sense:

So, I just feel like I have been very blessed, as you can see. And I’m just happy to be here and if I can help somebody else . . . because I started out as a below average high school student with not very much self-esteem and these things have come about . . . I mean God was in me, that’s all I can say.

Pam described her dissatisfaction with her job as a research lab supervisor as follows, “I realized I needed to get out of research, because it did not give me the contact that I so loved with people . . . It didn’t feed me emotionally or spiritually.” Pam made the decision to switch careers in part because the job she was laid off from did not fulfill her spiritually. Pam felt a spiritual calling to help build servant leaders in high school settings through community service projects. Pam became a regional director for Habitat for Humanity. Later in her career when her parents were ill she describes another calling to become a health care provider.

I feel I had been specifically called to help usher my parents into death . . . I have always felt I was in the hand of God . . . I feel most called to care for people at the end of life. I feel completely called to care for others.

The concept of vocation or calling was a spiritual element that many individuals perceived as they lived their lives and/or changed career directions. This trait of spirituality was not consistently centered on the doctrine of one particular religion or church but rather the particular individual’s worldview of feeling blessed, spiritually connected with their work, and called to a new job as part of a divine plan. It appeared the examples of spirituality
furthered the career changers’ awareness of self, their interconnectedness with their new occupational choice and a perceived relationship with a higher power.

**The Need for Job Security.** The seventh internal factor was identified as a deep seated need for job security: an internal belief that job security was of critical importance to the individual. This factor was cited by ten of fifteen participants in their interviews. Job security is defined as continuity of gainful employment and a confidence that the job would continue to be viable for that participant. For the participants who cited this factor, it was the internal emotional, and psychological need for job security that influenced how they interacted with unplanned events, not simply the outward reality of job market statistics. Many of the participants recognized that the area (and, in fact, the entire country) was facing a rapidly changing economy. Job security was described as work where the chance of losing one’s job was kept to a minimum and where participants could earn enough money to support themselves and their families.

Individuals who had experienced a job lay off or a company closing were more likely to express a need for job security as an important influence in their interaction with unplanned events. In describing their career paths, seven individuals sought different careers in order to achieve what they perceived as higher earning potential and longevity in the occupation. In total ten career changers described the internal need for job security as they sought a career path that would lead to a job where they would earn good pay and be assured of continuing work.

In relating the role for job security, career changers offered comments such as: “It started to hit home, I visited a factory in Honduras, You could see the trend [jobs moving off
Ten of the people interviewed stated clearly that job security was important for them in making decisions regarding their careers. The first example was Phyllis. After working eight years as a secretary, Phyllis married and within a year was pregnant. Her husband decided they would move to his hometown, where Phyllis would stay home to raise their newborn child and care for his aging mother. However, this plan did not work when her husband’s income dropped and it became apparent that his job was not secure and was inadequate to support the family. Phyllis described the desire for a secure job as the impetus for her to make the transition from stay-at-home mom to become a manager at a trucking repair depot. “I needed the money. I had to have the money . . . My husband never had a high paying job so I needed to work and he needed to work to pay the bills.”

A second example of an adult career changer influenced by the need for job security was Kathy. She operated her own graphic design business and had developed a new logo for a hospital campaign that was widely successful. However, a year later the hospital opted to go with a larger company and Kathy was forced to reevaluate her career goals. “So I started reevaluating my job options of what would give me job security. [An occupation where] I could always find a job no matter where my husband went . . . and I could always find a job, period.”

The desire for job security also played an important part in the career decisions of five individuals who were laid off due to workforce downsizing or plant closures. One
example was Temeka, a full-time health occupations student who was enrolled in college preparing for a career in nursing when she unexpectedly lost childcare service. She was forced to drop out of college and look for secure work that would pay her bills and allow her to support her child. She sought and found job security in a manufacturing job that offered her regular pay increases and promotions. In the beginning of her career life, Temeka believed that job security was to be found in manufacturing work.

For Temeka, her career choice of manufacturing served her well for about ten years. Then, in listening to company officials’ predictions of potential future layoffs, she sought job security by enrolling in her local community college and returning to her course work in Allied Health. She recalled:

That is my reason for going back to school. Because I figured I couldn’t be the one that doesn’t have a degree and be stuck somewhere and never know what I have, never have that security. So I wanted to feel secure and know that I had a degree to back me up.

Another example of the need for job security guiding individuals’ career choice comes to light in Annette’s story. Annette had worked in textiles for seventeen years when she was sent to Honduras to help set up new operations. She came to believe through this learning experience that Central American operations would likely displace many North Carolina textile industries and workers. She recounted:

It started to hit home, they have plenty of textile plants that were better [more modern and efficient] than here. We were getting a lot of stuff from overseas . . . I went to set
up a plant in Honduras and you can start seeing the trend. [My choice to switch to] nursing was a combination of me being sick and me seeking job security.

The need for job security was reported as an internal driver in the career pathway choices of two-thirds of the participants interviewed. These adult career changers felt the need and/or desire for job security, and they cited this as an influencing factor that came into play when interacting with unplanned events.

**Summary**

Individuals do not meet with unplanned events in a vacuum. Each individual brings to the experience his or her own personality traits, learned behaviors, previous life experiences, and belief systems. These internal contextual factors alone or in combination influence how any given individual will interact with unplanned events encountered in their career pathways. This section reported on the internal contextual factors participants identified as influences in their interaction with unplanned events. The next section will report on the external contextual factors identified.

**External factors influencing career pathways**

External factors also influenced the career pathways of adult career changers. In recalling their career paths, participants described external factors that could be classified into three areas: financial support, emotional support and logistical support. All participants reported at least one external factor as important in their career decision making. The external support factors were identified as circumstances or influences surrounding the career changer at the time an unplanned event occurred. Different from internal contextual factors external factors were independent of the career changer’s innate personal characteristics.
External factors could be described as environmental factors which encouraged or inhibited change in the participants’ career paths. These external factors influenced how career changers interacted with these events and had the potential to facilitate the participants desired actions or to create barriers that influenced the individual’s career direction.

**Financial Support.** The most frequent acknowledgement of financial support as an external factor that influenced how these adult career changers interacted with unplanned events was in relation to their return to school for retraining. Participants reported concerns about money as a major influence. For some, finances became a major obstacle and for others an enabling factor. Some participants’ reported overcoming financial barriers by receiving scholarships, moving back in to live with parents or siblings to cover expenses while in transition, and/or having spouses or significant others provide living expenses while in training. The lack of financial support was reported as a negative factor when scholarships were withheld, tuition money was lacking, or family financial obligations forced some individual to stay in a holding pattern [wanting to enroll in college to pursue new career but having to wait]. The lack of financial support prohibited some from pursuing a change in career as long as those financial circumstances remained in place.

Six individuals’ described their financial support system through the following examples. Annette was failing in her computer programming at a northeastern community college. She reached out for help: “My brother knew I was having trouble with computer science, so he offered to have me live with him and go to school in Raleigh [So he could help me with my studies].”
Ruth wished to become a nurse and her husband provided financial support for the family and paid her tuition, enabling her to return to nursing school. “My husband was very supportive so I saw this as my opportunity. Now I can do it [enroll in nursing school] after all these years.”

From a different perspective, Melissa recounted that she had the desire to continue school after a break-up with her live-in boyfriend. It was not financially feasible for her to continue on her own, so she asked for and received monetary support from her parents. That, combined with a part-time job, enabled her to continue working toward her career in nursing.

Participant Judy recounted that following her divorce she examined her career options and decided that she would like to go into nursing. But after evaluating her financial circumstances she realized that her goal was unattainable for that time. She concluded that she would have to stop working, as the nursing program required the commitment of a full-time student for the two-year duration of the program. “I knew I wanted to go to nursing school . . . I definitely wanted to, but it was just that I could not stop working, [I did] not have the money.” Judy lacked the financial support to change careers and though her goal was nursing, she continued in her same pathway as a telecommunications trainer.

Financial support was a key factor in interacting with opportunities presented by unplanned events in the career pathways of adult career changers. Money was sometimes an enabling factor, giving the participants the freedom to make a choice. For other participants the lack of funds was a barrier to change, or sometimes the impetus to force an unwanted change in an individual’s career pathway.
Emotional Support. Emotional support for these participants was expressed as hope or encouraging words to the career changer, as well as someone listening to and helping to build confidence as the individual started down a new career path. This support came through the actions of friends, colleagues, peers, family members, significant others, and mentors. These participants also noted that the lack of emotional support was a negative influencer in their careers. These negative experiences came about in the form of withholding moral support and encouragement when faced with a chance for additional education, training, or new job opportunities. Participants related discouraging and disparaging comments from significant others as well as manipulation and actively undermining self-esteem which prevented career change or discouraged the individuals from continuing toward a set goal. The adult career changer was supported or discouraged in his or her career direction as people significant in their lives either offered or withheld emotional support.

Examples of the influence of emotional support can be found in participants’ comments such as: “My boyfriend, he reinforced the whole education thing, because he was from a very educated family and he got me to enroll at the on-base community college.” This encouragement from Ruth’s husband [formerly the boyfriend] and his extended family supported Ruth as she continued in school and graduated from the community college.

Annette provides another example of emotional support as an external factor in interacting with unplanned events. Annette had just graduated from a four-year program and landed a textile management job. There she had a negative work experience, so she moved back to her hometown seeking support and looking for a new job. “I moved to Raleigh to be close to family and friends . . . They are my support.” With the support of family, Annette
found a job in a neighboring community and continued working in her field for fifteen years. Though this event was non-pivotal, in that Annette stayed in the same career pathway, she made meaning from the experience and came to realize that emotional support was important to her in both her personal and work life.

Phyllis initially enrolled in secretarial school after being told by her boyfriend he did not want her to go to college to pursue her dream of nursing. After graduation from secretarial school, she married him and he continued to “put her in her place,” which escalated into physical abuse. She divorced him, but her self-esteem was very low. During a visit to her brother, she found “my sister-in-law was a big factor in helping me . . . she was very influential.” After long talks, Phyllis worked to rebuild her self-esteem, began contemplating going back to school to pursue her original career plan to become a nurse. Phyllis’s example reflects both the positive and the negative influences of emotional support as factors in career decision making. Her boyfriends’ withholding of support became a barrier to her career goal and later her sister-in-law’s offer of support gave Phyllis what she needed to pursue the career change.

William, a mechanical engineering student, switched to chemical engineering with support and encouragement from a chemical engineering professor. He graduated and obtained a job as an environmental engineer, then experienced three different layoffs from chemical companies. Unexpectedly, William was invited to observe heart surgery being done by a surgeon friend while on a family vacation. This event radically altered William’s perceptions of his aptitude for health care are a profession:
I went down there and he [my friend, the surgeon] got me [permission to observe] two heart bypasses . . . for years my mom had told me I was too squeamish at the sight of blood, I’d never make it in the medical field . . . It was the coolest thing I’d ever seen.

After this event and with support of his surgeon friend, William overcame the negative discouragement he had internalized. He enrolled in a nursing program, a field he had once dismissed as unattainable for him.

Emotional support was a key factor influencing how participants reacted to unplanned events in their career pathways. Participants reported a need for approval, support, and encouragement from those whose opinions they valued. The withholding of this support was sometime enough to drastically alter career directions for some participants; conversely, the offering of support often gave the participant the confidence needed to make career decisions even when there were other obstacles to be overcome.

**Logistical Support.** Logistical support can be defined as help in the coordinating and planning everyday life. Logistical support might include such necessities as child care or elder care, balancing other family obligations in support of the participant’s career training, or providing needed transportation. Time constraints and the proximity of training and education facilities played heavily into this external factor. This framework of circumstances may either assist in or infringe upon an individual’s ability to take action when encountering unplanned events that present themselves as career opportunities.

Individuals described the presence or the lack of logistical support with comments such as “I didn’t have a car I had to walk everywhere,” “I did take a loss in pay, but when I
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looked at it . . . it was a little bit closer [a shorter commute].” “I was just out in the country and I didn’t want to drive all the way into Raleigh to work,” and “O’Charley’s was literally like one block from where I was living, [another job opportunity] was at least a ten minute drive, so that was another deciding factor.”

Logistical support became a primary external factor in rebounding from the setback of an unplanned event for Kathy. After closing her graphic arts business, she enrolled in nursing school at her local community college. She counted on support from her husband to pick up their kids from school and take off work to care for them when the elementary and community college schedules did not match. She described her logistical challenges and her husband’s support:

But trying to be the full-time mom, the full-time student, making sure I have coverage for childcare, making sure everybody is where they need to be when they need to be there . . . that’s really been the biggest challenge . . . My husband has been really great.

Phyllis reported that lack of childcare for her son was preventing her from returning to school. Phyllis was able to piece together a childcare network from various members of her family. She related: “Its great because I have somebody that can take care of him. If he has to go somewhere or needs picking up, I can count on my extended family.”

Annette had just been laid off when her company moved its operations to Mexico. The logistical support of already having an apartment and a reliable car enabled her to make the decision to continue working in her field. She took a job some 75 miles away where
transportation was a major issue without reliable transportation. She recalled: “I had just bought a new car . . . [and now] I am driving from Raleigh to Rocky Mount every day.”

External factors, which fell within the logistical support area, were identified by many participants as having influenced their interactions with unplanned events. These factors presented in both positive and negative ways, sometimes providing opportunities for participants to make new career decisions and sometimes becoming obstacles to change.

**Summary**

External factors, whether positive or negative, were present for all the participants’ as they confronted unplanned events. These external factors set conditions under which career changers balanced their personal, family and work lives during a career change or decided to stay on the same path after an encounter with an unplanned event. At times the factors made life changes difficult or in some cases prohibited change. But in many cases, the support of others and the removal of barriers were cited by participants as the outside factors that made the difference, affording them the opportunity to change their career paths.

**Chapter Summary**

This study provided insight into the career pathways of adult career changers and investigated how unplanned events have informed their career decisions. Fifteen adult career changers were interviewed, ranging in age from 24 to 55 years. Collectively they had 94 different work experiences. Forty-seven of the unplanned events they reported resulted in a job change or change in career direction. Analysis of the interviews and participant descriptions revealed the unplanned events that they identified fell into five domains: 1) family, 2) health, 3) interpersonal, 4) work, and 5) education. The study identified two types
of unplanned events: pivotal, in which the individual’s career goal changed and took a new
direction and non-pivotal, in which the individual continued along his/her current career path.

All participants described both internal and external contextual factors that facilitated
or prevented action in their career paths. The study identified seven internal contextual
factors, traits in the broad sense of the word, that individuals stated they possessed and which
they used or which had bearing on their ability to recognize and interact with unplanned
events. These factors were labeled as flexibility, curiosity, optimism, persistence, risk taking,
spirituality and the need for job security. Each influenced how, when, where and why the
individual was able to recognize and interact with the 94 identified unplanned events along
their career pathways. External contextual factors were classified as support systems and fell
into three categories: financial support, emotional support, and logistical support.

This study sheds light on how adult career changers inform their career decision
making in the 21st century. All fifteen participants in this study reported unplanned events in
their career pathways. In some instances, participants’ interactions with these unplanned
events caused a change in career direction, but change was not the only measure of influence.
In other cases, participants learned from unplanned event, made new meaning and decided to
stay on the same career path at least for a time.

Individuals interacted with unplanned events within a framework of internal and
external contextual factors. In all cases, financial, emotional, and logistical support were the
primary external factors that were in place as participants interacted with unplanned events.
Neither internal nor external factors that were identified in the study existed in isolation.
Both internal and external factors (whether identified as present or absent) made up the
complex matrix that represents an individual’s integrated work, education and personal lives and each was subject to overlap, interplay, and interaction with all other factors.

The analysis and interpretation of the findings, conclusions and implications for further research will begin in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the career pathways of adult career changers to better understand how unplanned events have informed their career decisions. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are adult career changers’ perceptions of the influence of unplanned events in their career paths?
2. What are the contextual factors or domains adult career changers used to recognize and interact with unplanned events?

In this chapter, I will present findings and key conclusions, drawing on the past research in Social Learning Theory of Career Development and Planned Happenstance Theory in order to provide critical insight for future researchers and practitioners. This chapter contains four sections. The first section is a summary of the findings of the study. The second is a discussion of the conclusions derived from the findings based on analysis of the transcripts and related literature. The third section discusses implications for theory and practice. The fourth section provides recommendations for further research.

Summary of Findings

This qualitative interpretive study was conducted with adult career changers and explored their perceptions of the influence of unplanned events in their career paths. The study’s purposeful sample included fifteen participants enrolled in allied health programs at North Carolina Community Colleges. Of the fifteen, fourteen were enrolled in nursing programs and one was enrolled in a radiology program. These adult career changers were
community college students in a lower to mid-socioeconomic group and, like many community college students: most participants had family responsibilities, held part-time jobs and had constraints on their time.

During the interview, each student completed a visual representation of his/her career path highlighting education, work, and personal life experiences as well as significant moments in his/her career path. Participants used these visual representations as an aid to memory and as a prompt for reflection while responding to the interviewer’s questions. The participant transcripts and the visual representations of career pathways were the raw data used in analysis.

The conceptual framework for this study was Social Learning Theory of Career Development (Krumboltz, 1979) and Planned Happenstance Theory (Mitchell et al., 1999). Krumboltz’s Social Learning Theory of Career Development includes the recommendation to create and transform unplanned events into opportunities for learning. This theory stresses that individuals should remain alert to unplanned and alternative opportunities and use these to learn skills for succeeding in each new activity (Krumboltz, 2009). Planned Happenstance Theory asserts that chance plays an essential role in everyone’s career. Open-mindedness, adaptability, and becoming an ongoing learner all help one to benefit from unplanned events. The goal of planned happenstance intervention is to encourage individuals to constantly look for opportunities to generate, recognize, and incorporate chance events into their career development. Here, indecision is viewed as open-mindedness and adaptability as a positive frame of mind.
This conceptual framework of Social Learning Theory of Career Development and Happenstance Theory bounded the study. Use of inductive analysis then allowed for descriptors to emerge from the data. Immersion in the data took place through an iterative process of open coding. Transcripts were cross-referenced with each individual’s visual representation which highlighted education experience, work experience, personal experience and unplanned events as identified by the individuals. Contextual factors surrounding unplanned events were identified from the transcripts.

Research questions guided and illuminated the influence of unplanned events on the individuals’ career paths. All of the participants reported having unplanned events. Some reported a change in career direction as a result of the unplanned event and these events were categorized as pivotal. Other individuals interpreted the unplanned events as reaffirming their career direction; in these instances the events were designated as non-pivotal to their career direction.

As stories of unplanned events were narrated, education, work, and personal experiences were recalled from the time of high school graduation to the time of the interview. A preponderance of incidents identified as unplanned clustered around the education, work, interpersonal, family, and health domains. These events were experienced as either pivotal or non-pivotal to participants’ career directions.

This study further explored the contextual factors that adult career changers used to recognize and interact with unplanned events. Participants discussed factors that facilitated or prevented movement in their careers. These contextual factors were separated into internal and external factors. Internal factors were traits or characteristics initiating in the individual
as they interacted with unplanned events and included flexibility, persistence, curiosity, optimism, risk taking, spirituality and a need for job security. External factors were outside influences around unplanned events in participants’ career pathways. These external factors were grouped into three areas of financial support, emotional support and logistical support. Both internal and external factors influenced participants in recognizing and interacting with unplanned events.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of adult career changers to better understand how unplanned events have informed their career decisions. The conclusions from this study follow the key research questions, and address: a) the perceptions of the influence unplanned events had on career pathways and b) the contextual factors used to recognize and interact with unplanned events. Three key conclusions arise from the findings in this study and include: adult career changers did experience unplanned events that affected their career pathways; unplanned events were either pivotal or non-pivotal in relationship to career decisions; and contextual factors, both internal and external, influenced participants’ interactions with unplanned events along their career pathways.

Adult career changers did experience unplanned events

In this study, participating adult career changers recalled unplanned events occurring along their career pathways. Some were of a positive nature and others negative. These unplanned events appeared to coalesce around the areas of education, work, interpersonal, family, and health. It should be noted that events often cut across more than one area.
In the earliest discussion of unplanned events in relation to career choices impacting career choice, Bandura (1982) suggested chance encounters affect life paths through the influence of personal and social factors. The another discussion in research literature comes from Miller (1983), who felt happenstance was commonplace in many career decisions. He defined happenstance as something that measurably alters one’s career behavior. Mitchell et al. (1999) later hypothesized that chance plays a major role in everyone’s career and events attributed to chance are often indirect outcomes of effective behavior. For example, those individuals who are open-minded may be more likely to recognize opportunities presented by unplanned events.

Other researchers have explored happenstance events in the lives of professionals. Cabral and Salomone (1990) focused on the role of chance in careers of adult professionals in graduate schools and discovered that although individuals aspire to control themselves and their environments, most acknowledge the influence of unplanned events upon the decision making process. Betsworth and Hansen (1996) built on the work of Miller (1983) and Cabral and Salomone (1990) and in their survey of older adults in a Midwestern university found 63% of men and 57% of women indicated their career paths were influenced by serendipitous events. Magnuson et al. (2003) noted in the narrative accounts of professional career counselor leaders that serendipitous opportunities and luck were turning points in their careers.

Betsworth and Hansen (1996) acknowledge that coincidence, happenstance, and chance factors play a significant role in career opportunities. In their study of prominent academic women, Williams et al., (1998) found that chance events affected the women’s
career choices and recommended integrating the concept of unplanned events into career development. Chen (2003) studied the integration of the notion of chance in career development and acknowledged that most individuals experience events and incidents that they call chance.

The current research study supports the findings of these earlier researchers on the topic of chance or happenstance in career choice. This study found that unplanned events do occur and they frequently influence career pathways. This study’s findings expand the research literature on unplanned events by studying a different population of adult career changers who are enrolled at community colleges. The average age of the participants was forty-one years old. They had held an average of 6.8 jobs before this study, and most were from rural working families in North Carolina. Over half were married and had children and were supporting their families through part-time work as they continued their education.

Also, while the current research was based on studies of Krumboltz et al. (1976), Williams et al. (1998), and Mitchell et al. (1999), this study looked at individuals’ career pathways over a longer period of time than previous researchers. Participants traced their career pathways from high school to the current stage in their careers, an average of 20.9 years. Previous research had examined work experience for shorter periods of time.

**Unplanned events were either pivotal or non-pivotal**

Based on interviews with participants it was clear that career goals are influenced by unplanned events. These influences can change one’s career direction, but participants in this study reported that the outcome of these events can also enhance or reaffirm the current paths they were already following. For purposes of this study, unplanned events that changed an
individuals’ career direction were called pivotal events, as the individual pivoted into a new career direction. Unplanned events that did not change the individuals’ career direction were labeled as non-pivotal. Often, through encounters with unplanned events, learning took place for the individual that created new meaning in their lives. As a result of what they learned through a chance encounter, some individuals in this study entered into a period of reflection and reassessment and ultimately decided to pursue a different career path. In the related literature on career decision making, so far only change or pivotal events have been examined.

Some previous researchers identified unplanned events in career pathways by the very fact that participants changed careers after the event. In early discussions of career development, Roe and Baruch (1967) explored factors that influenced adult career changers and noted that the accidental discovery of attractive alternatives was a factor that prompted occupational change. In discussing change, Miller (1983) viewed happenstance events as measurably altering one’s vocational path. Betsworth and Hansen (1996) cited degrees of change in career direction when studying serendipitous events in older adults associated with a large Midwestern university. Williams et al. (1998) discussed change in careers resulting from serendipitous events in the career paths of academic women when learning occurred through unplanned events.

From a different vantage point, rather than studying employed professional individuals, Henderson and Oliver (2000) studied unemployed middle to upper-class professional women without children. These women were in active job search. Following career counseling exercises, these women perceived chance events as opportunities for career
change. Future possibilities in their career direction were viewed as unexpected, new, and exciting.

These researchers found change in career direction as a result of unplanned events. In contrast, this study found non-pivotal events were also influential in affecting participants’ career decisions. Participants who chose to remain on the same career pathway noted that some unplanned events presented an opportunity to reassess and reflect on their current status. After a period of time, they decided to stay on the same path, sometimes with renewed confidence but in at least one case with beginning doubts. Past researchers did not seem to acknowledge and value the influence of non-pivotal happenstance events.

In this study of career pathways, change in career direction resulted from about half of the unplanned events reported by the adult career changers. This study also discovered that through encountering unplanned events, learning took place even when a change of career direction did not occur. Adults created new meaning, which affirmed or initiated the process of reflection on their current career goals. While some findings in this study support the conclusions of previous researchers that encounters with chance events can change individuals’ pathways, this study also found that change is not the only measure of influence. Some individuals may interact with an unplanned event by entering a period of reflection as to their career choice. The result may be a reaffirmation of their chosen career goal, after which they continue on the same path. It may also result in the planting of seeds of doubt, after which an individual may ultimately decide to stay on the same path, though with less satisfaction, or he/she may decide to change paths at a time distant from the inciting
unplanned event. In this case the unplanned event did provide opportunities for individuals to gain additional knowledge and to make meaning from experiencing the unplanned event.

**Contextual factors surrounding unplanned events**

Contextual factors, both internal and external, informed the participants’ thinking and actions when encountering unplanned events in their career pathways. These internal and external factors formed the framework of circumstances that surround individuals at the time an unplanned event occurs. This study found that these factors, alone or in combination, influenced how participants interacted with unplanned events. Contextual factors influence how, when, where and why a participant responds to an unplanned event. They can foster change when change is desired or, conversely, may present obstacles to any given change. In some cases, contextual factors enhanced learning and meaning making even when change did not occur.

**Internal Factors.** In this study, internal factors were defined as inherent or learned characteristics within the participants themselves that influenced how they interacted with unplanned events in their career paths. These characteristics were self-identified by participants in the interviews or deduced from actions taken by participants around unplanned events. The internal factors found in this study included: flexibility, curiosity, optimism, persistence, risk-taking, spirituality and a need for job security. Some findings in this study built on the work of previous researchers in the field of career development, as it applies to the first five traits of flexibility, curiosity, optimism, persistence, and risk-taking.

Mitchell et al. (1999) posited that career changers should develop the skill of flexibility to meet changing attitudes and circumstances in their careers, curiosity to explore
new learning opportunities, optimism in viewing new opportunities as possible and attainable, persistence when considering potential setbacks or in meeting challenging circumstances, and risk-taking to be proactive in the face of uncertain future career moves.

In her study, Williams et al. (1999) identified internal readiness factors that individuals cited as helping them take advantage of chance events. These factors included: flexibility, not being afraid to try new things; curiosity seeking change in new work environments or in working toward academic advancement; optimism, or the positive readiness to take advantage of unplanned events; planfulness, being alert to opportunities; and persistence to move forward in a career despite difficulties.

In her study of telecommunication professionals, Neualt (2000) correlated flexibility with career satisfaction as workers stretched beyond their comfort zones in balancing life and work for career success and correlated persistence with career success and hard work. Hackett and Betz (1981) noted optimism as an essential factor in career development.

As in previous studies, this study of community college career changers found that five internal factors – flexibility, curiosity, optimism, persistence and risk-taking – were significant factors that often benefited participants in learning from unplanned events along their career pathways.

Flexibility was cited by some participants as bolstering a willingness to step off the career path, as a predisposition to seek alternative solutions and as an ability to envision ways to accomplish either immediate or incremental change. Flexibility was a key trait that influenced how participants interacted with unplanned events along their career paths and was most often cited by them as a positive indicator of success.
Curiosity was reported by participants as a trait used in helping them prepare for and make informed decisions about their career directions as opportunities for assessment came about through unplanned events. It was to this trait that participants ascribed a willingness to explore, learn and go deeper to discover things they did not know about labor markets, new career possibilities, and/or to reflect on their own abilities and desires as these pertained to their career directions.

Participants cited optimism as a way to describe their positive outlook in daily living, including their relationships to their chosen careers. Participants described this trait as being beneficial by promoting open-mindedness and helping them see that an opportunity presented by an unplanned event was attainable.

Persistence was an influential internal factor referenced by participants who described a determination to continue forward with a decision, sticking to it and exerting effort to move ahead in their career goals. In addition, some participants cited this trait as helping them in overcoming obstacles or setbacks along their career pathways, or in helping them eliminate barriers to opportunities presented by unplanned events.

Risk-taking was a trait employed by some participants, who described a penchant for approaching new situations with forethought and a spirit of exploration. Participants who self-identified as risk-takers reported their interactions with opportunities presented through unplanned events as an assessment or a reassessment. They often weighed their options and continued along the pathway they most desired, even when that option was clearly more difficult.
Along with these five internal traits reported by previous researchers in career development theory, this study of community college career changers also discovered that spirituality and a need for job security were traits that many participants reported as influencing their interaction with unplanned events in their career pathways.

Some participants described spirituality as a profound sense of the guidance of a higher power, a mission or a calling to an area of work. For others, it was a spiritual feeling that the occupation was meant to be at this time during their career lives. This trait came into play in the descriptions of more than half the participants in this study. They reported a “calling” to a career that brought deeper meaning to their lives.

Weiss, Skelley, Hall, and Haughey (2004) indicate a calling in a career life is a part of the developmental process of realizing one’s own identity. Guidon and Hanna (2002) cite the spiritual dimension in a holistic framework of career development and describe it as a factor in career decision making. Hamilton and Jackson (1998) view spirituality as a further development of self-awareness, a sense of interconnectedness, and a relationship to a higher power. Tisdell (2001) saw spirituality as one's personal belief in and experience of a higher power or purpose in career choice. Other researchers have investigated the role of spirituality in guiding career decisions. And while a perusal of the literature does not reveal any discussion of the influence of this trait as it pertains to an individual’s response to unplanned events along his/her career pathway, this previous research is valuable to an understanding of the role spirituality plays in the career decision making process of many individuals.

In this study of community college career changers, spirituality was found to be an influence in participants’ interactions with unplanned events in their career pathways. Nine
out of the fifteen participants in the study referenced an unplanned event as leading them to seek the guidance of a higher power regarding their career choices, to desire more spiritual satisfaction from their careers, or to change careers in answer to a calling to a particular mission. For other participants, spirituality meant providing meaning, questioning who they were as individuals, what they were doing in their careers, and what contributions to the greater community they were making through their career choices.

When surveyed by the Pew Forum on religion in public life, sixty-nine percent of people in the state of North Carolina stated that religion was very important in their lives, the eighth highest ranking in the nation (Pew Forum, 2009). Therefore the location of this study may have impacted this finding. In addition, the adult career changers studied were all going into allied health careers, which are considered service and or caring occupations. Therefore the selection of a course of study may have impacted this finding.

In this study, the need for job security was also often identified by participants as an internal factor that influenced their interaction with unplanned events in their career paths. It should be stressed that this trait is considered internal that is, a need for job security, within the person, rather than the external reality of labor markets or projected statistics. A need for job security might be predicated on such things as the size of an individual’s family unit, children in college, illness in the family, care for elder parents, other financial responsibilities or in certain instances it seemed to be a response to participants experiencing the trauma of joblessness after layoffs or downsizing.

Participants in this study who had experienced layoffs in their career paths described a pressing need for job security in their next job as a result of the experience of leaving a job
when it was not their choice. In addition, participants who were looking to change career direction cited a need for job security as a factor that influenced their decision making process. In this study, participants with a high school diploma and/or some community college credits most often acknowledged the need for job security as an important factor in their interaction with unplanned events. Participants with four-year degrees cited this factor less often, but those who had experienced layoffs did report it as being an important factor in their career decision making process.

Nothing could be found in existing literature on happenstance and career development that addressed the need for job security as an internal factor used in interacting with unplanned events in one’s career pathway. As this study was undertaken, the economy in the US was faltering and unemployment was beginning to rise. These circumstances may have heightened the internal factor of the need for job security for many participants. Nevertheless, it could be a priority in any mix of factors that an individual would be likely to consider when contemplating a career change or deciding to continue along the same career pathway.

This study of adult community college career changers found that seven internal traits were influential in informing how, when, where and why individual participants interacted with unplanned events in their career pathways. Five of these traits: flexibility, curiosity, optimism, persistence and risk-taking have been investigated and reported by other researchers in Planned Happenstance Theory and career development theory. The remaining traits of spirituality and the need for job security, as they inform the interaction of individuals with unplanned events in their career paths, were particular to this study.
External factors. External factors, that is, circumstances or conditions that were present in participants’ lives at the time of unplanned events, influenced their abilities, desires and the chance of goal attainment while responding to unplanned events in their career pathways. External factors, as identified in this study, clustered around three different areas: financial support, emotional support and logistical support.

Financial circumstances were reported by almost all participants as a factor in interacting with unplanned events in their career pathways. The lack of funds or the prospect of losing income was often cited as the main reason why some stayed on the same career path, even when a change was desired. Some participants reported that financial support gained either by their own means or as contributions from others was an enabling factor in allowing them to pursue a change in career. Most participants were in the lower-to mid-range socioeconomic bracket and most had the financial responsibility of supporting a family. The lack of funds for tuition and retraining was often the deciding factor in whether a career change could be made, and therefore this factor acted as a barrier or a constraint in how the individual responded to unplanned events in his/her pathway. For others, the gift of a benefactor or the ability to procure funds through some other means was the deciding factor in making a career change possible.

While there are many studies on the correlation between the availability of financial aid and the decision to enter community colleges or continue in other forms of higher education, a review of literature found few studies about adult career changers, unplanned events, and financial support in one’s career pathway. Ali and McWhirter (2006) suggest that the lack of information, guidance, and financial resources may serve as significant barriers to
students pursuing a college education, asserting that half of the students in their study on postsecondary aspiration had indicated financial concerns were definitely a barrier. Ford and Orel (2005) note that the lack of financial support is frequently a barrier for unemployed women returning to college and suggest that society take responsibility for financial support to aid this particular population. In discussing reform in higher education, Barr (2005) notes the availability of financial support increases the participation of adult learners in further education. Nothing could be found in the literature on financial support and its role in career decisions that specifically addressed unplanned events. For many participants in this study, financial support was not only an important factor; it was the determining factor influencing their career decisions.

Participants also cited the presence or absence of emotional support as being an influential factor in how they interacted with unplanned events in their career pathways. In interviews for this study, emotional support was often defined as encouraging words from others that built confidence in their ability to change careers or remain on the same path with renewed self confidence. These words of support suggested that the individual was on the right track, or that a desired change was a good choice, or that this job choice was attainable. Conversely, some participants cited the lack of support or the open disapproval of others as a deterrent to change, or as an impetus for an undesired change. As an external influence, participants described a need for support from individuals to whom they were close or whose judgment they valued. These individuals included family members, teachers, advisors, friends and colleagues.
While there are studies noting the correlation between the availability of emotional support and career decision making, review of the literature found no research focused upon adult career changers, unplanned events, and emotional support in one’s career pathway. Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi, and Glasscock (2001) identified prominent factors in relational influence across relationship domains. The most consistent factor was the relationship as a multidimensional source of support such as emotional and social support. Nothing could be found in the literature on emotional support and its role in career decisions in context of unplanned events. Participants in this study identified emotional support as not only an important factor, but also the determining factor in forging new careers as well as making other career decisions.

The third cluster of external factors that influenced how participants interacted with unplanned events was labeled logistical support. These factors which impacted individuals’ career directions revolved around everyday activities. However, these influencing activities required time, effort, planning and attention from participants such as arranging transportation, child or elder care, household obligations and other familial responsibilities. For the adult community college career changers in this study, help with the logistics of daily living was often required. For some, the absence or loss of that assistance derailed their career plans, at least for a time. Many also cited the proximity of their community college as influencing their decision to change career directions in response to an unplanned event. In response to an unplanned event many adult career changers found logistical support focused around the issues of transportation.
Drummond (2001) outlines community college flexibility as a key factor in accessible education and training for the workforce and indicates community colleges are more conveniently located, less expensive and offer practical programs that tie directly to the workforce. These factors support students’ ability to overcome the logistical problem of time and financial demands in their current lives, as well as projecting financial support for their futures. Drummond (2001) also cites the availability of off campus centers that eliminated location and transportation barriers for some adult learners. Mingle and Birkes (2004) note the lack of childcare as part of a financial aid package serves as a barrier to participation for some adult learners. A favorable mix of logistical support such as child care, transportation and the proximity of the institution for education and retraining can provide the individual both access and a broader choice of career options. While there are many studies on the correlation between the availability of logistical support and the decision to enter community colleges, a review the literature found few studies which considered these factors around adult and career changers, unplanned events, and logistical support.

In summary, each individual in this study was situated at a particular nexus of internal and external factors that surrounded that individual at the time he/she encountered each unplanned event that influenced his/her career pathway. The factors examined were parsed into two domains: internal and external. Internal factors were found within the individual and may be learned or encouraged. External factors were conditions that exist in the everyday experiences of the participants. These circumstances may prove beneficial to the individual or they may serve as barriers that require concrete action to overcome.
Each of these factors or a combination of factors influenced how, when, where and why participants interacted with unplanned events. There was often interplay between internal and external factors, which either acted in concert with one another or sometimes in opposition to one another. An example of this interaction might be when the individual’s internal traits of flexibility and persistence were used to circumvent a barrier presented by an external factor, such as lack of childcare. That individual might try numerous avenues and eventually cobble together childcare from several sources or find a way to barter services to fulfill his/her needs.

In considering the dynamics of internal and external factors for career changers, these factors are perceived as forming a unique framework for each individual when encountering each unplanned events across the course of their working lives. Therefore, individuals need to be empowered to recognize and evaluate their particular matrix of factors at any given time to allow them to make informed choices about their career.

**Implications for practice**

The findings and conclusions of this descriptive case study contribute to a clearer understanding of the complex matrix of factors that influence how, when, where and why adult career changers interact with and learn from unplanned events in their career pathways.

**Unplanned events influence career pathways**

This study found that all participants reported more than one unplanned event in their career pathway during the process of constructing a visual representation and reflecting on their career lives. Unlike other studies, this research did not deem change the only measurable outcome of an interaction with an unplanned event. As participants described their
encounters, it became clear that an event sometimes had an effect even when it did not involve an immediate change in career direction. These effects included a reaffirmation of career choice, a new layer of knowledge or understanding about a career, beginning doubts about career direction, a clearer understanding and rededication to a career goal or resolve to continue along the same path due to external factors out of the participant’s control.

Using the instrument of the participants’ visual representations of their career paths, along with clarification questions from the interviewer, participants became increasingly aware of and adept at identifying unplanned events they had encountered along their career pathways that had an influence on their career choice. This aid, coupled with time for reflection and the interchange with the interviewer, helped participants become better acquainted with what constituted an unplanned event and was critical to the participants’ understanding of their own career histories. It was a valuable tool of reference in reporting their experiences. Therefore this study would indicate that the following suggestions should be implemented in the course of career development:

• Counselors, mentors and career guidance professionals should adopt or develop an instrument to aid clients in mapping and reflecting on their own career histories.

• Career professionals should encourage clients to identify unplanned events along their career pathways and reflect on how these events affected their decisions.

• Clients should be encouraged to consider how each event affected their career choices, even if no immediate change took place. They should be made aware that learning and meaning making from unplanned encounters can also be a significant outcome.
• Counselors, mentors and career guidance professionals should strive to eliminate the differentiation between personal experience and work experience, as many unplanned events occur in a person’s personal life but have implications for the individual’s work life.

**Career pathways are not linear**

Individuals use a complex matrix of internal and external factors to interact with unplanned events in their pathways. In the visual representations and interviews, participants reported on their lived experiences of recognizing and reacting to unplanned events in their careers. They came to understand that a career pathway is frequently non-linear. They also came to understand, in retrospect, that unplanned events provided an opportunity for change or for making new meaning around their career decisions. In response to the interview questions, participants identified seven internal factors or traits that they used to interact with unplanned events and reported that utilizing one or more of these traits was beneficial in recognizing and taking advantage of opportunities presented by unplanned events or in recovering from setbacks caused by unplanned events. Additionally, it was found that participants made career decisions within a framework of external circumstances centered around financial support, emotional support and logistical support and that the interaction and interplay among these internal and external factors informed their interactions with unplanned events. Therefore, the study points to a need for the implementation of the following principles in career counseling:

- Counselors, mentors and career guidance professionals need to empower clients to recognize that careers are nonlinear, that there is a need for continual learning along
one’s career path and that career decisions will likely be made many times across the span of an individual’s working life.

- Clients should be empowered to view unplanned events as a normal facet of the career-decision process and should be encouraged to be vigilant for the opportunities presented by unplanned events.

- Clients should be made aware that the cultivation of the seven identified internal traits participants described (flexibility, curiosity, optimism, persistence, risk-taking, spirituality and a need for job security) may have an impact on how they engage with and learn from an unplanned event.

- Counselors, mentors and career guidance professionals should seek ways to teach and encourage the development of these beneficial traits within their clients and to empower them to see these traits as strengths they bring to their career decision making processes.

- Clients should be made aware that they make career decisions within a framework of external factors. These factors may be beneficial or serve as barriers.

- Clients should be empowered to recognize that external negative factors are not immutable and that individuals may work to overcome them by exploring alternate solutions.

- Visual representations could be used to gather additional information on participants career pathways and show the impact of unplanned events on their path.
Recommendations for Further Research

This study examined the experiences of adult career changers to better understand how unplanned events have informed their career decisions. The study identified two types of unplanned events, pivotal and non-pivotal, seven internal contextual factors (flexibility, curiosity, optimism, persistence, risk taking, spirituality and the need for job security) and three categories of external factors (financial support, emotional support, and logistical support).

While this study contributes to a clearer understanding of the complex matrix of factors that influence how, when, where, and why adult career changers interact with unplanned events in their career pathways, it has limitations which should be noted. The sample, though large enough to provide valuable insights may not be large enough to be representative in two aspects. First, participants were self-selected in that they volunteered to take part in the study. They were then selected by several criteria: a) they were adults, b) they were career-changers, c) they were enrolled in community colleges, and d) they were in nursing or allied health programs. Further research should be done with a more diverse pool.

There is a need for further studies, both qualitative and quantitative on different populations including non-western groups to determine the influence of unplanned events on career pathways. Studies with a greater number of participants and/or a more randomized selection process need to be initiated to gather more information about how this phenomenon can inform the field of career counseling.
In addition, further studies are indicated to determine how the seven internal traits identified in this study may be developed, taught and encouraged to provide “fertile ground” for individuals who meet unplanned events in their career pathways.

The two additional traits identified in the study, spirituality and the need for job security, should be further investigated as factors that influenced job changers’. Spirituality could be examined in other jobs not readily identified as caring occupations such as business accounting or trades and industrial clusters. Conducting a study in another area of the country might also be enlightening. In regards to the need for job security as an internal factor, further study could examine the degree of influence of this contextual factor in relationship to the general state of the economy.

**Summary**

This study was undertaken to examine the career pathways of adult career changers to better understand how unplanned events informed their career decisions. The study further examined adult career changers perceptions of the influence unplanned events had on their careers and the contextual factors adult career changers used to recognize and interact with unplanned events. This study was grounded in Social Learning Theory of Career Development (Krumboltz, 1979) and Planned Happenstance Theory (Mitchell et al., 1999). The study sample was purposefully chosen from North Carolina community college students who were enrolled in Nursing and Allied Health programs. Community colleges offer accessible opportunities for both training and retraining and these participants were likely to have had eventful job histories.
For years, the trait factor model of assessment, matching, and placement was the standard practice in career counseling, and seemingly set in the minds of individuals as well. This model served reasonably well in the work environment of past decades. A person would endeavor to find what he or she was good at and then find a job that could utilize those skills. The match, once made, was not often questioned because individuals tended to stay in one career path, often with the same company, for the duration of their work lives. Workers were loyal to their employers and employers reciprocated by taking care of their workers.

In the twenty-first century there has been a paradigm shift. The social contract between employer and employee is fast fading from the workplace and workers no longer stay in one job or in one company through their entire working lives. Individuals now entering the workforce must be proactive and need to empower themselves to take ownership and responsibility for their own career decisions. Career counseling professionals and theorists need to work toward constructing models aimed at this goal. The old model of assessing and matching sought the answer to the question “What is my life’s career goal?” A new model of career development might center more continuously asking questions and with an open mind, while both recognizing and looking to create new opportunities for learning along one’s career path.

Each participant had an average of six different work experiences between the time of high school graduation and the present day. The average age of participants was forty-one at the time of the study. These present day job changers found that the line between personal and work lives had virtually disappeared as they described how unplanned events in their personal lives had influenced the career decisions and altered their career paths. Modern
workers must take a more holistic approach to career decisions, recognizing and acting upon opportunities that may be present from any facet of their lives.

Many of the participants in this study recounted how their own personal strengths had helped them when they were presented with the opportunities or setbacks of unplanned events in their lives. These strengths or traits of flexibility, open-mindedness, optimism, persistence and risk-taking often times governed how, when, where and why the participants interacted with unplanned events. In addition, spirituality and the need for job security were often cited as factors that influenced participants. These most often answered the “why” of the how participants interactions with unplanned events. These traits were shown to be important readiness factors and should be incorporated into any new model of career counseling to help empower individuals to guide their own career paths.

Change was not the only measure of the influence of unplanned events for the career changers in this study. Many reported that unplanned events in their careers or personal lives provided an opportunity for them to rethink their career choices and make new meaning for their lives. And since the shifts in the job environment now dictate that workers in the twenty-first century must continually decide, reassess, and decide anew throughout their working lives, new models for counseling should represent these new realities. They should include the concept of viewing every new encounter as an opportunity for learning that can inform career choices both for change and also for reflection on possibilities.

Unplanned events occur in every person’s life, no matter how logically or carefully one plans. Those who are best prepared to recognized and greet these encounters, as
opportunities for growth and development will likely find the greatest success in today’s complex job market.
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Appendix A: Contact email and study criteria

Text to be used in seeking assistance from College Administrator and the E-Mail follow up after initial phone call:

Dear and or Department Chair,

I am a doctoral student in the field of adult and higher education at North Carolina State University. I am doing my research in the field of adult learning and career pathways. The title of my dissertation research is: Adult career changers in community college vocational programs: The Influence of Unplanned Events.

My research will focus on career changers enrolled in allied health programs at the community college, with emphasis on adult workers returning for a degree as a registered nurse. I am grounding my research in the work of Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz on Planned Happenstance: Constructing Unexpected Career Opportunities and Krumboltz work in Social Learning Theory of Career Development. I am specifically interested how adults make meaning from these happenstance experiences in their lives.

In my years of work with students and adults I have been intrigued how people make career decisions. This study takes into consideration the rapid change and chance in the current workforce and overall labor market. The research will look at student’s perceptions of how they learn and make meaning for happenstance experiences in their career path.

The purpose of this study is to examine the career pathways of career changers to better understand how unplanned events have informed their career decisions. I plan to listen to career changers stories to discover their perceptions of the influence unplanned events
have had on their career paths and the contextual factors they have used to recognize and interact with unplanned events.

I am specifically looking to conduct a one to two hour interview on your campus with students who have or are making a career change. The criteria for students to be considered in this study they should be: 1) over 18 years of age; 2) making a new career choice and changing a career; 3) have had unplanned events that may have influenced their career path; 4) and are enrolled in an allied health program, preferably a Nursing Cohort Program.

I would appreciate your assistance in identification of students that meet this criteria so that I might interview them. When I receive your e-mail identifying the students and their phone numbers, I plan to call each student and conduct a short screening interview. Then I plan to select the students and set up one-on-one interviews on your campus in the library, joblink career center or a suitable location you have identified.

I will be following your college research guidelines as well as those of North Carolina State University through an approved Institutional Review Board for the use of Human Subjects in Research.

Thanks in advance for your assistance.
Research Subjects Criteria for the study:
Adult career changers in community college vocational programs:
The Influence of Unplanned Events.

- Students must be at least 18 years of age
- Students must be enrolled in an Allied health or preferably a cohort Nursing Program
- Students must have experienced one or more unplanned events in their career or work life
- Students should be willing to be interviewed for one to two hours on your campus
- Students must have worked a minimum of two years in an unrelated field of work.

What is an unplanned event?

- Unplanned events may be:
  - An unexpected life situation that some may call luck in career choice;
  - A happenstance event where things turn out best for people;
  - A serendipitous event meeting a person or attending an event not expecting that it might change your career yet it does;
  - An unplanned event in your life where you took action to capitalize on it;
  - An experience where you turned curiosity into an opportunity for learning and change;
  - E-mail from a friend that tells you about a job opportunity;
• A former boss calls today and says she has started her own company and asks if you would like to join her;

• A program that you saw publicized causes you to wonder if you could enroll and you do;

• A magazine responds to a query letter you sent months ago and had written off because so much time had passed.

The Research:

• The research will allow adult students to tell their stories of such career events to help others learn from their experiences.

• Participation in the study is not a requirement of their academic program and participation or lack thereof, will not impact their standing in the program
Appendix B: Visual Representations
Appendix C: Interview Guide

One on One Interview Process

Introduction

Thanks for taking part in this research study.

Let’s take a minute to review the content form … if you agree and are willing to take part in this interview. Please sign the form before we begin.

Opening

How are you doing today?

How are classes going?

My ride in was…

On thing that caught my interest in your college was…. 

Purpose

Now, First I am trying to get a sense of what career changers perceptions are of the influence unplanned events they have had on their career.

Second, I am looking at what the contextual factors career changers used to recognize and interact with unplanned events.

Do you have any questions about this?

Career Path Concept:

Listing the jobs you have held since high school Starting and the left and working to the right, on this piece of paper. You can feel free to add thoughts as we go through, I may make some notes as we talk, with will be a visual representation of your career pathway.
Tool for conversation.

So as we begin, I would like to take a few minutes we will talk about each job and your life in relationship to the career as you have moved from job to job.

Begin to discuss the jobs held the transitions, education at the time, volunteer work, Activities, supports, and other activities around each job.

Now let’s put them in order in relationship to the jobs and education.

Let's look at your resume and see if we need to add anything else to add to the timeline

**Research Interview on Pathways Adult Learning**

OK, now let’s start at the beginning and tell me how you moved from one job to the other and the relationship of school and events as you progressed on your career path?

We can use the time line and talk a little bit about each of the events as you move from high school to the present, through education, jobs, and events in your life.

What were events going on in your life?

Did you embrace the change?

In doing this if you think of additional jobs, education or events, we can write them on cards and add them to the timeline.

Let look at each decision point,

Education -- why did you attend this high school?

Tell me a little bet about it, classes, people, skills learned

Teachers that influenced you.

Work – why did you take this job?

How did you find out about it?
What skills did you have to take the job?

What was the work like?

What did you like best about that job?

What did you like least about the job?

If you could have changed one thing what would it have been? WHY?

Volunteer, Other Activities

How did you get involved?

Did it relate to you career?

What skills did you use?

Deeper Discussion

You mentioned (meeting that person, attending that meeting, the unplanned event)

Tell me about it … if needed . . .

How did you fell when it happened?

What did you do?

What do you think you learned from it?

How did it help you?

How do you feel it affected your work, career?

**Probing Questions if needed:**

What was your career goal when you were in high school?

What is it that made you consider this education, job?

How would you mother describe you as a person?

How would your best friend describe you as a person? As a worker?
How would you describe yourself?

At this point in your life did you have any responsibilities outside of school?

What is it in your personality that made you feel this might be a career for you?

What is it in the way you look at life that helps you look at this as a career decision?

Why did you take this job?

Why did you leave this job?

Describe what you learned from that event?

When that unexpected event happened what was your initial thought?

What was the biggest challenge you have encountered in your career path? How did you handle it?

What was the biggest challenge you have encountered at this nursing program? How did you address it?

What factors do you think have contributed most to your ability to move from one job to another?

How did your education contribute to your learning?

Tell me about a situation where you thought every was planned and things turned out different than you expected.  How did you handle the situation? What skills do you feel you used handle that situation?  What was the outcome?

Reflection back on these events, one at a time.

How did you recognize these events?

How did you stay engaged in the event?

What did you learn from the event?
What do you mean?
I’m not sure I follow you.
Would you explain that?
What were you thinking of at the time?
Give me an example?
Tell me about it.
Take me through the experience.
Why did this happen
How did it happen?
How did you react?
How did you discover
In your mind what were the top three skills or abilities you used