

The Impact of Action Learning
on the Lives and Learning of Baby Boomers

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my partner, Tom Kueht, and “fantastic” sister Colleen Stenholt, because their support and encouragement made this project possible; and to Tim, our talented, adventurous son, and Kristin, our Chief Everything Officer and daughter. Kristin and her partner, Rob, are the dedicated parents of Erin, Kate, Rian, and Evan, who inspire me to seek new adventures and to live richly, and appreciate each moment, remembering that each day is a new beginning.

And with fond memories and deep appreciation for my parents Dr. James and Betty Helz whose vision and unconditional love set a standard so that each of us could achieve our goals and realize a life rich with unlimited possibilities. I am mindful of their enduring presence and lessons each day.

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This study was conceived and completed with the support and encouragement of many friends and family. I acknowledge a few very special people. This study would have been impossible without the contributions of the baby boomers who so generously took time to participate in my study. The trust they placed in one another and the candid manner in which they shared their experiences greatly enriched this project.

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extended family, many women friends, colleagues, teachers, and mentors, accomplished in their own right, who have served as guides in my transformative experience and been an inspiration to me in times of self-doubt and exceptional challenge.

Abstract of Dissertation

The Impact of Action Learning on the Lives and Learning of Baby Boomers

This phenomenological study examined how baby boomer adults perceive and describe their transformative learning experiences within an action learning group. The study employed Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning theory and Marquardt's (2004) framework of action learning to facilitate action learning groups with a total of 16 self-selected baby boomers. The researcher explored and examined the power and applicability of action learning as one of the most effective approaches for adult learning (Marquardt, 2004; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003). Review of the literature suggested that action learning may lead to transformative learning outcomes.

A phenomenological approach that employed Moustakas's (1994) method of inquiry was used to gather data. The data were analyzed with the modified van Kaam method (1966) and NVivo© 7 (2007) analytic software. Two co-researchers confirmed the findings.

The action learning groups served as a forum for presenting a personal problem or challenge while engaging in discourse and reflection, and receiving support for actions. New learnings were realized and described by all study participants. The study results revealed five themes that describe the phenomenon of the baby boomer experience within the action learning context. The study results are significant because there has been limited research on how baby boomers make meaning and learn in an action learning group, and on the relationship of action learning to the transformative learning experience.

This research has the potential to contribute to both theory and practice, and is important for several reasons. First, the findings can assist adult educators, performance trainers, facilitators, managers, and organizations in developing the type of learning programs that will support the development of individuals, teams, and leaders. This could increase organizational effectiveness and support the building of learning organizations.

Second, the study can provide valuable information on elements of action learning and activities. This information could increase the opportunities and outcomes for transformative learning in developing change initiatives, program designs, adult education programs, teaching methods, and related self-help, support, and network groups.

Third and finally, the findings of this study provide individuals and organizations with critical information about the potential of action learning programs for fostering transformative learning, and the impact of such programs.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Adults are facing unprecedented challenges in almost every sphere of life, and the consequences for learning are both real and dramatic. In the workplace, individuals are increasingly required to change their management style (Barrett, 1998; Block, 1993; Greenleaf, 1977; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Hirschhorn, 1991; Imparato & Harari, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 1995); constructively engage with issues of racism and sexism (Quittner, 1999; Thomas & Wetlaufer, 1997; Thomas, 1990, 2001); or participate in self-management or collaborative governance (Harper & Harper, 1989; Hirschhorn, 1997; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1999). Central among those experiencing these challenges are “baby boomer adults,” the 78 million North Americans born from 1946 to 1964 who are considered to be at their lives’ midpoint. Baby boomers will be living younger longer, and are expected to provide leadership and solutions to many issues relating to their aging.

Thousands of baby boomers celebrate their 50th birthdays every day. The graying of the U.S. baby boomers, which is occurring in other industrial nations as well, is a demographic revolution with some of the most critical issues of our times. According to Hodge and Gordon (2004) no one is certain about what will happen, although many experts have predicted the effects of the aging of the baby boomers on the U.S. What is clear is that the policy implications and ramifications are unprecedented in history. America’s baby boomers will transform politics, retirement systems, health care systems, welfare systems, labor markets, banking, and stock markets. The baby boomers will force

a re-thinking of social mores and prejudices about age and gender discrimination in the job market and end-of-life care. Whether that transformation is positive or negative will depend on planning and preparation.

Baby boomers must now develop a radically new vision which transcends outdated practices and biases. Now is the time to encourage out-of-the-box thinking, creative systems development, and innovative approaches to effectively address the challenges. Creating bold, new paradigms will not be easy, but is not impossible. As baby boomers reflect on and possibly reconceptualize their identities, core beliefs, values, roles, goals, and behaviors, their experience of day-to-day reality will change.

According to Nohria & Berkley (1994), adult learners' experiences from the past have often led to a reliance on predetermined, static organizational roles and power relationships. This assumption may have been more appropriate when the stability of society and organizations was more reliable. However, as Vaill (1996) states, life today is a "whole new ball game" (p. 12). Schwandt and Marquardt (1999) echoed this thought when they said that "We are in a new era in the evolution of organizational life and structure. The immense changes in the economic environment caused by globalization and technology have forced organizations around the world to make significant transformations in order to adapt, survive, and to succeed in the new world" (p. 7). As Vaill (1996) suggested, organizations and individuals must change skill sets, knowledge, capacities, and mental perspectives in order to learn continuously in the changing economy and the new challenges of the 21st century.

Vaill (1996) emphasized the need for continuous learning in "permanent white water" (p. 10), and suggested that individuals must be extremely effective learners in

order to change with the times. Many leaders have also suggested that the stress, uncertainty, and need for flexibility in the developed world will only continue to grow. Thus, it is imperative for educators and training professionals to support the development of adults' abilities to adapt and thrive in the turbulent environment.

Effective learners must develop competency in managing such fundamental changes successfully. Knowledge-based economies require high-order skills and knowledge. Hodgins (2000) suggested that new technologies for knowledge management and just-in-time learning make "fixed and pre-determined learning virtually useless ... instead of 'know-what' (facts and figures) or even 'know-how,' it is 'know-why' that emerges as the most critical skill set for adults" (p. 23). In his assessment of the future for the National Governors Association and the American Society of Training and Development, Hodgins said that the new basic skills are innovation, problem solving, creativity, diagnostics, planning, and the ability to capture and articulate the results of knowledge work with others. A similar list from Bleedorn (2003) includes quality-thinking processes such as transformational thinking, global awareness, systemic thinking, the recognition of relationships, visionary futuristic thinking, intuitive and paradoxical thought, and critical thinking (p. xi).

One of the most recognized adult learning and development theories is Mezirow's (1991a) theory of transformative learning. This involves a transformation in perspective, frame of reference, personal paradigm, or habit of the mind, and a new point of view. Transformative learning is "the social process of construing and appropriating new or revised interpretation of meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 223). Brookfield (2000) said that "transformative learning involves a

fundamental reordering of assumptions” (p. 139). Through transformative learning, individuals become critically aware of how and why assumptions constrain the way they perceive, understand, and feel about their world (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow (1991) suggested that most significant, transformative learning was a highly social process that required open communication and information from others. Other individuals provide the trigger for learning; provide alternative perspectives; give support for change; participate in validating changed assumptions through rational, unbiased, candid discussions; and require new relationships to be developed within the context of the new perspective.

Effective approaches to enhance transformative learning include developmental methods such as experiential learning designs and tools such as learning journals. One such method, action learning, provides a structured experience in which individuals motivate and learn with each other to solve complex problems through transformative learning. Action learning can result in greater self-awareness and self-confidence, the ability to ask better questions and be more reflective, and improved communications and teamwork (Marquardt, 1999). McGill and Beaty (1996) state that action learning sets or groups provide the milieu for personal transformation within a small group. Thus, the action learning structure might be an effective method for fostering transformative learning.

Since Revans introduced and developed action learning in 1981, scholars and practitioners have explored its principles and elements. Action learning provides a systematic method for organizations to develop employees and solve complex problems in today’s ever more changing and competitive environment (Marquardt, 1999). Action

learning has a range of applications such as: (a) personal learning combined with problem solving, (b) individual management development, (c) team or organization development; (d) academic programs, and (e) problem solving which incorporates personal development. Action learning has proven to be effective for solving problems and developing individuals because the structure includes: (a) a problem or difficult question to which a correct answer can be discovered with the right techniques; (b) a real problem, in urgent need of a solution (rather than a case study) and capable of intellectually stretching the problem-solving team to expose their ideas; (c) a requirement that participants research, diagnose, and offer solutions to the problem and take action to implement the proposed solutions; and (d) regular meetings by participants to discuss the progress, setbacks, and proposals for tackling their problems, and to consider their own development, attitudes, and actions (Bowerman & Peters, 1999; Hii, 2000; Liedtka et al, 1999). Thus, participants attempt to learn about changes taking place within themselves, their peers, and their organizations.

General Statement of the Problem

The potential of action learning as an approach to develop transformative learning capacities is under-explored, despite the growing use of action learning in management development. Action learning has been increasingly used for management development since it was first developed by Revans in the middle of the 20th century (Conger & Toegel, 2003; Dilworth, 1998; Marquardt, 2004; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Weinstein, 1999). Although action learning has been studied in relation to management and leadership development (e.g., ARLTM Inquiry, 1996; Butterfield, 1999; Cunningham,

1997; Hii, 2000; Marquardt et al., 2003; Weinstein, 1997), there have been no studies which focus on action learning's capacity for fostering transformative learning.

Several studies have shown that action learning participants improved some of the skills and qualities required for coaching such as questioning, listening, relation building, feedback, and creating a supportive environment (Acker-Hocevar et al., 2002; ARL™ Inquiry, 1996; Butterfield, 1999; Cunningham, 1997; Dixon, 1997; Marquardt et al., 2003; Weinstein, 1997). These studies demonstrate the potential of action learning as an approach for developing coaching skills. However, there have been no studies that investigated the same potential of action learning for developing transformative learning. To assess this potential, research needs to examine the impact of action learning on changes in transformative learning. This study will investigate the process by which transformative learning takes place as a result of an action learning experience.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine and describe the relationship between action learning and transformative learning, and the elements of action learning that contribute to or hinder transformative learning.

The overarching research question is: How do baby boomer adults perceive and describe their transformative learning experiences within an action learning group context? In order to answer, the study asks three sub-research questions:

Do baby boomer adults experience transformative learning while members of the action learning group?

What elements of action learning contribute to transformative learning?

What elements of action learning hinder transformative learning?

Potential Significance of the Study

This study is important for several reasons. First, the findings can be used to assist adult educators, performance trainers, facilitators, managers, and organizations with the development of individuals, teams, and leaders. This could increase organizational effectiveness and support the building of learning organizations. The findings could also be used to enhance the understanding and development of skills in reflective practice, listening, questioning, problem solving, coaching, empowerment, decision making, collaboration, facilitation, relationship building, complex thinking, and the capacity to cope with change and transition.

Second, the study can provide valuable information on elements of action learning and activities. This information could increase the opportunities and outcomes for transformative learning in developing change initiatives, program designs, adult education programs, teaching methods, and related self-help, support, and network groups.

Third, the findings can provide individuals and organizations with critical information about the potential of action learning programs for fostering transformative learning, and the impact of such programs on developing self-understanding, reflective action, inclusiveness, confidence, and behavior change.

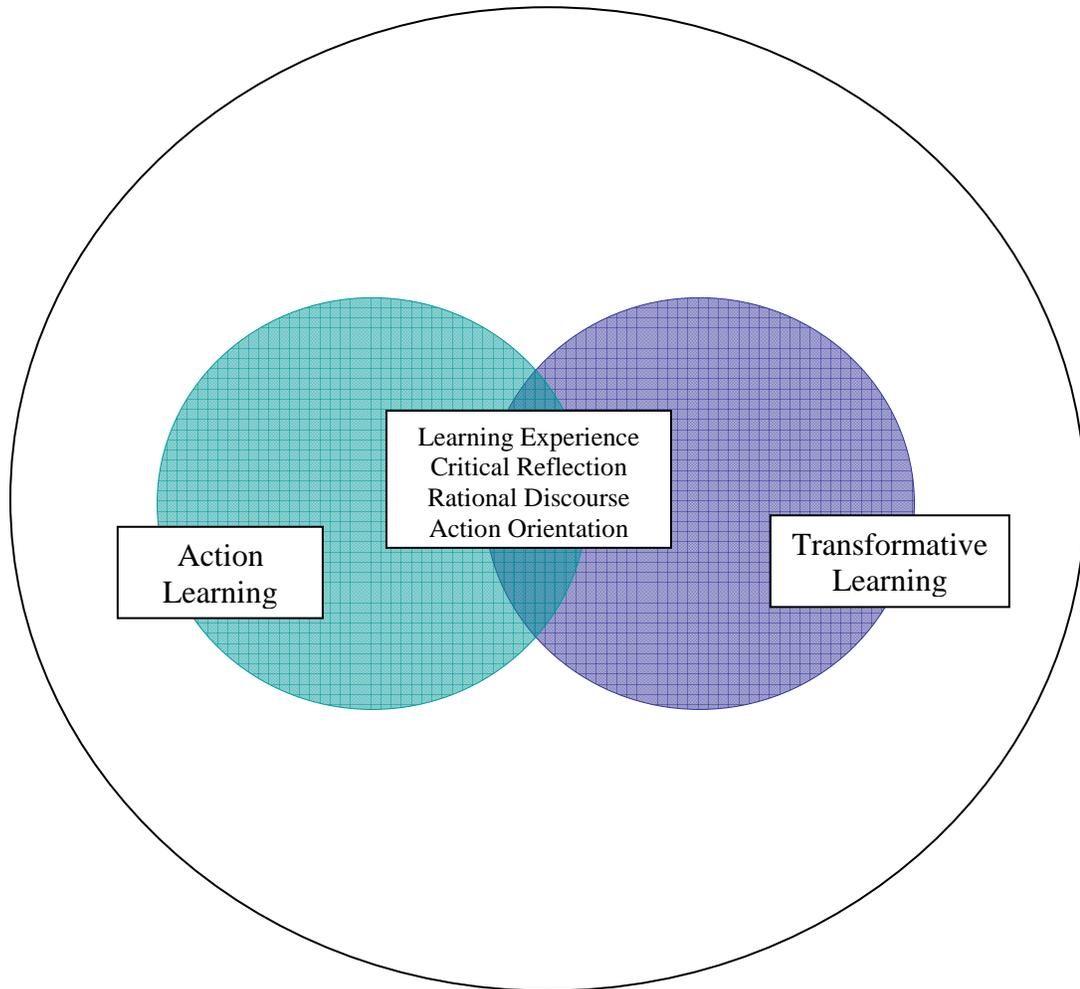
Conceptual Framework

The constructs for this study are transformative learning and action learning. As described in Figure 1, the conceptual framework is focused on understanding the relationship between constructs of transformative learning and action learning.

Mezirow (1991) explained that humans construct meaning from new information and experiences by either incorporating new knowledge into preexisting meaning perspectives or creating new categories to fit the new information. Transformative learning occurs when current meaning perspectives are inadequate to absorb or adapt to the new information. Individuals must then dismantle existing meaning perspectives and create a whole new way of seeing the world.

Mezirow (1991) identified three fundamental components of a transformative learning experience. First, a *learning experience* begins when the adult encounters an idea or concept that does not fit with his or her previous assumptions and beliefs. The experience is the central focus and the beginning of the transformative learning process. Experience is viewed as socially constructed. Therefore, experience can be deconstructed and reflected upon, before action is taken. Second, *critical reflection* is the act of questioning the validity of currently held beliefs. This usually happens when the individual becomes aware of a contradiction between his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions. Third is *rational discourse* in which the individual reflects on the experience and identifies the assumptions and beliefs. This is the condition in which the experience and the critical reflection interact. Through rational discourse, new or revised interpretations or meaning perspectives are formed.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.



Mezirow (1991) also speaks of planning a *course of action* as an important part of the transformative learning experience. In his later work (2000) Mezirow suggested that “taking action on reflective insights often involves overcoming situational, emotional, and informational constraints that may require new learning experiences to move forward” (p. 24). Mezirow said this change is not simply a change in thinking but a

change in acting: “Life is not seen from a new perspective, it is lived from that perspective” (p. 24).

This description of transformative learning represents a cognitive view of learning. Mezirow has been criticized for not considering the affective aspects of the learning experience. In later work, Mezirow (2000) did state that “cognition has strong affective and cognitive dimensions; all the sensitivity and responsiveness of the person participates in the invention, discovery, interpretation, and transformation of meaning” (p. 6).

Action learning could be an effective approach to fostering transformative learning because there are similarities between the skills required of each. Action learning is expected to improve skills such as questioning, listening, and giving feedback (Inglis, 1994; Marquardt, 2004; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Revans, 1998). Action learning is *reflective process*. Reflection is defined as “the ability to step back and ponder one’s own experience, to abstract from it some meaning or knowledge relevant to their experiences” (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988, p. 15). In action learning, participants are expected to learn how to support, collaborate with, and care about others by working with group members (Marquardt, 2004; Mumford, 1997; Revans, 1982). This may create a supportive environment in which participants can learn from each other. In turn, action learning is expected to improve participants’ interpersonal skills such as building trust with others and building relationships (Inglis, 1994; McGill & Beaty, 1995). Action learning is based on the premise that no real learning takes place unless and until action is taken (Mumford, 1995). According to Marquardt (1999, 2004), one of the fundamental beliefs of action learning is that we learn best when taking some action. Thus, this study explores the

experience of baby boomers in the context of an action learning group from a holistic viewpoint. The focus is understanding not only the cognitive process of making the transformation, but also the other aspects of the learning experience.

Summary of Methodology

To understand the experience of how participants perceive and describe their transformative learning experiences within an action learning group context, requires the study to consider a subjectivist, interpretivist world view (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Phenomenology represented the most appropriate methodology to study the experience. In 1981, Mezirow stated that “the concept of adult learning which plays such a crucial role in the adult learning process and perspective transformation needs phenomenological study” (p.11).

The study examined how baby boomer adults perceive and describe their transformative learning experiences within an action learning group. The study employed Mezirow’s (1981) transformative learning theory and Marquardt’s (1999, 2004) framework of action learning to facilitate the three action learning groups with a total 16 self-selected baby boomers.

Criteria for the participants included an interest in solving a problem or attaining a goal; an interest in understanding the nature and meaning of a transformative learning experience; a willingness to participate in an action learning group, which included four three-hour, facilitated sessions over a four-week period; and a willingness to participate in an in-depth interview.

The baby boomers adults who were North Americans born between 1946 and 1964 were recruited through personal references, professional and service associations,

and network organizations such as Professional Dimensions, the American Society for Training and Development, and the Council of Small Business Executives (Appendix A).

A phenomenological approach that employed Moustakas's (1994) method of inquiry was used to gather data from each of the 16 self-selected baby boomers. The researcher contacted each participant before the interview either by phone or email. The researcher conducted one face-to-face interview at the participants' settings of choice after the groups' sessions were completed. This allowed participants to construct meanings by relating to the world in which they live in a familiar and comfortable setting (LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 1990). The interviews were conducted over a 14-day period to maintain continuity and momentum with the participants.

The phenomenological investigation involved in-depth interviews during which the researcher presented open-ended comments and structured questions (Appendix C).

In each 90-minute interview, the researcher asked participants to reflect on the meaning of experiences. The data were analyzed with the modified van Kaam method and NVivo© 7 (2007) analytic software.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study will be delimited to the participants in the three action learning groups. Findings may not be generalized to populations of interest. In qualitative research, any generalizing to be done will be by individuals who are in situations similar to the one(s) investigated by the researcher (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). Qualitative research does not consider generalization as a desired outcome.

Several limitations are inherent in the study:

1. The participants in this study are baby boomer adults born between 1946 and 1964. Findings are not generalizable beyond this age group.
2. The participants in this study are baby boomer adults born in North America. Findings are not generalizable to adults of other nationalities.
3. Participants in this study are self-selected.
4. The length of the study was limited to four weeks. Results may not be generalizable to action learning groups conducted for longer or shorter periods of time.

The study used post hoc interviews to determine participants' transformative learning experiences. Results may be influenced by interviewer perceptions of participants' communication and meaning.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following key terms will be used throughout this dissertation:

1. *Action learning*: Action learning is “both a process and a powerful program that involves a small group of individuals solving real problems while at the same time focusing on what they are learning and how their learning can benefit each group member and the organization as a whole” (Marquardt, 1999, p. 4). For the purpose of this study, Marquardt's (2004) framework of key components of action learning are used to define key components of action learning:

Problem: A problem, project, challenge, issue, or task which is of high importance to an individual, team and/or organization.

Action learning sets: The group composed of four to eight individuals who handle an organizational problem that has no easily identifiable solution.

Reflective inquiry process: A process that emphasizes insightful questioning and reflection above statements and opinions. Because great questions lead to great solutions, the questioning process is emphasized.

Taking action on the problem: The action learning group must be able to take action on the problem it is dealing with. The group members need to be given the power to act or feel sure that what they recommend will be implemented.

Commitment to learning: Action learning places equal emphasis on the learning and development of individuals and the team, and on the solving of problems.

Action learning coach: An individual who helps the group members to reflect both on what they are learning and how they are solving problems.

2. *Baby boomer adults*: North Americans who were born between 1946 and 1964 and generally considered to be at a midpoint of their lives.
3. *Critical reflection* (also known as *premise reflection*): Becoming aware of why we perceive, think, feel, and act as we do and of the reasons for and consequences of such thoughts. We become critically reflective by challenging the established definition of a problem being addressed (Mezirow, 1991).
4. *Conditions*: Factors that foster or hinder transformative learning such as the individual, program, and organizational contexts.
5. *Cumulative transformation*: Transformations that are the result of a progressive, less traumatic sequence of changes in points of view (Mezirow, 1991).
6. *Disorienting dilemma*: Ranges from “an acute internal and personal crisis” (Mezirow, 2000), to “indefinite periods in which persons consciously or

- unconsciously search for something which is missing in their life; when they find this missing piece, the transformative process is catalyzed” (Clark, 1993, cited in E. Taylor, 2000, pp. 298-299).
7. *Epochal transformation*: Transformations in habits of the mind triggered by a traumatic event leading to a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1985b, p. 24).
 8. *Frame of reference*: A “meaning perspective” that reflects the structure of assumptions and expectations through which individuals filter sense impressions (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Frames of reference are the result of interpretations of experience, and are composed of two dimensions. The first is a habit of mind, or a set of assumptions that serves as a guide for interpreting experience. The second is a point of view, which is made of aggregations of meaning schemes or sets of immediate and specific expectations, beliefs, attitudes that commonly operate outside of one’s awareness (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).
 9. *Habit of mind*: “A set of assumptions that act as a guide for interpreting experience” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).
 10. *Learning*: The process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).
 11. *Meaning making*: The construal of meaning “by projecting images and symbolic models, and meaning schemes based on prior learning, onto one’s sensory experiences and imaginatively using analogies to interpret new experiences” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).

12. *Habit of mind/Meaning perspective*: A general frame of reference, set of schemas, world view, or personal paradigm (Mezirow, 1995).
13. *Perspective transformation*: “The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective and finally making choices or otherwise acting on these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 167).
14. *Phenomenology*: The experience of being, perspectives, and views of social realities (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989). Creswell (1998) provided a similar definition: “the meaning of the lived experiences of several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 51).
15. *Point of view*: “Made of aggregations of meaning schemes – or sets of immediate and specific expectations, beliefs, attitudes which commonly operate outside of one’s awareness” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).
16. *Rational discourse*: “A special kind of dialogue in which we focus on content and attempt to justify beliefs by giving and defending reasons and by examining the evidence for and against competing view points” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 225).
17. *Social interaction*: One of the three interrelated dynamics of communicative action; pertains to interactions with others as well as societal systems such as political power. The self-regulating system of social interaction serves as a boundary maintenance system of the life world (another of the three dynamics of communicative action) and

the transformative nature of learning (the other dynamic). The dynamic of social interaction can cause us to have open or closed worldviews (Mezirow, 1991).

18. *Transformative learning*: “The process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action... Transformative Theory’s focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

Summary

Chapter I introduces the study and provides a brief overview of the problem, the research question and sub-questions. The conceptual framework that guided and bounded the study was provided. Two constructs were described: 1) Transformative Learning 2) Action Learning. Chapter II presents a review of the literature that serves as a platform for the research. In Chapter III, the methodology will be explained including the epistemological underpinnings of the phenomenological method. Chapter IV will present the findings of the study following the format outlined in Chapter III, Chapter V will present conclusions based on the findings in chapter four and will discuss implications and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Groups and programs that foster transformative learning are needed to develop adaptive individuals in the 21st century. Although action learning has been cited in the literature as means for fostering transformative learning, the research on the potential transformative effect of action learning is limited. The literature review in this chapter describes research on the relationship between action learning and transformative learning, and supports the need for more research to further understand this relationship.

This review includes the transformative learning literature within the adult education field and the action learning literature. Books, articles, and dissertations were accessed through the following databases and sources: ERIC, dissertation abstracts, UMI's journal and article service, and general Internet searches. Works included in the review explicitly identified the topic of transformative learning or action learning, or explored a closely related concept. The literature searches included seminal works in adult learning, transformative learning theory, and action learning theory.

Adult Learning

Adult Learning Theories

In 1970, Knowles (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) was the first to illuminate the differences the adult learning process (androgogy) and the learning of children (pedagogy). Knowles' theory was summarized by Pratt (1993) who stated that adults learn through (a) assisting in setting the climate, (b) mutual participation in planning, (c) diagnosing their own learning needs, (d) formulating their objectives, (e) developing

personal learning plans, (f) implementing their learning plans, and (g) evaluating their own learning.

Since Knowles' groundbreaking work in 1970, the collective understanding of adult learning has gained sophistication. Many adult learning theories have been developed. Merriam and Cafferella (1999) categorized adult learning theories into "schools" of adult learning. Swanson and Holton (2001) consider these schools "orientations." The schools include: behaviorist, cognitivist, humanist, social learning, and constructivist orientations. Merriam and Caffarella also identified some theoretical variations within the schools that represent additional orientations within the same category. The following section discusses key aspects of each of these schools, or orientations.

Behaviorist Orientation

Behaviorists such as Watson (1914), Thorndike (1898), and Skinner (1974) focused on observable behavior. For behaviorists, the purpose of education is to produce behavioral change in a desired direction (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Providing suitable stimuli and reinforcement is critical for learning (Skinner, 1974). The environment provides the learner with stimuli as well as reinforcement for responses to the stimuli. Therefore, creating the proper environment with stimuli and reinforcement will result in the needed conditions for maximizing learning. Accordingly, an educator needs to arrange stimuli and reinforcement in the learning environment so that the desired behavior will occur (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Cognitivist Orientation

The cognitivist orientation to learning is grounded in Gestalt psychology. Gestalt psychology is based on the observation that human beings often experience things that are not a part of simple sensations. Gestalt theory is well-known for its concept of insight learning which implies individuals solve problems by means of a gestalt of organizing principle. Perhaps the most important contribution of the Gestalt psychologists' phenomenon is that they include objects and meaning (see discussion of Koffka [1922], Kohler [1929], and Wertheimer [1912] in Boring, 1950). Cognitivists such as Bruner (1962), Argyris and Schön (1978), Lewin (1951), and Piaget (1970) are concerned with internal mental processes such as insight, information processing, memory, and perception. The goal is to develop the skills and capacity to be a better learner. Changes in cognitive structures are a major concern for Lewin and Piaget. Interacting with the environment is critical for changing cognitive structures. Learning how to learn is another concern for cognitivists such as Bruner, Argyris, and Schön. Bruner's focus was teaching students creative thinking skills by encouraging inquiry. Inquiry is also important to Argyris and Schön, who believed that inquiring into one's own governing variables (i.e., the values on which human beings design action strategies) is essential for double-loop learning (i.e., changes in governing variables) and de-utero learning (i.e., learning to learn).

Humanistic Orientation

With the humanistic orientation, the basic concern is increasing the human potential for growth and development (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Humanists believe that individuals can control their own destiny, are free to act, and possess unlimited

potential for growth and development (Maslow, 1970; Knowles, 1975; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Rogers, 1983). Knowles et al suggested that adults' readiness to learn can help them to cope effectively with their real-life situations. The role of an educator is to facilitate learning and support self-actualization (Knowles et al., 2005; Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1969). To perform this role, the facilitator should possess certain attitudinal qualities: 1) genuineness; 2) caring, trust, and respect; and 3) empathic understanding and accurate listening (Knowles et al.; Rogers, 1969). Student-centered learning (Rogers, 1983), androgogy (Knowles, 1975), and self-directed learning are grounded in humanistic learning theories.

Social Learning Orientation

Social learning theorists such as Bandura (1997), Rotter (1954), and Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasize the social nature of learning. Learning takes place by interacting with and observing others in a social context. Therefore, it is important to build the social context that allows individuals to interact with and observe others. For Bandura (1977), most human behaviors are learned by observing and modeling behavior. By observing others, a person forms an idea about the performance of new behaviors. Later, this coded information serves as a guide for action. An educator needs to model and guide these new roles and behaviors (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In addition, a community of practice (CoP) is important for learning to take place. According to Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002), CoPs are "groups of individuals who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic." (p. 4). Since learning takes place when individuals form relationships in a CoP, an educator needs to help individuals participate fully in these communities (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

Constructivist Orientation

For constructivists such as Dewey, Weick, Freire, Kolb, and Mezirow, learning is a process of constructing meaning and knowledge through experience (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Action or experience is critical to learning. However, learning does not follow automatically from experience, because reflecting on an experience is central to learning from an experience (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Jarvis, 1987; Kolb, 1984). Dealing with an unfamiliar or complex problem, critical questioning, and sharing in dialogue can foster reflection (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Brookfield, 1987; Freire; Mezirow, 2000). Reflecting on action and one's perspectives can promote transformative learning (i.e., changes in meaning perspectives).

Finally, an individual's interaction with the environment is important for learning to take place. For example, Kolb (1984) argued that learning lies in the continuous interplay between expectation (i.e., old ideas, beliefs, or theories) and environment, and that each transforms the other. Thus, the educator's role is not only to transmit or implant new ideas, but also to dispose of or modify old ones that may get in the way of the new ideas. Furthermore, Taylor (2000b), Baumgartner (2001), and Dirkx (2001) argue that emotions and feelings can play a powerful role in adult learning. Transformative learning, experiential learning, and reflective practice are constructivist in nature (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Transformative Learning

The literature was reviewed in order to define transformative learning, and to identify the occurrence of transformative learning and the forces that hinder or foster it. A

description of Mezirow's transformative learning is provided, so that Mezirow's concept could be compared with other transformative learning theorists.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow's (1991) theory reflects a constructivist view of reality. This means that his theory put forth the idea that meaning is developed and exists within the individual instead of from external influences; he added that the meaning which is acquired through experience is then validated through external sources. His viewpoint was that knowledge creation is socially stimulated and subjectively interpreted. In childhood, learning is directed through authority: teachers, parents, and other authority figures. In adulthood, learning takes on a more transformative nature as one begins to question some of the beliefs and values brought forward from childhood learning experiences. Mezirow describes this as follows: "Rather than merely adapting to changing circumstances by more diligently applying old ways of knowing, they [adults] discover a need to acquire new perspectives in order to gain a more complete understanding of changing events and a higher degree of control over their lives" (p. 3).

The process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action... Transformative Theory's focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning was selected as the theoretical base for this study for two reasons. First, O'Neil and Marsick (1994) and Marsick (1990) discuss how ARL™ may be one approach for fostering Mezirow's critical reflection and transformative learning. Second, Mezirow's theory represents one of the most

comprehensive transformative learning theories in the literature (Brookfield, 1986; Marsick & Finger, 1994). Mezirow integrated a number of theoretical contributions into his framework such as Dewey (1933), Freire (1970), Gould (1978), Habermas (1971), and Kuhn (1970).

Theoretical Concepts

Mezirow (1995) identifies two types of transformative learning: 1) learning that results in new or transformed meaning schemes, or points of view and 2) learning that results in transformed meaning perspectives, or habits of mind. Points of view and habits of mind are what Mezirow (1998) refers to as “frames of reference”:

Habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. ... Habits of mind become articulated in a specific point of view—the constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation. (pp. 5-6)

For his research on personal transformation, Mezirow (1978a) studied women returning to post secondary study or the workplace after an extended period of time away from educational activities. In an effort to address the needs of these U.S. women, Mezirow conducted a qualitative study to “identify factors that characteristically impede or facilitate” women’s progress in the re-entry programs (p. 6). In the 1975 study, Mezirow investigated 12 re-entry programs with 83 women. The 12 programs represented a diverse population of women in New York, New Jersey, California, and Washington. The women were participating in programs from both 2- and 4-year colleges and were divided into four groups: re-entry into university after a long absence (51 women); college women’s center for counseling (8 women); regular adult enrolling, first-semester community college students (16 women); and a program to assist working women to manage their careers (14 women). As a follow-up to the study, he conducted a

nation-wide telephone survey of 24-on-site programs and a mail inquiry to colleges. On the basis of the findings, Mezirow (1978a, 1978b) and his team concluded that the respondents had undergone a ‘personal transformation’ and identified ten steps that they could experience.

The 1975 study’s participants were involved at some stage of the 10-step process of personal transformation: 1) a disorienting dilemma; 2) self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame; 3) a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychological assumptions; 4) recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change; 5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; 6) planning a course of action; 7) acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans; 8) provisional trying of new roles; 9) building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and 10) a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective. In 1991, Mezirow expanded on the 10-step model adding one more step stressing the importance of altering present relationships (1991a). The new step added, is “renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships” (Mezirow, 1991b, p. 224), between steps 8 and 9. This new step reflected the importance of critical self-reflection.

Some influences on Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning included Kuhn’s (1970) paradigm, Freire’s (1970) conscientization, and Habermas’s (1984) domains of learning (Mezirow, 2000). The ideas of these theorists informed Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and the concepts of disorienting dilemma, meaning

schemes, meaning perspectives, perspective transformation, and frame of reference. He also examined level of learning processes, habits of the mind, and critical self-reflection.

Kuhn's (1970) conception of paradigms provided a basis for Mezirow's transformative learning theory. In Mezirow's (2000) theory, paradigms became the frame of reference. Kuhn's paradigms shared two essential elements: a set of meaning schemes and habits of the mind or a meaning perspective.

The work of Freire (1970) informed Mezirow's (1975) initial theories. Freire compared traditional education as the banking method of learning, whereby the teacher deposits information to students. "The students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of the world" (1970, p. 19). Freire's solution to this reliance on someone else and the lack of free thought was conscientization and its emphasis on developing consciousness that has power to transform reality. He defined conscientization as "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions—developing critical awareness—so individuals can take action against oppressive reality" (p. 19). Freire identified three stages of conscious growth: 1) intransitive thought 2) semi-transitive 3) critical transitivity as reflected in individuals who think critically about their present conditions and who decide to take action to effect change in their lives and to see what catalyst for that change could be. This last stage of critical consciousness influenced Mezirow in his ideas of disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, critical self-reflection on assumptions and critical discourse (Mezirow, 1985).

Habermas (1971) also influenced Mezirow's theory of transformative learning.

It was primarily Habermas's early work on domains of learning that was influential. Mezirow (1981) turned to the work of Habermas to develop a critical theory of adult learning and adult education. Habermas had proposed three domains of learning: (a) technical, (b) practical, and (c) emancipatory learning. The technical domain is concerned with successful manipulation of the environment for which there is objective indicators of truth. The practical domain is concerned with the creation and interpretation of social norms for which there is not necessarily an objective indicator. And emancipatory learning is introspective as the learner is self-reflective in their experience of self-knowledge. Mezirow's examination of these three domains led to his description of perspective transformation. As a consequence, perspective transformation encompassed the 10-steps of adult learning.

Mezirow's (1978b) initial theory became more developed as he expanded the view of perspective transformation by relating the emancipatory process to self-directed learning to form three revised types of learning. The original three types of learning (technical, practical, and emancipatory), based on Habermas's (1971) work, became (a) instrumental, (b) dialogic, and self-reflective (Mezirow, 1985). Central to perspective transformation and, the three types of learning are the meaning perspective and meaning schemes. Mezirow (1985) defined meaning scheme and meaning perspective and introduced three learning processes: (a) learning within meaning schemes, (b) learning new meaning schemes, and (c) learning through meaning transformation. The first learning process, learning within meaning schemes, involves learners working with what they already know by expanding and revising present systems of knowledge. The second learning process is learning new meaning schemes that are

compatible with existing schemes within the learners' meaning perspectives. The last learning process is learning through meaning transformation. This process requires "becoming aware of specific assumptions (schemata, criteria, rules or repressions) on which a distorted or incomplete meaning scheme is based and, through a reorganization of meaning, transforming it" (Mezirow, 1985, p. 23). Transformation occurs by critical self-reflection of the assumptions that supported the meaning scheme or perspective in use.

Advancing his studies on perspective transformation, Mezirow found that it can occur in two dimensions. It can occur painlessly through an accumulation of transformations in set meaning schemes (Mezirow, 1985). Otherwise, perspective transformation may be an "epochal ... [and] ...painful;" (Mezirow, 1985, p. 24). Transformation of meaning perspectives or set of meaning schemes, as the dimension involves a comprehensive and critical re-evaluation of oneself. Mezirow (1991a, 1994b) states that the central aspect to the perspective transformation is critical self-reflection. Therefore, if a learner rationalized a point of view without dealing with the feelings that accompanied the original meaning scheme or perspective, perspective transformation could not occur.

Mezirow (1991a) expanded on his earlier idea of the distorted or underdeveloped meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1985). He introduces that in fact there are three types of meaning perspectives: epistemic, related to knowledge and how an individual uses it; sociolinguistic, related to language and how it is used in a social setting, and psychological, related to the way individuals see themselves. The solution for distortions involves the individual engaging in a perspective transformation through the revised 11-

step model and reflective discourse. However, there is no set order as to how perspective transformation occurs and all the steps do not need to be experienced.

Mezirow (1995) emphasized the importance of critical reflection in transformative learning theory. Reflection is the act of “intentional assessment” (p.44) of one’s actions, whereas critical reflection not only involves the nature and consequence of one’s action — it includes the related circumstances of their origin. Mezirow draws on Dewey (1933) who was interested in reflection as it related to problem solving but who did not differentiate types of reflection. Mezirow differentiates three types of reflection: 1) content reflection on what we perceive, feel, think or act upon; 2) process reflection on how we perform the functions of perceiving, feeling, thinking or acting with an assessment of how well we perform them; and 3) premise or critical reflection which involves becoming aware of why we perceive, think, feel, and act as we do and of the reasons for and consequences of such thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Mezirow (1995) believes that rational discourse and critical reflection are the two key methods by which transformative learning is achieved. Rational discourse is one way in which to justify beliefs. It is an informed and objective assessment of the reasons, evidence, and arguments that lead to a tentative, consensual best judgment. Consensual validation is ongoing and subject to review by a broader audience. Mezirow sees full, free participation in rational discourse and critical reflection as a basic human right and as the main goal of adult education. Through critical reflection and rational discourse, learning can become transformative “whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 6).

Building on his research, Mezirow (1998a) refined his earlier work on critical reflection. He presents two aspects of critical reflection. One of the aspects is the critical reflection of assumptions — when the learner examines the assumptions or presuppositions that were involved in the process (i.e., content and process reflection). The other aspect is the related concept of critical self-reflection of assumptions. It involves “a critique of a premise upon which the learner has defined a problem” (Mezirow, 1998b, p. 186).

Mezirow (1998b) articulates a taxonomy of critical reflection of and on assumptions that involved objective and subjective reframing. The distinction between them is that objective reframing is the consideration of the assumption and subjective reframing is a consideration of what caused the assumption to occur. Subjective reframing is critical self-reflection on assumptions. Subjective reframing can include one of four forms of critical self-reflection on assumptions: narrative, systemic, therapeutic and epistemic. Mezirow argued that ‘learning to think for oneself involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and practicing discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings’ (p. 197).

Mezirow (2000) presented another revision of transformative learning. He discussed his “theory in progress” (Mezirow, 1991a, p. xi) by expanding and revising his terminology. He argued that a meaning perspective is a frame of reference and comprises habits of mind and subsequent points of view. Habits of the mind were expanded to include a variety of dimensions: sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic. These perspectives were expressed as points of view, which comprise clusters of meaning schemes or sets of specific expectations, beliefs, feelings,

attitudes and judgments which shape a particular interpretation and assign causality.

Although they tend to operate outside of awareness, meaning schemes can be described in terms of what one sees and hears.

In addition to the three ways learning occurs, Mezirow (2000) added a fourth to include the emphasis on transforming points of view. In tandem with existing frames of reference, and transforming habits of mind, learning can occur by transforming points of view. It is important to note that people can change their points of view “by trying on another’s point of view” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21). However, a habit of mind is a different matter and the distinction between point of view and habit of mind is often critical.

As his theory relates to fostering an environment for adult learning, Mezirow (1991) defines seven ideal conditions that foster free full participation in rational discourse: 1) having accurate and complete information; 2) being free from coercion and distorting self-deception; 3) being able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively; 4) being open to alternative perspectives; 5) being able to become critically reflective upon presuppositions and their consequences; 6) having equal opportunity to participate; and 7) being able to accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity. Educators can help create an environment that fosters these ideal conditions.

Theoretical Criticisms

There have been some major criticisms of Mezirow’s work. Clark and Wilson (1991) criticize Mezirow’s exclusive focus on rationality: “Mezirow proposes a form of rational dialogue based on the force of argument alone. ... He would have us believe that rationalism, on its own, is able to sort out distortions in our meaning perspectives” (p. 3).

Mezirow (1995) claims that emotions and will are included in his theory, although his definition of rational discourse suggests that rationality is his main focus.

Mezirow has been criticized for his exclusive focus on the individual (Marsick & Finger, 1994). Mezirow remains concerned with the development of the individual's perspectives. Since transformative learning is a key strategy for solving today's organizational challenges, Marsick and Finger suggest that it must include collaborative and collective dimensions.

Collard and Law (1989) refute Mezirow's claim that his theory is about social action. They also criticize Mezirow for his exclusive focus on the individual, and cite his lack of explanation about the relationship of individual transformation to social action.

Fourth, Tennant (1993) identifies a need to distinguish between normative psychological development (e.g., expected through normal life cycle stages) and Mezirow's transformative learning. Tennant's question relates to the inevitability of transformative learning as an individual matures.

Definition of Transformative Learning

Mezirow (1991) focuses on individual adult learning. Argyris and Schön (1992) focus primarily at the organization level but also apply their theory to individual and team levels (Watkins & Shindell, 1994). Despite this difference, there are striking similarities between Mezirow and Argyris and Schön. Mezirow's content and process reflection are very similar to Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept of "single-loop learning," which involves changing action strategies when objectives and results do not matter. Mezirow's premise reflection is very similar to Argyris and Schön's (1978) double-loop learning, which involves exploring values and assumptions that cause individuals to frame an

objective in a certain way. Double-loop learning provides the possibility for transforming theories-in-use, which are similar to Mezirow's meaning perspectives.

Mezirow's meaning perspective is similar to Kuhn's (1970) idea of paradigm change, although Mezirow concentrates on individual change rather than social changes. Farquharson (1992) replaced the term "meaning perspective" with "paradigm" and applied Mezirow's theory to workplace performance. Application of Mezirow's theory to workplace program design and delivery can assist leaders in creating the complex and flexible mindsets required to survive in today's world.

Daloz (1997) and Kegan (1994) define transformative learning from an adult development perspective as movement toward higher-order developmental stages. Mezirow (1991) suggests that transformative learning moves adults to more complex orders of thinking (i.e., more differentiated, inclusive, reflective, and permeable perspectives).

The contribution of Boyd and Myers (1988) is their conceptualization of transformation in terms of analytical psychology. Boyd and Myers do not acknowledge that Mezirow's theory was influenced by Gould. As Mezirow (1977) said, "Psychoanalytic theory provides substantial reinforcement of the idea of perspective transformation" (p. 6). Gould (1978) influenced Mezirow (1985) to: 1) focus more closely on the individual person; 2) stress childhood as an important period in one's life; and 3) explore the concept of meaning schemes as conscious, and meaning perspectives as unconscious. Mezirow never explored the psychoanalytic dimension of adult learning any further in his writings.

Boyd and Myers (1988) and Mezirow (1991) both emphasize that a significant change within an individual involves awareness, examination, and reorganization of deeply held values, beliefs, and assumptions. Boyd and Myers' (1988) transformative education stresses the significance of affective, intuitive and extra rational elements, e.g., symbols, images, and feeling, for personal transformation. Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformation emphasizes rational, cognitive elements yet Mezirow (1995) stressed the importance of critical self-reflection.

Themes Across Transformative Learning Definitions

First is a theme of progressive advancement toward meaning structures that are more differentiated, inclusive, complex, and reflective. This theme includes a belief in unit-directionality as described by the theorists:

1. The direction of learning is in ascending spirals rather than linear; one goes back in order to go forward (Mezirow, 1985).
2. An upward cycling through levels of movement (Daloz, 1986).
3. Cyclic movement, analogous to climbing a mountain...as one circles, the vision is broadened (Boyd & Myers, 1988).

Second, most of the theorists share the belief that transformative learning deals with identifying, challenging, and altering preexisting assumptions, i.e., critical reflection (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Brookfield, 1990; Kegan, 1996; Mezirow, 1991). Third, transformations take time to occur and are an ongoing process (Brookfield, 1986; Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991).

Identification of the Occurrence of Transformative Learning

The literature on the occurrence of transformative learning is discussed in two parts: 1) transformative learning outcomes and 2) steps in the transformative process.

A key similarity related to transformative outcomes is the occurrence of conceptual change. For transformative learning theorists, conceptual change results in a more differentiated, complex, inclusive, and reflective perspective or paradigm (Apps, 1996; Argyris & Schön, 1992; Brookfield, 1990; Farquharson, 1992; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991).

As Cranton (1994) illustrates, empowerment is a second similarity:

The more autonomous a learner is the more likely he or she would be to engage in transformative learning (p. 60). The individual who is insecure, lacking confidence, anxious, or unsupported—and is then plunged into activities designed to stimulate critical self reflection—may not be able to overcome emotional barriers to learning and development. (p. 162)

Cranton (1994) sees learner empowerment as a product of transformative learning, but also views elements of empowerment as critical to beginning and maintaining the process.

While theorists agree that action is an anticipated outcome of transformative learning, they differ in their view of action. Farquharson (1992) believes that transformative learning produces a successful reality—one that brings out the best in a situation. Brookfield (1995) believes action can be either visible or completely internal. Mezirow (1991) believes that a transformative learning experience requires the learner to make an informed and reflective decision to act. The decision to act may be an immediate decision to act, delayed action, a reasoned reaffirmation of an existing action, or a action; 3) the ability to participate freely and fully in rational discourse; and 4) willingness to

accept consensual validation as a mode of problem solving in communicative learning (Mezirow, 1991).

The research of Vogelsang (1993) assessed an additional component—the degree of centrality to an individual’s identity—in the evaluation of transformative learning outcomes. Vogelsang used Mezirow’s (1991) theory in her qualitative case study design to determine whether the educational experience of 20 higher education students was transformative and what kinds of educational activities were helpful in promoting transformative learning. Two interviews were conducted, with the second interview used to clarify and elaborate themes found in the first interview. Vogelsang found that the more central a meaning perspective is to the identity of the individual, the more emotionally challenging its transformation, and the more impact its transformation will have on the individual’s life.

Mezirow (1991) identifies two limitations to researching transformative learning. Respondents may present their espoused theories rather than their theories-in-use, and observation of respondents merely reveals their behavior. It was important to manage the espoused theory limitation.

Another difference is the theorists’ identification of rational and/or affective outcomes. For example, Mezirow (1991) suggests that the outcome of rational discourse is that “participants accept an informed, objective and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity” (p. 6). In addition to changing beliefs, Apps (1996) claims that becoming aware of our body and emotions are an important outcome of transformative learning. Boyd and Myers (1988) define an outcome as “a spiritual event or energy which can be shown or witnessed or revealed, but cannot be fully explained” (p. 29).

Steps in the Transformative Learning Process

There are similarities across the various models of transformative learning. Mezirow's (1978) steps were confirmed in research by Morgan (1987), Williams (1986), and Hunter (1980). For Daloz (1986), the transformative journey represents a rite of passage which embodies the notion of separation, initiation, and return. These three steps seem inherent in Cranton's (1994) five-step synthesis of various transformative learning models. Cranton (1994) believes that "it is not safe to say, however, that these stages of transformative learning are in any way sequential or hierarchical or that they are consistent across learners" (p. 72). Mezirow (1991) and Marsick (1978) also found that the steps of the transformation process "do not follow an invariant sequence" (p. 16).

Cranton's stimulating event **or** situation can be found across most theories, although descriptions differ. Mezirow (1978) and Daloz (1986) suggest that transformative learning is initiated by a life transition or a trigger event. Mezirow (1981) added that coping with life crises, reading a book, listening to a lecture, or visiting a new culture as possible disorienting dilemmas. While Mezirow believes that critical reflection is almost always stimulated by the environment and discussion with others, Boyd and Myers (1988) support Cranton's (1994) proposition that it is possible that internal processes lead to self-questioning. According to Cranton, trigger events may be positive,

Cranton (1994) discusses how transformative learning varies among different individuals, Cranton criticizes Mezirow for not addressing individual differences, and uses Carl Jung's seminal contribution to the development of the Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator to make this point. Cranton admits that there are limitations to her research data, and suggests that transformation may be experienced differently among

individuals of different personality types. Cranton's analysis produces discrepancies with Mezirow's (1991) theory in that some psychological types are likely to engage in premise reflection but not in revising meaning perspectives.

Factors that Hinder Transformative Learning

The journey through the transformation process is difficult to negotiate and frequently involves "compromise, stalling, backsliding, self-deception, and failure" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 8). There seems to be consensus among leading theorists that one cannot return to the old perspective after a perspective transformation has occurred. However, individuals can stall, either temporarily or permanently, at any phase of the process. Mezirow and Marsick (1978) found that there are two points where stalling is most likely. The first is the beginning of the process "when exposing one's life roles and feelings surrounding them to critical analysis threaten a long established sense of order" (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978, p. 16). The second occurs when "a commitment to action should logically follow awareness and insight but is so threatening or demanding as to be immobilizing" (p. 16).

Farquharson (1992) incorporates Mezirow's theory into his six steps and makes suggestions on how to help prevent stalling. The assessment of paradigms has the potential for defensiveness and anxiety. One way to minimize these feelings is to identify the context within which the paradigm is being assessed. Restricting the context allows for the probability that the ineffective paradigm could be effective within a different setting (Farquharson, 1992). Farquharson suggests setting up a three to six month trial period. This helps individuals cope with the anxiety of taking permanent action with their new paradigm. Farquharson makes an assumption an individual who completes the fourth

step will experience success (the fifth step) with significantly improved performance. This success justifies the new paradigm as more effective.

Daloz (1986) takes an emotional perspective to potential stalls. Transformations are often accompanied by a ground-shaking feeling that can make individuals feel lost and lose their sense of purpose, which can be frightening. Some may be unwilling to let go of the past; and are unable to see the larger possibility.

Despite the potential stalls, theorists share a humanistic vision of the person, and believe that human beings are capable of change and free to act in the world (Apps, 1985; Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 1986; Mezirow, 1985). In summary, the greatest hindrance to transformative learning is the potential for stalls at the beginning of the process, when the action required is too threatening, or when an individual is unwilling to let go.

Factors that Foster Transformative Learning

A review of the literature indicates three themes that seem to foster transformative learning: 1) the individual context, 2) the educational context, and 3) the organizational context. Although the three categories are used as an organizing framework, there is often overlap among them. As mentioned earlier, Clark and Wilson (1991) criticize Mezirow for ignoring context—the personal and sociocultural factors that play an influencing role in the process of transformative learning. These factors include the immediate context surrounding a learning event. Clark (1991) stresses the importance of taking contextual factors into account because they shape the meaning of the learning by structuring it and directing its course.

The Individual Context

Within the individual context, three conditions are discussed: 1) relationships, 2) readiness to change, and 3) life changes. First, Mezirow indirectly refers to relationships in the context of his rational discourse and consensual validation. Taylor (1997) criticizes Mezirow for overlooking the more subjective elements of relationships, e.g., friendship and trust. Taylor's comprehensive review of the transformative learning literature found that more studies referred to the significance of relationships in perspective transformation than any other finding in the review. For example, Bailey (1996) used a qualitative case study to understand meaningful learning and factors that facilitated perspective transformation among Ed.D. students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In the 31 interviews with recent graduates, Bailey found that factors outside the program or institution were important in facilitating perspective transformation. These included: 1) professional and personal therapeutic relationships, and 2) readiness for change.

Further support for readiness to change is also found in Taylor's (1997) in which readiness for change was a factor. Taylor (1994) had conducted a qualitative study which included in-depth interviews with 12 inter-culturally competent participants who were able to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture. Taylor found that participants "were ready for change due to former critical events, personal goals, or prior intercultural experiences" (p. 169).

Life changes often provide trigger events for perspective transformation. King's (1997) study delineated the learning activities that contribute to perspective transformation among adult learners within the context of higher education. King developed and used a questionnaire that had objective and free response questions. A

total of 471 (from 700) surveys were completed, along with eight follow-up interviews. King (1997) found that 41.6% of the time, a life change had an influence on perspective transformation. The highest life change ranking was job change at 19%. Vogelsang (1993) also found prior stressful life events as a contributing factor in perspective transformation.

The Educational Context

The educational context seems to be a contributing factor in transformative learning. Especially important are the creation of a supportive environment, various learning processes/activities, and the role of the educator.

A common theme around conditions for transformative learning is the importance of a supportive environment for open sharing and the development of trust (Apps, 1996; Argyris & Schön, 1978; Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 1986; Farquharson, 1992; Mezirow, 1991). Kegan (1982) believes a supportive environment performs three functions that allow individuals to transform and grow: “It must hold on, it must let go, and it must stick around so that it can be integrated” (p. 121). Research studies have also identified a supportive environment as a critical element in fostering perspective transformation (Bailey, 1996; King, 1997; Ludwig, 1994; Murry, 1992; Pierce, 1986; Vogelsang, 1993). Vogelsang found that a safe environment allowed for the sharing of alternative viewpoints, which is a critical factor in the promotion of transformative learning. Pierce (1986) and Ludwig (1994) both conducted qualitative research on transformative learning. Pierce’s work took place within the context of a management development program, while Ludwig’s was within the context of a Job Training Partnership program.

Both researchers found that Mezirow's ideal learning conditions promoted a sense of safety, openness, and trust.

In addition to a supportive environment, challenge plays an important role (Brookfield, 1990; Kegan, 1994; Murry, 1992). King (1997) found that challenges from teachers were the second most important factor that influenced perspective transformation. However, growth and development were impeded if the challenge was too great. Daloz (1986) suggested that providing the optimal mix of support and challenge was critical in bringing about transformation.

According to the literature, three learning activities or processes can help foster transformative learning: 1) critical reflection, 2) dialogue and inquiry, and 3) affective processes. A key similarity across the majority of theorists is the importance of critical reflection in the transformative learning process. The theorists agree that critical reflection involves examining, uncovering, and challenging the learner's assumptions. Mezirow (1998), for the first time, differentiates several forms of critical reflection in an attempt to clarify its major role in transformative learning. King (1997) found that critical reflection was the most important factor in contributing to transformative learning.

Although Bailey's (1996) study did not specifically use an action learning design, her theological program used many ARL™ principles. Bailey found that action and reflection patterns were helpful in fostering transformative learning:

The process of meaningful learning characterized by observation, experience, cognitive input, reflection, action, and in many cases dialogue, is similar to a praxis model described by Brookfield as a pattern of activity, reflection upon activity, collaborative analysis of activity, new activity (p. 197).

Mezirow and Associates (1990) suggested additional activities that foster critical reflection. Consciousness raising strategies are suggested to increase self-awareness and

to begin looking at familiar things from a new perspective. Role-plays, simulations, games, life histories, and learning journals all increase self-awareness. Learning journals are commonly cited in the literature as tools for fostering transformative learning (Apps, 1996; Brookfield, 1990; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

Cranton (1994) also suggested some learning strategies that foster critical reflection. In general, Cranton believes that critical reflection is stimulated by perceived discrepancies between learner's beliefs, values, assumptions, and new knowledge, understanding, information or insights. Brooks (1989) used a qualitative case study to look at critically reflective learning within the corporate context. Brooks found that empathizing with and granting respect to the perspective of another group, along with perspective taking, were the most essential components of the transformative experience. Vogelsang (1993) found that providing an alternative perspective on an issue of personal significance to the student can evoke a disorienting dilemma and trigger perspective transformation. Also, cognitive input from lectures and readings can evoke disorienting dilemmas (Bailey, 1996; King, 1997; Vogelsang, 1993).

Dialogue and inquiry are other learning processes that foster transformative learning within an educational context. There seems to be no common definition of dialogue. For Apps (1996), dialogue is not about validating, as it is with Mezirow, but about questioning assumptions and beliefs. Argyris and Schön (1978) focus on balancing advocacy and inquiry as methods to get at the reasoning that underlie one's actions. Bailey (1996) labeled Mezirow's rational discourse as "dialogue" and found that it fostered transformative learning. For the first time, Mezirow (1998) refers to Bohm's

work on dialogue: “Dialogue involved learning about the context and nature of the processes by which individuals form their paradigms and take action” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 38). Mezirow (1998) calls “rational discourse” one form of dialogue, and calls for research on programs that promote such dialogue.

Affective processes are mentioned as critical in fostering transformative learning in an educational context. To develop only rationality (i.e., critical reflection and rational discourse) runs the risk of negating intuition, courage, risk, creativity, and caring (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Kuhn (1970) noted that intuition plays an important role in paradigm shifts. For Daloz (1986), Apps (1996), Brookfield (1987), and Boyd and Myers (1988), transformative learning is a holistic activity which includes the heart, soul, body, intellect, and emotions. Slowing down, attending to feelings, and being deliberate and patient are all ingredients for holistic learning. Two affective activities cited as those with potential for fostering transformative learning are: 1) silence, solitude, and meditation (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Farquharson, 1992; Scott, 1997); and 2) the use of images and personal stories to enhance learning and to help the learner form a personal connection with the subject matter (Apps, 1996; Daloz, 1986).

Research has confirmed the role of affective processes in fostering transformative learning (Bailey, 1996; Brooks, 1989; Clark, 1991; Murry, 1992; Pierce, 1986; Scott, 1997; Taylor, 1994; Vogelsang, 1993). Despite the recent abundance of research supporting the role of affective processes, Mezirow (1998) holds firm that critical reflection and rational discourse have been found to work better in more circumstances than the other options. In later work, Mezirow (2000) did state that “cognition has strong affective and cognitive dimensions; all the sensitivity and responsiveness of the person

participates in the invention, discovery, interpretation, and transformation of meaning” (p. 6). Taylor (1997) calls for more research on “other ways of knowing” and whole person transformative learning that includes cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions.

The final educational condition identified in the literature is the role of the educator. Three similarities appear across theorists regarding the educator’s role in fostering transformative learning. First, there seems to be consensus that educators need to help create democratic conditions and a supportive environment where transformative learning can occur (Apps, 1996; Argyris & Schön, 1992; Brookfield, 1991; Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 1986; Farquharson, 1992; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). Second, since presenting alternative perspectives, ideas, and values that challenge learners’ assumptions is a critical factor in transformative learning, educators need to present alternatives and encourage other learners to do the same (Apps, 1996; Argyris & Schön, 1992; Brookfield, 1991; Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 1986; Farquharson, 1992; Mezirow, 1995). Third, no theorist supports a directive or authoritative style in which educators transmit their knowledge and expertise to learners. For example, Boyd and Myers (1988) and Daloz (1986) call the educator a “guide” in the learner’s transformative journey.

There are also some differences among transformative learning theorists. Cranton (1994) is the only theorist to suggest that the educator have an understanding of individual differences so that he or she can work toward the empowerment of all individuals. Cranton (1994) and Brookfield (1995) are the only theorists who suggest that educators themselves must be critically reflective if they are to help learners be critically reflective.

Mezirow (1991) and Cranton (1994) are clear that an educator's role in helping learners take action is helping them plan for that action, since such action often takes place after the educational experience. However, Brooks (1989) found that critically reflective learners need to have a commitment to the change, as well as the will to carry through in order for behavioral change to occur. Brooks recommended that educators help learners with the requirements of actually changing behavior. Farquharson's (1992) step of experimental believing, which is a suggested 90-120 day trial period for new behaviors, may be a useful strategy.

The Organizational Context

There were few transformative learning research studies that took place within an organizational environment. Job changes are part of an organizational context and were found to be the highest ranking life change factor (19%) for fostering transformative learning in King's (1997) study. Brooks (1989) found the following organizational facilitators of critical reflection: 1) having had a variety of work experiences; 2) open-ended assignments—where the goal is clear but the procedure is not; 3) encouragement of questioning—actively soliciting participating and divergent opinions, rewarding critical questioning, and setting a safe environment; 4) honest feedback served as encouragement and a confidence builder and a vehicle for gaining awareness of personal dysfunctional behavior or attitudes; 5) modeling, or working for managers who role-modeled critical reflection; and 6) participation in policy-making and implementation (Brooks, 1989, p. 126).

Quinn (1996) conducted a qualitative and quantitative study on obstacles encountered when participants of the University of Michigan Leadership Education and

Development program returned to work after the program. Quinn's study supports Brooks' findings on the necessity of modeling by higher management and a non-bureaucratic culture. Quinn found that managers who encountered conflict were not sure about how best to address the problem. This could relate to Brooks' (1989) finding of the necessity for a culture of inquiry and feedback. Quinn (1996) added the additional obstacles of operating under intense deadlines and time pressure. Working under stressful time constraints often made it difficult to think about initiating new ideas.

While Brooks (1989) and Quinn (1996) conducted their studies in a corporate setting and Bailey (1996) in a higher education setting, all cited two common organizational conditions as important in fostering transformative learning: 1) modeling of desired behavior by others; and 2) a safe environment with a culture of inquiry, feedback, and dialogue.

Action Learning Literature Review

Definition of Action Learning

Action learning was developed by Revans in England in the middle of the 20th century. Action learning is defined by Revans (1982) as "a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his observable behavior henceforth in the problem field" (pp. 626-627).

Action learning emphasizes Q, i.e., questioning insight (Marsick, 1990; Mumford, 1997; Pedler, 1997; Peters & Smith, 1998; Raelin, 1999; Revans, 1997; Weinstein, 1997). Revans (1998) distinguishes between two kinds of learning: P and Q: P refers to the

acquisition of existing, programmed knowledge, while Q refers to the acquisition of the ability to ask fresh questions. Revans suggests a learning formula: $L = P + Q$. While the emphasis of traditional approaches to learning is on P, action learning focuses on Q (Beaty, Lawson, Bourner, & O'Hara, 1997; Boddy, 1981; Revans, 1982).

Key Components

The basis of Revans' proposition for action learning is that individuals learn best while trying to resolve an unfamiliar, intractable problem with co-learners (Revans, 1982, 1997). Furthermore, insightful questioning stimulates creativity, discovery, a re-examination of underlying assumptions, and experimentation (Revans, 1982). Scholars and practitioners have suggested various principles and elements of action learning since Revans first conceptualized action learning. For McGill and Beaty (1995), in action learning, individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their own experiences. Yorks, O'Neil, and Marsick (1999) argue that the foundation of action learning is "working in small groups in order to take action on meaningful problems while seeking to learn from having taken this action" (p. 3).

The various principles and elements of action learning are incorporated into the six interactive components proposed by Marquardt (2004):

1. *A problem, task, or project.* One of the fundamental beliefs of action learning is that we learn best when taking some action (Marquardt, 2004). The best form of action for learning is work on a project that has significance for the individuals (Marsick, 2002; Mumford, 1995). Thus, in action learning programs, participants solve a real business problem, project, or challenge (Marquardt, 1999; Pedler, 1997; Weinstein, 1999).

2. *The group or set.* Action learning assumes that the learning process is social, i.e., managers learn best with and from one another (Mumford, 1995; Revans, 1981). Consequently, action learning occurs around a group or set of four to eight individuals (Marquardt, 2004). The group members have been referred to as “comrades in adversity” (Revans, 1982), and “fellows in opportunity” (Mumford, 1996). One important principle is to form a group based on the greatest diversity possible (O’Neil & Dilworth, 1999; Marquardt, 1999). A group needs to include individuals with diversity in experiences, functions, and personalities.
3. *The questioning and reflective process.* Action learning emphasizes asking the right questions rather than giving the right answers (Marquardt, 2004; Revans, 1998). This emphasis on questioning is well illustrated in the formula employed by action learning: $L = P + Q + R$ (Marquardt, 1999) in which L stands for learning, P programmed knowledge, Q questioning, and R for reflection. Reflection is defined as “the ability to step back and ponder one’s own experience, to abstract from it some meaning or knowledge relevant to their experiences” (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988, p. 15).
4. *The commitment to taking action.* Action learning is based on the premise that no real learning takes place unless and until action is taken (Mumford, 1995), because one is never sure the idea or plan will be effective until it has been implemented (Pedler, 1997). The action enhances learning because it provides a basis for reflection. Comparing the results of an action against the assumptions or expectations of the action can encourage a person to reflect upon his or her assumptions (Revans, 1982).

5. *The commitment to learning.* In action learning, the learning is as important as the action (Marquardt, 2004). Thus, action learning places an equal emphasis on the accomplishment of the task, and the learning and development of individuals and organizations.
6. *The learning coach.* A learning coach helps the group to develop good process skills (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Pedler, 1997) through questioning and reflection (Marquardt, 2004; Marsick, 2002; O'Neil, 2001).

The Action Learning Process

Revans (1982) suggests that in action learning, participants follow three interactive processes termed Systems Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. The design of management decisions demands information about three critical elements: the value system of the managers, the external system they exploit, and the internal system by which they exploit it. The structured interplay of these three information sets is the design process of a management decision. This is called System Alpha.

System Beta is the process by which managers achieve their objectives. This includes a cycle of five phases: 1) survey in which data on the three elements of System Alpha are identified, 2) hypothesis, 3) experiment or action, 4) inspection, and 5) review of the results in relation to the overall objectives and situation. This cycle repeats itself as the participants move toward their goals. System Gamma addresses the managerial mindset and means to monitor learning. Following the cycle of System Beta, participants are continually checking their expectations against what actually happens. In the process, participants check their thought patterns as well. Recognizing discrepancies between one's expectations and experiences encourages change in thought patterns and beliefs,

where learning takes place. Many scholars and practitioners have developed and employed various action learning processes based on this process. For example, Marquardt (1999) argues that action learning programs move through three phases: understanding the problem, developing alternatives and constructing a solution, and taking action.

Several learning activities that foster critical reflection are described in the literature. An action technology cited as fostering critical reflection and transformative learning is ARL™ (Marsick, 1990; O'Neil & Marsick, 1994). Marsick (1990) states that the ARL™ model of action learning:

helps individuals both individually and collectively make explicit and then question the social norms that govern their action; individuals begin to be attuned to the way they help create and maintain meanings, often without questioning them, and the way their untested assumptions, beliefs, and expectations influence the perceptions of factors that influence and sometimes limit their thinking and decision making. (p. 44)

Benefits of Action Learning

Action learning has many benefits at the individual, team, and organizational levels. At an individual level, action learning is considered to be a mechanism for developing individuals faster and better (Dotlich & Noel, 1998). Specifically, action learning is seen as one of the most effective means to develop management and leadership skills (Conger & Toegel, 2003; Dilworth, 1998; Dotlich & Noel; Inglis, 1994; Marquardt, 2004; Weinstein, 1998). For example, participants develop the skills to improve their relationships at work, as well as effective approaches to learning and delegation, project management skills, and facilitation skills (McGill & Beaty, 1995). Action learning also helps a participant to understand a concept intellectually, apply new

skills, gain experience, and then undergo an inner development that leads to personal development (Marquardt, 2004; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Weinstein, 1999).

At a group or team level, action learning helps to develop strong teams and build skills for individuals to work effectively in teams (Marquardt, 2004; Inglis, 1994). The process of ongoing questioning and sharing learning builds powerful caring and cohesion among the members, and improves social processes such as helping each other learn (Weinstein, 1999).

At an organizational level, action learning is an effective way to accelerate organizational learning (Marquardt, 2004; McGill & Beaty, 1995). Action learning can be an important vehicle for transforming an organization's culture by helping to break down silos, create synergy, and encourage collaboration (Dilworth, 1998; Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Weinstein, 1998). All these benefits can contribute to improving a company's performance (Conger & Toegel, 2003). For example, 3M uses the recommendation from action learning projects (e.g., R&D productivity, e-productivity, and global business development) as inputs into growth plans for business (Alldredge, Johnson, Stoltzfus, & Vicere, 2003). In addition, companies can also raise revenue or cut costs by resolving real business problems (Dotlich & Noel; Marquardt, 1999; Weinstein).

Action Learning and Adult Learning

Key adult learning theories have been incorporated into action learning (Marquardt, 2004; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003). This section discusses how the theories and principles of the five key learning schools are incorporated into action learning.

Constructivism and Action Learning

Action learning incorporates key principles of constructivism. An emphasis on action or experience in constructivism (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984; Weick, 1979) is consistent with the emphasis on taking action in action learning. In action learning, a commitment to taking action is a key vehicle for learning (Marquardt, 1999). For Revans (1997), the principle of action learning was to “learn by doing” (p. 8).

Reflection is key to learning in constructivism (Dewey, 1933; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991). Beginning with Revans in 1982, reflection and questioning have been core components of action learning (Marquardt, 2004; Marsick, 1990; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Mumford, 1997). Moreover, for constructivists such as Mezirow (1994) and Dewey (1933), posing a complex problem is critical to fostering reflection. Mezirow (1991) argues that most reflection takes place within a problem-solving context. Likewise, action learning occurs in the context of problem solving. In action learning programs, the participants typically solve real, complex business problems (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 1997).

According to constructivists (e.g., Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1998), dialogue is also crucial for fostering reflection and learning. Action learning provides an ideal environment that enables dialogue. In other words, participants are involved in dialogue with peers and coaches as equal beings.

Constructivists view the role of an educator as one that “facilitates and negotiates meaning with the learner” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 264). This role is similar to the role of a coach in action learning. The coach helps the group members make meaning

of what they learn by asking questions and providing feedback, and by challenging assumptions (Waddill & Marquardt, 2003).

Congruence between constructivism and action learning lies in the similarity of their learning processes. According to Marquardt (2004), the learning cycle in action learning goes through the same cycle proposed by Kolb (1984). Kolb's learning model also emphasizes the balance between dialectically opposed dimensions, e.g., the balance between concrete experience and reflective observation. Action learning enables a balance to occur between action and reflection (Dotlich & Noel, 1998).

Social Learning and Action Learning

For social learning theorists, a social setting that encourages social interaction with and observation of others is central to fostering learning (Bandura, 1977; Phares, 1980). Action learning provides such a social setting. Learning is social (Revens, 1982). Participants work on their problems or tasks in action learning sets, which include individuals from different backgrounds, functions, and business units (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 1999). Accordingly, the diverse experiences and knowledge of each participant is brought to solving the problem. The set members' interaction and exchange of their diverse experiences and knowledge facilitates learning (Dotlich & Noel; Revans, 1998). The set members also learn by observing each other in the process of action learning.

Active participation in a community of practice is also important in social learning theories (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Action learning sets are learning communities that enable the set members to actively participate. In social learning, an educator's role is to model and guide new roles and behaviors (Merriam &

Caffarella, 1999). The role of a coach in action learning is congruent with this role. The coach becomes a model for empowerment which includes respecting others, questioning, and giving feedback (Marquardt, 2000). The participants learn from modeling the coach.

Humanism and Action Learning

The humanist orientation is also incorporated into action learning. First, congruent with humanism, action learning involves the whole person in the learning situation. Unlike the conventional management education approaches that address pieces of the whole, action learning delivers a cognitive, affective, and business-focused experience (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 2004).

Humanists emphasize that adults are best motivated to learn when they perceive that learning will help them cope with real-life problems or tasks (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Rogers, 1983). Similarly, in action learning programs, participants address real problems or tasks that are significant to their work or their organization (Revans, 1997; Weinstein, 1999).

The fact that adults are capable of self-direction and autonomous work is another key concept for humanists (Knowles et al., 2005; Rogers, 1983). Action learning also incorporates this concept. Participants solve the problems individually or with the set members. This is usually accomplished without expert help. Sponsors of the problems do not provide the answers. The participants are empowered to develop and implement these ideas. The learning coaches empower the participants, and facilitate learning by providing feedback, encouraging reflection, confronting, challenging, and questioning (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 2004). In action learning, participants are also free to act, ask questions, and experiment with new ideas (Marquardt, 2004).

Cognitivism and Action Learning

Understanding the whole is central to cognitive learning theories. One implication of Lewin's (1951) field theory is that problem solving requires understanding of the whole field surrounding the problem. This involves determining how the interaction of related forces influences the problem, and identifying the underlying causes of the whole. Action learning also emphasizes the use of systems thinking that views the whole picture (Marquardt, 2004). Specifically, in action learning, diverse group members use reflective inquiry to work on complex problems. This process of inquiry enables the member to "think beyond symptoms to root causes, and to explore a wide array of perspectives" (2004, p. 93).

Both cognitivism and action learning view questioning and reflection as the core of the learning process (Marsick, 1990; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003). For Argyris and Schön (1978), double-loop learning takes place when individuals question their basic assumptions after they have acted. As well, the questioning and reflective process is a central component of action learning (Revans, 1982; Marsick, 1990). This process helps group members examine their dilemmas, values, beliefs, and assumptions (Marsick, 1990). Double-loop learning is likely when individuals engage in this process.

Behaviorism and Action Learning

A behaviorist orientation requires the design of a learning environment that provides the learner with stimuli as well as reinforcement for the learner's responses (Grippin & Peters, 1984; Skinner, 1974). Action learning programs provide such an environment for participants. First, in action learning programs, participants are asked to address real and challenging business problems or issues (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Pedler,

1997; Weinstein, 1999). These issues or problems serve as stimuli (Marquardt, 2004; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003). The participants are required to solve the problem within a certain time limit, and to give recommendations and new ideas to the top managers. This acts as a stimulus to the participants' creativity.

Secondly, action learning participants are provided with both short-term and long-term reinforcements. Participants have many opportunities to receive feedback on their behaviors, ideas, and presentations. This feedback is provided by learning coaches, set members, and sponsors. In response to the feedback, the participants are likely to increase or decrease the frequency of behaviors and ideas (Marquardt, 2004; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003).

Summary

The analysis of the connection between adult learning and action learning, illustrates that action learning incorporates diverse adult learning theories. The power and applicability of action learning suggests that action learning is one of the best approaches for adult learning (Marquardt, 2004; Wadill & Marquardt, 2003). The literature review also suggests that action learning may be very effective in developing transformative learning. However, as suggested by the review, there has been scant research which has examined the relationship and impact on transformative learning.

The relationship and connection between transformative learning and action learning, illustrates that action learning incorporates diverse adult learning theories. Similar conditions, beliefs, and skills are employed to achieve an action or result. Action learning is based on the premise that no real learning takes place until action is taken (Mumford, 1995). Some of the benefits of action learning are greater self-awareness and

self-confidence, an ability to ask better questions and be more reflective, and improved communication and teamwork (Marquardt, 1999).

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) is a highly social process that requires open communication and information from others. Other individuals precipitate the trigger for learning, provide alternative perspectives, give support for change, and require new relationships to be developed within the context of a new perspective. In addition, the power and applicability of action learning suggests that action learning is one of the best approaches for adult learning (Marquardt, 2004; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003). The literature review suggests that action learning may be very effective for developing transformative learning outcomes. However, as suggested by the review, there has been limited research which has examined the relationship of action learning on changes in transformative learning experience.

Chapter III
METHODOLOGY

Overview

It is through reflection that individuals make meaning of the things themselves in their lives. Frankl (1988) captures the idea of meaning construction through phenomenology in the following quote:

Phenomenology is an attempt to describe the way in which man understands himself, in which he interprets his own existence, far from the preconceived patterns of interpretation and explanation such as furnished by psychodynamic or socio-economic hypotheses. (p. 7)

Research in this genre of understanding focuses on the participants' experience and meaning making as experienced by them, not keen descriptions of overt actions or behavior by the researcher. Meaning making takes place at the intersection of the physical world in which experience transpires, and the mental emotional world of the participant. This individual-world intersect is where the greatest understanding can materialize and phenomenology seems to best lend itself to discovery.

This research employed a phenomenological approach to the examination of baby boomer adults' perception and description of transformative learning experiences within an action learning group. The relationship between transformative learning and action learning is unclear and under-explored, although review of the literature suggests that there is a potential relationship.

In 1981, Mezirow stated that "the concept of adult learning which plays such a crucial role in the adult learning process and perspective transformation needs phenomenological study" (p.11). This chapter discusses the phenomenological research tradition and describes the specific methods employed in this study. Particular attention is

paid to the phenomenological interview method, the major data collection vehicle. The research design, unit of analysis, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, the issue of trustworthiness, and human subjects review are also discussed.

Research Procedures

Epistemology

This study examined how baby boomer adults in action learning groups perceive and describe their transformative learning experiences. The epistemology of this study was concerned with meaning versus facts. After participation in a group to understand each participant's experience and the meaning of the experience, participants engaged in long, in-depth interviews. The goal was to understand the essence of the phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). This epistemology is also supported by Mezirow (1981), who based his work on Habermas (1971), Husserl (1931), and Schutz (1967).

Theoretical Perspective

The phenomenological research method was selected for this study because it supported the study's goal of examining how baby boomer adults in action learning groups perceive and describe the experience of transformative learning. Phenomenology "refers to knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Phenomenology is derived from the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning theory is based on the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1971) and the meaning-making theory (Schutz, 1967). These theories support this study's orientation, which is consistent with the

phenomenological research tradition. This study was less concerned with facts and more committed to describing meanings. In addition, the study employed Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning theory. This is based on a constructivist world view in which learning includes making meaning of one's experiences. Husserl (1931) suggested that knowledge is derived by making meaning from lived experiences. Mezirow's theory provides a viable framework to examine how baby boomer adults describe their experience of transformative learning.

Phenomenological Research Tradition

Phenomenology, a tradition of qualitative research, aims to understand a given experience from detailed accounts of those who have lived the experience. This approach "seeks to disclose and elucidate the phenomena of behavior as they manifest themselves in their perceived immediacy" (van Kaam, 1966, p. 15). Kockelmans (1967) suggested that it was Hegel who was the first to provide a comprehensive definition of the term. Moustakas (1994) noted, "For Hegel, phenomenology referred to knowledge as it appeared in the consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (p. 26). Husserl (1931) played a major role in the development of the phenomenological research tradition by developing a method of inquiry for deriving knowledge from lived experiences (Cloonan, 1995; Moustakas, 1994). The transfer of individual or empirical experience into essential insights is achieved through a process Husserl referred to as "ideation" (Kockelmans, 1967). Through this process, meanings result from blending objects that appear in the conscious with the same objects as they appear in nature. In this manner, knowledge is

extended. This process demonstrates a relationship between what exists in the conscious awareness and what exists in the world.

Husserl's (1931) phenomenology is a transcendental phenomenology because it emphasizes the subjectivity and detection of experience, and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology to transform conscious insights and experience into knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). This approach is referred to as "phenomenology" because it transforms the essence of experience and objects into phenomena. The approach is deemed to be transcendental because it relies on what can be discovered through reflection, from consciousness, and from the environment. Intentionality is essential to the relationship between consciousness and nature, which leads to discovery and expansion of knowledge. Moustakas (1994) suggested that intentionality is a crucial aspect of transcendental phenomenology, because it describes the internal experience of being conscious. Knowledge of intentionality requires that one be aware of oneself and of things in the world; and that one recognizes that the self and the world are distinct elements of meaning.

Klocelmans (1967) posited that consciousness requires openness and attention to other. Here, other refers to the world and its inhabitants. To be conscious is to be in an ongoing relationship between self and other. Intentionality directs consciousness toward something (whether it actually exists or not); one is perceiving something, thinking something, and remembering something real or imagined. In every intentional experience there is a material side and an ideal side. Noema (the what) is the material side of intentionality, or what is actually seen and experienced; while noesis (the how) is the ideal side that is perceived (Moustakas, 1994). Noema and noesis are critical aspects of

intentionality. Husserl (1931) introduced the concepts of noesis and noema, and suggested that noesis constitutes the mind and spirit of perception, and noema the physical. Noesis gives meaning to the noema, or the physical part of the experience. Noema is that which is experienced, and noesis is the sensory way it is experienced.

Husserl (1931) differentiated between the actual object and the intentional object as it appears in the consciousness:

The tree plain and simple, the thing in nature is different as it can be from the perceived tree as such, which as perceptual meaning belongs to the perception, and that inseparably. The tree plain and simple can burn away, resolve itself into chemical elements, and so forth. But the meaning of this perception, something that belongs necessarily to its essence-cannot burn away; it has no chemical elements no forces, no real properties. (p. 260)

Transcendental phenomenological research shares features with ethnographic approaches, grounded theory, hermeneutical approaches, empirical phenomenology, and heuristics. Qualitative research approaches distinguish it from traditional, quantitative research theories and methodologies. Phenomenological research describes the meaning of particular experiences as they are lived by individuals. It begins with the “things themselves,” or the individual(s) who have experienced them. According to Atkinson (1972), the task of a phenomenological researcher is the descriptive investigation of the contents of conscious phenomena (both objective and subjective) or of consciousness.

Four key practices distinguish phenomenology from other qualitative designs. The first is *epoche*, which involves the suspension of prior beliefs. Proponents of the phenomenological approach maintain that such suspension is critical to understanding the essence of a phenomenon under investigation. The researcher must attempt to eliminate any prejudgments, set aside presuppositions, and reach a transcendental state of freshness and openness. In so doing, the researcher established a readiness to see in an unfettered

way, and remains unconstrained by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of “normal science” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). Sanders (1982) stated that

The basis of phenomenology as a procedure is the belief that when individuals ask certain metaphysical questions they do so burdened with the mental baggage of assumptions—unquestioned definitions, categories or opinions that separate the scholar from the truth of things. The essential phenomenological attitude is the temporary suspension of all existing personal bias, beliefs, preconceptions or assumptions in order to get straight to the pure and unencumbered vision of what a thing “essentially is.” Husserl referred to this as “*epoche*” or bracketing. (p. 355)

The researcher set aside her presuppositions as she entered each action learning group meeting and interview, and then again as she encountered the transcripts of the interviews. Through this process the researcher attempted to make present her assumptions about the experience under investigation and shed common interpretations.

The second practice is *phenomenological reduction*, which Moustakas (1994) described as “returning to the self.” From “the vantage point of self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-knowledge,” phenomena can be experienced as if for the first time (Moustakas, p. 95). The researcher describes perceptions in rich, textural language, with each perception adding to the whole of his or her knowledge of the phenomenon. With each successive view or angle of perception, the researcher acquired deeper knowledge of the phenomenon and understanding of its distinctive characteristics. When the researcher was satisfied that she had accessed the core essence of the phenomenon, the statements or horizons that represent those perspectives were reviewed with attention to what was central or thematic to the experience. In the process called “horizontalizing” (Moustakas, 1994), statements that were irrelevant, or overlapping and repetitive were removed, leaving only those that became the invariant constituents of the phenomenon. This process was accomplished by analyzing the language used by the participants that

described their experience, and excluding comments within and across interviews that have similar essences. The invariant core constituents of the phenomenon were clustered into themes that represent the various dimensions of the phenomenon. It was this process that facilitated the development of the individual textural descriptions. Then a composite textural description was written as one of two final composite statements. By “horizontalizing” information, or viewing all statements as equal in value, and building rich descriptions from statements, phenomenological reduction interweaves “person, conscious experience, and phenomenon” (Moustakas, p. 97).

With the third practice, *imaginative variation*, the researcher offers possible meanings from divergent perspectives that are systematically and reflectively explored. After the researcher completed the individual and composite textural descriptions, she engaged in imaginative variation as a means of arriving at “the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). In this step, the researcher varied the possible meanings of the statements of the experience through the use of imagination and free association. This was an intuitive process and the researcher was mindful and remained open to whatever would be revealed which is the heart of this practice. Perspectives of phenomenon were considered from different vantage points and meanings in an effort to discern the structural elements that had come from the textural descriptions. This included “varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles or functions” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97-98). The challenge for the researcher was to discover the “how” of the experience. How is it that this experience is? What are the elements that have provided the conditions for

this experience to emerge? In application, this process involved both data and the consciousness of the researcher. As Moustakas noted, “consider...the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relations to others” (p. 99) as avenues of access to the invariant structural themes. Through imaginative variation, the researcher sought to penetrate the underlying dynamics of the experience and identified qualities that helped her understand how the experience was experienced by the participant. It was this process that facilitated the development of the individual structural descriptions. Then a composite structural description was written. The composite represents the core most fundamental and essential structures that explain what has been experienced. It described those elements which were foundational to the experience.

The final practice that distinguishes a phenomenological study is *synthesis*. Through synthesis, the researcher integrates the composite structural and textural descriptions into a statement that clearly and meaningfully describes the essences of the phenomenon under examination. It should reflect the experience of all the participants and viewed as the foundational expression of what is timeless in the experience under investigation. The researcher crafted the synthesis of the composite textural and composite structural description that responded to all themes. In this step it was important for the researcher to blend the textural themes in with the structural themes as a means of illustrating in the concrete what became a fairly abstract interpretation of the experience.

Phenomenology searches for the “essence” of an experience and emphasizes the intentionality of consciousness. For the phenomenologist, experiences contain both

outward appearance and inward consciousness that is based on memory, image, and meaning. The reader of a phenomenological study should feel that “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that [phenomenon]” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

There are numerous paradigmatic systems (e.g., positivist, post-positivist, constructivist, naturalistic, and critical) proposed by researchers such as Denzin and Lincoln (1994), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Patton (1990). This study focused on the interpretive paradigm. The methods employed in this research allowed the researcher to record participants’ observations and perceptions of their experience as a participant in an action learning group.

Information on participants, observations, and in-depth interviews was used to obtain data. Research under the interpretive paradigm recognizes that “what is constituted as knowledge by a particular group is also a social construction, the product of interpretive processes” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Research Design

Research Questions

The research questions for the study were as follows:

- a. Do baby boomer adults experience transformative learning while members of the action learning group?
- b. What elements of action learning contribute to transformative learning?
- c. What elements of action learning hinder transformative learning?

Population

According to Moustakas (1994), there are no advance criteria for locating and selecting participants for a phenomenological study because the aim of the study is to uncover the necessary structural invariants of an experience. Phenomenological researchers maintain that such invariants are fully discoverable in an individual case. However, Dukes (1984) suggested that there is a danger that the researcher will see only what he or she wants to see. Therefore, in this study, a convenience sample of 16 baby boomer adults provided “information-rich cases for in-depth studying” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Baby boomer adults are defined as North Americans born between 1946 and 1964 who see themselves at a midpoint in their lives. Criteria for the participants included an interest in solving a problem or attaining a goal; an interest in understanding the nature and meaning of a transformative learning experience; a willingness to participate in an action learning group, which included four three-hour, facilitated sessions over a four-week period; and a willingness to participate in an in-depth interview.

Baby boomer adults were recruited through personal references, professional and service associations, and network organizations such as Professional Dimensions, the American Society for Training and Development, and the Council of Small Business Executives.

Data Collection Methods

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. In this study, several approaches were used to collect data for analysis: reflection forms, limited observations, and in-depth interviews after participation in a group.

Observations

Observations were conducted during the action learning group meetings. Each observation session was limited to some notes with greater attention to observation. The researcher observed each group until confident that there little new material, and that the observation had reached saturation of data (Miles & Haberman, 1994; and Creswell, 1997). After each action learning group meeting, the researcher used audio recording to expand and clarify the collected data.

Creswell (1997) suggested that capturing the depth of experience required a number of essential steps:

1. Obtained permission to gain access to the site. In this study, sites selected by the researcher will be used for the action learning groups.
2. Selected an individual for each team to help gain greater insight and guidance concerning the team's (group's) operation and organization.
3. Established the researcher role. In this study, the researcher role was to be as an observer action learning coach as opposed to participant in any action learning group.
4. Designed an observational protocol. The protocol for this study included descriptive and reflective notes (i.e., notes about the researcher's experiences and reactions). Appendix B provides the initial observation protocol for the study.
5. Recorded the details of the observation on audiotape after each session.

In-depth Interviews

Phenomenological investigation involved in-depth interviews during which the researcher presented open-ended comments and structured questions. To encourage

honest comprehensive responses, the participant must feel comfortable during the interview. The researcher contacted each participant before the interview either by phone or email. As described in Appendix E, participants received an explanation of the study's purpose and data collection procedures as well as the written informed consent and an audio release form at the first group meeting.

The researcher conducted one face-to-face interview at the participants' settings of choice. This allowed participants to construct meanings by relating to the world in which they live in a familiar and comfortable setting (LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 1990). The interviews were conducted over a 14-day period to maintain continuity and momentum with the participants. In each 90-minute interview, the researcher asked participants to reflect on the meaning of experiences. The researcher and participants determined whether a session was extended or shortened. This was necessary because a phenomenological researcher must allow subjects to speak in their own way and at their own pace about the relevant aspects of the experience in question (Dukes, 1984). Field notes were also created to capture descriptive information that might not have been reflected in the tapes. Probing questions were used for clarification. Permission to conduct follow-up by telephone was requested at the end of each interview. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed within 48 hours to ensure that appropriate meanings were preserved.

Data Analysis

To reduce and analyze the data, the researcher used Moustakas' (1994, p. 122) seven-step modified van Kaam (1966) method of phenomenological analysis. The

NVivo© 7 (2007) computer software was used to sort and store data. The data analysis included the following activities:

1. The researcher provided a full description of her own opinion of the phenomenon
2. During the review of all interview transcripts, the researcher:
 - a. Considered each statement for its potential significance in describing the experience
 - b. Recorded all relevant statements
 - c. Listed each non-repetitive, non-overlapping statement, which formed the meaning units, or *horizons*, of the experience.
 - d. Related and clustered the invariant meaning units into themes.
 - e. Synthesized the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience, along with verbatim examples.
 - f. Reflected on personal textural descriptions and constructed a description of the structures of the experience
3. The researcher then constructed a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience. This involved integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a description that represented the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). Appendix D provides a more detailed explanation.

Verification

Creswell (1998) has defined verification as “a process that occurs throughout the data collection, analysis, and report writing of a study” (p. 194). Creswell suggested that

researchers use at least two methods of verification. For this study, three methods were used: epoche, member checking, and thick descriptions. The first method, epoche, involves clarifying the researcher's biases. The researcher provides a written description of any personal experiences, biases, prejudices, and/or orientations that could have influenced the researcher's interpretation of the data and approach to the study. This process is often regarded as a return to "natural science," because it relies on intuition, imagination, and a universal structure to obtain a picture of the experience the researcher is describing (Creswell, 1998).

The second method of verification is member checking. According to Lincoln (1985), this approach is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). With member checking, the researcher presents concise statements of the descriptions gathered from participants to the participants in order to validate the statements. The researcher then asks the participants the following question: "What aspects of your experience have I omitted?" Member checking is the most important way to avoid misinterpretation of participant perspectives (Maxwell, 1992).

Phenomenological researchers are committed to generating descriptions of experiences, rather than explanations or analyses therefore rich, vivid descriptions represent the third method of verification. The researcher composes detailed descriptions of the participants and settings under study. These descriptions enable the reader to identify shared characteristics and to transfer the findings to similar situations (Erlandson, 1993). Rich descriptions keep the phenomenon alive, accentuate its underlying meanings, and retain its spirit.

According to Polkinghorne (1989), validity is the extent to which a concept is well grounded and well supported. Polkinghorne suggested that, throughout the data gathering and analysis phases, researchers ask themselves the following five questions to determine the validity of their work:

- a. Did the interviewer influence the contents of the subjects' description in such a way that the descriptions do not truly reflect the subjects' actual experience?
- b. Is the transcription accurate and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation of the interview?
- c. In the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived? Has the research identified these alternatives?
- d. Is it possible to go from the general structural descriptions to the transcriptions and to account for the specific contents and connection in the original examples of the experience?
- e. Is the structural description situation specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations? (Creswell, 1998, p. 208)

The researcher, who followed Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation, asked the "validity questions" throughout data collection and analysis to establish trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln (1985) suggested that a qualitative study is of no value if its trustworthiness is questioned. Trustworthiness is defined as warranting trust. Trustworthiness serves to convince audiences that the findings of a study are worth taking into consideration. Trustworthiness can influence the attention accorded to

research in the literature and among researchers in the field, who might include findings of the work in their own investigations. The trustworthiness of a project is also of interest to participants who have dedicated their valuable time to contribute to the research. It is important that participants feel they have been adequately represented and their time has been well spent.

Lincoln presented four questions that should be considered in addressing trustworthiness: (1) *Truth value*: how can the research establish confidence for the study participants and for the context in which the research was implemented?; (2) *applicability*: how can one determine the extent to which the findings are applicable to other persons and settings?; (3) *consistency*: how can one determine if the findings would be the same if the study were repeated?; and finally, (4) *neutrality*: how can one establish that the findings are free from biases, motivations, interest, or perspectives of the researcher and the extent to which they are representative of the respondents?

Criteria related to these questions to ascertain trustworthiness were important. *Credibility* (truth value) is of concern for two reasons: (1) the need to conduct the study in a manner that will increase the probability that the findings will be accepted by the general audience, and (2) the need for the study participants to approve of the findings. In this study, the researcher employed epoche (bracketing) to set aside preconceived notions about the phenomena being studied. A reflective journal was used to differentiate between the researcher's own ideas about the phenomena being studied and those of the participants. Member checks were used to increase trustworthiness by providing participants with the opportunity to review and comment on transcripts of individual interviews. Peer reviews were also used to revise the data as needed.

Dependability was established by the following of epoche to ensure the appropriate distance between the researcher, the phenomena, and the participant. The goal is to maintain the study free of values of the inquirer. While this is never perfectly achieved, measures such as bracketing increase the likelihood of this occurring.

Transferability was not part of the study design. The sample included 12-16 baby boomer adults who are North Americans born between 1946 and 1964. Generalizability was not a consideration.

Confirmability was established by maintaining an audit trail with (1) all raw data such as copies of interview tapes and transcripts of all participants; (2) all data reduction and analysis products, and the researcher's journals and theoretical notes; (3) all data reconstruction and synthesis products, such as horizontalizations, textual structural descriptions, and individual notes on participants' interviews; and (4) all process notes such as the initial notes used to develop the design and to achieve trustworthiness, as well as other information gathered at each stage.

In this study, the researcher brought professional experience in facilitation, coaching, and the design of action learning groups and transformative (experiential) learning experiences. The researcher attempted to compensate for this potential bias by: a) asking subject matter experts and peers to review data collection, coding, and instruments for indicators of bias; b) remaining conscious of personal assumptions during interviews; and c) conducting member checks when appropriate.

The researcher focused on assessing whether and how apparent transformative learning occurred. This was done by checking with subject-matter experts and peers

throughout the research process, and using the NVivo© 7 (2007) computer software to store and code the data (See Appendix D).

These approaches to increase trustworthiness were used to establish confidence for the study participants and for the context in which the research was implemented. In addition, the goal was to increase the probability that the findings would be free from biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the researcher; and that the results were representative of the participants.

Protection of Human Subjects and Ethical Considerations

Given the nature of the study, no adverse impacts to the participants were anticipated. The following procedures (Creswell, 1997) were followed to avoid possible ethical issues for the researcher and participants. As described below, an informed consent in agreement with the requirements of The George Washington University was provided to the participants to ensure their understanding of the researcher's position on these ethical issues:

1. Each participant was required to sign an informed consent agreement in accordance with The George Washington University requirements.
2. Participants' anonymity was maintained throughout the study. Participants were identified via letter/number code to differentiate among responses and data collection methods.
3. The researcher informed participants of the purpose of the study, the procedures to be used in data collection, and their right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at anytime. This was reiterated in the cover letters, informed consent of agreements, and verbal explanations of the study.

4. The researcher acknowledged responsibility for the safeguarding and appropriate use of the data collected. Every effort was made to ensure confidentiality in conducting the study and reporting results.

Summary

Chapter III described the methods and procedures for gathering data from baby boomers adults, the target group for this study. The chapter describes methods for examining the significance as it relates to Mezirow (1991) transformative learning theory. The study employed a phenomenological method (Moustaches, 1994) to uncover the essence of the baby boomer adult experience through the use of coding and thematic analysis methods (Patton, 1990). A post-group participation interview, based on Mezirow transformative learning theory, was used to conduct interviews with each of the baby boomer adults.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to answer the overarching research question: How do baby boomer adults perceive and describe their transformative learning experiences within an action learning group context? This was answered by addressing three sub-questions: (1) Do baby boomer adults experience transformative learning? (2) What elements of action learning contribute to transformative learning? And, (3) what elements of action learning hinder transformative learning? These questions were answered by using the seven-step, modified van Kaam (1966) method of phenomenological analysis, as outlined by Moustakas (1994). The focus was to identify the perceptions and experiences of an action learning group of baby boomer adults as related to the (de)manifestation of transformative learning.

The research examined the methods by which baby boomer adults learned and how they perceived that learning within an action learning group setting. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the 16 self-selected participants in a setting of his or her choice. The researcher presented open-ended comments to structured questions. The interview data were the primary data used in the modified van Kaam (1966) analysis.

The researcher employed NVivo© 7 qualitative analysis software to analyze the interviews. Through analysis, the researcher identified themes comprised of clustered invariant constituents. From these themes, composite-textural, structural and textural-structural descriptions were written. The results of this study will determine the under-explored potential of action learning as an approach to develop transformative learning.

Participant Demographics

The study involved 16 self-selected baby boomer adult participants in action learning groups. The participants reflected on their experiences via in-depth, one-on-one interviews. The participants were baby boomers ranging in age from 45 to 60 years. There were 14 women and 2 men; all were born in North America and were Caucasian. Most had completed college and some held advanced degrees. The participants represented a wide range of occupations and professions – an editor, public relations directors, and executives from the hospitality, tourism, and staffing industries; an association manager, business owners and entrepreneurs, a vice president of sales, customer service manager, business developer, attorney, market research consultant and retired executive assistant. (See Table 1 for a complete list of participants' ages and occupations.) In this dissertation, the participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms in order to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality.

Table 1

Pseudonyms, Ages, and Occupations of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation
Meredith	52	Former editor, job seeker
Jane	51	Public relations professional
Rebecca	51	Public relations professional
Colleen	56	Marketing and product development consultant
Monica	60	Tourism industry executive VP
Kate	53	International association executive director
Peggy	57	Commercial real estate owner and entrepreneur
Alice	45	Staffing industry senior-level sales manager
Helen	52	Technology firm VP of business development
Marta	59	Business owner
Betsy	54	Retired administrative assistant
Mary Beth	50	Former corporate executive, entrepreneur
Robert	51	Attorney
Toni	47	Educational institution administrator
Tanya	51	Upper-level human resources manager
George	47	Former hospitality industry executive, job seeker

Epoche

Epoche is a Greek word that means to stay away or abstain. In phenomenological research tradition, it is also described as bracketing. The researcher uses this technique to set aside his or her prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas in preparation for best understanding the phenomena as described by the participants and for deriving new knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

This researcher employed epoche by meditating before each interview to set aside her personal bias regarding the phenomena. She began by bracketing her preconceived ideas about the phenomenon so as to understand it through the accounts of participants. She accomplished this by reflecting on each question in the interview protocol. To clear her mind of influences of personal biases, the researcher considered and set aside her past

experiences. The researcher's resulting interest in action learning, transformative learning and deep change motivated this study.

Interview Findings

The researcher, with the aid of NVivo© 7 software, grouped the data according to themes based on the emerging invariant constituents. The interview data were analyzed by the seven-step, modified van Kaam (1966) method of analysis of phenomenological data. In Step 1, listing and primary grouping, horizontalization occurred with each relevant expression of the experience listed. In Step 2, reduction and elimination, each expression was evaluated for the two requirements of Moustakas (1994) and only those qualifying as central were retained and labeled as invariant constituents. It is important to note that the specific invariant constituents identified by this research are not necessarily the words used by the participants who shared the experiences described by the invariant constituents. The invariant constituents are a word or phrase that embodies a *general notion* described by participants. When participants used the actual word or phrase, it was merely coincidental. The invariant constituents describe the *sentiments* of the participants' experiences rather than explicitly restating verbatim the participants' words. After horizontalization, reduction, and elimination, participant responses were grouped according to their content, with the resulting groups labeled as the invariant constituents. In Step 3, clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, related invariant constituents were clustered together to create the appropriate thematic labels. In Step 4, final identification of invariant constituents and themes by validation, the themes were verified as important and relevant to the research questions. In Step 5, individual textural descriptions with verbatim examples were formed for each participant. In Step 6,

individual structural descriptions were formed from the textural descriptions for each participant. In Step 7, composite descriptions and textural-structural descriptions, composite descriptions were formed from the participants' textural and structural descriptions. From these composite descriptions a final textural-structural description was formed.

Listing and Primary Grouping

After listing and grouping the data, the researcher examined all data and identified the preliminary invariant constituents and themes. NVivo© 7 qualitative analysis software was used and the results checked for validity and context. Horizontalization occurred during this primary step. Horizontalization was completed by examining each of the participant interviews for relevant descriptions of the participant's lived experiences. The relevant descriptions were excerpted and later reduced, categorized, and further analyzed to determine their connections to the relevant themes. The process first horizontalized the data on an individual participant basis, and then combined the refined data to further continue the analysis. Several excerpts were identified from each participant interview and these became the invariant constituents.

Reductions and Elimination

Each of the expressions determined during the listing and grouping phase (horizontalization) were then tested for relevance in order to determine the actual invariant constituents. Overlapping, repetitive, or vague expressions were eliminated at this step as prescribed by Moustakas (1994). The expressions that withstand this elimination round are the invariant constituents that appear.

Clustering and Thematizing

Invariant constituents were identified through analysis of the baby boomers' interviews, the names of which have been changed to pseudonyms, and used to form thematic labels. Reviewing the invariant constituents and the thematic labels facilitated the emergence of specific themes. The thematic labels found were (1) methods utilized to reflect; (2) methods utilized to contribute to or trigger learning; (3) aspects which hindered learning; (4) transformations of speakers; and (5) characteristics of the overall group experience.

Horizontalization

The researcher gave equal consideration to each statement in the verbatim transcript of each participant's interviews, in order to examine each statement's significance in describing their experience in the action learning group context. Each horizon, or statement, contributed to an understanding of the baby boomer's experience. These horizons informed the invariant constituents, the textural and structural descriptions, and finally the composite textural-structural descriptions. This process of horizontalization produced the raw data for analysis. In the following subsections, excerpts from the transcripts of interviews with three participants are presented here as representative examples of the horizontalization process. Horizontalization was completed by examining each participant interview for relevant descriptions of the participant's lived experiences. The relevant descriptions of experiences have been highlighted in each of the following excerpts.

Horizontalization Excerpts from Rebecca's Interview

1. "There was a high level of trust and empathy among the group and I wondered what it would have been like if it had been a coed group. All women tend to be more communicative and empathetic."

2. "Taking the time to reflect on some things. I would say, for instance, saying that I'm underpaid, I'm underappreciated at work, and I really don't network much anymore because I just don't have the motivation to do that. What relearning was, was hearing from other people well, yes, but everybody else in the room by the time we're at this point in our careers we actually have had accomplishments and it just sort of relearning or learning a different way to look at where you are."

3. "I think it was reflecting with other members in the group that helped me relearn that self-worth and the value of the career that you've had. And that would be a tool that would get me into kind of like thinking, 'It's going to be OK to retire,' or 'It's going to be OK to work at another job down the line.'"

4. "I personally reflect by looking back at notes and at the end of every month."

5. "Yeah. I had kept diaries, and in fact that actually helped me."

6. "I think discussing, listening to everybody evaluate their own situations and their feelings really helps you reflecting back on your situation, too."

7. "I think that one thing that I had learned is these sort of, limit your discourse to the topics that you first raised, otherwise you're going to be all over the place. I mean, it's kind of interesting."

8. "We've got the will written. I've got the financial plan in place. I found more business. I advertised in the PD newsletter. All of these action steps."

9. “Maybe my old attitude, “You know, I really should be at a different place in my career,” when in fact, I’m actually at a good place.”

10. “Again, I think I started at the group and you wonder who everybody is, in that discourse and reflecting on everyone’s experience it just reinforced my ego a little bit or something. It was interesting. I think everybody thinks they could be in a better place or that they had been in a better job.”

11. “And then when we all started here, we were all sort of a little less than we thought, we weren’t back where we used to be. There was something that was better.

12. I think just more positive attitude. I think everybody had a more positive attitude, and had a few tools to work with, whether it was journaling or the ability to say, ‘You know, I could get a different job, or write a book, or put your brochure together.’ The action steps helped or identified.”

13. “Those five action steps, I’ll look back on.”

14. “I really haven’t discussed everyday job career with anybody, and so these four nights gave me that opportunity and kind of put me back on the level playing field that I always pictured myself to be in. So, the bottom line for me was just like, it was almost sort of like therapy, but that could be very true because we all came in with a personal take on something.”

15. “This is what I really feel overall. There was an emotional change or rethinking.”

16. “Yeah. And a change in my value to my employer, a change of attitude about that back to what it really is. But again I think without discussion or any reinforcement on a daily basis just sort of addressing how you need that reinforcement.”

17. “Well, I’ve changed priorities to look for business networking opportunities. I actually looked around to find out what awards I could apply for. Schedule time to just talk to my husband about financial planning and what we’re going to do with the will and what are we doing six months from now.”

18. “Well, I would say that my husband sees me as a little more optimistic and buoyant, and optimistic about going to work every day. You know, reporting in at the end of the day of accomplishments. So I think he has a little bit of pride in the fact that I went to go do it. Positive reinforcement.”

19. “Reflecting on other people’s situations. Listening to their evaluation of my situation. The peer pressure of needing to be able to report in the next week.”

20. “What else hindered me from learning? Time limitations, just the time to explore.”

21. “It was a help because it kept everybody kind of thinking and moving and on our toes. Then you knew, well, she’s going to lay out her situation this week and then it’s up to us to then start paying attention and thinking of the questions. In that way, that was a help.”

22. “In the end, what came out of it, what I really grabbed onto was restoring self-esteem, grabbing onto some action activities that I could do.”

23. “It was a successful experience because it was very gratifying to meet other people and reflect back on your own situation and see that, you know, you’re just pretty normal and that everybody has challenges, some of them even larger than yours. So it was a real positive experience for my ego, and also just in terms of the approach to my

job. I have a much more positive aspect, a positive outlook about my daily work and my potential for doing things.”

24. “I really enjoyed just meeting the people, too. And getting some ideas and seeing people’s levels of enthusiasm or senses of humor. It was a kind of a special treat to have a group, kind of like joint counseling, where there’s again, as we started out with, the level of trust and empathy and sort of what stays in this room stays in the room.”

Horizontalization Excerpts from Alice’s Interview

1. “I think what was the most interesting for me how cohesive the group became so quickly. It was rapid cohesiveness and a lot of instant trust. That was like table stakes and everyone knew it and I felt very comfortable saying things that, frankly, I’ve said to no other person in my life. I don’t know why. It just seemed like the time to do it. I felt very supported. It was neat. Good chemistry.”

2. “With that kind of group and the backgrounds, you can’t help but learn something, I think, every conversation, dialogue that you have, you’re going to learn something. Well, it’s called ‘action learning’.”

3. “I think when members of the team asked some of the simple questions were really the hardest. I think saying some things out loud that you know or that you want to do or that, I guess, learning I guess in this sense is to me more action-oriented. Self-discovery, so when people ask you simple questions, and thoughtful questions.”

4. “Sometimes just the follow-up questions would be deeper than you wanted. This is getting painful. I brought it up and I do have to answer and they’re holding me accountable. Some it’s just forced self-knowledge when you speak something out loud,

and very simple statements said by others that just end up [to] resonate, that are simple but profound.”

5. “It’s almost like I have to talk to myself. I put up little Post-it notes just to remind myself of things that I kind of need to keep in focus or ongoing reflection.”

6. “For me, I think the discourse was an integral part of the learning because you’re asking questions which in some cases are challenging. ‘Why are you still in the job you’re in if you’re so miserable?’ ‘I don’t know.’ ‘What are you going to do about it?’ ‘I don’t know!’ I think that that was, discourse really pushes you forward in terms of learning and action.”

7. “I think the ‘why’ question is really powerful sometimes. I find myself using that a lot when I’m coaching people, when they’re kind of stuck. Quite a few times I found it used on me, too, as part of this process.”

8. “Yeah, I think the biggest thing – I’m not even sure who said it; it might have been Kate – in terms of just finding things that are your own and holding them, and don’t let her take any more, just kind of find and hold onto your own things (I don’t know what word to use.). So, that was important to me.”

9. “So I’ve talked with four other people who are peers of mine and kind of shared with them, actually shared with them the whole concept of the group, what we were doing, and because I trust them, what the issue was, and then kind of sharing what I was getting because I thought it was so powerful for me that I wanted them to know, too. Hugely well-received. Huge. Huge.”

10. “Yeah, I think it was about the control and really, and the realization that you’re not going to be there, figure out how to survive, keep control and just recognize

that you're not going to be there. So, it's almost like saying that out loud, that no, I can't stay there for long, it was almost like this wave of relief that came over me."

11. "I think another outcome is that more validation of work cannot be so much of who I am."

12. "Because I feel a whole heck of a lot better and I just thought of it now. I actually admitted to the group that I was on the anti-depressants. I don't think I have, I haven't really consciously thought about it until right now, but I'm a bad pill-taker but I haven't taken any probably since our last meeting."

13. "I think maybe what we just talked about, about the work thing can't be be-all, end-all. You know, you got to have more balance and what I shared previously about how yesterday was just so ... and I did no work. You know, that was O.K. I can feel good about doing things and not necessarily so worried about the title and the identity and stuff. I mean, it still lingers, but it's not as, it's not as prevalent."

14. "I think everyone in the group was really awesome. I think Kate was probably best at asking questions, very thoughtful questions. She's an excellent listener and can translate it into a question."

15. "I would say probably more positive. I was sending off highly negative radiation there for a while which is yeeuch, you know that's not good."

16. "So I think people who knew me well would be like, "She's getting back on track. Her situation isn't really any better, but she's dealing with it better." Not perfect, but better."

17. “So, I think that there are just a few little phrases that I kind of try to, you know, ‘Fake it ‘til you make it,’ ‘Is this relevant?’ and kind of ‘Protect yourself,’ are kind of some guiding things that I ...”

18. “I think they were genuinely interested, and like Helen kind of followed up with me in between. Kind of, ‘You’re going to do that? O.K.’ Just accountability. I think one week I’m almost embarrassed. You know, ‘Well, what have you done?’ ‘Not as much as I should.’ Accountability and then follow-up. I’d be curious if some of them want to continue to do this.”

19. “I think, no. The only thing that I worried about sometimes, and I feel like I kind of monopolized the discussion sometimes.”

20. “It’s like very simple and very difficult at the same time, the questioning. It’s a lot about listening and being in the other person’s moment and not yours and not giving advice.”

21. “Some of it just needed to be stated. The questioning was definitely the more difficult but yet the more powerful when we were able to do that, when you locked on the right question. Maggie got really good at that, too. I think I was the worst at the questioning.”

22. “I really do. I have a ways to go, but I think I’m happier. Thank you.”

Horizontalization Excerpts from Betsy’s Interview

1. “I noticed that as the weeks progressed that the comfort level with the group got better. People were much more open and we became more cognizant of how we were interacting, we knew we were supposed to ask questions and that was a hard transition

instead of giving opinions or giving advice and, 'Oh, I'd try this.' So to put it in the form of a question, I think, was quite a challenge, and I think as we progressed that got better."

2. "Well, I think you as a facilitator really were quite helpful in guiding us and directing us. Learning how other people handled challenges was beneficial."

3. "It was also interesting to see that, here you have this group of accomplished, very accomplished people and they were all struggling with something, and wanting to learn how to kind of move from one place to another. That was interesting and I think possibly that that has something to do with our age and we've all been through a lot and we all have high expectations of ourselves."

4. "We see the clock ticking and we have certain goals and certain things that we want to accomplish. And I also noticed a change in where it seemed everyone had the same focus that they wanted to do things that they enjoyed more, that they got more fulfillment from, that they felt a real sense of accomplishment. To some extent the dollars come into play."

5. "I think when you leave the group you're thinking about what transpired, especially when you left with a kind of plan of action for the week. Then you're thinking, 'Well, what did we talk about? What did we learn from it, and how am I going to use what I learned this week to move forward?'"

6. "Well, I read my notes and so it's not all from memory. I'm a big note-taker; I always have been. So, I like to look over my notes. I like to make further notes based on that, kind of an action. You think it, then once you write it down it almost seems like now you have to do it. Just the thought. Once you write it down, kind of make a to-do list – I'm great at to-do lists and then it feels good to cross it off. You feel a sense of

accomplishment, like, ‘Ooh, I got that done!’ And sometimes to-do lists push from week to week and that’s O.K.”

7. “I think reflection in general when you think of past experiences I think lots of times you may base future, what you do in the future, by how things have gone for you in the past when you’ve done a certain thing a certain way. Sometimes those habits are hard to break and sometimes maybe it’s not a great way to proceed, so sometimes it’s good to mix it up a little bit and try new ways.”

8. “Yes, when Robert kind of told me to get over it. He was so wonderful. I mean, everybody was wonderful, but he had the guts to kind of step out there and say that; everybody was probably thinking it. He didn’t say it really in the middle of the group; he said it at the end of the group, basically, just to me.”

9. “So, that was a turning point for me. I thought, ‘O.K., they’ve accepted me for who I am. Now get over the fact that you’ve had this injury.’ Even though, people who don’t have that don’t really get the whole thing, because when your whole life is turned upside down, when your career is lost, and your marriage is lost, and your health is lost, that’s huge.”

10. “And you don’t just get over it, and it’s always going to be there with you. Oh, and your self-esteem, too! And the ability to read, and you know, put together sentences, and memory, all those things.”

11. “I think possibly my main growth was emotional. Feeling a certain level of acceptance by the people in the group. I did learn—I mean I’ve always been a pretty good communicator—I did learn that asking questions and being asked questions makes you think a lot harder about a situation rather than someone telling you, ‘This is what you

should do,' and sometimes you go, 'Oooh,' or, you know. So, I think I did learn that maybe in interacting with people going forward that just lending your advice or what you might think might be their next step isn't always the best approach. Yeah, I guess I did learn quite a bit."

12. "I think it gave me some confidence to -- you know when I got out of your group, I thought, 'You know, maybe I should go take a class. This was fun. I really liked ... But something where there would be an opportunity for discussion, not just lecture.'"

13. "Well, I think that I touched on that in my last answer, that giving advice or giving the benefit of your knowledge is not always the best way to help someone or to have a discussion about something."

14. "They might have their act together to certain extent but we're all searching for something more, something better, something different. That was an observation that I made. No matter how much education one had or how high up on the ladder they were or how great their family life is, that everybody seemed to be searching for a bit more. I didn't sense—I mean, there was a certain level of contentment, but there was more ... and I think because everybody was so candid that people are struggling a little bit with certain things. That's what I took away from it."

15. "It kind of turned on the curious switch that makes me want to learn more, possibly about action learning, and about other things."

16. "Well, I shared with my mother just a bit about what we were doing, not about the discussion, but the form, you know, what we were doing, and she noticed, I think she commented that I was looking so forward to the next sessions: 'I haven't seen you this excited about something in a while.'"

17. “I think the setting was very helpful. It was a very relaxed setting. You felt like you were in someone’s home, really. I think that the direction that you gave us was very helpful.”

18. “The fact that it was stated that things that were said in the room stayed in the room, I think, provided that confidentiality comfort level that people did share a lot more than they might have if we hadn’t discussed that and made a pact. I thought that was very important.”

19. “Well, it was successful for me because I did the work. I attended all the sessions. I thought about it a lot during the week. I listened in the group. I tried to participate as much as I felt my participation would be helpful. I learned a lot from them, they really wanted to help you. You got that sense that this wasn’t just an exercise, that it was genuine.”

The highlighted excerpts above show which phrases were determined to be relevant to the research aims and questions. After these phrases were identified, they were reviewed for relevancy, grouped according to their content, and eventually were the elements fundamentally making up the emergent themes.

Individual Textural Descriptions

Creswell (1998) suggested that the textural description refers to the “what” of the appearing phenomenon. The textural description describes in concrete, full terms what composed the experience. This includes a full description of the individual’s conscious experience as relayed to the researcher, and it includes the thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, and situations that composed the experience. The 16 textural descriptions that follow demonstrate that while elements are unique to each baby boomer experience, other

aspects of the experience were shared by all study participants. These shared elements constitute the composite textural description, which follows the individual textural descriptions. These descriptions include excerpts from the collected interview transcripts, and provide literal examples of the participants' feelings and thoughts about the invariant constituents and themes.

Textural Description for Meredith

Meredith refers to reflection as “the vehicle for change.” She reflects by having an inner conversation while “doing something mindless.” She uses reflection as a method of problem solving. Meredith stated, “You know, that is how I solve problems, especially work-related problems...I think for lots of business things, the best I've done is when I've just been doing something else completely mindless.” She continued, “And the answer only comes when I'm doing something else and not focusing on the particular issue or problem.”

Meredith believes that questions and subsequent introspection trigger learning. She said, “People ask a question, to answer it you have to think through how you feel and so that's how you learn.” Continuing, she stated, “The right question sticks in your mind and so you learn from that. I mean, if you ask yourself the question again later, outside the group, I think those are the things that you learn from because then you focus on a few of them that you really need to solve.”

Meredith feels as if there were no hindrances to the learning process. She did speculate about the possibility of one such hindrance: “In some groups it might be a person, maybe there might be someone who you ended up not wanting to speak more openly in front of. You know, the group itself can be an impediment or something about

the group, but I don't think that was true in this case. I just don't think there was a barrier."

Meredith said she became slightly more proactive as a result of participating in the group. When asked how someone she knows well would describe her as different following participation, she responded, "It would be optimal, I guess, if the answer was 'I see her taking certain steps to an action.' I've already done a resume." She also believed that none of her beliefs or assumptions she previously held were changed, only dormant ones brought to light. Meredith stated, "It's not so much that it challenged a belief or an assumption. I think it just, like running a highlighter over something; it really just brought it to the forefront."

Meredith believes the experience was "very nice" and that the group was "collaborative" and "came together easily." Overall, she classified the experience by saying, "The group experience was really pleasant and helpful."

Textural Description for Jane

Jane said, "Reflecting is just sort of hearing that inner voice as to how you responded to something...and then deciding whether that was really what I meant to do or meant to say." She stated that, "reflection plays a huge role for me because I mull over things multiple times and in multiple ways...I don't think there are a lot of black and white, yes and no answers in my world."

Jane believes that hearing herself aloud made a difference in the learning process. She stated, "I think the group validated a little bit for me who I was. By saying it out loud sometimes you also learn." She also cited questions as a trigger for learning. Jane said, "The questions make you think and if you have to respond...then your process of

explaining how you feel is a learning process, because you have to have some reasons for choosing the words you're using to respond." She mentioned discourse as stimulating her thinking process, saying, "I think that discourse played a critical role in my thinking process, what I was thinking about."

Jane suggested that learning could have been greater had problems been discussed in more depth. "I think we could have prodded deeper. We could have uncovered a couple layers," she stated. She said that the cause of this lack of in depth conversation was likely a result of "time constraints."

Jane said she encountered an attitude change as a result of her participation. She stated, "I'm feeling a little bit different than I was before. My attitude is different. [I'm] just not quite as angry [anymore]." She also felt more proactive as a result of her participation: "The people who know me know that I'm sort of talking about change (now) and how to change what does that mean and what do I want to do. The point that I was at was just to be quiet about [the problem] and find other outlets and figure out how to work my way to work around it. So I think I've been talking a little bit more about it in the last couple weeks."

Jane believes the experience was a success because, "It made me think and I met some interesting people. I learned some things about myself, some things I wasn't doing, at least in a work situation, and some things that I wanted to change, or wanted it to be different at work. So, overall, I thought it was very successful." She described the group as "dynamic."

Textural Description for Rebecca

Rebecca reflects by “looking back at notes.” She said, “At the end of every month I’ll look back over the calendar and go through every day...and pick up to see what did or didn’t happen or what needs to be finished yet.” She also mentioned keeping diaries for years.

Accountability served a large role as a contributor to learning according to Rebecca. She stated, “The peer pressure of needing to be able to report in the next week (contributed).” She also cited “reflecting on other people’s situations” as a contributor to learning. She said that discourse resulted in learning. Rebecca said, “We all really learned things just from sort of the spin-offs.”

Rebecca believes that time was a hindrance to learning. She said, “In the beginning we all agreed, these would be two and a half hour sessions, sometimes it was three, and just the problem is that there are other time commitments, and if you needed to leave and it wasn’t done, you know, that was kind of hard.”

Rebecca feels more motivated and proactive as a result of her participation. When asked how she handled a situation differently as a result of her participation, she said: “Scheduling myself to go out and join, get involved in the social networking, and just really was not motivated to do that. “ She believes her ego was reinforced through discourse and reflection. “...in that discourse and reflecting on everyone’s experience it just reinforced my ego a little bit.” Rebecca believes that participants’ attitudes improved during the course of the meetings, including her own. She stated, “I think just more positive attitude (developed).”

Rebecca classified the overall experience as gratifying. She stated, “It was a successful experience because it was very gratifying to meet other people and reflect back...” She also described the group as trustworthy, “communicative and empathetic.”

Textural Description for Colleen

Colleen believes reflection plays a “big role” in her learning process. She reflects by, “putting my mind at ease and sitting back and thinking when I’m uninterrupted with anything else.” Colleen suggested that questions triggered learning experiences for her. She stated, “Some of the probes, some of the things people asked me, some of the questions that were asked made me think about myself and my situation. So I learned some things about others and just took in what they had to say, constructively.”

Colleen says time constraints may have hindered the learning process. She stated, “I wish some of it could have gone on longer but some of us had other commitments a couple of evenings. The timeframe I guess constrained a little bit, but that’s all.”

The process gave Colleen more confidence. She said, “It gave me a little more confidence, I have to say that. I haven’t had a specific time that I can think of when I’ve done anything to act as a result, but it certainly reinforced my confidence.”

Colleen “thought in a very short order it was a very trusting group.” She stated, “It (the experience) was successful because of the dynamics of the people, just the warm feeling that I came away with. It was just good because of the trust we all had with one another and it was just a good experience.”

Textural Description for Monica

Monica said about reflection, “I think it plays more (of a role) than I realized, because I think I do reflection. I don’t take time, I don’t sit down and do yoga, or take

time, as you suggested, in the morning to do reflective questions. I do it when I drive. I do it when I'm working out. So I think I'm a reflective person." She continued, "I'll pose a challenge or an idea in my head and I'll think about the angles...If it's decision-making, I'll go through the pros and cons. And I'm a good list-maker, too, so sometimes I will actually write down my pros and cons to try to make a decision. The journaling has come and gone."

Monica said "the questions" triggered learning for her. She added that accountability played a role as well, saying, "And then the weekly progression, to know there was an expectation that you will have done something about the action steps you said you'd take." She mentioned that one of her peers inspired her to learn. She said, "I remember the excitement of Rebecca...She was kind of an inspiration to me..." She also stated, "Discourse added to learning. And writing down your challenge..."

Monica believes more time would have benefited the participants. When asked what barriers or elements hindered learning she said, "Just life." She continued, "Just that we don't take the time. Every minute of our calendar's got something on it. So, I think that's a barrier."

Monica said she became more optimistic as a result of her participation. She stated, "The most significant learning for me was that enjoy the process of this road to retirement." She said her optimism and more proactive attitude "relieved some anxiety." She said, "Talking about it and facing it and making a plan for it always makes it much, much easier and relieves the stress." Monica has become more organized. She stated, "I think they might recognize that there's more clarity, that there's a plan..."

Monica feels the group was very “open and honest.” She said, “I noticed the group started to bond right away...There was a feeling of camaraderie, I guess.”

Textural Description for Kate

Kate reflects by “just tending to think.” She said, “I often just lie in bed for a few minutes in the morning and think about the day.” She added, “I’m not a journaler.” Kate believes accountability played a role in learning. She said, “I think the commitment to show up in itself is a structure that encourages people to think differently...” She said, “I think [discourse] plays a pretty big role (in learning).” She added, “Most of the learning for me really came through conversation.”

Kate said that a lack of trust was a hindrance to the process. She said, “It was like I found myself having to hold back from making some judgments.” Kate also said she learned values of organization and commitment from her participation. She stated, “Well, I’m organized right now. I’m not worried what I’m not going to know about for tomorrow. So my commitment is to keep organized so that I’m open for new things coming into my life.” She also stated, “I think for me it was really more having a commitment...I would say it was just more the structure than an actual “aha” moment during the group.”

Kate classified the experience as a success, saying, “I felt that I created the commitment to find a way to do something differently. For me that’s a good thing.”

Textural Description for Peggy

Peggy reflects through the use of daydreaming. She said, “I have times during the day where I—I call it meditation but it’s really like daydreaming...but I can do that while I’m playing on the computer.”

Honest feedback contributed to the learning process for Peggy. She stated, “I think it was the honest feedback I was getting, without judgment. She also feels that empathy plays a role. She said, “...really thinking about it and maybe putting themselves in my position, and me doing the same thing, being able to put myself in someone else’s position and say, and grab, go from the history and experience...That’s a big part of it.” She said that comments and a new perspective help. She stated, “Just getting a different perspective, a different point of view, someone else’s take on what you’re going through.” She said discourse played a role in learning, “From the types of questions people asked, you get to learn a lot about them. You know where they’re coming from, who they are, what’s their background, what have they been trained to do...” Peggy also said reflection triggered learning. When asked what triggered a learning outcome, she replied, “Yeah, well, I went home and thought about it.” She said having intelligent, “quality people around,” encouraged learning.

Peggy said that the facilitator’s mandate for the participants to inquire during a particular session was a hindrance. Then when asked about hindrances, she said, “I don’t know. Other than the fact that the style that we were learning was to ask questions, I would say no. Other than that, no.”

Peggy believes she had a humbling experience during the process. She is now optimistic about her future. She said, “I think it was the one that I shared with everybody about saying, ‘Oh, my God, I’m so depressed about not knowing what to be when I grow up because everything’s in place and I don’t have any big challenges...The fact that it’s a luxury and not a curse. That it’s an opportunity and not a bad thing.”

Peggy classified the experience as helpful. She said that the people were “genuine” and “were really helping each other.”

Textural Description for Alice

Alice said that reflection plays an important role in her learning: “I put up little Post-it® notes just to remind myself of the things that I kind of need to keep in focus.” She also reflects with inner conversation: “Sometimes I’ve got a pretty long commute coming into work, so I’ll reflect during that time. Sometimes I’ll have the radio off, phones off, and I’m almost like background processing.” Alice said discourse plays an important role also. She said, “For me, I think the discourse was an integral part of the learning process because you’re asking questions which in some cases are challenging. She also believes accountability was important for learning. Referring to elements that contributed to learning, she said, “Accountability and follow-up. I’d be curious if some of them wanted to continue to do this.”

Alice believes that questions played a role in the learning process. She also mentioned that hearing her own affirmations helped the learning process. She stated, “It’s bringing up things that you already know but all of a sudden when you say them you hold yourself accountable and there’s the learning piece right there.”

Alice suggested that she felt like she “monopolized the discussion.” She wondered if this was a hindrance to the learning process for others. She replied, “To me it felt...a little, kind of, ‘Ooh, I hope I’m not taking up too much time and too much energy.’”

Alice believes she has an improved attitude as a result of her participation. She even mentions ending her dependency on prescription anti-depressant medicine as a

result of her participation, saying, “There you go, there’s a nice outcome for you, Alice’s off drugs!” She continued, “I think it’s successful because I feel that I’m happier than I was when I started.”

Alice said the group had “Good chemistry.” She explained, “I think what was the most interesting for me...how cohesive the group became so quickly. It was rapid cohesiveness and a lot of instant trust.”

Textural Description for Helen

Helen reflects by inner conversation. She said, “I can reflect a lot when I’m alone; that’s a much better time...I just think that when I’m by myself different ways that things could play out, you know, those kinds of things.” She continues, “I think maybe I’m reflecting all the time. I’m always thinking.”

Helen believes the questioning and subsequent reflection provided an opportunity to learn. She states, “So that would be an opportunity to learn because you’re really forcing yourself to think something through before sharing your thoughts, and its appropriate to just say, ‘Wait a minute. Let me think about this for a minute and then I’ll tell you what I think.’” She learned the most from the lesson on asking good questions. Helen said, “I think a lot of them are significant, but I think that the one that would be, was real relevant to me, is that I just have to make sure that I’m asking good questions and then also just reflecting.” When asked what triggered learning she responded, “Marta’s questions.”

Helen suggested that her inability to ask good questions was a hindrance. When asked about barriers or hindrances, she replied, “The barrier was initially saying, ‘You know, you don’t know how to ask good questions,’ and then having to overcome that.”

Helen believes she overcame the barrier and was able to learn to ask good questions.

Helen believes the overall experience was successful. She said, “Yeah, it was a successful experience – I got to, not that I was forced in a bad way, but I was forced to stop and think about all this, right? Because you show up at your group and you turn everything else off and you just focus on questions, reflection, change, other people’s issues.”

Textural Description for Marta

Marta reflects by using an inner conversation. She said, “I probably go over the interchange, verbal interchange that might have occurred with someone.” She also mentioned reflecting “as I was driving back I was reflecting and thinking.” She also mentions the use of journaling. When asked, she said, “So I was thinking...I was thinking, ‘Well, maybe I should start that journaling thing again.’”

Marta believes that hearing herself speak helps with learning. She stated, “I find that many times when I hear myself saying the words, it helps clarify things for me. So, you learn just by your own, ‘Oh! I’m saying that. I didn’t realize I felt that way.’ So, in that way discourse—my own discourse—helps me learn a little bit about myself.”

Marta expressed that time constraints were a hindrance to the learning experience. She said, “Time constraints in the sense that, if one person took longer and yet there was this kind of everybody has to have a chance to talk, which I think led to sometimes people going, ‘That’s okay, I don’t need to have a chance to talk this time.’”

Marta was described by her peers as “more mellow” even after one week of participation. She said she had become “maybe a little bit more introspective” and “maybe a little bit more satisfied with my life.”

Marta described the overall experience as “pleasant.” She said “we were a pretty compatible group...a homogeneous group...we kind of had a lot of synergy just walking in the room.” She feels like other members may have gotten more out of the experience than she did, stating, “I think she had a much more positive experience than I did. Maybe that’s because I’ve been in groups before. It’s not a new experience for me.”

Textural Description for Betsy

Betsy believes that reflection plays a key role in learning. She stated, “I think when you leave the group you’re thinking about what transpired, especially when you left with kind of a plan of action for the week. Then you’re thinking, ‘Well, what did we talk about? What did we learn from it, and how am I going to use what I learned this week to move forward?’” She reflects by taking notes, she says. “Well, I read my notes and so it’s not all from memory. I’m a big note taker. So, I like to look over my notes.”

Betsy added that the facilitator’s guidance and reflecting on others were two contributors of learning. She said, “I think you as a facilitator really were quite helpful in guiding us and directing us. Learning how other people handled challenges was beneficial.” Betsy also said the setting was beneficial. “I think the setting was very helpful,” she said. This setting includes what Betsy calls a “confidentiality comfort level.”

Betsy found that there were no barriers with regards to her learning. She stated, “I didn’t feel and barriers.” Betsy believes mainly what she learned was emotional. She

said, “I think possibly my main growth was emotional.” Later she added, “I think I’m more confident.” She said she also learned that, “Giving the benefit of your knowledge is not always the best way to help someone or to have a discussion about something.” She changed her beliefs on the most successful people. Betsy stated, “I guess a belief (that I changed), the thought that most successful people really have their acts together.” She also became more curious. “That would be the number one thing,” she said, “It kind of turned on the curious switch that makes me want to learn more.” Her mother commented, “I haven’t seen you this excited about something in a while.”

Betsy said the overall experience was successful. She said that it was “genuine” and, “It gave me confidence to move forward. I think that’s the biggest reward that I could say from the four weeks is it really boosted my confidence level.”

Textural Description for Mary Beth

Mary Beth reflects by going somewhere she can concentrate and conducting an inner conversation. She stated, “Usually when I left here I would drive down the Hoan Bridge, because I think it’s pretty at night. The drive home was an important part of it.” She continued, on the topic of journal writing, “I’ve started doing the morning pages, so every morning I was doing three pages of whatever came top of mind.”

Mary Beth believes that alternative perspectives were useful in learning. She stated, “So it’s nice to have, actually to have the men’s perspective.” And later, “I think I was really surprised at maybe the pieces they (the other participants) were able to pick up and the really interesting perspectives that they brought to it.” She also believes that goals set by the facilitator helped learning. Mary Beth said, “The aspect of the weekly goals triggered [learning].” She also said reflection was key to learning. She said, “Well,

[reflection] is how I learn.” She said “the questions” was a specific element that contributed to learning.

Mary Beth suggested that some awkwardness may have hindered the group’s learning process. She stated, “There was nothing wrong with the group, but I think it was a little awkward at times.”

Mary Beth said she interprets questions differently as a result of her participation. The interviewer also mentions that she is now “softer-spoken, less competitive, in feeding back questions.” Mary Beth explained that “there was a good level of trust” within the group. She concluded by saying “It was a big learning experience for me.”

Textural Description for Robert

Robert believes reflection is an organizational tool for him. He said, “I think reflection allows me to sort out and prioritize things that were important or of lesser importance.” He said he reflects in his mind: “I reflect by replaying whatever occurred, the event, I replay it in my mind and I think about what happened.”

Robert said the setting triggered learning. He stated, “I think it was being in a close personal setting, where everyone was looking at you. When it was my time to act, I had to act.” He believes his peers had valuable information he could learn from, due to experiences. He said, “They have perspectives that I valued.” He continued to say, “...to move beyond clearly what my understanding and ability was to take in the advantage of these other people’s perspective. Because I think I had developed some sort of a trust or admiration for those individuals.” Robert also believes self-realization or self-declaration of a solution is key. He stated, “I think that there’s something that I learned here that when the individual comes up with the solution themselves, it’s probably going to be a

more effective solution than if they're told what to do." He said that the forced questioning was a contributing factor. He said, "For sure, being forced to ask questions as opposed to making statements contributed to learning."

Robert created his own barriers and feels that these were the only barriers present: "The only barriers were really my lack of preparation for the group."

Robert became more open minded from his participation. He said, "I became more trusting of the advice (of others). Not that I would necessarily follow it, but that I would definitely think it through instead of just letting it bounce off...So probably a learning thing was, it doesn't matter who's saying it, evaluate it and reflect on it." He continued, "I have become more open-minded to the statements and positions of others that in the past I would have probably always listen to them but probably not reflect upon them as much as I would now." He also learned to be able to approach friends about business propositions in a non-awkward manner. Robert said, "I think a significant learning outcome was that I decided, regardless of what the reason was for not doing it in the past, I shouldn't do that in the future. I should change my approach to look for the business, discuss the business or whatever, and react in a friendly manner, not to hound them and beat the dead horse, but to definitely broach the subject and get it over with." He has become more "bold" as a consequence of his participation.

Robert believes the experience was "extraordinary." He said, "I think the experience was extraordinary, that you would have people that didn't know each other...we were able to act as a group." He observed the group worked effectively and cohesively. He stated, "...able to interact as a group, I thought, effectively and pretty much without hesitation. When called upon we each played our role and followed the

instructions, and so we worked together cohesively and helped each other in the way that was intended.” In closing, Robert said, “It was a successful experience, yes, because one, I think that I accomplished my mission which was to examine some behavioral thing and change the behavior and I think that I did that. It was also successful in that I got over this sort of pompous attitude that I’ve reached.”

Textural Description for Toni

Toni reflects mentally and also with the aid of notes. She stated, “I’m not a journal person but my mind is always going and always thinking...It’s all in my head ... I wrote down some notes, and it wasn’t like those were off the top of my head. It was things that I had been thinking about.”

Toni believes that group interaction and discourse triggered learning. She stated, “I think a lot of it was the group interaction and having people ask you questions.” She continues to include alternative perspective in the discussion, “I think it (discourse) was helpful because, you had people who – I don’t feel like it was challenging in the way they’re challenging things you think but, asking questions that maybe help you think about things a little differently than you might have before coming in, or looking at a different perspective and being able to talk about a situation.” Toni thinks accountability played a role. She said, “You had someone you were accountable weekly.” She also cites participants’ openness and honesty as contributing to learning. She said, “... people were very open and honest.” She also attributed some success to the setting. She said, “Having the right kind of room, the right kind of environment...I think there’s something to be said for that.”

Toni said there were no barriers that hindered learning. Toni noted the process was helpful to her and that it helped her be proactive about her future. She stated, “It definitely was helpful to me and I think, like I said, it was a jumpstart for me to do what I wanted to do and know I need to do, and sort of to think about maybe a different way to sort of frame the challenge.”

Toni said the group was very comfortable. She explained, “When I came in it was funny to me because it seemed like they all knew each other for a long time, you know, their comfort level with each other. It was surprising that first day.” Also, “... that camaraderie that developed, especially that first time, that was amazing to me...”

Textural Description for Tanya

Tanya believes she does her best reflecting while walking the dog. She states, “I walk so much now, so for that hour that’s uninterrupted—well, except for the dog barking, but I mean for the most part I’m by myself, I can think. That’s when I do my best thinking.”

Tanya said reflection and introspection triggered learning. She explained, “I think the introspection...well, the probing questions on the part of others and the requirement [and] opportunity to be more introspective (triggered learning).” She said, “I think it was the constant questioning. I mean, kind of being in the hot seat while five other people are asking you a bazillion questions.” She also mentioned the importance of perspective. She said, “I hadn’t thought about it maybe from that perspective or maybe from that, because their questions I looked at it from a different viewpoint. So that was helpful.”

Tanya believed there were no barriers or elements that hindered her from learning. She feels she gained confidence as a result of her participation. She stated, “I

think that the discourse and the reflection helped find that, which I didn't have before. So, it was helping with the confidence not to take it." She continues, "Well, certainly the career decision that I made was an obvious one and the timing is everything. But I think it has made me look at different things, at my life differently and my choice differently. I think also it was the right time for me personally to be more introspective." She adds that the experience made her think in a different way. She states, "But it made me think about things differently and it changed my perspective about life."

Tanya believed that the group was candid and empathetic, which led to a quick connection amongst the participants. She stated, "One of the things I was amazed at was that from the very beginning, this group of relatively unknown people to one another were able to be so candid...Then following the first meeting, everyone was so empathetic to one another... So the phenomenon of being able to connect with people so quickly is really surprising."

Textural Description for George

George does his reflection via inner conversation, usually while "driving, working out, or walking." George believes learning was triggered by asking questions. He stated, "I think the approach is right on, you know, learning through asking questions. I think that I learn through repetition and practice, but I've always taken the approach that you solve difficult problems through asking questions." George believes reflection is very important too. He states, "Once you put that solution or the action plans in place, you have to reflect along the way and you have to reflect afterwards in order to look back and say, 'If I were to face this situation again, or similar type of situation, what would I do differently?'" George believes discourse challenged his thinking. He said, "Well, it

challenged my thinking. It forced me to think outside the box and look at things differently, things I might not have explored because I'm only, I only know what I know." He continued, "To me, it's about getting different points of view and sort of encouraging constructive conflict."

George believes asking questions was a "key element" that contributed to learning. He said, "You know, the first, most obvious one being asking questions as opposed to giving answers." He then continues to explain other elements which contribute, such as discussion, thinking and asking questions. He stated, "Those are the elements, the group discussion, forcing you to think, asking the questions, rephrasing questions, rephrasing the challenge, you know, going back and rephrasing the problem. Those things...all those elements helped facilitate learning."

George said time was a barrier that hindered learning. He explained, "Certainly time, time was an element, a barrier. A time per person, having a time per person, you couldn't devote the entire evening to one person's challenge. Time, being that there were only four weeks. Time was certainly a barrier." He believes the rest of the barriers were fixed resources. He stated, "The only barriers being our resources were only X, were fixed...A fixed amount of resources meaning fixed amount of depth...Fixed amount of diversity..."

George reported he learned a different way of approaching life. He states, "I learned maybe a little different way to approach things and think about things, how to relate. I mean, you're always learning." George thinks the experience was successful. He said, "I met friends, colleagues, future resources, job opportunities today, immediate,

long-term results and certainly just reinforced my belief that problems are solved through questions and not through telling people what to do.”

Composite Textural Description

The learning experience for each baby boomer was prompted by focusing on each of their individual presenting problems or challenges. As others listen and take notes, they heard the presenting baby boomer describe how he or she perceives and experiences his or her issue.

The baby boomers learned through reflecting, engaging in discourse, and asking great questions. They described their approach to reflection in various ways. They utilized various methods and revealed how they engage in reflection as a perpetual process. They mentioned that it was more effective and advantageous to be alone, take a walk, or do something mindless because it allows them to think in different ways and play scenarios out in their mind. Each of them described what happens internally as “always thinking” or that the “mind is reeling” and reworking whatever it happens to be of concern. As part of the action learning group process, baby boomers know that the tools of journaling and note-taking are a means they can use to enhance their ability to reflect on their thinking and feelings.

Discourse adds to the learning for all baby boomers. The baby boomers alluded to some kind of change or shift in thinking or feeling. An outcome for them was being able to look at their presenting problem from a different perspective. And the baby boomers found it helpful to hear themselves as they shared their problems with a group of empathic, supportive individuals who did not necessarily know them prior to the experience yet were genuinely interested in helping them.

Contributors to learning were accountability and peer pressure—of needing to report their actions taken each week because it enhances motivation. Baby boomers echoed how they learned that creating the actions and solutions in a group of supportive participants is effective and can ensure commitment to take action and ownership for the problem’s solution. Baby boomers described how they saw a positive difference in themselves from the group experience such as having greater confidence, being more optimistic, and having a more positive attitude.

The action learning group experience was characterized by the baby boomers as helpful. While they described the phenomenon of how the group worked together, they elaborated on how quickly the group members made connections with one another and felt a sense of camaraderie developing with one another. They also expressed that a sense of cohesiveness and trust is essential. This allowed people unknown to each other to use the action learning tools to be open and willing to talk about their problems.

Baby boomers described their experiences in a favorable light. The only aspect that seemed to hinder the learning for themselves and others was the available time—or lack thereof. In summary, baby boomers learned how to address and solve their problems through action learning; they increased their self-awareness; and they examined and broadened their meaning schemes, and in some instances changed their meaning perspectives.

Individual Structural Descriptions

Moustakas (1994) suggested that structural description portrayed the “how” of the phenomenon, which may be used to explicate the “what” of the experience and gain a deeper understanding of that experience. The researcher employed imaginative variation

to study the underlying structures of the baby boomer's experience. The textural descriptions of baby boomers' learning—produced through the phenomenological reduction process and including the thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, and situations that constitute the experience—were used to examine all possible meanings and divergent perspectives, to vary the frames of reference about the phenomenon of baby boomer learning, and to construct a description of how they learned. The three structural descriptions that follow explore the underlying and possible precipitating factors for baby boomer learning. These descriptions were compiled by using the above summarized textural descriptions as their framework. They provide a basic portrayal of the participants' feelings and thoughts about the invariant constituents and themes.

Structural Description for Monica

The underlying structures that triggered Monica's learning were a growing sense of frustration and stress emanating from not having a plan for retirement and her anticipated transition to part-time work in a few years. Monica related that she had difficulty talking her husband about their future. It had been her experience that he would become defensive and wanted to avoid any discussion of their future. She expressed frustration with his stubborn ways and was beginning to feel more distant due to their inability to communicate on this important topic. She felt it was imperative that they talk about retirement and gain a better understanding of their financial situation because that would be pivotal to their future planning.

Like many other professional dual-career couples, Monica and her husband earned a six-figure income which by most standards seems like it would allow for a comfortable retirement. In addition, they raised and educated four children who are adults

and self-supporting. They do have one son who recently graduated from college living with them. She admitted they willingly made sacrifices to ensure their children had access to opportunities and a private education. Due to their decision to invest in their children's futures, Monica felt uncertain about what they will have in savings and related investments to support themselves in the future. This had been a preoccupation and distraction during the last few years. She wanted to look at the "numbers" and start to make some plans with her husband to see what was possible for their future.

Another part of the equation for Monica was about talking about her future plans with her boss. She had a talented and younger staff and wanted to start making a plan for succession. Based on her previous experience with her boss, she felt uncertain about how he would respond to a discussion about her transition. Both of these conversations had been on her mind and she wanted some resolution.

Monica's learning goal focused on her decision to have some conversations with her husband and boss to start the life-work planning process and making it more transparent. She talked about reflection: "It plays a more (of a role) than I realized ...". The conversations triggered learning for her. She said accountability to the group played a role as well, noting that "the weekly progression, to know there was an expectation that you will have done something about the action steps you said you'd take," and discourse added to the learning.

An underlying structure that informed Monica's learning was the feeling of excitement from the other participants and their "inspiration." She said the group was very "open and honest" and they started to bond right away. And she experienced a

feeling of camaraderie. She felt that more time spent with the group might have been beneficial for her and others.

Monica talked with both her husband and boss. She felt that her choice of time and how to approach each of them made a difference. She said, “Talking about it and facing it and making a plan for it always makes it much, much easier and relieves the stress.”

Monica’s significant learning was to enjoy the process on the road to retirement. In fact, she reframed how she thought about it and now refers to it as “reirement.” She believed that she became more optimistic and was more proactive as a result of her participation in the group.

Structural Description for Robert

The structures that permeated Robert’s situation were his feelings of self-doubt and a diminished sense of self-efficacy in his ability to contribute financially to the family and develop prospective clients. He stated that he found it difficult to develop and execute a strategic plan for attracting and engaging potential clients. As with most law firms, there was an expectation that Robert bring in some new clients to the firm not only for himself but also the other partners and associates. Robert had access to a number of high-profile executives, and business owners through associations, social networking, and his son’s school sports activities.

Robert admitted that he felt guilt and pressure from his spouse who was a high-performing sales executive. He believed that she wanted him to make a better income for the family’s current and future needs. She had contributed significantly to the family’s finances over the years, and especially during the years when he owned a small

specialized legal practice. In a few years, their talented sons would be going to college and he wanted to be able to provide the best opportunities for them to attend the best schools. Robert felt like he needed to do something different and learn how to improve his situation and develop his acumen to secure clients for future business.

Another complication for Robert that added to his angst was his impression and growing lack of trust in the firm's other associates and their competence. He felt uneasy with the law firm's policies and ethics. After a few years with the firm, he was disappointed with the choice he made and frustrated with the partnership. It seemed like he felt trapped and did not see any other viable options for the near future.

Robert's expressed challenge was to learn how to overcome his apparent thinking that got in the way of being able to develop relationships and potential business with high-profile friends who he had come to know through other activities. He hoped that his participation in the group would uncover some reasons why he had difficulty and prompt him to act on his intentions.

As the sessions progressed, Robert used critical reflection to become more aware of his thinking and he began to examine his faulty assumptions and beliefs. He reported that he used reflection as an organization tool. Through the forum of discourse, listening to others and asking questions, he learned more about himself and others. He related that he had become more open-minded. And he came to recognize that other participants had a lot to say and valued their perspectives. Altering some of his perspectives, he began to admire and trust others and the process. "I think there is something that I learned here that when an individual comes up with the solution themselves, it is probably a more effective solution than if they're told what to do."

Robert reported that he felt more “bold” and overcame his self-doubt. He changed his thinking and began to approach friends about business. He said, “I think a significant learning outcome was that I decided, regardless of what the reason was for not doing it in the past, I shouldn’t do that in the future. He summed up his group experience and what he learned as “extraordinary.”

Structural Description for Meredith

The underlying structures that triggered Meredith’s experience were feeling somewhat conflicted in her personal life and stalled in her ability to start a career/job search. She decided to leave her former employer, a publishing company, because she was not aligned with how the company was being managed. The lack of effective management and leadership would not change so she decided to resign and move on.

Meredith knew she was multitalented and she was confident of her abilities since she has had to move due to her husband’s job relocations over the years. She said that she usually found a position that was interesting and challenging. Now she felt stuck and not able to execute an effective job search. She knew that she first needed to define her goals and assess what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. This would lead to finding a new direction toward new opportunities with companies that shared similar values and offered a creative challenge. Another option Meredith discussed with talked the group was her openness to being entrepreneurial and starting a freelance marketing consulting practice.

An underlying structure for Meredith was feeling the weight of the responsibility for her family’s care and support. For her, meeting the needs of her family was a priority and she was committed to their care. It was primarily her responsibility to take care of the

day-to-day responsibilities and parenting since her husband travels all week. She felt the need to spend time with and be available for one high school daughter still at home. On the other hand, she believed that having interesting and challenging work was what she needed to feel stimulated and whole.

Another underlying structure that contributed to Meredith's situation was her pre-occupation with her other daughter's safety and well-being. She felt distracted and extremely stressed out and out-of-control due to her obsessive concern for this daughter who was traveling alone in Asia.

Meredith referred to using reflection as an inner conversation. She thinks that it is done best when she is engaged in a mindless activity. The collaboration and questions from the group members was helpful. She recalled that some questions triggered personal introspection: "People ask you a question, to answer it you have to think through how you feel and so that's how you learn."

Meredith felt that she became more proactive from participating in the group. She thought that she had identified some direction and took some proactive steps to launch her search, such as updating her resume. Overall, through reflection, some assumptions and beliefs that she referred to as dormant ones had surfaced during this time. She was positive about the group experience and described it as pleasant. Meredith summarized her group experience by comparing it to "running a highlighter over something; it really brought it to the forefront."

Composite Structural Description

The underlying structures that permeated the baby boomers' learning focus were the action learning group context, facilitator-coach, guidelines for interaction, and the

other baby boomers who are members in the group. The need to present their problem or challenge served as a catalyst for learning. A common thread in the baby boomers' experiences was learning the role of reflection, discourse, and asking great questions, and how these practices fostered learning in the action learning group context. While baby boomers experienced anxiety in the groups at the beginning, they quickly developed rapport, increased self-awareness, practiced reciprocity, and learned more about themselves and others.

The baby boomers expressed feeling frustrated and being restricted with the guidelines that required them to ask great questions rather than give advice or solutions to one another. Initially, after feeling uncertain and awkward about what to expect of themselves and others, they cooperated and utilized the action learning process and tools. As they coalesced and engaged with participants in their groups, they applied the methods with intention and greater skill. They saw the advantages of quickly building trusting relationships. Reflecting, engaging in discourse, asking questions, and taking some action were critical to making meaning and learning.

Developing increased self-awareness, seeking to understand, and deciding to take action were essential to making meaning and change. The action learning group experience was positive and fostered new learnings about self and others. For baby boomers, learning was motivated by the need to preserve one's well-being, self improvement, making connections, identifying next steps to live more fully, and adapting to changes in an uncertain, turbulent, and rapidly evolving world. To sustain learning, they understood that increasing self-awareness, altering perspectives, adapting, and

taking action were essential for a disposition to life-long learning and integration in an evolving life.

Textural-Structural Description of Essence

The phenomenological approach employed in this research systematically builds on findings from each step of the data analysis. This produced the textural-structural description, or essence of baby boomer learning. This method required thorough consideration of the data and an imaginative assessment to allow the essence of the data and related elements to surface and to become differentiated from the non-essential elements. The textural-structural synthesis is presented below as the “essence” of baby boomer meaning making and learning.

Textural-Structural Synthesis: Baby Boomer Learning

Baby boomers agreed that learning is essential to understanding and taking the next step, whether it was toward a personal or professional aspiration or goal. The action learning group context provided a forum for discourse to present a problem or challenge, to hear oneself, and to have others respond to the issue from their experiences.

Baby boomers experienced feeling frustrated and restricted with the mandate to ask questions as part of their discourse. Learning how to incorporate the action learning process did not come easily and it required thinking in a different manner. When they discovered the power of the question, they adapted and learned how to ask better questions, which is a catalyst for learning. They sought to identify and define the problem with the presenter and the other participants. They recognized the value of their interactions with others and taking the right actions. They realized the merits of talking about their problem or challenge with a diverse group of thinkers who had different

inputs and perspectives. Baby boomers saw the value of open relationships with each other and establishing trust.

They employed discourse as a vehicle to explore situations, behaviors, norms, and practices which they did not see or understand and which were possibly contrary to their assumptions and beliefs.

The action learning group meetings were catalysts for introspection and reevaluation of their assumptions. The participants engaged in information gathering and examine opportunities and possibilities. The combination of discourse, reflection, and questioning was recurrent and did not happen in a particular order or combination.

The most common changes for baby boomers were an increase in confidence and adopting a more proactive approach to life's problems and challenges. The researcher observed increased know-how utilizing the action learning skills and practices. The participants did not mention any personal negative changes. Baby boomers discovered that gaining insight about self was enhanced and more effective in the context of the action learning group setting. Their participation in a group facilitated learning, improved self-efficacy, and bolstered them in times of self-doubt. Baby boomers learned in the action learning group setting that the capacity for camaraderie and trust was essential to the group's effectiveness. It is noteworthy that no participants mention a negative characteristic of belonging to and participating in the group.

Themes

In the study's interviews, all 16 participants expressed each of the five themes.

Theme 1: Reflection Is Done Through Inner Conversation

The act of simple reflection or critical reflection is done through inner conversation, the invariant constituent noted by most participants. This theme describes the experiences of the participants in the action learning groups in a several ways. To reflect on one's experience, integrate knowledge gained from experience with knowledge possessed, and take action on insights was described simply by one participant, "I just tend to think" and more explicitly by another, "You have to think it through, so, that's reflection. I think reflection is the vehicle for change when you're trying to change something that's more internal...I usually have that kind of inner conversation when I am doing something mindless."

When posed with the question about how they reflect, many participants paused and became noticeably more thoughtful before they responded. One of the participants, Rebecca, an accomplished public relations professional, talked about her presenting problem in what would be described as a content reflection. She reported feeling a lack of motivation and commitment to her work after having a successful career in public relations for many years:

I will try to answer it and if I miss it ...I reflect by replaying whatever occurred, the event, I replay it in my mind and I think about what happened and that leads me to think back in terms of other things that could have happened, or if there is a question being asked, I reflect on all the alternative answers to the question and which would be most appropriate. I guess I learn something by doing that; I either reaffirm what I know is correct, or that some of the other possibilities would have equal value or additional value.

Another participant, Mary Beth, is a former executive who left the corporate world several years ago. She could be described as a serial entrepreneur who sought to launch a new business venture. She talked about her process of reflection:

I think reflection allows me to sort out and prioritize things that were important or of lesser importance. It also allows me to think about the way it could have been and whether it would have been better had I done something different. Reflection, in terms of the comments that came from other people, was as important because several were things that I never would have thought of. So the power of the group was that it brought a lot more to the table than I would have brought alone to the process.

As a practicing attorney who expressed discontent with the culture and ethics in his law firm, Robert talked about examining the premises and the change in his thinking that arose during his participation in the action learning group. He began to critically assess and question his assumptions about people, and he was considering a potential move to another firm more aligned with his values. He reflected on the premises and explained that

This sounds very pompous but I really guess that I have become open-minded to the statements and positions of others than in the past. I would probably listen to them but probably not reflect upon them as I do now. I think in a different part of my life I did, but I have been trained by experience, after dealing with so many adversaries and people who are out there to obtain a certain outcome, that I become very distrustful and I retreat back...If I don't have any reason to believe that they were an expert or actually knew something, I was going to discount it entirely. Now I have decided, I can get something of value out of (what people say) if I think about it and so I will work to see what value I can get as opposed to discounting it.

A serial career changer and currently an upper-level manager in human resources, Tanya was considering the offer of another job opportunity at her present company. Her life circumstances had also changed and she described herself as being in transition. She was divorced last year and was adjusting to being single after twenty-five years of being married. She talked about a closer self-examination and her emotional response:

I think early in the process the questions that were asked of me...the question about taking the fork in the road, when I had not taken the fork...have I always taken the fork in the road – that was presented. Have I ever turned any opportunities down? Since things have already come to me, always come to me,

did I ever turn anything down and how do I make the decision about the fork in the road?...Those kinds of questions made me think a lot more about how I really do that...Do I sit back and allow life to happen to me or am I really doing something to make something happen and I don't realize it. My life is different now I have lost my safety net and I'm somewhat anxious...is an unfamiliar experience for me. My reflections prompted by the questions started to help I think about what is important, how do I make that decision, how do I trust my instincts...So the discourse around that and the reflection around those questions I think were very helpful.

Recognizing that one's experience is shared by others in the action learning group was noted by many participants. Betsy, a retired administrative assistant on long-term disability due to a serious accident, expresses her sentiments eloquently:

I think possibly my main growth was emotional. Feeling a certain level of acceptance by the people in the group almost immediately, I did learn...I mean I've always been a pretty good communicator. I did learn that asking a question and being asked questions makes me think a lot harder rather than people telling you, this is what you should do...I did learn interacting with people going forward is the best way to go.

The 16 participants described reflection within the action learning group experience from different and alternative perspectives. The inner conversation as described by most participants was simply used to describe one's thinking and experience. Upon closer examination of reflection, the data revealed a broader, deeper, and more complex process that included content, process, and premise reflection. For some, a stimulating event such as a life transition or situation, or the group experience itself, caused questioning of normal thinking and actions that resulted in new awareness and behavior change.

Several participants expressed enthusiasm for journaling as a reflective tool. Few, however, were able to sustain journaling for any length of time. Journaling was suggested as a tool by participants to one another, although it was not a required method in the

action learning groups. When asked about reflection, several participants referred to their practice of journaling. Marta responded, “Yeah, I did, and I’ve kind of dropped that...It’s interesting to bring that up, I was thinking ‘Well, maybe I should start that journaling thing again.’ But I haven’t kept up with it so much.” In contrast, Rebecca provided a testament to good journal writing: “I kept diaries, and in fact, that actually helped me when I was offered a job and I didn’t take the job; I liked the job I was doing...it helps me reflect.”

Note taking, another invariant constituent, appeared to be used more extensively in practice than journaling. The participants who used note taking utilized the method on an ongoing basis, as opposed to the sporadic journal writing that was reported. Alice described her note taking, “I put up little Post-it notes just to remind myself of things that I kind of need to keep in focus for ongoing reflection.”

The first theme—*reflection is done through inner conversation*—was derived after examining the invariant constituents related to the thematic label of *methods by which participants reflect*. Four invariant constituents were used: (a) inner conversation, (b) journaling, (c) note taking, and (d) making lists. Only those constituents which received three or more responses were discussed here: (a) inner conversation, (b) journaling, and (c) note taking. Reflection played a pivotal role for participants’ daily lives and as part of their experiences in the action learning groups. Nearly every participant used inner conversation to reflect, and this made this constituent the most commonly reported reflection method. Journaling and note taking occurred with equal frequency, each with a quarter of the participants using that method. Table 2 provides the complete data.

Table 2

Methods Utilized to Reflect

Invariant Constituents	Participants who reported this experience	
	#	%
Inner Conversation	14	88
Journaling	4	25
Note taking	4	25
Making Lists	1	6

Theme 2: Learning Is Fostered Through Discourse and Questioning

The interview data revealed how participants in action learning groups experienced learning through discourse and questioning. As a former executive in the hospitality industry George said, “Well it challenged my thinking. It forced me to think outside the box and look at things differently. With a diverse group, you get more information to act on.”

Another participant, Jane, a public relations professional who works for an international foundation that educates the public and raises funds for medical research, said

I think in the group, the discourse was fascinating to hear what other people were experiencing and dealing with (problems)...I think the give and take between people with different views, they would say something and you’d be like, what a brilliant insight...how did you get that from what I said?

Kate, an executive director of a well-known international association, details how she experienced discourse in the action learning group:

I think (discourse) plays a big role...I guess one of the keys in a conversation is just having the openness to look at things differently or to feel that something is being presented in a way that might offer you a different perspective. And some

of that is the combination of discourse and reflection, because you have to learn from the conversation...

Monica, an executive vice president in the tourism industry who is considering retiring and starting her own business, described her experience of discourse in the action learning group setting another way:

Discourse added to learning. And writing down your challenge, restating your challenge, and writing down your action steps works for me. The list maker and writer in me, if I can put it down in words and be able to go back and look at it and see progress that helps. I think the process. It helped me at least.

Alice, a senior level sales manager working with an international staffing corporation, reported feeling anxious and disliked her job and her supervisor. Alice said

For me, I think discourse was an integral part of the learning because you're asking questions which in some cases are challenging. Why are you still in your job if you are so miserable? I don't know. What are you going to do about it? I don't know. I think the discourse really pushes you in terms of learning and action.

The most frequently mentioned elements—discourse and questioning—fostered learning. Some participants reported that questioning tends to feel awkward. Their tendency is to give advice and this is a new behavior for them. Questioning added to the forum of discourse.

Most participants emphasized the value of questioning and being challenged by fellow participants. They indicated that questioning was definitely an element that contributed to their experience of learning in the group. George sums this up concisely: “Well, I think the approach is right on, you know, learning through asking questions.”

Another important learning outcome was the opportunity to obtain an alternative perspective that started with a great question from another participant. Peggy, an entrepreneur and successful business owner of commercial real estate properties, added,

“Yeah, comments, just getting a different perspective, a different point of view, someone else’s take on what you were going through...And it is so valuable.”

The importance of discourse and being challenged was noted by Toni, an administrator with an educational institution. Toni, who is considering making a career change to find new position because she feels it is time to move on, added another insight:

I think it (discourse) was helpful because, you had people who feel like it was challenging. They are challenging things you think but asking questions that maybe help you think about things differently than you might have before coming in, or looking at another perspective and being able to talk about a situation, have people ask you sort of questions that might help you think about what the next steps are or how to maybe look at your problem a little bit differently, I think it is very helpful and I learned from others.

Introspection and reflection were noted as contributors to learning. In the following response, these invariant constituents contributed in part to the forum of discourse. As Toni said, “I think the introspection, well, the probing questions on the part of others and the requirement—not a bad requirement—it is an opportunity to be more introspective.”

Meredith, a former editor for an international publication, joined the group to talk about her search to explore new career opportunities more aligned with her life-work goals. She said

Well, the personal aspects of learning, I think triggered that was that you had to do some introspection; you have to. People ask a question, to answer it you have to think through how you feel and so that’s how you learn.

Kate said, “I think that the commitment to show up in itself encourages people to think differently and act differently and try to make a commitment and stick to it.” Toni added, “You had someone you were accountable to weekly.” One-third of the participants

were concerned that they may appear as a slacker and that no one wanted to let other people down.

As part of the group experience, several participants described a sense of empowerment or realization in hearing themselves speak in the action learning group. Marta believed that hearing her own voice helped with learning. She stated, “I find that many times when I hear myself saying the words, it helps me clarify things for me.”

Robert observed that speaking aloud and hearing himself was related to learning and solving problems with the support of the group. He concluded that, “I think there’s something learned here that when the individual comes up with the solution themselves, it’s probably going to be a more effective solution than if they’re told what to do.” Other participants shared similar sentiments.

The second theme—*learning is fostered through discourse and questioning*—was derived by examining the invariant constituents related to the thematic label of *methods which contribute to learning*. A total of 15 invariant constituents were used. Only those constituents which received three or more responses were discussed here, and these were (a) discourse, (b) questions, (c) alternative perspective, (d) introspection/reflection, (e) accountability/commitment, and (f) hearing oneself speak. Of these constituents, discourse and questions were the dominant responses, which were noted by more than half of the participants. However, nearly half of the participants offered alternative perspective and introspection/reflection as methods that contributed to learning. Most participants validated that learning was fostered by discourse and that it provided a vehicle for asking questions, which is consistent with the research. Table 3 provides data for all 15 invariant constituents.

Table 3

Methods Utilized that Contributed to Learning

Invariant Constituents	Participants who reported this experience	
	#	%
Discourse	11	69
Questions	10	63
Alternative Perspective	7	44
Introspection/Reflection	7	44
Accountability/Commitment	5	31
Hearing Self Speak	4	25
Reflection on Others	3	19
Setting	3	19
Facilitator's Direction	2	13
Mandate to Inquire (by facilitator)	2	13
Confidentiality Comfort Level	1	6
Empathy	1	6
Excitement/Inspiration from Peers	1	6
Quality Participants	1	6
Weekly Goals	1	6

Theme 3: Learning Is Hindered by Time Constraints

The intentions of the action learning groups were to allow enough time for each participant to present their presenting problem or challenge, and to recognize that time needed to be shared equally among the group members. In several cases, the participants' presenting problems or challenges were very complex and vaguely defined. The time allowed for the action learning program was limited to a period of four weeks.

As the group facilitator, the action learning coach needed to be aware and remind the participants of their use of time. Each participant needed their designated time during each session to discuss their problem, respond to questions, and commit to an action for the coming week. There was not enough time to discuss issues, ask questions, and follow

up on actions and solutions. As George said, “I can’t think of a lot. Certainly, time was an element, a barrier.”

Another participant, Jane, referred to time as a hindrance that prevented participants from knowing more about each other on a deeper level that might have allowed for more questioning. The extension of the sessions beyond the four weeks prompted her to wonder what might have happened:

I think (with more time) we could’ve prodded deeper. We could have uncovered a couple of layers, and maybe that’s a time constraint more than anything. You know given time, I think you know we all ran out of time more than anything. It would’ve been interesting to see where it would’ve gone. We didn’t look back very far with people; we were only looking at current, who they were in the current world, and a little bit of background but not a whole lot. That would be my hindrance right there.

When asked about barriers, Marta said, “Time constraints, in the sense that, if one person took longer and yet there was this kind of everybody has to have the chance to talk, which led to sometimes me going that’s okay, I don’t need to have chance to talk this time.” However, all participants had an opportunity to talk about their problem or challenge each session.

Helen, a vice-president of business development for an established woman-owned technology support and consulting firm, described her experience of time in another way:

Yeah, sometimes, it (time) was something; it took away spontaneity, because I always had to be thinking, Okay, how do I phrase this as a question rather than a statement? Mostly I was trying to be supportive when I was making those statements, and how do I ask a question about being supportive. That to me was something that (constrained) me that I had to take the time to think it through. So other than that it was good.

Monica shared a similar response to describe her experience:

No, except that I guess that it’s a start of a process and where does it go? Is it something that could be continued because, and obviously four weeks in a row is

kind of intense and it's hard to fit into the schedule. But it could expand into a class or learning group that over a year's time we'd really see some progress and change.

Helen spoke to her experience in the action learning group. She noted

It's different from other groups that you're in; it's not social, it's not volunteerism, it's not your family. But it's kind of therapeutic, start as strangers and get to know each other and to trust each other to the point of where you can talk about what went on and then what you might learn from it. So I guess it was an interesting process but not enough.

Colleen, a marketing and product development consultant to small growth businesses and multi-national corporations, echoed Monica's comments and added the following comments

Yeah, and to have others have more time to talk and you know have the question and answer session and reflection go a little bit longer. I like the way you (facilitator-coach) would occasionally—you did a lot—when someone would speak, you'd have the rest of us write down what the perspective was or how we viewed what was going on. I think those were good and that thought-provoking and that was a good thing. I guess that would be the only thing I might do.

The third theme—*learning is hindered by time constraints*—was derived after examining the invariant constituents related to the thematic label of *aspects which hindered learning*. Nine invariant constituents were used, although participants noted few barriers to their learning in the action learning group. The only barrier cited by more than one participant was time constraints, the most frequent invariant constituent. A quarter of the participants responded that there were no barriers at all. In fact, beyond time constraints, this response, “I don't think there were any barriers that hindered the learning process,” was the only one to trigger multiple responses. Some other responses that were limited to one participant's description of a hindrance or barrier included awkwardness,

lack of trust, bad questioning, and mandate to inquire by facilitator. Table 4 offers data for all nine invariant constituents used.

Table 4

Aspects Which Hindered Learning

Invariant Constituents	Participants who reported this experience	
	#	%
Time Constraints	6	38
None	4	25
Awkwardness	1	6
Bad Questioning	1	6
Lack of In Depth Discussion	1	6
Lack of Preparation	1	6
Lack of Trust	1	6
Mandate to Inquire (by facilitator)	1	6
Monopolization of Time	1	6

Theme 4: Participants Gained Confidence and Became More Proactive

The theme suggests that some participants examined and enhanced their existing meaning schemes, while in a few cases, they changed their meaning structures. Colleen asserted, “Well, it gave me a little more confidence. I have to say that certainly helps.”

Another participant, Tanya, described a situation that had been discussed at an earlier meeting regarding a job offer at her current company:

Well, I think saying no to...that job opportunity, was more definitive because of the conversations we had about the fork in the road and about whether or not I always jump at every opportunity. Because this was one of the first times, probably the only time I can think of where I did say no...to be able to have the confidence to say, you know. I don't know this...I mean I didn't tell him this, but this isn't right for me right now. Could I do it? Yep. Do I want to do it? No, not really. I don't know this...I think the discourse and reflection helped find that, which I didn't have before. So it helped with my confidence.

When Betsy thought about her experience, she related that participation in the group was “not just another exercise, it was genuine.” She said, “It gave me confidence to move forward. I think the biggest reward that I could say from the four weeks is it really boosted my confidence level.”

Some participants noted that they had become more proactive in elaborating on the changes in their behavior and personalities and that this enabled them to function more effectively. When asked how someone she knows well would describe her as different after participating in the group, Meredith responded, “It would be optimal, I guess, if the answer was, I see her take certain steps to action now when before this (group) I was stalled.”

One of Monica’s challenges related to thinking about and talking about retirement with her spouse and boss. She said

Actually, I came to more than, not total resolution, but I came further in a discussion (with my boss) than I thought that I would have the courage to do... about where I see myself and my role as I bridge to retirement, and what I want to do...So we had a frank discussion on, “No, you’re not really going to be 60!” Yes. I am. And we talked about that, what it was going to look like for the next couple years and where do I want to be. It was more than I thought I would have the courage to trust him with but I thought, well, lay it out there and let him know what I am thinking.

Initially, Robert talked about how he had missed opportunities to develop business and how he decided to be more active this area. Robert shared how he changed his thinking and behavior:

What I decided upon reflection on that, in one sense there so many opportunities that were lost for the perfect opportunity and sometimes the actual event would never occur. The other thing I realized is that it would probably be better to just do it as opposed to wait, then act spontaneously and recover or do damage control. Just have the conversation as opposed to waiting and role-playing endlessly all the possibilities. I became emboldened to think that I was confident

enough. I could just do it and I could react appropriately no matter what the feedback.

Some participants reported they felt and experienced a noticeable shift in their attitudes. Jane responded to a query, “I think if I had to say the most significant learning outcome for me, would probably have been an attitude change...I am feeling a little bit different than I was before. My attitude is different. That would be it.”

Rebecca summed her experience and observations of the other participants:

My old attitude. You know, I really should be at a different place in my career, when in fact I am actually at a good place...I think it's just a more positive attitude. I think everybody (in the group) had a more positive attitude, and had a few tools to work with, whether it was journaling or the ability to say, “You know, I could get a different job, or write a book, or put my brochure together.” The action steps helped or identified what I needed to do.

The participants experienced a wide range of insights and some spoke about altered perspectives over the course of the four weeks. These experiences were reviewed for meaning multiple times in order to select a representative sample of reported experiences.

Insights and a change in perspective occurred for Betsy when Robert said to her, “Oh Betsy, why don't you get over it!” She said she felt different among other working professionals since she could no longer work due to her disability. She expressed gratitude for his candor and support.

Peggy talked about a shift in her mindset and how she was thinking about her transition as she approached her sixties:

I was in the mindset of, when women get to a certain age, and their kids are grown and their kids have their own lives, and I'm in another career and not in the public eye as much as I used to be, you get to be invisible, you get to feel like a non-contributing member in society. I think that's a big part of what I was thinking. Well, here I am. I'm at that crossroads where you just sort of fall out of

sight, it's scary. I don't want to be there. But then Marta said something like 'What are you talking about? You've got twenty-five years or something! Yeah, she's right. I am not sick. I am fine. I have everything going for me and I have some time I never used to have because of being a parent and being so active in a career. I have choices now that I didn't have before...I like the fact that I have choices, but with that comes a little scariness, and that's where I think the transition came. I went from being maybe afraid to being a bit excited about it, like, excited about the thought that this was an opportunity and not a curse. Not a, "Oh my god, you're going to become invisible! Here I go.'

Mary Beth shared her experience and meaning as they relate to questions as part of the action learning group process. She said she felt that it was important to reveal her powerful insights and the shift in her thinking over the course of the sessions to the researcher:

I remember being asked questions (by my father) as a kid growing up...when you've done something wrong or I've got a reason. I'm going to show you how you are wrong. Or, Why did you do that? So, it always came out as, they came out use hard, they came out as fast, they came out in an attacking way...at least in my memory of them, were very much being on the defensive, very much not being right, or being good enough. And compound that with my mother who was a school teacher and me wanting to do things right. It was quite a revelation to realize how I transfer that to every kind of situation when questions arise... Yeah, so it was huge. Between the third and fourth week is when I finally got it from here (head) into here (heart). The whole room shifted for me in the last week. I felt different in that conversation...because I shifted for me they shifted too (other participants). Or maybe it was a way of hearing them. The questions that were being asked, the responses I was giving felt more helpful than critical. That was huge for me...So that is my big "aha"... I've been wanting to share this, that experience with you (the researcher).

Robert, who tended to be analytical and deliberate in his approach to developing business, commented on his changed viewpoint and behavior. He indicated that it was remarkable to him that this happened over the four-week period:

Well, one is that fact that I made this transformation in my viewpoint on how I would pursue this business opportunities especially with friends...in my mind resolved in a very favorable way, with a different behavior pattern that should be beneficial to me. So it optimized the situation and it hadn't happened in years, so

it was very remarkable to me that it would happen sort of overnight — it really happened after the first meeting.

Monica recalled and described her learning and experience. She said

The most significant learning for me was to enjoy the process of this road to retirement, and I don't even like the word 'retirement', because I'm not retiring. I am leaving this job to do something else. And whether that's retirement or whatever they come up with for baby boomers, when you say 'retirement' to me that sounds like an end, what I feel like it is the beginning of something new for me, not ending. So what I found is, don't be scared of the process. Be thoughtful so it works to your advantage and its probably going to be a two a three-year process...So make it work for you.

The fourth theme—*Participants gained confidence and became more proactive*—was derived after examining invariant constituents related to thematic label of *transformations of speakers*. A total of 15 invariant constituents were used. Only those constituents which received three or more responses were discussed here, and these were (a) confidence/ego boost, (b) more proactive, (c) optimism, and (d) positive attitude (generic). Most participants in the action learning groups shared some level of change or gain as they examined their experience in the group. It appears that all participants reported some positive feeling or consciousness. Many participants described the shift as an increased sense of emotional security or confidence, an invariant constituent that resulted in greater faith in oneself and the power to act. Table 5 provides data for each of the 15 invariant constituents used.

Table 5

Transformations of Participants

Invariant Constituents	Participants who reported this experience	
	#	%
Confidence/Ego Boost	5	31
More Proactive	5	31
Optimism	3	19
Positive Attitude (generic)	3	19
Altered Perspective About Life (generic)	2	13
Happier/More Satisfied	2	13
More Introspective	2	13
More Mellow	2	13
More Organized	2	13
Interpretation of Questions	1	6
Learned Good Questioning	1	6
More Bold	1	6
More Curious	1	6
More Humble	1	6
Open Mindedness	1	6

Theme 5: Camaraderie and Trust Are the Foundation of the Experience

Participants were willing to elaborate on their experience in the action learning groups. They described a sense of openness about sharing their problem or challenge. Overall, they thought their colleagues listened to each other and some felt a shared understanding. Monica said, “I think everybody was very, very willing to share the time, to focus on one person and then discuss it.” Monica eloquently continued:

I noticed that the group started to bond right away. As soon as people were open and honest; there was a real feeling of, “I’m going to listen to you and I’m going to help you and I’m going to help you solve the problem.” There was a feeling of camaraderie, I guess.

Toni related, “I’m just amazed how revealing people were and at ease with one another immediately. I’ve never experienced that in a group before.” Alice summed up her observations and experience of the group dynamic and how it affected her:

I think what was the most interesting for me, although I had known one or two people, sort of previously, how cohesive the group became so quickly. It was rapid cohesiveness and a lot of instant trust, that was like table stakes and everyone knew it and it felt very comfortable saying things that, frankly, I have said to no other person in my life. I don’t know why. It just seemed like the time to do it. I felt very supported. It was neat. Good chemistry.

Colleen added that she enjoyed the process and noted that she felt her fellow participants were constructive in their feedback to one another. She said

I thought in a very short amount of time we really trusted one another and I kind of liked that. We opened up quickly. We didn’t have any reservations about talking about ourselves and our needs. I thought criticisms were positive—they weren’t even critical—it was constructive. But I thought in a very short order it was a very trusting group.

George saw an outcome of the action learning group experience for him and some others as, “I found new colleagues, new contacts and relationship with people who will probably be a resource for me in the future.”

The element of trust, as a sense of integrity and commitment to care of others, was a frequently mentioned constituent. Most participants talked about trust as essential to becoming open and honest in the group.

Only one person, Kate, shared that she felt herself holding back from making judgments and becoming cautious as she experienced another participant in her group:

We are coming into a group where you don’t know people to solve a personal problem, there needed to be a higher level of trust and – or I would have needed a

higher level of trust. Not that there wasn't anybody there that was not trustworthy, But for me personally, I would have needed to know people more deeply.

Having found a renewed sense of energy and new perspective, Rebecca shared her thoughts about what she experienced:

There was a high level of trust and empathy among the group and I wondered what it would be like if it were a coed group. All women tend to be more communicative and empathetic. ... There was sort of a building almost friendship. There was acceptance of everybody's view of what was going on with their issue.

Reflecting back on his experience in the group, Robert talked about trust as a sense of loyalty among participants in the action learning group:

I felt like the group members became friends, and that the friendship developed at the first meeting, and they became sort of loyal, and that there was caring being demonstrated. ... I looked forward to the next group meeting and being able to talk with them.

Peggy expressed amazement and wondered if other group members felt like she did. She described her observation and experience of trust in the group:

None of us knew each other very well, and I think it is amazing how easily we got to know each other, how easily we divulged some really sensitive and personal things, and wanted to and wanted the anonymous advice of people in the room rather than having somebody who might have preconceived ideas of who we are, what we and what our issues are.

Jane offered a concise syntheses of the group experience:

I think it is telling four basic strangers what was going on and having them say to you, "Time to start thinking about it in a different way." I think having the dynamic of new people ... my friends and family are tired of my (grumbling), you know, it is like new blood.

And as a researcher I reflected and said, "Trust the process. It works."

The key characteristics of the experience were camaraderie and trust, which are fundamental in ensuring a positive learning experience. A sense of

camaraderie is an important element to successful group tasks, and the same can be said for trust.

Monica said, “I noticed the group started to bond right away...There was a feeling of camaraderie, I guess.” Toni used the word camaraderie also. She said, “...that camaraderie that developed, especially that first time, that was amazing to me...”

While some boasted of the camaraderie, others spoke of the trustworthiness of the group. Colleen thought, “in a very short order it was a very trusting group.” And, Mary Beth said, “There was a good level of trust.”

Trust is such an important element, as emphasized by Robert. He said, “I had developed some sort of a trust or admiration for those individuals, and so whatever barriers there were came down so I could openly accept what they were saying and think about it.”

The fifth theme was derived after examining the invariant constituents related to the thematic label of *characteristics of the overall group experience*. A total of 13 invariant constituents were used. Only those constituents which received three or more responses were discussed here. These were (a) came together easily/camaraderie, (b) trustworthy/trusting, and (c) helpful. Many of the participants found the experience to be “helpful,” although there were other positive invariant constituents such as “genuine,” “collaborative,” and “empathetic.” Table 6 provides data for each of the 13 invariant constituents used.

Table 6

Characteristics of the Overall Group Experience

Invariant Constituents	Participants who reported this experience	
	#	%
Came Together Easily/Camaraderie	7	44
Trustworthy/Trusting	7	44
Helpful	4	25
Empathetic	2	13
Genuine	2	13
Pleasant	2	13
Collaborative	1	6
Communicative	1	6
Dynamic	1	6
Extraordinary	1	6
Gratifying	1	6
Homogeneous	1	6
Intelligent	1	6

Summary

In Chapter IV, the researcher employed the modified van Kaam (1966) method of phenomenological analysis suggested by Moustakas (1994) to present the findings of the phenomenological data analysis. Prior to collecting the data, the researcher engaged in epoche to suspend her own opinions regarding the phenomenon of how baby boomers make meaning and learn. The phenomenological approach required this section to provide examples of the data analysis at each step in the process. The examples demonstrated how the researcher derived the meaning and essence of the baby boomers' learning from the data analysis. Examples of the individual meaning horizons, invariant meaning horizons and themes, and individual textural and structural descriptions of the baby boomers' learning were included. Using Moustakas's method, the researcher focused on approaching the phenomenon with as unbiased an attitude as possible.

Chapter IV included the results and analysis of the in-depth interviews of the self-selected 16 baby boomer adults. The researcher asked questions to understand the baby boomers' thoughts and feelings as participants in four-week learning group that met for a three-hour session per week. Participants were asked to describe their overall experience, how and what they learned, what roles certain elements played in either learning or not learning, and how they learned. They were asked questions about the learning process and their experiences both in and outside of the group.

The interviews were analyzed according the modified van Kaam (1966) method of phenomenological analysis suggested by Moustakas (1994). The researcher, with the aid of NVivo© 7 analysis software, found invariant constituents and used these to discover emergent themes across the data. Through this process, five themes emerged which have been thoroughly described in Chapter IV. In accordance with the modified van Kaam (1966) method, textural, structural, and textural-structural descriptions were written and included in this chapter. These descriptions provide the reader with the essence of the findings.

The findings reflect that with action learning, baby boomers experienced an aspect of transformative learning. The study revealed that 100 percent of the baby boomers reported some change in their thinking, behavior, feelings, habits, and routines during the course of the four weekly action learning sessions. The findings reflect that all the elements of action learning employing Marquardt's (1999, 2004) framework and six interactive components contributed to transformative learning in the action learning groups. The data analysis revealed there were minimal negative reports about the learning group experience, and there was no aspect of the group experience that significantly

hindered the learning experience. However, some participants reported that time was a constraint.

The five resultant themes are: (1) Reflection is done through inner conversation; (2) Learning is fostered through discourse and questioning; (3) Learning is hindered by time constraints; (4) Participants gained confidence and became more proactive; and (5) Camaraderie and trust are the foundation of the experience.

Chapter V will include the research conclusions, implications of the study, and recommendations for practice.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study examined how baby boomer adults in action learning groups perceived and described their transformative learning experiences. After participating in a group to understand each baby boomer's experience and the meaning of the experience, the participants described their experiences through in-depth interviews. The goal was to understand the essence of the phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological research method was appropriate for this study because it supported the study's goal of examining how baby boomer adults in action learning groups perceived and described the experience of transformative learning. This study was less concerned with facts and more committed to describing meanings. The study employed Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning theory and Marquardt's (2004) framework of key components of action learning to facilitate the self-selected baby boomer groups. In addition, the researcher explored and examined the power and applicability of action learning as one of the best approaches for adult learning (Marquardt, 2004; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003). The literature review suggested that action learning may be very effective for developing transformative learning outcomes.

This study is significant because there has been limited research that examined the relationship of action learning on changes in the transformative learning experience. The study provided another foundation for further inquiry, and contributes to the growing body of research on the lives of baby boomers.

The action learning groups, which employed Marquardt's (2004) framework and key components, provided a forum for presenting a personal problem or challenge while engaging in discourse, reflection, and receiving support for actions. New learnings were realized and described by all the participants in the study.

This final chapter presents conclusions and recommendations based upon the findings contained in Chapter IV. The chapter concludes by providing implications, and recommendations for practice and future research.

Conclusions

The overarching research question of this study was: How do baby boomer adults perceive and describe their transformative learning experiences within an action learning group context? In order to answer, the study asked three sub-research questions:

- a. Do baby boomer adults experience transformative learning while they participate as members of an action learning group?
- b. What elements of action learning contribute to transformative learning?
- c. What elements of action learning hinder transformative learning?

Analysis of data from the 16 baby boomer participants in the study revealed a number of conclusions, as described below.

Conclusion: With Action Learning, Baby Boomers

Experienced Levels of Transformative Learning

The study revealed that 100 percent of the baby boomers reported some change in their thinking, behavior, feelings, habits, and routines during the course of the four weekly action learning sessions. For some participants, the change could be described as

a change in point of view/meaning scheme such as a specific belief, feeling, attitude or value judgment that accompanied and shaped interpretation (Mezirow, 1996).

Advancing his studies on perspective transformation, Mezirow found that it can occur in two dimensions. It can occur painlessly through an accumulation of transformations in set meaning schemes (Mezirow, 1985). Otherwise, perspective transformation may be an “epochal ... [and] ...painful” (Mezirow, 1985, p. 24).

The findings suggested that seven participants experienced what would be described as a perspective transformation. The participants revealed that they became critically aware of assumptions that underlie their beliefs, feelings, and actions. And as a result, they examined why their assumptions had come to constrain the way they perceived, understood, and felt about the world, thus making choices and beginning to act on their new understandings (Mezirow, 1991).

Baby boomers reported taking full advantage of the group setting which fostered learning. The methods of reflection, discourse, and questioning required interaction among participants, and this interaction fostered learning. Discourse and questioning were important to creating a foundation on which other successful methods could be built. Discussions allowed participants to share their experiences and their emotions that emerged when presented with alternative perspectives.

The dominant view of transformative learning advocated by Mezirow (1991) is of a process that is inherently rational. While Mezirow (2000) acknowledged the importance of affective, emotional, and social aspects of transformative learning, it is nevertheless characterized as being primarily rational, analytical, and social. And, it relies on the cognitive process of critical reflection and dialogue to uncover meaning and eventually

foster transformation. This view proved inadequate in describing the transformative experience of the participants in this study.

As it relates to this study, there has been an ongoing discussion in the transformative learning literature about whether transformative learning is rational or affective. This study suggested it was both. Empathy, experiencing emotions, and emotional sharing were affective components prompted by the action learning group process; while reflection, discourse (dialogue), validation with others, and deciding to practice new behaviors were the rational components. Both rational and affective components occurred simultaneously.

Affective processes are mentioned by some theorists as critical in fostering transformative learning in an educational context. To develop only rationality (i.e., critical reflection and rational discourse) runs the risk of negating intuition, courage, risk, creativity, and caring (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Affective and rational components and their interaction vary for different individuals. Much research has confirmed the role of affective processes in fostering transformative learning (Bailey, 1996; Brooks, 1989; Clark, 1991; Murry, 1992; Pierce, 1986; Scott, 1997; Taylor, 1994; Vogelsang, 1993).

In this study, human qualities were integral to each participant's learning experience. For some of the baby boomers their affective outcomes appeared to be just as important as the rational outcomes. For Daloz (1986), Apps (1996), Brookfield (1987), and Boyd and Myers (1988), Yorks and Kasl (2002) transformative learning is a holistic activity which includes the heart, soul, body, intellect, and emotions. Although the study employed Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning as a basis for the study of

transformative learning, a more holistic view of transformative learning as described by other theorists is more appropriate to this study and its findings.

*Conclusion: Elements in Action Learning Contributed to the
Baby Boomers' Transformative Experiences*

Contextual Conditions Influenced the Outcomes

Contextual conditions influenced the outcomes of the action learning group, and this confirmed the researcher's selection of an appropriate, comfortable setting that would be conducive to personal sharing and group interaction. As Betsy said, "I think the setting was very helpful. It was a very relaxing setting. You felt like you were in someone's home, really." Another participant, Robert, mentioned, "I think the setting was desirable in that we were fairly close to each other, not quite in each other's faces but you couldn't hide. That was a good thing in terms of group dynamics."

The importance of context and the role it plays is well documented in the literature. Context is integral to key adult learning theories that have been incorporated into action learning (Marquardt, 2004; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003). Action learning has been aligned with the social learning theorists' assertion that a social setting that encourages social interaction with and observation of others is central to fostering learning (Bandura, 1977; Phares, 1980). Action learning provides a social setting, which supports Revans' (1982) belief that learning is social. As demonstrated in this study, participants worked on their problems or tasks in action learning sets, which include individuals from different backgrounds, functions, and business units (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 1999).

In 2007, Taylor examined Mezirow's 2000 interpretation of transformative learning, which re-affirmed that context has implications for both personal and sociocultural factors. Taylor recognized a shift in focus toward making sense of the contextual factors that shape the transformative experience and how it can be fostered in practice. Findings in other studies by Courtenay et al. (2000) and Baumgartner (2000) on service to others, and King (2000) and Lyon, (2001) on developing intercultural awareness also highlighted the role of context.

Thus, this study's findings concur with previous research that emphasized the need for educators (and action learning coaches) to create democratic conditions and a supportive environment where transformative learning can occur (Apps, 1996; Argyris & Schön, 1992; Brookfield, 1991; Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 1986; Farquharson, 1992; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991).

Trust and Camaraderie Are Essential for Building Relationships in an Action Learning Group

One of the most significant findings of the study was the baby boomers' view of the importance of camaraderie and trust, which were central to their experience in the action learning group. Participants offered few negative comments about the group experience. Instead, Alice noticed "how cohesive the group became and how quickly." Rebecca added, "There was a high level of trust and empathy among the group." Robert concluded: "It was enriching ... I had developed some sort of trust or admiration for those individuals and so whatever barriers there were came down."

This finding concurs with the action learning literature that has consistently suggested that the learning process is social, i.e., managers learn best with and from one

another (Mumford, 1995; Revans, 1981); that action learning occurs around a group or set of four to eight individuals (Marquardt, 2004); and that members of a group, referred to as comrades-in-adversity (Revans, 1982) and fellows-in-opportunity (Mumford, 1996), benefit from the greatest diversity possible in experiences, functions, and personalities (O'Neil & Dilworth, 1999; Marquardt, 1999).

In transformative learning, Mezirow (1991) indirectly refers to relationships in the context of his rational discourse and consensual validation. Clark and Wilson (1991) criticized Mezirow (1991) for ignoring context—the personal and sociocultural factors that influence the process of transformative learning. These factors include the immediate context that surrounds a learning event. Clark (1991) stressed the importance of contextual factors because they shape the meaning of the learning by structuring it and directing its course. Taylor (1997) also criticized Mezirow for overlooking the more subjective elements of relationships, e.g., friendship and trust.

More recently, Taylor (2007) discussed the significant relational nature of transformative learning. Taylor questioned the recent emphasis on the autonomous and formal nature of transformative learning, and reaffirmed a learning process that depends on the need for support, trust, friendship, and intimacy. The nature of these relationships was also included in Carter's (2002) typologies that address relationships.

Commitment to Solving a Priority Problem and a Sense of Urgency Are Important

In this study, the researcher's reflective notes revealed some salient characteristics of participants who appeared to reach or advance toward a solution. Those who were able to clearly articulate their problem or challenge, reframe their situations either objectively or subjectively (Mezirow, 1998) after some questioning from fellow group members, and

commit to weekly action steps were the most satisfied participants with the action learning group experience. These participants also appeared to have a sense of urgency about realizing a solution. This was noted in the participants' weekly self-reports of actions taken and their reported satisfaction with their progress and accomplishment. For some participants, feeling a sense of accountability each week to the group moved them to take some action.

These findings mirror Revans' (1997) proposition that individuals learn best while trying to resolve an unfamiliar, intractable problem with co-learners; McGill and Beaty's view (1995) that in action learning, individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their own experiences; and Yorks, O'Neil, and Marsick (1999) argument that the foundation of action learning is "working in small groups in order to take action on meaningful problems while seeking to learn from having taken this action" (p. 3).

The findings also reflect the principles and elements of action learning as proposed by Marquardt (2004). In action learning programs, participants solve a real business problem, project, or challenge (Marquardt, 1999; Pedler, 1997; Weinstein, 1999), and learn best when taking some action (Marquardt, 1999, 2004) and working on a project of personal significance (Marsick, 2002; Mumford, 1995).

In the transformative learning literature, however, there is scant evidence of a requirement to identify and solve a specific problem. For the most part, the theorists share the belief that transformative learning involves identifying, challenging, and altering preexisting assumptions, i.e., critical reflection (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Brookfield, 1990; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). Transformations take time to evolve and are an

ongoing process (Brookfield, 1986; Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). As Brookfield (1986) said, “Wrenching ourselves out of habitual ways of interpreting our practice, and learning new ways of acting that correspond to new ways of seeing, are difficult, tiring, and piecemeal tasks” (p. 242).

Asking Questions and Engaging in Discourse Helps Develop a Disposition for Learning

For the baby boomers in this study, asking questions was challenging, unnatural, and uncomfortable. Since the participants were seasoned executives, managers, and business owners, the researcher observed and surmised from their comments and discussions in the group that they were most comfortable giving orders and advice. In the interviews, some of the participants reported that they became more aware of their own resistance and the impulse to give advice, and they expressed in the groups how awkward or unnatural it was for them to pause, think, and construct thoughtful questions.

During the four-week study, most participants improved their skill in the art of asking thoughtful questions. Nearly all participants commented on how questions triggered thinking, reflection, and, in some cases, action. Alice added, “The questioning was definitely the more difficult but yet the more powerful when we were able to do that, when you locked on the right question.” This suggested that making the act of asking a right question conscious and bringing attention to this practice prompted learning.

In the action learning groups, baby boomers also learned about the importance of discourse to building relationships and learning. The participants spoke of being open to discussing their challenges, listening to one another, and being involved on the process. The participants reported that encountering an alternative point of view or a different perspective contributed to a change for themselves or others. The combination of

discourse, questioning, and reflection was described as a symbiotic by one participant. Another summarized the nature of discourse as, “It was good to say things out loud ... people respond to you from a completely different point of view.”

These findings agree with Marquardt (2004) who suggested that the learning cycle in action learning is the same cycle proposed by Kolb (1984), which emphasized the balance between dialectically opposed dimensions, e.g., the balance between concrete experience and reflective observation. Action learning enables a balance to occur between action and reflection (Dotlich & Noel, 1998).

The findings also agree with Mezirow (1991) who envisioned rational discourse and critical reflection as the two key methods by which transformative learning is achieved. Rational discourse is an informed and objective assessment of the reasons, evidence, and arguments that lead to a tentative, consensual best judgment. Consensual validation is ongoing and subject to review by a broader audience. Mezirow (1995) saw full, free participation in rational discourse and critical reflection as a basic human right and as the main goal of adult education experience. This goal was realized by the baby boomers in this study.

Asking Insightful Questions and Reflection Are Critical for Understanding and Problem Solving

In this study, at least one participant in each group was skillful in asking insightful or cogent questions. These participants were admired and recognized for their talent, and they served as role models in their group. During the meetings and in the interviews, participants remembered the individual who asked them the right, often

meaningful, question. Skillful questioners were respected, acknowledged by others, and appeared to be more influential in the action learning group.

The insightful questions appeared to trigger introspection and changes in perspectives. Insightful questions and reflection are complementary skills and work in tandem. Reflection has been defined as “the ability to step back and ponder one’s own experience, to abstract from it some meaning or knowledge relevant to their experiences” (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988, p. 15). In this study, almost all participants referred to reflection as an inner conversation. One participant described it as an interpersonal dynamic that feels good or feels uncomfortable. Many participants mentioned that they would take the question with them and think about it later, although they did not refer to this process as critical reflection. The researcher observed that some participants experienced premise reflection that led to a transformation of participant learner’s meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991).

The importance of questions in this study is congruent with action learning, which emphasizes Q, i.e., questioning insight (Marsick, 1990; Mumford, 1997; Pedler, 1997; Peters & Smith, 1998; Raelin, 1999; Revans, 1997; Weinstein, 1997), rather than giving the right answers (Marquardt, 2004; Revans, 1998). An action technology cited as fostering critical reflection and transformative learning is ARL™ (Marsick, 1990; O’Neil & Marsick, 1994). Marsick (1990) stated that ARL™ was another model of action learning that

helps individuals both individually and collectively make explicit and then question the social norms that govern their action; individuals begin to be attuned to the way they help create and maintain meanings, often without questioning them, and the way their untested assumptions, beliefs, and expectations influence the perceptions of factors that influence and sometimes limit their thinking and decision making. (p. 44)

Most theorists share the belief that transformative learning involves identifying, challenging, and altering preexisting assumptions, i.e., critical reflection (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Brookfield, 1990; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). Boyd and Myers (1988) and Mezirow (1991) emphasized that a significant change within an individual involved awareness, examination, and reorganization of deeply held values, beliefs, and assumptions. All of these processes were found in this study.

Mezirow's (1991) content and process reflection are similar to Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept of single-loop learning, which involves changing action strategies when objectives and results do not matter. Mezirow's premise reflection is very similar to Argyris and Schön's (1978) double-loop learning, which involves exploring values and assumptions that cause individuals to frame an objective in a certain way. Double-loop learning provides the possibility for transforming theories-in-use, which are similar to Mezirow's meaning perspectives. Both single-loop and double-loop learning were experienced by the baby boomers in this study.

The Ability to Take Action Is Critical to Developing Confidence, Empowerment, and Learning

In this study, participants reported taking action on a weekly basis. For some, this involved a noticeable change in their overall demeanor and participation in the action learning group. Participants demonstrated an eagerness to listen to other participants' progress. Reporting progress to the other participants each week was a positive reinforcement, inspiration, or incentive for others. In some cases, the report was a reminder to increase the pace and to commit to some actions. This was based on a sense

of accountability to themselves and one another. A few participants admitted that they felt guilty when they did not live up to their expectations from the past week.

The value of encouragement and support was critical. Frequently, participants shared their feelings, and expressed that the genuine support from fellow participants was welcome and rare. In each of the action learning groups, at least one baby boomer was seeking a job. Three were unemployed and were seeking employment. Four were dissatisfied with their current situation. Two participants were considering starting their own companies, and three were weighing job opportunities at their respective companies or seeking to revitalize their current position.

The action learning group served as a forum to discuss their situation and as an impetus to become more proactive. Action learning helps a participant to understand a concept intellectually, apply new skills, gain experience, and then undergo an inner development that leads to personal development (Marquardt, 1999, 2004; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Weinstein, 1999). In action learning programs such as the current study, participants addressed real problems or tasks that are significant to their work or their organization (Revans, 1982, 1997; Weinstein, 1999).

The fourth interactive component proposed by Marquardt (2004) states that action learning is based on the premise that no real learning takes place unless and until action is taken (Mumford, 1995). This is based on the reality that a person cannot be sure if an idea or plan will be effective until it has been implemented (Pedler, 1997). The action enhances learning because it provides a basis for reflection upon assumptions (Revans,

1982). Mezirow (1991) stated that the transformative learning experience requires the learner to make an informed and reflective decision to act. The decision to act may be an immediate decision to act, a delayed action, a reasoned reaffirmation of an existing action, or a decision not to act.

Other theorists agree that action is a typical outcome of transformative learning, although they differ in their view of action. Farquharson (1992) believed that transformative learning produced a successful reality, one that brings out the best in a situation. Brookfield (1995) believed action can be either visible or completely internal. Cranton (1994) referred to the view of action as empowerment:

The more autonomous a learner is, the more likely he or she would be to engage in transformative learning (p. 60). The individual who is insecure, lacking confidence, anxious, or unsupported—and is then plunged into activities designed to stimulate critical self reflection—may not be able to overcome emotional barriers to learning and development. (p. 162)

Cranton (1994) saw learner empowerment as a product of transformative learning, but also viewed elements of empowerment as critical to beginning and maintaining the process.

Changes in Thinking, Transitions, and Transformational Experiences Are Different for Each Person

The findings indicated that the transformative changes for each baby boomer were variable in content and scope. In 1995, Mezirow stressed the importance of critical self-reflection in perspective transformation. Some of the participants experienced meaning making (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162) and others reported perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991a, p.167).

One of the participants in the interview related that she could not think of anything specific to describe the change: “I wanted to make some changes or figure out some short-term and long-term changes in my situation. I think one of the triggers is you’re coming back and explaining what went on. ... That’s a motivating factor.” She reported being more confident and having a changed attitude. Marta said that she felt “more mellow” by the second session and shared a change in her perspective: “O.K., I’m single. I’m going to just embrace that kind of thing.” For Mary Beth, she heard her father’s critical tone and inquisitions every time she was asked a question until she had a revelation and recognized how she transferred that to every kind of situation where questions arise. This was one of several breakthroughs as she described her experience. Robert reported that he made a “transformation in his viewpoint.”

Action learning clearly describes change, and helps a participant to understand a concept intellectually, apply new skills, gain experience, and then undergo an inner development that leads to personal development (Marquardt, 1999, 2004; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Weinstein, 1999).

Transformative learning theorists have examined the phenomenon of transformative experiences. Mezirow (1995) identified two types of transformative learning: 1) learning that results in new or transformed meaning schemes, or points of view, and 2) learning that results in transformed meaning perspectives, or habits of mind. Points of view and habits of mind are what Mezirow (1997) refers to as frames of reference. In this study, both types of learning were experienced by the participants.

Cranton (1994) is the only theorist who discusses how transformative learning varies among different individuals, Cranton criticizes Mezirow for not addressing

individual differences. Cranton admits that there are limitations to her research data, and suggests that transformation may be experienced differently among individuals of different personality types.

Change Is Continuous and Can Be Cumulative, Episodic, or Epochal

The baby boomers described change in a variety of ways. Every one had experienced at least one disorienting dilemma, if not more, in the last year, as specified by Mezirow (1978). Some of these dilemmas included job losses and changes, deaths of significant others, separations and divorce, illness or disability, health crisis, children leaving the home to go to college, business and financial challenges, and care for aging parents. In the action learning groups, these situations became the focus of the participants' presenting problems or challenges. How a participant viewed and interpreted his or her situation involved a complex interaction of conditions or frames of reference, as defined by Mezirow (1991), that shaped their interpretation. For some participants, the experience could be characterized as an epochal-type transformation while others might interpret it differently through reintegration. Seven participants acknowledged what they called a "Wow" type of transformative experience. Some participants described what might be called cumulative transformations (Mezirow, 1991). These changes were described in Lamm's (2000) study of leaders who had participated in an ARL™ program at a global trucking express company. The Cumulative Transformation Model emerging from the study's findings provides for a better understanding of the cumulative type transformations. The model includes a complex interaction of individual program and organizational contexts that foster a transformative process including a demonstration of rational and affective outcomes.

Lamm (2000) elaborated that cumulative transformations may occur when all participants experience a similar learning process (new awareness, verification, and practice) which seemed indicative of a gradual sequence of related changes in points of view. Lamm's description was appropriate for the participants' description of the action learning group experience

Finally, there were other changes that could be best defined as episodic, i.e., participants viewed their changes made as separate, loosely connected episodes, and limited in duration or significance.

The Action Learning Coach Is Important for the Successful Facilitation of Group Process

One of the six components proposed by Marquardt (2004) was the learning coach. A learning coach helps the group to develop good process skills (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999; McGill & Beaty, 1995; Pedler, 1997) through questioning and reflection (Marquardt, 2004; Marsick, 2002; O'Neil, 2001). During the course of the action learning group sessions, the baby boomers commented on the value of having a facilitator-coach teach the process and guide them to stay focused on asking right questions.

In action learning groups, participants have many opportunities to give and receive feedback on their behaviors, ideas, and presentations. This feedback is provided by learning coaches, set members, and sponsors. In response to the feedback, the participants are likely to increase or decrease the frequency of behaviors and ideas (Marquardt, 2004; Waddill & Marquardt, 2003). Although participants in this study mentioned how helpful it was to have a guide, there was some resistance to the learning coach's direction, mandate to ask questions, and interventions to redirect and focus the group process.

One of educational conditions identified in the transformative learning literature is the role of the educator. Three similarities appear across theorists regarding the educator's role in fostering transformative learning. First, there seems to be consensus that educators need to help create democratic conditions and a supportive environment in which transformative learning can occur (Apps, 1996; Argyris & Schön, 1992; Brookfield, 1991; Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 1986; Farquharson, 1992; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). The findings of the study suggest that the action learning group process appears to be a catalyst for transformative learning. There appeared to be three key factors. Action learning offered a structured process—the six components proposed by Marquardt (2004). Action learning stresses the importance of teaching the explicit skill of asking the right question, rather than giving the right answers (Marquardt, 2004; Revans, 1998). The emphasis on questioning is well illustrated in the formula employed $L = P + Q + R$ (Marquardt, 1999).

Finally, the commitment to action makes a difference in the outcome and fosters transformative learning. Action learning is based on the premise that no real learning takes place unless and until action is taken (Mumford, 1995), because one is never sure the idea or plan will be effective until it has been implemented (Pedler, 1997). The action enhances learning because it provides a basis for reflection. Comparing the results of action against the assumptions or expectations of the action encourages a person to reflect upon his or her assumptions (Revans, 1982).

Conclusion: The Element of Time Constraints Hindered Transformative Learning

One of the only barriers cited by some participants was time constraints. For the participants who mentioned time as constraint, there were differences in how they described the meaning for them

The time allowed for the action learning program was limited to a period of four weeks. In the action learning groups, participants were to allow enough time for each participant to present their problem or challenge, and were to recognize that the available time needed to be shared equally among the group members. In some cases, the participants' presenting problems or challenges were very complex and vaguely defined.

The action learning coach needed to be aware and remind the participants of their use of time. Each participant needed to use their designated time during each session to accomplish three tasks: discuss their problem, respond to questions, and commit to an action for the coming week. There were limitations and not enough time to discuss issues, ask questions, and follow up on actions and solutions. One participant expressed, "Yeah, to have others have more time to talk and you know have the question and answer session and reflection go a little bit longer ... would have been helpful." Jane referred to time as a hindrance that prevented participants from knowing more about each other on a deeper level that might have allowed for more questioning. And the extension of the sessions beyond the four weeks prompted her to wonder what might have happened.

Time was mentioned as a hindrance in ARL™ groups. The study also supports O'Neil (1999) findings that while there were a number of external influences, the length and timing of the action learning program had the greatest external influence on the practice of learning advisors.

In addition, a lack of program continuation was a most frequently mentioned hindrance and a relapse in the absence of continued support as a common finding in ARL™ research studies (ARL™ inquiry. 1999; Willis, 1997).

Implications Amidst Demographic Change

The implications of this research rest on the unsteady ground in which the US economy now rests. In a StraightTalk web cast on January 12, 2009, The Conference Board's chief economist Gail Fosler spoke on the economy and the growing concerns of business and consumers. Fosler warned that "the biggest challenge ahead is how to stop the downward spiral feeding on its own momentum" (p.1). George Magnus, in his book *The Age of Aging*, framed the problem into three categories: those who claim that the current economic crisis is just another Malthus scare story and can be sorted out with a few tweaks to retirement ages and pension policies; those who preach gloom and doom of a meltdown in asset prices, poverty in old age, health-care rationing and even intergenerational warfare as the young and old compete for scarce resources; and those in the middle, who analyze numbers and work to find more palatable solutions. The author stated that no solution will be easy, and that politicians, policy makers, corporate and global leaders, and all citizens of the world must take action and some ownership of the global tsunami that has arrived.

Although the impact of the current economic crisis has been experienced by many, the baby boomers—the focus of this study—are a generation at great risk. The current economic conditions and uncertain future of baby boomers were expressed in a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2008). The report stated that American baby boomers are in a "collective funk" (p. 1), the generation born between

1946 and 1964 is more “gloomy” than other generations. The survey indicated that boomers rate their overall quality of life lower than those of other generations. Boomers now believe it is harder to get ahead now than it was 10 years ago. This belief has been reinforced by recent financial reports, and in troubled economic times. boomers’ lack of confidence in their long-term plan to maintain a reasonable standard of living, retire, or even decrease the amount of time they spend working.

As Vaill (1996) suggested, organizations and individuals must change skill sets, knowledge, capacities, and mental perspectives in order to learn continuously in the changing economy and the new challenges of the 21st century. Vaill emphasized the need for continuous learning in “permanent white water” (p.10) and suggested that individuals must be extremely effective learners in order to change with the times. Many leaders have suggested that the stress, uncertainty, and the need for flexibility in the developed world will only continue to grow.

Implications for Human Resource Development

In the current worldwide economic crisis, with a growing scarcity of and competition for resources, the field of human resource development may be facing one of the most massive changes in the workforce of modern times. Generations like the baby boomers in this study had expectations of retirement and financially secure living in their older years. These expectations stand in uneasy contrast to the new, harsh financial realities that will alter the baby boomers’ reality and their need to continue gainful employment in a global, high-tech business world. Some baby boomers who have retired may be forced to return to the workforce. In the new global and economic climate, the

boomers will face unprecedented competition, and the ongoing problem of age and related discrimination in the workplace.

In addition to the challenges faced by the baby boomers, millions of American workers of all ages will need continuous learning and the type of extensive training needed to build the 21st century green economy—an economy that will need workers with a vastly different talents and skill portfolios. Executive leaders, government officials, and leaders in the non-profit sector, educators, and human resource professionals will be challenged in this environment to support the abilities of American workers to adapt and thrive in the turbulent environment of the 21st century. These times can be viewed through Dickens’ duality of the worst and best of times. The worst economic recession of modern times may evolve as one of the most exciting times for adult learning, as the U.S. workforce changes to meet the changing times. What is certain is that the field of human resource development must become innovative and imaginative and take a leadership role in the development of talent and rebuilding and “re-skilling” of the American workforce.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

Executive leaders and HRD practitioners must take a more proactive role in addressing the needs of the baby boomers in the workforce. On January 9, 2009 AARP posted a bulletin to its web site, which reacted to the grim statistic on the 2008 unemployment figures. “Workers who are 50 and older, along with those other age groups, have been buffeted by layoff and reorganizations that have been spawned by the worst economic downturn in decades,” said Tom Nelson, AARP Chief Operating Officer

(AARP, p. 2). “Mature workers are especially vulnerable because it takes them longer to find new jobs, and they often face severe obstacles in getting health coverage” (p. 2). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007), “workers 55 and older ... are projected to leap from 16.8 percent to 22.7 percent of the labor force between 2006 and 2016. The aging of the baby boom generation will cause not only an increase in the percentage of workers in the oldest age category, but a decrease in the percentage of younger workers.”

It will be imperative for HR executives and practitioners to champion innovative strategies that support baby boomers’ need to work longer and with flexible arrangements that are mutually beneficial. Those who choose to leave their full-time career may move into what have been called *bridge jobs*—full-or part-time jobs that are different from those in which they spent the better part of their working years and that provide the bridge between the transition from work to retirement (Quinn, 2003). Successful organizations of the future may be those that successfully leverage the talents and needs of older workers. This may involve offering options and programs designed to help older workers such as part-time or flexible hours, training, telecommuting, and a flexible menu of new innovative solutions.

It appears that now is the time for HRD executives and leaders to be creative and craft an alternative vision for the future. At one time it was suggested that the vision of the future would give boomers the unprecedented opportunity to direct their energy towards a positive social purpose and create an enduring legacy. This is a shift in perspective for some boomers who are choosing to look forward as they approach the

years of late adulthood as a fresh opportunity and process of becoming. The new global and economic realities are quickly redefining that vision.

For HRD practitioners, practice must focus on understanding their stakeholders and members of the 21st century workforce. They need to identify talent and anticipatory learning strategies that have value and outcomes along with learning experiences and courses that can prepare the workforce for 21st century work. These may be blended learning and distance learning approaches that include problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking, negotiation, innovation, and learning modules that help to develop the learners' capacities for asking questions and participating in reflection, observation, discourse which implies becoming agile leaders. The results of this study suggest that practitioners could use action learning groups for themselves to create the former learning opportunities along with special topic groups for baby boomers and their replacements. Custom-designed developmental experiences for talent, in combination with action learning, could be used as opportunities to create, share, and transmit valuable knowledge and experience.

To optimize individual and group learning experiences for high potential talent leaders, it may be beneficial to design and implement special purpose learning groups or action-learning teams (Marquardt, 2004). These would address real-life work projects that operate throughout an organization, and help employees learn how to manage the complexities and demands of a new work. The action learning group could be an integral part of leadership and management development programs, and the organization's performance management system.

Recommendations for Further Study: Action Learning

Within the current turbulent context, it would be helpful if research and development could be focused on learning the skills and process of collaborative decision making which includes observation, asking questions, reflection, feedback discourse (dialogue) and commitment to action: to examine effectiveness and the role these skills/processes play in action learning and transformative learning. Additionally, the relationship and function of these elements both in action learning and transformative learning should be studied. This could be accomplished through creative use of media and varied methods of measurement that include meta-analysis, mixed-methods, surveys, assessment instruments, field studies, and sequential in-depth interviews that examine the experiences groups and individuals in the midst of significant changes, challenges or transition.

The findings in this study and others suggest that there are a number of influences external and internal that differentiate successful outcomes, sustain change and growth for participants and demonstrate a return on the investment of time and resources. In this study, some of the key recommendations are: 1) action learning groups have design implications keeping the focus, goal and participants in mind; 2) selection, role and training of the action learning coach or advisor are essential ingredients; 3) setting and discussing expectations, standards and guidelines with participants is important; 4) ongoing development and mentoring of the action learning coach by qualified sponsor is imperative; 5) consideration for the ongoing development of the action learning group participants as part of each meeting or process would build skills and learning.; 6) follow

up support through meetings and online could provide critical ongoing problem/solution support and develop connections and community.

The fields of action learning and transformative learning would benefit from more research. Taylor’s (2007) review of research on transformative learning from 1999-2005 involved 40 studies published in peer-reviewed journals. He suggested there was a need for more research in transformative learning in different settings. This research could provide data that leads to a greater understanding of the relationship between action learning, transformative learning, and opportunities for application. Table 7 identifies the elements of action learning, showing how action learning and transformative learning are similar and how action learning is a catalyst for and contributes to transformative learning.

Table 7

How Action Learning Contributes to Transformative Learning

Elements of Action Learning	Contributes to Transformative Learning
Context for Action	
Environment: comfortable setting	X
Problem, task or project	
Disorienting dilemma	X
Project has significance for individuals	X
Solutions focus	
Group or sets	
Social relationships	X
Renegotiating relationships	X
Negotiating new relationships	X
People learn best from each other	X
Diversity of experiences	X
Rational discourse (dialogue)	X

Collaborating	X
Time factor	X
The questioning and reflective process	
Clarify and confirm problem, project, activities and tasks	X
Reflective discourse	X
Ask questions	X
Focused	X
Insightful	X
Challenging	X
Critical reflection	X
Content	X
Process	X
Premise	X
Critical self-reflection	X
Alternative thinking	X
Meaning making	X
(Re)framing problem	X
Examining assumptions, beliefs, values, practices and behavior	X
Experience of emotions/feelings	X
Transform meaning schemes/points of view	X
Transform meaning perspectives/habits of the mind	X
Taking action on the problem	
Commitment to action	X
Empowered to act	X
Change	X
Continuous	X
Cumulative	X
Episodic	X
Epochal	X
Readiness and motivation of the members	X
Commitment to learning	
Transfer of skills and tools to learner	X
Ask, give and receive feedback from each other	X
Action learning coach	
Model and transfer process skills	X
Help group members reflect	X
Give feedback and intervenes only when necessary	X
Step back from being the perceived leader-coach	X
Become a resource “consultant” to the group	X

Recommendations for Further Study: Baby Boomers

Limited research has explored the experiences of baby boomers in the workforce. The baby boomers in this study described their positive experiences with their learning and personal growth. Given the current uncertainties on all levels and predisposition to change, it would be helpful to examine how more diverse groups of baby boomers make meaning and describe their experience, and how they manage their work and personal lives during these changing times. It would be interesting to learn how diverse groups of boomers examine and revise their meaning perspectives and schemes as they adapt and cope with changes and transitions in their lives. Research could explore the role of resilience, relationships, concerns about declining health and financial challenges, and how boomers reinvent themselves and adapt to problems and challenges that are out of their control. Such research would be useful in understanding strategies, and adjustment to changing paradigms (Kuhn, 1970)

This research concentrated on a group of self-selected baby boomers all North American and Caucasian who had expressed interest in participating in a month-long action learning group for four weeks. It would be interesting to conduct a study of baby boomers while they were in transition in their work situations and to examine their experience in real time. Such a study could be conducted on-site by a team of field researchers and thus extend the data collected beyond that provided by the study participants. The study could combine interviews with participant feedback through varied means to add a new dimension to the exploration. This type of longitudinal study could provide valuable insights into the baby boomers' experience and the cyclical nature

of the disorienting dilemmas such as those sparked by their future outlook for the next decade and competition for resources. In addition, since no data were available on the experience of female vs. male baby boomers in the workforce, it would be helpful to study gender differences within this group and consider differences in backgrounds, education, age, racial and ethnic diversity.

With a high degree of certainty, we can predict that baby boomers will be remaining in the workforce longer because in many instances, and they cannot afford to retire. Action learning may be an important technique for helping baby boomers adapt and to be open to change and to the possibilities for innovation, and more ready to contribute to a positive—yes, we can; yes, we will—dialogue and self-directed action.

Summary

In the 21st century, technology and globalization have created a volatile condition where understanding, communicating, working, and sharing resources globally and locally are a reality. Reinventing ourselves, our industries, and our institutions is imperative and vital to survival and sustainability in the world today. Continuous learning and adaptation to changing conditions are widely recognized as strategic necessities to survive and thrive as we move forward in Vaill's (1996) whitewater of the 21st century.

Developing increased self-awareness, seeking to understand, and deciding to take action are essential to making meaning and change. The action learning group experience was positive and fostered new learnings about self and others. For baby boomers, learning was motivated by the need to preserve one's well-being, self improvement, making connections, identifying next steps to live more fully, and adapting to changes in an uncertain, turbulent, and rapidly evolving world. To sustain learning, they understood

that increasing self-awareness, altering perspectives, adapting, and taking action were essential for a disposition to life-long learning and integration in an evolving life.

This research, which examined how baby boomers make meaning and learn in an action learning group, is timely and has the potential to contribute to both theory and practice. This study is important for several reasons. First, the findings can assist adult educators, performance trainers, facilitators, managers, and organizations in developing the type of learning programs that will support the development of individuals, teams, and leaders. This could increase organizational effectiveness and support the building of learning organizations. The findings can also be used to enhance the understanding and development of talent and skills in reflective practice, listening, questioning, problem solving, coaching, empowerment, decision making, collaboration, facilitation, relationship building, complex thinking, and the capacity to cope with change and transition.

Second, the study can provide valuable information on elements of action learning and activities. This information could increase the opportunities and outcomes for transformative learning in developing change initiatives, program designs, adult education programs, teaching methods, and related self-help, support, and network groups.

Third and finally, the findings of this study provide individuals and organizations with critical information about the potential of action learning programs for fostering transformative learning, and the impact of such programs on developing self-understanding, reflective action, inclusiveness, confidence, and the type of behavior change necessary for success in the 21st century.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Material

ARE YOU A BABY BOOMER?

Born between 1946 and 1964

Do you want to:

- Find new interests or make a transition in your career.
- Tackle a business problem or personal challenge.
- Achieve balance in satisfying work and an enjoyable lifestyle.
- Learn a future-oriented, innovative process to understand any problem or challenge and the know-how to develop solutions.

If you are a baby boomer, one of the seventy-eight million North Americans born between 1946 and 1964, YOU might be interested in learning more about action learning groups and participating in a research study.

I invite you to consider joining a small action learning group with five other participants. This is an exciting opportunity to focus on your situation and engage in an innovative process. Action learning groups bring people with real problems and challenges together. And through a group process that focuses on asking questions that matter, reflection, collaboration, and discussion – people take action, learn new skills, and develop sustainable practices.

Kathie Kueht, business owner, consultant and doctoral student in the Executive Leadership Program in the Graduate School of Education and Human Resource Development at The George Washington University, is carrying out a research study under the guidance Dr. Michael Marquardt, Professor of Human Resource Development and Program Director of Overseas Programs at George Washington University. He is the author of eighteen books and numerous articles on the topic of action learning and in fields of leadership, learning, globalization and organizational change.

What is the time involved?

- Four weekly action learning group meetings – approximately 2.5 hours in length
- One follow-up interview approximately one and a half hours

When will the action learning groups meet?

Late afternoon (end of the business day – 5:00 PM), Tuesday, February 20, 2007

Where will the action learning groups meet?

The University Club, 924 East Wells Street, Milwaukee

There is no fee for participation. Parking is free and light lunch/snacks will be served

ALL ACTION LEARNING GROUPS – will be limited to 5-6 participants and Action Learning Coach

If you would like to participate in this research study, and would like further information or have any questions, please contact Kathie Kueht at PROACT by telephoning 414-347-9903 (office) or 414-218-0883 (mobile) or kkueht@proactlearning.com

IRB # 080656 Version Date: 8/30/06

Appendix B

Observational Protocol

Observational Protocol

Action Learning Group

Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

Sample Observational Protocol adapted from Creswell (1997).

Comments

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

At the beginning of each of the interviews, the participant is reminded of the purpose of the study, which had been explained to him or her when he or she first agreed to participate in it. Then the purpose of the specific interview is stated. Participants are informed that they will be provided copies of the transcript after the interview and provided an opportunity to add or modify their responses if necessary.

Participants are reminded that the interviewer will be asking open-ended questions that she will follow up with questions to clarify responses to get more details on their experiences of learning in the action learning group context. Participants are encouraged to share as much as they can about their experience.

Purpose: In the interview, participants are asked to reflect on their learning and the meaning of their experience as a participant in an action learning group.

This study is about understanding how you learn. I would like you to think about how you learn.

1. What did you notice about the group experience? ()
2. Did you anticipate you would learn before entering the group? ()
3. What triggered learning for you? (a) (b)
4. What role does reflection play in your learning? (b)
5. How do you reflect? (b)
6. Can you give me some examples of how you used reflection? (b)
7. What role did discourse play in your ability to adjust and learn? (b)

8. Can you give me some examples of how you use discourse to adjust and learn?
(b)
9. Can you think of a specific situation after the group, when you feel you handled it differently than you would have before the group? (a)
What do you think made it different?
What did you consider?
10. Did you have a most significant learning outcome? (a)
11. What made you say it was your most significant learning outcome? (a)
12. Do you believe it challenged a belief or assumption that you previously held? (a)
If so, what previously held beliefs or assumptions did you challenge or change?
13. Do you remember what first triggered this learning outcome? (a)
14. In the learning experience that you just described, how did learning from this experience influence your actions? (b)
15. How might someone who really knows you (e.g., a family member, friend, peer) describe you as different after participating in the group than before participating?
(a)
16. Were there any specific elements of your experience that contributed to learning?
(b)
17. Were there any barriers (elements) that hindered you from learning? (c)
18. Is there anything you might want to add that we haven't touched on that would help me understand more about what significant learning or change you experienced as a result of your participation in the group or more about how your learning has impacted your life? (a)
19. Was this a successful experience? Why?

Appendix D

Detailed Explanation of NVivo© 7 Coding Process

After the interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo© 7 as source documents, the researcher began the execution of the first step of Moustakas' (1994) seven-step, modified van Kaam method: horizontalization. This involved carefully reading each document and assigning codes to every word, phrase, and expression that was relevant to answering the research questions of the study. Each coded word, phrase, and expression is referred to as a "node" in NVivo© 7, or an invariant constituent. Once the interviews had been reviewed, the researcher reviewed the nodes and generated a list of relevant and salient terms that arose in participants' responses to the interview questions.

The researcher then used NVivo© 7 to run "text search queries" on each of the words throughout the texts of each of the interviews. This allowed the researcher to see the number of participants that had reported each node, as well as which participants had mentioned which nodes. Based on the nodes found in the text of the interviews by running the text search inquiry, the researcher was able to assign codes identifying what was represented by the nodes. However, because not all queried words were relevant to the research questions, the researcher had to review each appearance of each node throughout the text of the interviews to ensure that only relevant expressions were included in the analysis. Additional nodes were also identified in the review of the queried terms.

This constituted the first part of the second step of Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method: the reduction and elimination of the invariant constituents (nodes). The expressions were examined to determine if (a) the experience contains a moment that is considered an important element for understanding the experience or (b) the moment of the experience can be separated and labeled as a horizon or value to the experience (Moustakas). The experience labeled as a horizon is considered "invariant constituents of the experience" (Moustakas, p. 121). In order to execute this step, the nodes were reviewed, and irrelevant nodes were removed from the analysis. Relevant nodes were combined based on similarity. Relevancy was established by the context in which the statement was reported. This generated the total number of invariant constituents included in the final analysis and presentation of the data.

The third step of the data analysis required the clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents. In NVivo© 7, the clusters of invariant constituents were organized into "tree nodes" and then into "attributes" (thematic categories). These attributes constituted the final thematic categories included in the analysis. Using the "matrix coding queries" in NVivo© 7, the researcher was able to access data of how many participants mentioned which invariant constituent in which categories. Once the thematic categories, and the invariant constituents of which are comprised, were established, the final four steps of Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological method were completed.

Each of the final four steps – (a) individual textural descriptions, (b) individual structural descriptions, (c) textural-structural descriptions, and (d) composite structural descriptions – involved the creation of descriptions to express the data in a rich narrative

from structural and textural perspectives. In NVivo© 7, “compound queries” were run to identify relevant quotes from participants to include in the individual summarized textural descriptions.

Reports generated by NVivo© 7 to display the frequencies of occurrence (for each participant) for each invariant constituent in each thematic category. The data from these reports was entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and reorganized in order to generate the APA style tables representing the participant data. These tables were included to enhance the clarity of the composite description sections of the data analysis.

Appendix E

Participant Information and Consent Form

GW IRB Reference Number: # 080656
Investigator: Dr. Michael J. Marquardt
Telephone Number: (202) 994-2473
Research Coordinator: Kathleen H. Kueht
Telephone Number: (414) 218-0883
E-mail: kkueht@aol.com

1. Introduction. You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Dr. Michael Marquardt of the School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University (GWU). You will need to understand the risks and benefits before you can decide whether to participate. This consent form provides information about the research study. I will be available to answer your questions and provide further explanations. If you agree to take part in the research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. This process is known as informed consent.

Your decision to take part in the study is voluntary. You are free to choose whether or not you will take part in the study.

2. Purpose. The School of Education and Human Development of the George Washington University is conducting this study to determine and describe the relationship between action learning and transformative learning, and identify what elements contribute to or hinder transformative learning.
3. Procedures to be used in this study. Each participant will be asked to take part an action learning group with five-six other participants for a period of four consecutive weeks. This will be followed by one interview at a location that is mutually agreeable to the participant and the researcher. The interviews will consist of open-ended questions and will be tape recorded and transcribed. After each interview participants will be provided transcripts to review and validate. Individuals will have access to their own interview transcripts. The data will include the tape recordings, data storage devices, and any paper notes and documents that are produced only for transcription. Complete confidentiality will be maintained and is defined as ensuring data in all forms from this research is maintained securely in a location where only the research coordinator and transcriptionist have sight and access. Finally, all data will be stored and destroyed at the conclusion of the project so that no record of the data remains. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is fourteen hours over the next six weeks.

4. Possible risks. Given the nature of this study no risks are envisioned. To the best of my knowledge, the interviews will pose no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.
5. Possible benefits to be achieved by this study. Results of this study are expected to add to the theory and practice in adult learning. Additionally, this study is expected to yield findings that can be used to enhance the effectiveness of action learning in developing individuals, organizations, and leadership, as well as demonstrating how the use of action learning can promote transformative learning in adults.
6. Costs. There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.
7. Compensation. You will not receive compensation for participating in this study.
8. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may decide not to begin or to stop this study at any time.
9. Confidentiality of research records. Your records will be confidential. You will not be identified (e.g., name, Social Security number) in any reports or publications of this study. It is possible that representatives of regulatory agencies and from the study's sponsor may come to GWU to review your information. In that situation, copies of the relevant parts of your records will be released with all identifying information removed. Except for these entities, research study records will be kept confidential unless you authorize their release or if the records are required by law (i.e., court subpoena). During the group meetings, while we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of the discussion, we request that all present respect the group by not repeating what is said, "outside the group."
10. Questions. If you have questions about the procedures of this research study, please contact Kathleen Kueht by telephoning (414) 218-0883 during the workday. If you have any questions about informed consent process or any other rights as a research subject, please contact the Assistant Vice President, Office of Health Research, Compliance, and Technology Transfer at The George Washington University, at (202) 994-2995.
11. Signatures. By signing this consent form, you affirm that you have read this informed consent form; the study has been explained to you, your questions have been answered, and you agree to take part in this study. You do not give up any of your legal rights by signing this informed consent form. You will receive a copy of this consent form.

I understand the information printed on this form. I have discussed this study, its risks and potential benefits. My questions so far have been answered. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study and my understanding that I can withdraw at any time.

Participant's Printed Name

Participant's Signature

Date

12. Research coordinator's statement. I certify that the research study has been explained to the above individual by me or my research team including the purpose, the procedures, the possible risks and the potential benefits associated with participation in this research study. Any questions raised have been answered to the individual's satisfaction.

Research coordinator, Kathleen H. Kueht

Signature

Date

Appendix F

Audio Release Form

I hereby authorize Kathleen Kueht to use my audio recording of the interview for the project entitled, The Impact of Action Learning on the Lives and Learning of Baby Boomers. I have indicated below the name I wish to appear with my voice. I understand that by signing this form, I am releasing the recording to her for this expressed purpose. I will not receive any compensation for this now or at anytime in the future. I further certify that I am over the age of 18.

Participant's Printed Name

Participant's Signature

Date_____

Please initial Audio only_____

Research coordinator's initials_____

Appendix G:

Confidentiality Agreement for Transcription Services

I, _____, agree to maintain complete confidentiality of the data provided by Kathleen Kueht, researcher and client. These data include audio tape recordings, data storage devices, and paper notes and documents that are produced for transcription. Complete confidentiality is defined as ensuring data in all forms from this research is maintained securely in a location where only the transcriptionist has sight of and access to the data. In addition, the signer of this document agrees that no part of the data will be shared with others either written or verbally, indefinitely. Finally, all data will be returned to the researcher and client, and any copies—either data, audio tape or paper formats—will be destroyed so that no record of the data remains with the transcriptionist.

I so agree and abide by the rules of this agreement.

Printed Name

Signature

Street Address, City and Zip Code

Date _____