

Summary Report

**Life Histories Examining Women's
Lifelong Learning Trajectories:
Implications for Adult and Higher
Education in Canada**

Social Science and Humanities Research
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**Patricia A. Gouthro
Mount Saint Vincent University
Halifax, Nova Scotia**

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Overview of Study

This research study was funded through the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to explore lifelong learning trajectories of mature women students in Canada. The barriers, supports, challenges, and motivational factors that impact upon women's ability to participate in adult and higher education were investigated through a combination of life history interviews with women students and interviews with "key informants" – individuals in the policy sector and administrative positions in higher education. In total, 36 life history participants and 15 key informants interviews were conducted in four different provinces in Canada; British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Nova Scotia.

Life History Participants

Life history participants were recruited through advertisements for women who self-identified as lifelong learners, over the age of 40, who were either currently enrolled or recently graduated from university. Participants were selected to obtain as diverse a range of experiences as possible, taking into account factors such as age, academic programs, sexual orientation, race/culture, marital status, and whether or not they had children. Life history interviews, usually about two hours in length, were used to explore the decisions women make as they negotiate different responsibilities and experiences that shape their learning pathways.

Key Informants

Key informants were approached after doing a web search to find possible names of participants in different higher education administrative roles, as well as in the government policy sector. These interviews, usually about forty-five minutes in length, focused on gaining insights into policies and programs that might impact on the experiences of women learners in higher education in Canada.

Challenges in Returning to Learning

- Many women postponed their return to schooling (often more than once) to attend to caregiving responsibilities or to accommodate a spouse's or partner's career
- Women often changed or lowered their career aspirations to accommodate family caregiving responsibilities
- Many learners had serious personal life crises or familial problems, including alcoholism, divorce, drug addictions, sexual abuse and domestic violence, that frequently impacted on decisions around schooling
- Minority women faced additional challenges around racism and prejudice both in classroom and employment contexts
- Older women raised concerns about ageism, employment opportunities, and financial security in retirement
- Numerous learners had high amounts of student debt
- International students were less likely to be hired as teaching/research assistants, thus losing both financial assistance and important experience
- Housing costs were often a problem, particularly in larger cities
- Child and elder care created ongoing challenges regarding both time for studies, and perceived lack of respect for unpaid labour

Benefits in Continuing Learning

- Returning to higher education is a positive experience for most learners
- Decisions around schooling are often linked with career aspirations, but returning to higher education offers positive attributes not directly connected to the paid labour force
- Learners often spoke about a sense of personal growth, as well as excitement and engagement with the learning process
- Students reported higher levels of confidence and self-esteem that were often linked with being successful in academe
- For students who had suffered traumatic incidents, learning seemed to be a positive way to transition forward in their lives
- Mature students who were mothers thought by continuing their education they were being positive role models for their children

Supports in Adult and Higher Education Contexts

- Few, if any policies and programs in higher education are designed specifically to target the needs of female learners
- Some policies may be of more benefit to women ie. in some provinces policies around student debt are based upon income after graduation, which may be more important for women since they often have lower salaries
- Some institutions have innovative programs to support diverse learners, such as Elders-in-Residence for Aboriginal students
- Flexible program options, including distance learning, are often appreciated by women students
- Supports that may particularly benefit women, such as affordable family housing options and flexible on-campus childcare, vary considerably across institutions and provinces
- While some administrators would advocate for more resources to be allocated to support these kinds of services, others indicate these are more personal responsibilities for learners

Analysis

The influence of gender in shaping "personal" decisions around learning trajectories is evident, as women continually discuss the importance of caring commitments within the homeplace affecting their learning pathways. In research papers that have been/are being developed from this study, a critical feminist analysis is used to explore the reasons why lifelong learning is shaped within an individualistic and competitive discourse that often situates women learners at a disadvantage. Recommendations to address some of these concerns are explored in more depth.

If you would like to read more about the results of this study, please go to my research website under Women's Learning Trajectories. The website will be updated regularly to list and include links (when available) to presentations and papers published on this study.

www.lifelonglearningresearch.ca