EMERGING CAREER EXPERIENCES: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE
CAREER PATTERNS OF EARLY CAREER PROFESSIONALS LIVING IN A SOUTHEAST
UNITED STATES COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the career patterns of early career professionals living in Aiken County, South Carolina. Two theoretical frameworks were selected for this study; Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory and Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Theory. The researcher conducted an in-depth literature review of peer reviewed journals from disciplines including, adult learning, career counseling, education, human resource development, and psychology. A qualitative general inductive analysis approach was selected to support the collection and analysis of data. Twelve early career professionals were recruited to participate in the study. Based on the qualitative data collected, 16 categories and 12 themes emerged. The findings support the concept that human beings are complex open living systems impacted by individual dynamics and external forces. The findings also demonstrate that career patterns are aligned with the human development process.
Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to a recent USA Today article, approximately one in seven families has their adult children living at home (Nasser, 2012). This “boomerang kid” effect is due in part to a limited and emergent job market. Upon graduation, these college educated early career professionals are challenged by the economic conditions brought on by the great recession in 2007. As of 2012, the unemployment rate for early career professionals was 9.4%, while the under employment rate was 19.1% (Shierholz, Sabadish & Wething, 2012). Many of these early career professionals find themselves struggling to make the connection between their college major and the job market while carrying the burden of student debt (Souto-Otero, 2010).

Even the value of a college degree has come into question. In April of 2013, the Wall Street Journal published an article The Diploma’s Vanishing Value. The author, Selingo (2013) argues that students are encouraged to earn a college degree credential without any regard to major selection and viable career opportunities. North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory made controversial remarks in January of 2013, when he questioned the value of a college degree and his state’s funding formula for higher education. Governor McCrory believes that funding should support graduation and job placement rates and not simply college enrollment. This strategy places pressure on institutions of higher education to offer programs with viable career options (Kiley, 2013).

Problem Statement

The challenge of managing a career in the emergent job market is a national issue in the United States. College bound students are encouraged to select a major and initial career plan from an array of unfamiliar options. It is estimated that 25% of entering college freshman are undecided regarding their major and plans for the future (Lopez and Andrews, 1987). Others
arrive to campus with a preselected career path based on limited information gained during their formative years (Carduner, Padak, Reynolds, 2011).

Many early career professionals, upon graduation, find that there is not a clearly defined career path. These students have incurred an enormous amount of student debt in pursuit of a career that may or may not have viable job opportunities upon graduation. As stated, many of these college educated graduates are unemployed or underemployed upon graduation. Still unable to connect with the world of work, these recent graduates return to graduate school and amass more debt (Souto-Otero, 2010).

Some early career professional, however, are thriving in the new emergent job market (Yen, 2012). Despite the high unemployment and underemployment rate, jobs in the technology sector and with new start-up companies are actively recruiting qualified workers (LaHart and Casselman, 2011). Often these companies struggle to fill key positions because today’s workers lack the knowledge and skills to compete for these highly specialized jobs. Employers and job opportunities in today’s market can be defined as emergent and transient (Kamenetz, 2012).

Even the concept of a career is emergent and changing. Today’s workforce contains a broad range of career patterns and experiences. Some early career professionals choose a traditional career experience, working 20 plus years for the same company. Others are choosing to stay within the same industry, but are gaining new experiences by changing jobs and switching companies every couple of years. Today’s workforce also contains a new breed of worker who has adopted a protean career approach (Hall and Mirvis, 1995) and chooses to compile a plethora of career experience from restaurateur to internet startup. Their resumes do not reflect a traditional linear career and instead showcase multiple experiences including diverse employment and education (Kamenetz, 2012).
Problem in Theory, Research and Practice

The dominant approach to career development theory has not significantly changed over the last 60 years. Early 20th Century career development scholars focused on the individual psychological perspective of matching one’s personality with a suitable occupational choice. During the mid-20th Century, career development theories expanded to include human development stages to account for the fact that people change over a life time. In the 1960s and 1970s career development theories again shifted in the wake of social changes in the United States to account for the inclusion of minorities and women in the workplace (Patton and McMahon, 1999).

Research on the subject of career development has focused on the effective use of career counseling techniques such as personality and fit assessments. As new theories have emerged research has shifted its focus on gap spotting to determine if there are holes in research and theory. Research on the subject of career development has focused on gap spotting areas such as demographics, gender, race, cultural influences as well as the effectiveness of career counseling techniques (Patton and McMahon, 1999).

From a practitioner’s standpoint, career preparation in schools and universities are still limited to resume writing, interview techniques, career interest inventories, and matching interest with a broad occupational field (Koivisto, Vinokur, Vuori, 2011). These low dosage activities have a limited impact and do not address the uncertainty and ambiguity faced by early career professionals (Hughes and Karp, 2004). Recent college graduates have expressed concern that they feel lost and unprepared for the job market (Yen, 2012).

Theories, researchers, and practitioners have tried to address the challenges that young people face when preparing for a career. What is not well understood is how early career
professionals are conceptualizing their career pattern and choices in light of the current economic conditions and the emergent job market. Insight gained from their perception regarding career patterns can help to prepare early career professionals to embrace and thrive in the new emergent job market.

**Significance of Research Problem**

Despite efforts made by career development practitioners and the evolution of research in the field of career development, some early career professionals are struggling to find work in the new emergent job market, while others are thriving (Souto-Otero, 2010). This is a national issue in the United States. However, the economic landscape in the American Southeast poses a unique challenge for early career professionals living in this region. The Southeast is experiencing a renaissance of technology driven companies relocating to the area as well as new companies starting up operations. This is part a continual economic shift in the Southeast (Edgar, 1998).

Since the arrival of the colonist in the Southeast and up until the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} Century, agriculture has been the predominant source of income and wealth. This source of employment and income was augmented by the development of textile mills during the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century. Textile mills provided workers in the Southeast with an alternative work option to farming. These mills offered low skilled low wage labor positions, but with a steady income for workers. The Southeast and particularly South Carolina, witnessed another shift in the economic landscape during the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} Century as manufacturing began to relocate to the region. The lure for these firms was a warmer climate, a non-union environment, and a low wage workforce. This trend of manufacturing firms and advanced technology firms relocating to the Southeast continues today (Edgar, 1998).
Aiken County is an economically diverse community that is fully experiencing this shift in the economic landscape. This community is located in the western part of South Carolina and borders Augusta, Georgia. Aiken County is a diverse community with an estimated 160,000 residents of which 70% are White persons non-Hispanic, 25% are Black persons, and 5% are Hispanic and Asian persons. The median household income is $44,000 and 16% of the population is below poverty (Census.gov, retrieved 2013). The community also has a history of being at the forefront of economic and industrial change.

Aiken County began as a depot stop for the first South Carolina railroad in the 1830s. The Hamburg rail line stretched from the port city of Charleston, South Carolina to modern day North Augusta located on the Savannah River. During this era, William Greg established several textile factories in the Horse Creek Valley area of Aiken County. These two events transformed Aiken County from a farming community to an industrialized community (County Spotlight Aiken, 2012).

The next major shift in Aiken County’s economic landscape occurred in the 1950s. With the Cold War fully underway, the federal government selected Aiken County as the site to build the Savannah River Plant. This facility produced material for the United States’ nuclear weapons program. Aiken County’s population increased during the 1950s and 1960s as workers in the science and nuclear field relocated for jobs with the Savannah River Plant. Over the last 20 years, Aiken County has also enjoyed an increase in manufacturing firms relocating to the area. Firms such as Kimberly Clark, Bridgestone, and MTU Tognum have opened and expanded their operations in Aiken County bringing with them a demand for qualified technical workers (County Spotlight Aiken, 2012).
Aiken County’s job market continues to be emergent and transient as new industries relocate and expand in this community. Manufacturing is expected to grow by 5% through 2022 bring over 300 jobs to the area. Not only do opportunities exist in manufacturing and nuclear, but healthcare is a growing industry as well. Aiken Regional Medical Center serves as the County’s major healthcare provider and employer. Opportunities for employment also exist in nearby Georgia with Georgia Health Sciences University, Doctor’s Hospital, and University Hospital. Another impending event that will have a significant impact on the emergent job market and early career professionals in Aiken County is the graying of the workforce. It is estimated that 6,500 workers in Aiken County are over the age of 55 and will be retiring (Thomas P. Miller and Associates, 2012).

Preparing the workforce for the emergent and transient job market is a major challenge. Aiken County hosts two public institutions of higher education, Aiken Technical College and The University of South Carolina Aiken. Aiken County and South Carolina’s public school system is also focused on preparing citizens for opportunities in the emergent and transient job market. One recent initiative is the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) which was signed into law by Governor Mark Sanford in May of 2005. This legislation was in response to the acknowledged gap between traditional academic preparation and the requirements of the emergent and technology driven job market. This initiative requires that all South Carolina 8th graders develop an individual graduation plan in partnership with their parents and guidance counselors. Students select an initial career from the following 16 career clusters.
Table 1.1

_EEDA 16 Career Clusters_

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<td>Transportation, Distribution and Logistics</td>
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Guidance counselors and career specialist act as advisors encouraging students to explore opportunities based on table 1.1 career clusters. They also discuss educational requirements needed to enter these occupations after high school. The first cohort of 8th graders under the
Education and Economic Development Act graduated in 2011; therefore the results of this legislation are uncertain (www.SC Pathways.org, retrieved 2012).

Technical employment opportunities are growing in Aiken County due to expansions and new companies relocating to the area. These opportunities also come at a time when companies are projecting large numbers of retirements. What is not known is how early career professionals, living and working in Aiken County, are conceptualizing their careers and the opportunities that exist in this community. It is also unclear how critical events and their social network influence their career patterns.

**Positionality Statement**

My own experience resonates with the uncertainty and excitement of trying to navigate the new emergent job market. As a high school student I received very little career counseling. The mantra of the day was “go to college and everything will work out”. The problem was that I was unemployed upon graduating from college. However, this is where real life began. I adopted a protean career mindset and had the opportunity to gain multiple work experiences. These experiences allowed me to continue to redefine myself and my career.

**Research Central Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the career patterns of early career professionals living in Aiken County, South Carolina. Specifically, the researcher wanted to understand how these early career professionals described their career patterns and experiences, as well as the role of critical events and their social network in shaping their understanding of careers.

Research questions:

1. What are early career professional’s perception regarding their career patterns?
2. What critical events shaped the career patterns of early career professionals?
3. How do early career professionals describe the impact on career patterns from their social network?

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Mohrman and Lawler (2011), researchers should review multiple disciplines and theoretical frameworks before beginning a study. They should also take a collaborative approach and combine theoretical frameworks to fully “understand the fundamental problems that are being investigated” (Mohrman and Lawler, 2011, p. 45). In the spirit of adopting a collaborative approach, two theoretical frameworks were selected to provide a lens for this study. The two theoretical frameworks selected for this study were Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory and Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Theory.

Career Development Systems Theory focuses on the interrelation of parts. It takes a holistic perspective regarding the topic of career development. The theory was developed by Patton and McMahon (1999) to provide an overarching framework for multiple career development theories. The central concept of Career Development Systems Theory is that people are not isolated insular beings. Rather they are part of a larger system and are affected by internal and external forces (Burke, 2008). Career Development Systems Theory takes into account that people are impacted by interpersonal dynamics, their surroundings, defining moments, and people (Patton and McMahon, 1999). Figure 1.1 is a graphical depiction of Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory.
As presented in figure 1.1, career patterns are shaped based on an array of internal and external forces. The individual is at the center and develops mental models of the world and their place in it. These concepts are shaped through external experiences, institutions, social
groups, and information. Patton and McMahon (1999) also argue that people change over time and the influence from internal and external forces vary as a person progresses through life.

Similarly, Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Theory explores the dynamics of a person’s social networks and the impact on career patterns. Their study focused on understanding how the concept of mentoring has changed from a traditional one on one relationship to a diverse and multi-facet network. As the world of work has changed, so have the concepts of mentoring and the importance of social networks. Organizations used to provide stable lifelong employment with one on one career mentoring opportunities. Today people rely on multiple relationships and have a network of people that make up their mentors (Kram and Isabella, 1985). Figure 1.2 is a graphical depiction of Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Typology.

Figure 1.2

*Developmental Network Typology*

To support their theoretical framework, Higgins and Kram (2001) created a developmental network typology. This typology is based on two factors, diversity and strength.
Diversity refers to the multiple numbers of people and viewpoints that a person has access to within their network. Strength refers to the quality of the relationship.

Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory framework and Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Theory complement each other and support the concept that career patterns are not formed in isolation. The process is complex and multi-faceted. Table 1.2 provides a graphical depiction of how the purpose statement, research questions and theoretical frameworks in this study align.

Table 1.2

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<th>Purpose Statement</th>
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<td>how these early career professionals describe their career patterns and experiences,</td>
<td>1. What are early career professional’s perception regarding their career patterns?</td>
<td>Career Development Systems Theory</td>
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<td>as well as the role of critical events and their social network in shaping their understanding of career options.</td>
<td>2. What critical events shaped the career patterns of early career professionals?</td>
<td>Career Development Systems Theory</td>
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<td>3. How do early career professionals describe the impact on career patterns from their social network?</td>
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As presented in table 1.2, the researcher wanted to understand the perceptions of early career professionals regarding their career patterns and experiences. Research questions were developed to gather the participant’s perception regarding career patterns, how critical events and how their social networks influenced their story. These questions were supported by the two theoretical frameworks selected for this study as they provided a comprehensive lens for exploring the phenomenon of career patterns.
Assumptions

The researcher assumed that meaning is socially constructed by individuals as they interact with their world and reality is not completely agreed upon. People interpret their experiences differently and at different points in time (Merriam, 2009). This assumption is based on a social constructivist viewpoint. Social constructivism is also one of the foundational elements for Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory. The researcher also assumed that individual dynamics such as race, gender, social status, and parental education level would greatly impact perceptions on career patterns. Finally, it was assumed that messages from one’s social network greatly impacted career decision.

Delimiters

The researcher is a scholar practitioner living and working in Aiken County, South Carolina, who wanted to understand the phenomenon of career patterns at the local level. Therefore, the scope of the project was purposefully narrowed to gain insight into the career patterns of early career professionals living in Aiken County, South Carolina. The researcher also limited the study to 12 participants who met the criteria of having an earned bachelor degree, be between the ages of 22-28, and working or residing in Aiken County, South Carolina. The limited number of participants allowed the researcher to spend more time with each interviewee to ensure that their perceptions and story was fully uncovered. This was part of the data collection strategy. The participants also reflected the larger population of early career professionals living and working in Aiken County, South Carolina both on gender and race. These delimiters were essential for narrowing the scope of the study.

Limitations
Narrowing of the scope also created limitations. The participants in the study entered the local job market in Aiken County, South Carolina. Their perception of the local job market may not be reflective of comparable early career professionals who entered a different job market such as a major metropolitan area. Although the researcher’s intent was to recruit a diverse pool of candidates based on race and gender, criteria such as economic status, religious views, and sexual orientations were not taken into consideration. Based on these limitations, the researcher recommends that this study be duplicated in other geographical areas to understand the perceptions of early career professionals at a global level.

**Key Terms**

- Career Development: Field of research related to the study of careers
- Career Experiences: Positions, titles, and responsibilities that make up a person’s career.
- Career Patterns: Individual career choices, expectations, and plans.
- Critical Events: Interpersonal dynamics and external forces as well as experiences and events that impact one’s life such as race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, and defining moments.
- Categories: A group of conceptually congruent qualitative data statements.
- Emergent Job Market: The job market is ever changing; traditional jobs are being downsized and new jobs are being created due to innovation and technology growth.
- Protean Career: The person, not the organization, defines success and what career and educational experiences they wish to engage
- Social Network: A person’s network of family, friends and mentors such as coaches, teachers, and employers.
• Themes: Synthesized ideas that emerged from the data and from multiple categories.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review was based on research conducted in the field of career development. Articles were selected from peer reviewed journals ranging from a wide variety of disciplines including counseling, human resource development, career development, psychology, education, and industry. Key word searchers included career patterns, career choice, career development, learning theories, emergent job market, and mentoring. The researcher explored the seminal work of Parsons, Holland, Roe, Ginzberg, and Super as well as the evolution of current thought leaders and research regarding critical events, social networks, and career patterns. This review also included literature on learning theories, early career professionals and the emergent job market.

Seminal Work in the Field of Career Development

The modern understanding of a career began to take shape in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} Centuries with the start of the industrial revolution. During this period, researchers in the field developed theories and models to assist people in identifying career options. This section explores the work of the seminal researchers in the field of career development, their theories and relevance to the field of study as well as their critics.

Parson is considered the father of career education and counseling (O’Brien, 2001). Through his research, Parsons identified three fundamentals associated with career patterns. Career patterns are defined as an individual’s choice, expectations, and plans regarding their career. Parson’s three fundamentals include having a clear understanding of self, having an understanding of career options, and understanding how the self and the world of work relate. His work led to the development of career counseling techniques such as the use of personality assessments (Parsons, 1909). His trait and factor theories, which focused on matching an
individual’s personality to a suitable occupation, served as the framework for future career
development researchers (Patton and McMahon, 1999).

Holland expanded on the work of Parsons in the mid-20th Century. He believed that a
person’s personality was expressed through their career and that it was essential for people to
make an informed decision (Holland, 1973). Based on his observations as a career counselor,
Holland (1973) developed a typology that aligned people’s personalities into six categories and
six corresponding occupation clusters. This typology, known as the Holland Codes, has had a
lasting impact on career development theories and counseling techniques (Patton and McMahon,
1999). Figure 2.1 is a graphical representation the Holland Codes (1973).

Figure 2.1

*Holland Codes (1973)*

The Holland Codes (1973) as depicted above, have been criticized for not taking into
consideration that people’s personality and interest evolve over time. Critics also argued that his
research was biased and based solely on white middle class values. Therefore the factor and trait
theories do not necessarily apply to minorities and females (Kerka, 1998). Holland did later
revise his theory to address socioeconomic concerns and to take into consideration that people change over their lifetime (Patton and McMahon, 1999).

Ann Roe is known for her occupational classification system developed in 1956. Similar to Holland, her purpose was to develop a framework to study career patterns in relation to personalities. She identified seven occupations and placed these occupations into one of six levels of difficulty. These levels of difficulty are based on responsibility, knowledge, skills and ability. Roe was keenly aware that not only did a person need to be suited for an occupation based on their personality, but they also needed to have the competency to be successful (Borgen and Weiss, 1968).

The mid part of the 20th Century was a time of change for career development research. While the focus was on personality and fit theories, other theories began to emerge that focused on process. Ginzberg was one of the early career development researchers who recognized that people change over a lifetime and that career patterns were part of a process and not a single event. He developed a three stage model that mapped a person’s career pattern from childhood to adulthood. The first stage is known as the “fantasy stage” in which an adolescent explores career options in partnership with an adult such as a parent. The next stage is the “tentative stage” in which an adolescent compares their career interest against their perceived capabilities. During the tentative stage, adolescents also mentally compare their value system to possible career choices. Finally, in the realistic stage the individual pulls together their personal assessment of their capabilities and personality to establish a career (Patton and McMahon, 1999).

Super’s theory of careers was developed in the 1950s and like Ginzberg focused on process. He believed that career patterns did not stop developing during adolescents, but
continued to develop over a person’s life span. His theory was based on 14 propositions. These propositions provided a holistic approach to career development and not just a focus on one’s personality. Super stressed in his propositions that career patterns follow the life cycle stages of human development. People change based on social experiences and career patterns are influenced by parental and socioeconomic factors (Chloe, 2004).

Super identified several different roles that individuals play throughout their lives. These roles include: child, student, leisurite, citizen, worker, and homemaker. Super suggested that learning was the central theme to his model and that people are experiential learners as they move through the life cycle stages playing numerous roles (Patton and McMahon, 1999). He also argued that family origin and dynamics played an influential role in a person’s ongoing career pattern development (Chope, 2005). His work revealed that building a career is more complex than simply matching personality with an occupation.

Although Super acknowledged the importance of family origin, critics argue that Super’s life span stages do not pertain to women because their roles and presence in the workplace has changed over the last several decades. Critics also claim that Super’s theory does not take into consideration that many minorities tie their ethnic identity to their shared cultural experiences when shaping career patterns (Kerka, 1998).

**Current Thought Leaders in the Field of Career Development**

Although early researchers in the field of career development provided foundational tools such as personality assessments, critics have argued that personality and occupation fit models tell only part of the story. Human beings are complex open living systems that must constantly evaluate multiple external factors and internally adjust themselves to adapt and grow (Burke, 2008). This section explores the research of current thought leaders who have adopted a systems
perspective to explore the multiple influences on career patterns including critical events (Patton and McMahon, 1999) and social networks (Higgins and Kram, 2001).

Career development theories expanded in the 20th Century from a simple personality fit model to a life span model. These models were also tested and further expanded based on major cultural changes in the workplace. Changes that impacted the workforce in the United States include the Civil Rights Act of 1964, desegregation of schools, and the women’s rights movement of the 1970s. With the Civil Rights Act and desegregation, African Americans began to pursue more prestigious and challenging careers. In the 1970s, women entered the workforce in greater numbers because of financial opportunities and personal fulfillment objectives (Bobo, Hildreth, Durodoye, 1998). Based on these changes, scholars have expanded the conversation regarding career development to include a holistic systems perspective. This expanded perspective looks at how critical events and social networks influence career choice.

**Critical events.** Critical events are defined as interpersonal dynamics and external forces as well as experiences and events that impact one’s life. Interpersonal dynamics include race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic conditions. These dynamics manifest themselves into critical events and experiences as individuals engage with the outside world. These experiences influence the development of self-efficacy and impact the development of career patterns (Patton and McMahon, 1999).

According to Bandura (2001), people’s self-efficacy plays an essential role in career choice. Self-efficacy is defined as a person’s self-perceptions regarding their talent and abilities. A person’s aspirations, commitments, resilience to adversity, and attributes are determined by their level of self-efficacy. People with low levels of self-efficacy will deselect careers that they
perceive are beyond their competency. Some researchers have determined that self-efficacy is a better predictor of career success than personality assessments alone (Bandura et al., 2001).

As mentioned, critics argue that personality assessments are biased and developed based on white middle class values. They do not take into considerations critical events such as interpersonal dynamics and external forces (Patton and McMahon, 1999). Interpersonal dynamics have a major influence on self-efficacy and career patterns. According to Gottfredson (as cited in Tang, Pan and Newmeyer, 2008), by the age of 13, most children have developed a sense of personal interest and ideas for occupational options. They have also developed an understanding of sex types and gender roles. This influences their self-efficacy and career patterns. Studies have found that women may have high career aspirations and maturity; however, gender role conflicts may impact their career patterns. For example, a female student may deselect career options such as engineering or being a homemaker because one is too masculine and the other is considered low status (Kerka, 1998).

Tang, Pan and Newmeyer (2008) conducted a quantitative study to explore the relationship between gender and career patterns. Their findings revealed that female students placed a high value on internal rewards such as the satisfaction of helping others. Female students with a high career self-efficacy chose people oriented careers. Males generally place value on prestige and financial rewards. Their study also revealed that when a male or female chooses a non-traditional career path, these individuals have a high level of self efficacy (Tang et al., 2008). Similar studies also find that children of working mothers tend to pursue challenging and masculine careers over those with stay at home mothers. Boys with high self-esteem tend to hold a more traditional view of gender roles in the workplace and girls with high self-esteem choose non-traditional careers (Bobo et al., 1998).
According to Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005), culture and race also influence career patterns. Their research confirmed that race and cultural identity does not impact career aspirations. It does however impact self-efficacy and the perception of career barriers. Minorities may perceive that they will not be accepted in a career field even though they possess the skill and competency to be successful (Fouad and Byars-Winston, 2005).

According to Kerka (1998) salience describes the value people place on roles such as work, service, family life and leisure. These roles change over time and are impacted by socioeconomic dynamics. Some African Americans may have a high salience with regards to their cultural identity of being Black. Cultural identity and shared cultural experiences impact how people perceive themselves and the importance of the various roles they play (Kerka, 1998).

A recent qualitative study conducted by Perry and Calhoun-Butts (2011), highlights the importance of cultural identity and its impact on career patterns. Their study explored career perceptions of Latino youth who attended an afterschool program. Using Critical Latino Race Theory as their framework, the researchers volunteered at an afterschool center to gain an etic perspective. The researchers interviewed the youth to understand how their cultural identity and the family influences impacted their perception regarding career patterns. Their findings indicated that the youth had high aspirations. However, dealing with immediate problems took a higher priority over their own career dreams.

A similar qualitative study conducted by Fouad, Kantamneni, Smothers, Chen, Fitzpatrick, and Terry (2007) focused on Asian Americans and career choice. The participants varied in age, were all first generation American born citizens, and had worked for at least one year. Their findings demonstrated that Asian Americans typically pursue high status careers in the medical, scientific, and engineering fields. Family was a major influence regarding their
Career patterns. Career status not only brought prestige for the individual, but also for the family. Asian Americans in the study also cited discrimination and the need to prove that they were equal in the eyes of the majority culture as influential in the development of their career patterns. Bandura et al., (2001) conducted a quantitative study that supports Fouad et al., (2007). His study revealed parental efficacy has major influence with regards to a child’s self-efficacy and career patterns. Children will pattern their career from their parental influences.

**Social networks.** Social networks include both work and non-work relationships. In today’s new emergent job market, these relationships are critical in developing careers and gaining new experiences (Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy & Kram, 2011). The structure of social networks in relationship to career patterns has been traditionally viewed as a one on one relationship between a mentor and a protégée. The reality is that the world of work has become so complicated, that people need to develop a network of mentors to assist them in navigating the emergent job market (Higgins and Kram, 2012).

Brown (2004) studied the impact of family on career patterns. His findings concluded that family is the most influential variable in the shaping one’s career. Conditions such as the number of parents in the home, the size of the family, and the relationship between parents and children all impact career patterns. Socioeconomic dynamics such as race and social class are experienced through the lens of one’s family. Parent’s occupational status, level of income and education attainment is a good indicator to the career patterns and aspirations of individuals. If a person’s parents were highly educated executives, then there is a good chance that their son or daughter will pursue similar status positions (Brown, 2004).

According to Chope (2005), measuring family influence on career patterns is a challenging process. One reason is that the society’s definition and the structure of the family
are changing. Families are structured in a variety of formats such as grandparents serving as the main caretakers, gay and lesbian domestic partnerships gaining legal status, and stepfamilies. Another reason is that children are different and parenting styles will adapt to the personality of the child. For example, first born children are often treated and raised differently than later children. Chope (2005) also notes that other influences have an impact on career patterns and aspirations such as teachers, mentors, coaches, and youth leaders. All of these variables make it difficult for researchers to isolate the impact parental influence has on shaping career patterns (Chope, 2005).

Chope (2005) conducted an in-depth review using qualitative research methods to assess the impact of family on career patterns. He reviewed the work of several researchers including Amundson (1998) and Taylor (2003). These researchers attempted to understand and measure the family’s perspective regarding career patterns, aspiration, and work in general. Based on his review, Chope concluded that more efficient qualitative data tools need to be developed to provide future researchers with a benchmark. He also concluded that there is value in the family’s perception regarding aspiration and career patterns because they can assist in the career development process by serving as a sounding board.

Lopez and Andrews (1987) explored the connection between career patterns, family development, and career indecision. They argued that career patterns are intertwined with adolescent development. Young adults who are struggling with adult identity formation and separation issues may remain undecided. According to Paa and McWhirter (2000), high school students identified parental influence as a major contributor in their decision making process.

Mentors and role models are another external source of influence that impacts self-efficacy and drives career patterns. As students grow and develop, they begin to seek out role
models in and outside of the family that can assist with their career growth and development. These mentors and role models come in the form of professors, employers, coaches, church members, and professionals. Early career professional’s self-efficacy is impacted by the messages that they receive from these mentors. This phenomenon can be observed in the field of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) where women are underrepresented. A study conducted by Fried and MacCleave (2009) found that more men are selecting STEM careers because there are more male role models and mentors already in the field. Role models and mentors play a significant role influencing career patterns (Fried and MacCleave, 2009).

Ramaswami and Dreher (2010) conducted a qualitative study focusing on the mentoring relationships among MBA students from India. The researchers define mentoring as “an intense reciprocal interpersonal exchange between a senior experienced individual and a less experience individual” (Ramaswami and Dreher, 2010, p. 501.) Their study focused on mentoring in the workplace. Participants in the study were MBA graduate students enrolled in a United States institution of higher education. The study focused on the importance of mentoring as a career development tool for future opportunities. Some of the benefits of mentoring within an organization include nominating the protégé for promotion, protecting the protégé from potentially damaging contact with other senior officials, and offering challenging assignments.

**Learning Theories**

Human beings are open living systems that are influenced by internal and external forces (Burke, 2008). Career development researchers have explored the complexity of humans and the impact of internal dynamics and external forces on a person’s career pattern (Patton and McMahon, 1999). Learning theorist provide complementary work regarding how people learn based on external stimuli, experiences, and internal dynamics. This section briefly explores the
literature regarding learning theories including behaviorism, constructivism, post-modern, adult learning, and experiential learning.

**Behaviorism.** Behaviorism is a learning theory that views learning as a direct response to stimuli. B.F. Skinner was a seminal researcher in the field of behavioral learning. He advocated that people learn and change behavior in response to positive or negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement encourages behavior through a system of rewards. Negative reinforcement encourages behavior through a system of consequences. Behaviorists believe that one’s environment and external forces are the most influential factor in a person’s growth and development. According to this theory, people will learn and develop patterns based on their external environment (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2012).

**Constructivism.** Constructivism explores the cognitive process of an individual. Constructivists believe that learning is a process and people construct meaning out of learning experiences. People gain knowledge of the world and develop their own perspective and understanding based on their interpretations of events and social interactions. The learner also continues to build upon their knowledge as they broaden their social networks and gain new experiences. This continual learning process is manifested in the development of personal rules, mental models, ideas, and decisions (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2012).

**Post Modernism.** Post-Modernist argue that reality is complex and fluid. Each learner is unique and interprets the world and experiences differently than another person in the same situation. According to Post Modern theories, learning is a continual shifting of ideas and understanding as people interact with the world (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2012).

**Adult Learning.** Malcolm Knowles is considered the Father of adult learning theories. His worked compared adult learning concepts against established pedagogy and discovered
several unique aspects of adult learning (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2012). Table 2.1 is a graphical description of Knowles’ six assumptions of adult learning.

Table 2.1

*Malcolm Knowles’ Six Assumptions of Adult Learning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>Adults are self-directed and internally motivated to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Adults have a plethora of experience which to draw from.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness to learn depends on need</td>
<td>Learning is dependent on the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem centered focus</td>
<td>Adults need to transfer knowledge to real world application.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Motivation</td>
<td>Adults are motivated to learn to improve their life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults need to know why they need to learn something</td>
<td>Adults need to know the value of what they are learning and how it will apply to their life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As depicted above, adult learners are different from children in that they are more self-directed and they have experience and existing knowledge to build upon. Experiential learning plays a significant role in adult learning. Adults want to know the relevance of a subject to their life and work (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2012). Therefore the ability to transfer knowledge to their career is a critical element in adult learning.

**Experiential Learning.** Learning also takes place through direct experiences. Kolb (1984) argues that learning is a holistic view that incorporates behaviorist, constructivist, and other
cognitive theories. The process of learning and gaining knowledge is grounded through one’s experience. The learner is engaged in a four step action research process of taking concrete experiences, reflecting on them, developing new ideas, and then testing the new ideas through experience. Experience learned is essential as human beings adapt to their external environment (Kolb, 1984). Figure 2.2 is a graphical depiction of Kolb’s (1984) four step process of experiential learning.

Figure 2.2

*Four Step Experiential Learning Model*

Kolb’s (1984) model as depicted above supports Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory which states that individuals develop their career patterns based on internal dynamics and engagement with external forces. Individuals are continuously learning as they experience life, internally reflect on their experiences and form new mental models.

**Emergent Job Market and Early Career Professionals**

Traditional career experience is characterized by linear career progression, fast upward mobility, and single company focused. A professional in this traditional system is often dependent on a single mentor and upward mobility is dependent on internal openings and promotions. Today’s emergent job market promotes non-traditional career experiences that are
unpredictable, emergent, involves horizontal mobility and mobility across occupations. Early career professional are experiencing an insecure and transient job market. However, this new emergent job market also offers early career professionals complete job autonomy regarding the direction of their careers (Colakoglu, 2011). This section will explore the literature regarding the emergent job market and the protean career attitude. It will also explore the characteristics of early career professionals.

**Emergent Job Market and the Protean Career.** The new emergent job market has changed the concept of a career and career patterns. The agreement between employers and employees has changed. Traditional career experience included a life-long career with one company. Although some workers are still experiencing this traditional structure, many are accepting the fact that job security is not the norm. A transient culture has emerged where employers recruit and onboard employees with specific competencies. These employers have an expectation that the new recruit will stay for a short tenure. Employees also expect to experience shorter tenures, collect experiences and move on to the next opportunity (Higgins and Kram, 2001). This transient culture has given rise to the concept of the protean career attitude. A protean career attitude is defined as self-managed career development versus organizational based. It requires individuals to take ownership of their professional development and career experiences and prepare themselves for new opportunities (Hall and Mirvis, 1995).

Knowledge therefore has become the most important asset to a company as well as the employee who is managing their career. As mentioned, employers are searching for workers with specific knowledge that will help their organization grow and thrive. For the new knowledge worker to be of value they must be continuous life-long learners. Growth and sustainability in the new emergent job market requires workers to stay current on the knowledge
in their field. They also need to develop the skills to conceptualize and implement new knowledge into their practice. This is the value of the knowledge worker in the new emergent job market (Higgins and Kram, 2001).

Colakoglu (2011) developed a model for understanding the positive and negative aspects of the new emergent job market which she characterizes as boundaryless. The positive feature of the emergent job market is career autonomy and the ability to direct one’s career. The negative aspect, however, is career insecurity. Colakoglu’s research focused on professional’s conceptualization of career success in the new emergent job market (Colakoglu, 2011). Figure 2.3 is a graphical depiction of Colakoglu’s (2011) career competency model.

Figure 2.3

*Colakoglu’s Career Competencies*

Colakoglu’s (2011) model identified three career competencies essential for developing a successful career and balancing the benefits of career autonomy against the threat of career insecurity. The first career competency, knowing-why, refers to the professional’s ability to
understand their values, needs, and aspirations. This understanding will guide their decision making process with regards to career choices. Knowing-how, refers to the competency of collecting transferrable work related skills, knowledge and experiences that can be pulled together into a portfolio. Finally, knowing-whom refers to a professional’s competency at building a social network that will provide developmental opportunities as well as future employment and new career experiences (Colakoglu, 2011).

Smithson and Lewis (2000) studied the impact of the new emergent job market and its effect on early career professional’s expectations. Their study acknowledged that early career professionals transitioning into the world of work will most likely not have the same experience as previous generations. As mentioned, previous generations experience traditional employment structures of entering into full time employment and pursuing a linear career path with one company. Although some early career professionals are still experiencing this traditional structure, others are gaining experience through temporary contract assignments and part time work (Smithson and Lewis, 2000).

**Early Career Professionals.** Early career professionals are defined as college educated professionals aged 22 – 28. Individuals within this age range are members of the Millennial Generation born in the late 1970’s and early 2000’s. The date range for the Millennial Generation varies among scholars (Treuren and Anderson, 2010). A quick review of the literature regarding this generation reveals that members of the Millennial Generation are unabashed job hoppers who are loyal to their career and advancement, but not so much to their employer. Members of this generation are ambitious, hardworking, and reward driven. They expect higher salaries, quick promotions, greater challenges, and the opportunity for professional
development and growth as well as a balance between life and work (Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons, 2010).

According to Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons (2010), today’s early career professionals are also searching for meaningful work and a nurturing environment. Earning a paycheck is not the only goal of these early career professionals. Many want to work for an organization that has a strong value and mission statement that match their own. They are also looking for a nurturing environment that mirrors what they have grown up with (Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons, 2010). The Millennial Generation was raised by their Baby Boomer parents who provided a nurturing environment that strived to maintain a healthy self-esteem. Growing up, the Millennial Generation has received a constant stream of positive and constructive feedback. They expect that their managers and leaders will continue to foster such an environment (Herbison and Boseman, 2009). This aligns with Colakoglu’s career concept of knowing-why.

Although the Millennial Generation only make up 10% of the workforce, this generation will continue to populate the workplace and is expected to fill the employment gap that will be left behind by retiring Baby Boomers (Sampath, 2007). As the baby boomer generation exits the workforce, the traditional psychological contract between employers and employees will be further diminished. Smithson and Lewis (2000) studied the impact of the new emergent job market and its effect on early career professional’s expectations starting their career. Their study acknowledged that early career professionals transition into the world of work will most likely not be the same experience as previous generations. The net result of their study is that younger workers are not as concerned with long term job security as compared to older generations. Their study also revealed that younger worker’s acceptance of the new emergent job market
varied with regards to balancing the excitement of taking ownership of their careers and the challenges of job insecurity (Smithson and Lewis, 2000).
Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter provides a description of the research methodology and processes selected to collect and analyze the data. The researcher provides commentary regarding the rationale for why a qualitative inductive analysis approach was selected. This chapter also explores the recruitment of participants as well as the detailed step by step procedures used to collect and analyze the data.

Methodology

According to Merriam (2009), meaning is socially constructed by individuals as they interact with their world and reality is not completely agreed upon. People interpret their experiences differently and at different points in time. The purpose of qualitative research is to understand people’s interpretation of their experiences with the social world. Another aspect of qualitative research is that the process is inductive as themes, explanations, and conclusions are developed based on the data collected (Merriam, 2009).

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the career patterns of early career professionals living in Aiken County, South Carolina. Specifically, the researcher wanted to understand how these early career professionals described their career patterns and experiences, as well as the role of critical events and their social network in shaping their understanding of careers. A qualitative research approach was selected for the study as this approach allowed the researcher to gather data from early career professionals regarding their perceptions of career patterns. The collected qualitative data allowed the researcher to integrate and explore categories and themes across multiple perspectives, reflect on human processes, and understand how people interpret experiences (Weiss, 1994).
Research Tradition

The researcher also adopted a general inductive analysis approach to support the collection and analysis of the data. According to Thomas (2006), general inductive analysis was developed out of the need by researchers to have an open approach for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Other qualitative traditions such as grounded theory, case studies, and phenomenology have developed over time with very specific technical data collection and analysis procedures that must be followed. General inductive analysis provides researchers with a concise, non-technical, data collection and analysis procedural system for conducting a qualitative study (Thomas, 2006). An inductive qualitative approach to research also allows theories and concepts to emerge from the data collected instead of approaching a study with a preconceived hypothesis (Merriam, 2009). This study utilized a general inductive analysis approach to understand early career professional perception regarding their career patterns.

Participants

According to Weiss (1994) an effective research sample must be a representation of the larger population. Merriam (2009) also argues that a sample should be selected purposefully. One method for purposeful selection is sampling for range. Researchers using this method will select participants based on established criteria to ensure that the sample is diverse. The criteria and selection of participants should focus on selecting diverse participants who are information rich (Merriam, 2009). This diversity will ensure that the topic under investigation is fully addressed (Weiss, 1994).

Recruiting a sample for range involves finding volunteers to participate in the study who meet the criteria of the study and provide diversity. Researchers can start the recruitment process by working with people that they know and then asking their contacts to refer other potential
participants. This method is known as “snowball sampling.” This method has limitations if the researcher does not have a large group of contacts. It does, however, provide an effective method for recruiting a sample for range (Weiss, 1994).

The researcher collected a sample for range using the snowball sampling method. Twelve participants were recruited. The participants met the established criteria of having earned a college degree, between the ages of 22-28, and currently working or residing in Aiken County. Other demographic criteria were taken into consideration to ensure that the selected participants represented the larger community including race and gender. Table 3.1 shows a graphical representation of the participants in the study and a comparison to Aiken County’s population demographics.

Table 3.1

*Aiken County Participant Demographic and Profile*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aiken County Demographics</th>
<th>Participant Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50% Male, 50% Female</td>
<td>5 Males, 7 Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70% White</td>
<td>6 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25% Black</td>
<td>4 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5% Latino and Asian</td>
<td>2 participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Caucasian, female, age 25, liberal arts degree, works in procurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>Caucasian, male, age 27, engineering degree, works in manufacturing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>African America, female, age 22, liberal arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Latino American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table illustrates that participants were selected to ensure a diverse group was recruited in accordance with Aiken County’s population demographics. This was part of the
researcher’s data collection strategy. One of the limitations of this study was recruiting a diverse pool based on other criteria such as economic status, religious views, sexual orientations, etc.

**Recruitment and Access**

Prior to soliciting participants, the researcher presented the study to his committee. Upon committee approval the proposed study was then submitted for IRB approval in accordance with Northeastern University’s policy and procedures. The IRB committee at Northeastern University approved the research proposal and the process of recruiting and interviewing participants for this study.

Once approved, the researcher began the recruitment and selection process by first meeting with the local Aiken Chamber of Commerce’s Young Professional Association (AYP), which has over 100 members, aged 22 – 39. Working with a full time staff member at the Aiken Chamber, members of AYP received an email request to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Potential participants then replied back to the staff member that they were interested in participating in the study. The list of interested candidates was sent to the researcher. The researcher then contacted the potential participants to schedule a time and establish a mutually agreed upon public location to conduct the interview.

At the beginning of each interview, the participant received a clear description of the study and was asked to sign an interview consent form (see Appendix B). At the conclusion of each interview, participants were also asked to refer other potential participants. The researcher continued with this process of scheduling interviews and asking for referrals until the desired number of 12 and the diversity objectives were achieved.

**Data Collection**
The data collection plan was divided into three phases. Prior to the launch of the first interview, a pilot interview with two participants was conducted (see Appendix C). Phase one of the data collection process included semi-structure interviews with each participant. Phase two involved sending a follow up email soliciting additional thoughts 72 hours after the interview (see Appendix D). Finally, summary vignettes for each participant were developed and emailed to the participants after all interviews were complete (see Appendix E). Participants were asked to review their vignette for accuracy, provide additional thoughts, and to describe their career using a metaphor. A graphical description of the data collection is provided in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1

*Data Collection Phase 1-3*

Prior to interviewing the first series of participants, the researcher conducted a pilot test of the research questions with two participants. During these pilot sessions it became clear that the flow of questions was out of order. Pilot participants were asked to provide personal and professional background information. They were then asked questions regarding critical events...
and their social network followed by a final series of questions regarding their professional life. The researcher felt that a better flow of questions was to move from personal and professional background information directly into questions regarding professional life.

The researcher also discovered potential bias in one of the probing research questions; *please describe your feeling of preparedness to enter the workforce after college*. This question assumes that everyone goes to college full time and then enters the workforce. One of the participants in the pilot session worked full time and attended college on a part time basis. Both the order of questions and the probing question were revised prior to interviewing the participants for the study.

In accordance with Weiss’ (1994) qualitative interviewing protocol, the researcher conducted face to face semi-structured interviews. Table 3.2 provides a graphical representation of the alignment between the research questions and the interview questions.

Table 3.2

*Research Questions and Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are early career professional’s perceptions regarding their career patterns?</td>
<td>1. What is your perception regarding the process of selecting and building a career?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What critical events shaped the career patterns of early career professionals?</td>
<td>2. Please describe any events or defining moments that shaped and influenced your understanding of work and careers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3. How do early career professionals describe the impact on career patterns from their social network?

### 3. Please describe the people who shaped or influenced your understanding of work and careers.

As depicted above, the interviews supported the data collection in relationship to the research questions. The phase one semi-structure interviews were 30 to 45 minutes long. The setting was a public location such as a café or bookstore. Participants reviewed a description of the study and were asked to sign a consent form. These interviews were recorded using an I-phone and voice recording application. Interviewees were asked an ice breaker question to describe themselves and their current occupation. This was followed by several probing questions in line with the selected theoretical frameworks and research questions.

In phase two of the data collection plan, participants were sent a follow-up email 72 hours after the interview. The purpose of this follow up email was to solicit any additional thoughts, perceptions or reflections. The majority of participants did not provide any additional thoughts, however, they did reinforce points they made during the interview and expressed an interest in reading the vignettes.

The third phase of the data collection plan included developing participant vignettes based on a summary of their interview. These vignettes summarized the participant’s educational and work experience as well as highlighted the unique theme of their story. These summaries were then emailed to the participants to verify accuracy and solicit any final thoughts, perceptions or reflections. Participants were also asked to provide a metaphor that described their career pattern.
Throughout the data collection process, transcripts and summaries were reviewed for saturation. The researcher also reviewed the demographics of the first six participants to ensure that the desired racial and gender diversity objectives were met. A graphical description of the data collection schedule is provided in table 3.3

Table 3.3

_Data Collection Schedule_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Review initial open coding 1-6, checked for saturation and diversity of participants.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview participants 7-9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Interview participants 4-6.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sent follow up email to participants 4-6 and record email responses from participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open coding of interview transcript 4-6.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop participant vignettes 4-6.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Interview participants 1-3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sent follow up email to participants 1-3 and record email responses from participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open coding of interview transcript 1-3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop participant vignettes 1-3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre Interviews</td>
<td>Pilot interview questions with 2 participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flow and sequence of questions revised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question regarding preparedness to enter the workforce after college revised.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Week 4          | Interview participants 10-12.  
|                | Send follow up email to participants 10-12 and record email responses from participants.  
|                | Open coding of interview transcript 10-12.  
|                | Develop participant vignettes 10-12. |
| Week 5         | Revise, finalize, and email personal vignettes for participants 1-12 and email. |
| Week 6         | Reviewed final reflections and metaphors from participants 1-12. |

The researcher followed the data collection schedule as depicted above. This allowed for an inductive process of interviewing participants, coding and sorting of data, and checking for saturation throughout the data collection process. The personal vignettes also allowed the researcher to check for trustworthiness.

**Data Storage**

All interviews were recorded using an I-phone with voice recorder application. This provided a high quality recording and allowed the researcher to save each individual file electronically. The files were then uploaded to the researcher’s computer hard drive and sent electronically to the transcriptionist. The recordings and transcripts were stripped of personal identifiers and saved in a secure location.

**Data Analysis**
According to Creswell (2009) and Weiss (1994), the data analysis phase of a research project involves understanding and making sense of the information collected. The proposed study analyzed the data in accordance with processes outlined by Weiss (1994) and Thomas (2006). Weiss (1994) outlined four broad stages for data analysis: coding, sorting, local integration and inclusive integration. Coding is the process of linking response data with a specific category. Sorting is the physical process of moving data and aligning it under a specific category. Local integration is defined as the process of reviewing each category, ensuring conceptual congruity, and interpreting the data. Finally, inclusive integration involves making connections between the categories and interpreting the data.

This process was complemented by Thomas’ (2006) process of inductive analysis. Thomas outlined a five step process for inductive analysis: 1. Initial read of the data, 2. Identify specific segments of information, 3. Label categories, 4. Reduce overlap, 5. Create a model for incorporating the most important categories. Table 3.4 provides a graphical representation of the data analysis processes and alignment with Weiss (1994) and Thomas (2006).

Table 3.4

Data Analysis Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1: Open Coding and Sorting: Initial Categories and Categories</th>
<th>Stage 2: Initial Interpretation: Themes</th>
<th>Stage 3: Research Questions and Final Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open coding and sorting of transcripts, follow up emails, summary vignettes.</td>
<td>Review purpose and literature review, interpret data at the local level, interpret data at the inclusive level</td>
<td>Review initial interpretation of data, develop conclusions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As depicted in Table 3.4, the data analysis process was conducted in three stages. Each stage had multiple steps. The following section describes the mechanics of each stage in the data analysis process.

Stage one of the data analysis process focused on coding and sorting the data. Thomas (2006) argues that qualitative data analysis begins with an initial read of the data transcript. As outlined in the data collection schedule, the researcher would conduct three interviews, post interview email responses, and then code and sort the data. Audio transcripts were sent to a third party transcriptionist and converted into written transcripts. The researcher listened to each audio transcript and compared the audio with the written transcript. This was conducted to check for trustworthiness and accuracy of the transcripts. The researcher developed six initial categories based on the research questions. These initial categories were labeled: work, job market, college, parents, mentors, and demographics. This provided the researcher with a start list for categories and allowed the researcher to begin coding and sorting the data.

Next the researcher read each written transcript and response email independently. He used multi colored highlighters to mark statements. Following Thomas (2006) and Wiess (1994) procedures, specific segments of information were selected and electronically sorted under an initial category. After this process was conducted for the first six interviews, the researcher began to develop more specific labeled categories. These expanded categories were developed based on the criteria that four or more participants’ made similar statements. This process was repeated for the final six interviews. Summary vignettes were developed and emailed after all 12 interviews were completed. Six of the participants responded to the summary vignette emails and provided metaphors describing their career. This data was coded and sorted under the expanded categories. Stage one data analysis process produced 16 categories.
Stage two of the data analysis process involved making sense of the data which included local and inclusive integration. This stage served as a bridge to the data coded and sorted under each category and the conclusions developed in the final analysis. In accordance with Weiss’ (1994) local integration process, the researcher reviewed each category to ensure that the data was conceptually congruent and developed a summary of the findings. These summaries focused on the central ideas expressed in the individual’s statements. The summaries also included the number of participants who made similar statements, for example, all 12 participants stated they felt prepared to enter the job market. Also, in accordance with Weiss’ (1994) local integration process, the researcher began to develop themes to make sense of the data. These themes were developed using Patton and McMahon (1999) and Higgins and Kram (2001) theoretical frameworks as well as the research questions as a guide. The researcher’s tentative explanations and theories were recorded in a journal and used in the process of developing 12 themes. These 12 themes emerged via an inductive process and served as the basis for answering the three research questions and developing the final conclusions. Table 3.6 is a graphical representation and sample of the data analysis process in stage one and two.

Table 3.6

Sample of Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Category</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work/Job Market</td>
<td>Preparedness for Work</td>
<td>I felt prepared, but then reality set in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Only fear I had was working</td>
<td>“Only fear I had was working with older</td>
<td>“Only fear I had was working with older guys”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with older guys”</td>
<td>guys”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I found a job waiting tables”</td>
<td>“I found a job waiting tables”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“moving home with my parents</td>
<td>Moving Home with Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was a traumatic experience”</td>
<td>“moving home with my parents was a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>traumatic experience”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Search Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I found a job waiting tables”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Home with Parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“moving home with my parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was a traumatic experience”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.6 is an example of how data statements made by three participants were coded, sorted and interpreted as outlined in stages one and two of the data analysis process. The data in this example were originally coded and sorted under two initial categories, work and job market. The statements were then recoded and sorted in alignment with one of the 16 conceptually congruent categories. After summarizing each category and conducting an initial inclusive integration of the data, these same three statements were aligned under one theme.

Stage three of the data analysis process involved further inclusive integration of the 16 categories and 12 themes to answer the research questions and develop the final conclusions. According to Weiss (1994), the process of inclusive integration involves combining the meaning in each category into a coherent story. The researcher referred back to the category summaries and themes. The first step in stage three was to align each theme with one research question. The researcher first aligned themes that specifically addressed research question number two regarding critical events. These themes addressed critical events such as the college experience, internships, moving home after college, and interpersonal dynamics such as race and gender. Next the researcher identified themes associated with social networks such as parents and mentors. These were aligned to answer the third research question which focused on social networks. Finally, the research aligned all remaining themes with the main research question. Once the themes were aligned, the researcher reviewed the data under each category and theme. Using an inductive process, the researcher developed theories and explanations regarding what the participants collectively said to answer each research question.

The final step in stage three involved reviewing theories and explanations generated for each research question and the development of five conclusions. The researcher first read each
of the answers developed for the research questions. He then reviewed the two theoretical frameworks selected for this study along with the literature review. This step was in line with Thomas’ (2006) recommendation of creating a model for incorporating the most important categories. The conclusions in this study were identified by the researcher as being the most important categories in understanding the career patterns of early career professionals living and working in Aiken County, South Carolina.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness describes the relationship of the data and the conclusions. According to Maxwell (2005), trustworthiness, or validity, of the results is the goal of a qualitative study. Two common threats to trustworthiness are researcher bias and reactivity. Researcher bias refers to researcher’s own theories and preconceived ideas influencing the collection and analysis of the data. Reactivity refers to the researcher’s influence on the participant’s answers during the interview (Maxwell, 2005).

With regards to research bias and reactivity, the researcher must be conscious of their own position during the interview and when reviewing the data. Although research bias and reactivity cannot be fully extinguished (Maxwell, 2005), strategies can be implemented to decrease their threat. One strategy deployed was interviewing diverse respondents. This allowed the researcher to collect rich data from diverse points of view. Another strategy deployed was respondent feedback also known as a stakeholder check (Thomas, 2006). Respondents were asked to read their summary vignettes and confirm accuracy. The researcher also adopted Merriam’s (2009) recommended audit trail to document the process of creating codes, aligning data, reviewing codes, making changes, creating matrixes, implementing internal validity checks and developing interpretations.
Chapter 4 – Report of Research Finding

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the career patterns of early career professionals living in Aiken County, South Carolina. The following chapter presents the results of the study. This chapter begins with a review of the data collection and analysis procedures. The data is then reported using a four phase approach including: a summary of the participants, categories description and findings, thematic analysis, and research question analysis. Table 4.1 provides a graphical representation of the data report.

Table 4.1

Data Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Summary of the</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stakeholder Check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: Category Description</td>
<td>Local Integration</td>
<td>Label the category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Findings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3: Thematic Analysis</td>
<td>Inclusive Integration</td>
<td>Reduce overlap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4: Research Question</td>
<td>Inclusive Integration</td>
<td>Create model for incorporating the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>most important categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher utilized Weiss (1994) and Thomas (2006) data collection and analysis procedures as outlined in Table 4.1. The data is also reported in this chapter using Weiss (1994) and Thomas (2006) data reporting guidelines. The next section is a summary of the data collection and analysis procedures.

Summary of Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher adopted a qualitative general inductive analysis approach to collect and analyze the data. Twelve participants were selected for the study based on the following
requirements; college educated, between the ages of 22-28 and living or working in Aiken County, South Carolina. The researcher conducted semi-structured 30-45 minute interviews with each participant. The participants received a follow up email 72 hours after the interview soliciting addition reflections, and a final summary vignette of their story for review. The audio data files were sent to a transcriptionist. The written transcripts were reviewed by the researcher. Six initial categories were identified based on a preliminary read of transcripts and a review of the audio files. These categories were expanded to 16 categories and then integrated into 12 themes. Finally, the themes were aligned to answer the research questions and develop conclusions.

**Phase 1: Summary of the Participants**

The following summary of each participant was developed based on the interview notes and a review of the transcript. The purpose of these summary vignettes was to capture the general story of each participant. These summary vignettes were reviewed by each participant for trustworthiness and to solicit final thoughts and reflection.

**April.** April is a 25 year old Caucasian female. She graduated with a liberal arts degree in history and currently works as a buyer for an engineering firm. Her plan was to pursue a career in museum administration or in nonprofit. She graduated from college in 2009 during the height of the recession. After an unsuccessful start to her job search in her college town, she moved home with her parents and began networking. April finally secured employment through contacts via her extended family. She believes that networking is the key to building a career and she is making connections within her current company. April plans to stay with her current employer as long as there are professional development opportunities.
**Bill.** Bill is a 27 year old Caucasian male. He holds two bachelor of science degrees and is currently employed as a mechanical engineer. His first degree is in physics, a subject he enjoyed while in high school. However, upon graduation he could not find a suitable career path in this field. He then returned to college to earn a second Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering. He participated in a co-op program which he argues helped prepare him for the real world. Bill accepted a job offer five months before he completed his second Bachelor degree.

**Deborah.** Deborah is a 22 year old African American female and a recent college graduate. Since graduating from college in 2012, Deborah has been unable to secure full time employment and is currently living at home. Deborah attributes this to the fact she is over educated. Deborah’s perception is that the local job market does not need a large workforce. Her goals are to find a job, earn money, and go back to earn a master degree in criminal justice. Deborah’s perceptions of career were most influenced by her parents.

**George.** George is a 25 year Latino male born in Mexico and raised in the United States. He graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering and is currently working with a local manufacturing company. He participated in a co-op program which prepared him for the social aspects of the working world, especially the challenge of managing employees who were older. Upon graduation he worked in operations and was eventually hired by the same company from his co-op experience. He aspires to be an engineering manager with his current firm in 20 years.

**Heather.** Heather is a 26 year old Caucasian female. She earned a bachelor degree in marketing and is currently working in business development. She is married with a young son. Her original plan was to become an early childhood educator until she switched to marketing. Although she enjoyed studying marketing, she wishes that she had studied something more
practical for the current job market. She believes she should have had more direction with regards to selecting a major.

**Julie.** Julie is a 27 year old African American female. She graduated with a bachelor degree in marketing and is currently working for a non-profit agency. Julie has a passion for fashion design and her plan was to study marketing and start her own business. While working at a local retail store in college, she met a woman whose husband owned several local companies. Julie secured an internship through this connection and was offered full time employment upon graduation. She plans on staying with her current employer while pursuing her dream of being a fashion designer.

**Lisa.** Lisa is a 27 year old Asian American female. She has a bachelor degree in business administration and economics. She currently works in banking. She benefited from a well-established internship program through her college. However, she did not obtain a job through her internship after graduation. She held a series of jobs including waiting tables. These experiences broadened her understanding of work and careers, especially regarding how to work with different types of people. She continues to develop a social network of mentors including supervisors and leaders at work as well as a friend whom she respects.

**Mary.** Mary is a 27 year old Caucasian female from a rural southern community. She has a bachelor degree in sociology. She currently works as an administrative clerk. She contemplated earning a master degree in social work. However, after observing her classmates in the field has decided not to become a social worker. She is frustrated that she has a college degree and is working in an administrative position that only requires a high school diploma.

**Mike.** Mike is a 27 year old Caucasian male. He has a degree in political science. He currently works as a junior buyer for a local nuclear engineering and operation firm. His original
plan was to attend law school. However, he decided not to pursue further education at the time. He wishes he had studied engineering, because he believes engineers have many opportunities in Aiken. His plan is to stay with his current employer as long as there are opportunities for professional development and promotions.

**Phil.** Phil is a 27 year old African American male. Phil’s brothers influenced his decision to study accounting in college. He currently works as a financial analyst for a contractor at a Department of Energy nuclear facility. Phil believes that networking is the key to building a successful career. He hopes to one day start a business even though he is satisfied with his current employer because of professional development opportunities.

**Tom.** Tom is a 24 year old Caucasian male. He attended a for-profit college and earned a bachelor of computer science degree. He currently works within the nuclear industry as a web developer. Tom attended school and interned in a year round format. His internship taught him the importance of social skills in the workplace. He would like to one day start his own company, but is quite content to stay where he is. He believes that the local job market is tough for computer technicians; however, larger markets such as Atlanta and Charlotte have abundant opportunities.

**Wendy.** Wendy is a 27 year old African American female. She went to college while working full time and obtained an associates and bachelor degree in business administration. She currently works for an engineering firm in the finance department. Education was not a top priority for her family growing up. However, outside influences encouraged her to pursue higher education as a pathway to economic advancement. This is in direct conflict with her upbringing. Wendy is always searching for professional development opportunities.

**Phase 2: Category Description of the Findings**
This section reports the summary and findings of the 16 categories as outlined in stage one of the data analysis process. The raw data was initially coded under six categories. After reexamination of the data, the initial categories were expanded to 16 conceptually congruent categories. The summaries presented in this section were developed using Weiss (1994) initial step for local integration of the 16 categories.

**Preparedness for work.** All 12 of the participants felt they were prepared to enter the workforce after college. One participant was already in the workforce and pursuing college part time. Three of the participants described some feeling of fear and unease. Bill acknowledged that there was a learning curve in starting a new job and George expressed concern regarding how to manage older workers. Overall the participants felt confident that given a chance they would be successful.

**Job search experience.** The participants in this study graduated after the start of the Great Recession beginning in 2007. The process of finding a job varied with each participant. Two interviewees stated that they had jobs lined up before they graduated because of their internships during college. One participant found work via an internet site 10 days after moving to a northern city. Another listed his resume on various job boards and was contacted by a recruiter.

Four of the participants stated that networking was the key to obtaining their first job. Statements such as “one of my buddies got me a job” and “my Father connected me with the job” were common among those who networking was essential for securing employment. Five of the participants described an emergent experience of accepting part time and temporary positions that did not require a college degree prior to working in their current position. The length of the job searches varied from 0 – 6 months. Only one participant was still unemployed.
Moving home with parents. Half of the participants moved in with their parents after graduation. These participants who returned home all described this experience in negative terms. Financial concerns were the main reason for moving home. Statements such as “it was the best financial decision at the time” were common among those who lived at home after college. The time at home ranged from three months to two years. Only Deborah was still living at home at the time of the interview.

Current employer relations. Perceptions regarding the relationship between employer and employee varied among the participants. Seven of the participants felt that company loyalty was a thing of the past. These same participants described their parents' experience as being traditional, one job for life. They believe their generation will move around a lot as companies lay people off and employees search for new opportunities with other firms. Professional development was listed by five of the participants as essential for staying with a company. Three participants said they would leave their current employer if another company offered more money.

Process of building a career. The participants varied in their responses regarding the process of building a career. Six of the participants felt that a person’s networking strength was the key to building a career. Comments such as “it’s who you know that matters” were common among these participants. Four of the participants shared that work experience was essential to building a career. These participants place high value on their internship experience. One participant shared that he would have been better off working instead of going to college. Two participants share that what you know is important in building a career.

Perception of the job market. Despite some of the negative or frustrating job search experiences, 10 of the participants believe that the job market in Aiken County is good,
especially for engineering and manufacturing workers. Ten of the participants also felt that Aiken County was better off economically than other parts of the country. The general consensus was that the market is good, but limited.

**Decision to go to college.** All 12 participants stated that the decision to go to college was never in question. Statements such as “I always planned to go to college” and “it was never a question” were common. Half of the participants grew up where at least one parent had a college degree. Eleven of the 12 participants received encouragement from their parents or grandparents to go to college. Nine of the 12 participants grew up in communities where going to college was held in high status.

**College major and selection.** Early Career Professionals were defined as college graduates aged 22 – 28; therefore all 12 participants earned at least an undergraduate degree. Five of the participants studied business administrations, four earned a liberal arts degree, two earned an engineering degree, and one student studied computer science. Ten of the participants described a feeling of uncertainty regarding what to study in college. Two participants switched majors before graduating. Of the twelve participants, only four are currently working in a field that interested them during high school, and only half are working in a field related to their college major.

**Internship experience.** Ten of the interviewees participated in an internship program while still in college. They described this experience as essential to developing their understanding of the world of work. Two participants described learning the social skills required for work. Another interviewee described the challenge of working with diverse generations. The participant in the study, who worked full time during college, described her job as her internship experience.
Value of college education. All 12 participants stated that a college degree was necessary in building a career. Participant’s answers varied with regards to specific benefits. Three participants with liberal arts degrees shared that college helped them with reading, writing and critical thinking skills that they use in their current position. Similarly, the three participants with technical degrees shared that college provided the foundational knowledge which helped them apply their technical skills on the job. Three of the participants believed there is a direct correlation between a person’s level of income and the level of education.

Perception of advance education. Similar to the value of a college education, 11 of the 12 participants perceive advance graduate degrees as beneficial. However, only two of the participants were currently pursuing a master degree. The majority of participants were reluctant to invest the time and money to earn an additional degree. Comments such as “I just don’t have the time” were common among the participants. The perceived benefits of earning an advanced graduate degree were increased salary and better position.

Parental influence and messages. All 12 participants stated that their parents were instrumental in shaping their understanding and perceptions of careers. Each participant described their parents as role models for what to do or not to do. The two participants raised by their grandparents stated that their parents were examples of what not to do.

Although the parents and grandparents of the participants served as role models, they did not provide specific messages regarding career choices. Nine of the 12 participants stated that their parents were encouraging, but gave little direction regarding career choice. Going to college regardless of degree was the recipe for success for 11 of the participants. Three participants stated that they wished their parents would have given them more direction
regarding what to study. One participant was encouraged not to attend college, but was also given vague career choice messages.

**High school mentors.** Only six of the participants mentioned mentors or role models outside of their family during their high school years. They recounted stories of how a teacher took interest in them and their future. One such teacher encouraged his students who were exceptional in math to pursue engineering. Other teachers inspired their students by exhibiting passion for their subjects. Two participants described how their coaches encouraged them to excel in school and work hard on the field. All six participants said their mentors or role models encouraged them to go to college.

The participants in the study grew up in different areas of the United States. However, all 12 of the participants stated that their high school guidance counselors were not a factor in developing their understanding of careers or provide specific direction. Common statements among the 12 participants included “I never really spoke with my guidance counselor” or “my counselor did not seem to really care”. Two participants were bothered by what they experienced and observed. Their experience was that guidance counselors were only interested in the top 10% academically in the school. The perception for participants was that guidance counselors were not concerned with the average student.

**College and workplace mentor.** Nine of the participants shared that they benefited from a college or workplace mentoring relationship. These mentors took an interest in the participant’s career and well-being. They were described as providing information on work place politics, how to get along with others, goal setting, and success. College and workplace mentors also served as role models.
**Race and Culture.** All of the White non-Hispanic and two of the African American participants in the study did not feel that race or culture was a major factor in the development of their career. The one Hispanic and one Asian participant shared how their culture influenced their work ethic. Two of the African American female participants felt that race impacted their self-efficacy. One noticed that there were limited number of African American role models or heroes growing up. Both stated that race was a hindrance to their career.

**Gender.** The males in the study did not discuss gender as playing a role in their career patterns. Only George, a Latino Male stated that his culture influenced his understanding of being a man and that a man is supposed to work hard for his family. All of the females in the study made some reference to their gender, but none described being influenced regarding their career choice based on gender stereotypes. There was discussion regarding the balance of having a family and working. All female participants discussed wrestling between staying at home and working outside the home.

**Phase 3: Thematic Analysis**

This section presents the data report of the themes developed in stage two of the data analysis process. During this data analysis phase the researcher re-examined the coded data under each of the 16 categories to identify themes. The process of initial inclusive integration cultivated 12 themes. Table 3.5 is a graphical representation of how the categories were developed into themes using the process of inclusive integration.
Table 4.2

*Categories and Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories: initial start list.</th>
<th>Categories: emerging from data transcript.</th>
<th>Themes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Preparedness for work</td>
<td>I felt prepared, but then reality set in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job search experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Market</td>
<td>Moving home with parents</td>
<td>I literally fell into this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Current employer relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Process of building a career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>Perception of Job Market</td>
<td>Should have been and engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decision to go to college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College major and selection</td>
<td>Should I stay or should I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internship experience</td>
<td>What it takes to succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value of college education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of advance education</td>
<td>Be successful, go to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Parental influence and messages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High school mentor</td>
<td>A taste of the real world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>College and workplace mentor</td>
<td>You can't go home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic</td>
<td>Race and culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>My parents were encouraging, but vague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I had few role models in high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Getting a feel for the real world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Who I am and who I am going to be</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As presented in the table above, the researcher reviewed the summary data under each category and through the process of inductive analysis developed tentative explanations and theories. These were recorded in a journal and then developed into 12 themes. Each theme and summary is presented in this section.

**I felt prepare, but then reality set in.** Upon graduation from college, the participants generally felt that they were prepared for the world of work based on their academic, internship, and work experience. Many soon realized as Bill articulated “there is a learning curve” (personal communication, January 15, 2013). Mary said “I was prepared as far as I had my degree. But I did not have a lot of knowledge about how to work in a big company or how to handle stress” (personal communication, January 19, 2013). Both Bill and Mary articulated the participants experiences that there was more to work and life than what was taught in their college courses.

George also felt he was prepared academically, but stated the “only fear I had was working with older guys” (personal communication, February 8, 2013). This fear was based on his cultural experience. Growing up in a Latino culture, George was taught to respect his elders. Now, because of his position, he was required to manage men his Father’s age. This was outside of his comfort zone. George stated that he should have taken more communication and soft skill courses in college.

**I literally fell into this gig.** Each participant experienced various levels of success and frustration during the initial job search experience. Those participants who earned a technical degree found employment within their field through traditional employment recruitment channels. Others found work within industries that they may never have considered prior to entering the job market. Table 4.2 provides each participant’s description of the initial job search experience.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Description of Initial Job Search Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>I’m a buyer for an engineering firm and I literally fell into this gig. I found work through family connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>I found my first job at a career fair, about 10 – 11 months before I graduated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>The only work I’ve been doing since college is working at a retail shops during seasonal times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>I graduated in May of 2008. Everyone got serious about finding jobs that summer, but could not find one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Prior to graduation, my CEO (internship) offered me a job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>We (interns) were hoping to get picked up full time after college, but that did not work out. Then I waited tables for seven months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Ten days after I moved up North I found a job via Craig’s list, which was shocking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Upon graduation a position came available at my college, so I took it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>One of my buddies got me a job waiting tables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>It took me six months to find a job. My current employer called me up. Don’t know how they found me. I posted my resume on several websites, maybe they found me there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>I found my first job after high school through a temp agency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As presented in Table 4.3, each participant experiences various levels of success in acquiring their first job. Job searches using traditional methods such as job fairs helped only a handful of participants. New methods including internet-based job search and databases were also deployed. Participants also began to experience the power of social networks in helping them identify their first job.

**Should have been an engineer.** All of the participants in the study currently work or reside in Aiken County, South Carolina. Aiken County is continuing to experience an increase in manufacturing, nuclear, and technology firms relocating and expanding in the area. Half of the participants found employment within this sector. Others found work in higher education, banking, and non-profit. The general perception of the Aiken County job market is that it is good, but limited. April, a liberal arts major, stated “everything is so engineering and manufacturing drive, it was hard for me to stand out” (personal communication, January 22, 2013). Mike shared “this (market) is good for labors and engineers; but not so much for the finance or accounting people” (personal communication, January 21, 2013). Tom, a computer science major, agreed “the computer science field is not bad, but in Aiken County it’s a little rough” (personal communication, February 8, 2013). Mary summed up the general feeling of those participants who were not pursuing a technical degree by stating “I feel like there are jobs out there but maybe I’m not qualified for them” (personal communication, January 19, 2013). Deborah, a political science major, also felt that Aiken County was limited in its offering of non-technical jobs stating “I understand that I have not found a job yet and maybe it is the field I choose to go in” (personal communication, February 7, 2013).

The majority of the participants were simply told to go to college. The participants in the study, especially liberal art majors, concluded that college major selection is an important
decision. The liberal arts majors in this study did not regret earning their degrees. However, based on the local job market, many wished they had pursued a technical degree.

**Should I stay or should I go?** The participants generally believed that they will change employers several times throughout their career. Lisa stated “I think people are moving around a lot more; we have sort of been programmed to think that way by our parents” (personal communication, February 12, 2013). Some participants stated that staying in the area was important and therefore they were choosing to stay with their current employer. Mike said “I look at my career to fund my life and stay in the area, but if someone will bump up my pay 25%, I’ll take it” (personal communication, January 21, 2013). Phil declared “I’m on the fence with staying here; I think there is a lot of opportunity” (personal communication, February 11, 2013).

The participants in this study looked to their employer for promotions, greater challenges, and the opportunity for professional development and growth. Bill shared “I know others have left for more money, but I am in charge of improving different sections of the machines. I like the position” (personal communication, January 15, 2013). Lisa feels that her company’s professional development program is a sign that they are interested in her “they are always asking me what I want to learn more about, what certifications do I want to earn” (personal communication, February 12, 2013). April received a different message from employers “companies promise a lot of professional development, but don’t deliver; the message I receive is that the bottom line is all that matters and you are expendable” (personal communication, January 22, 2013).

Although the concept of lifetime employment with one company has changed, companies still want to attract and retain talent. The participants in this study suggested that they would remain loyal to a company as long as professional development and growth opportunities were
available. Participants also discussed the importance of their values and lifestyle when contemplating the idea of switching employers. Participants did state that money was important, but not as important as professional growth and lifestyle.

**What it takes to succeed.** Success was defined by the participants in various terms. From a practical standpoint, all of the participants agreed that money was important and that if another company offered more they would switch. However, money was not a driving force. Bill described being motivated by interesting projects at work. Lisa and Julie both described how work provided an opportunity for them to help people. Wendy was passionate about being a positive example for her children and motivated to show her husband “how successful I can be” (personal communication, January 17, 2013). Mike, who desires to stay in the area because of family, described his reasons for working in more practical terms; “you are told to do what you love, but in the grand scheme of things, you find a job that suffices from 9-5 as long as you are happy from 9-5” (personal communication, January 21, 2013).

The participants also reflected on the value of their college degree with regards to successfully managing a career in the emergent job market. Heather lamented “I wish someone had told me the importance of what to study in college, unless you have a specialized skill, you are not going to get a job” (personal communication, January 15, 2013). Bill wished he had spent the “last six years working instead of going to college” (personal communication, January 15, 2013). Although he values his education, he feels the experience he gained on the job is more important to building a long term career than his experience in college. Tom and George both acknowledge that their college experience and internship experiences helped prepare them for knowing the science behind their jobs. George stated “the coursework provided you the theory and the internship gave you the practical experience” (personal communication, February
8, 2013). According to Tom being “technically capable” is important, but “knowing how to get along with other people will help you build a career” (February 8, 2013).

The majority of participants believed that “who you know” is more important than what you know when building a career. April discussed her strategy for building a career stating “I’m trying to make contact with people at corporate; you are only as valuable as the people you know” (personal communication, January 22, 2013). Wendy stated “workplace connections are very important; if you do not know the right people, your chances of success are slim” (personal communication, January 17, 2013). Deborah expressed her frustration about being unemployed since leaving college “I feel that you have to know somebody; that is how you get a chance to prove yourself” (personal communication, February 7, 2013).

**Who I am and who I am going to be.** The participants in the study varied regarding their perception of how race, culture, and gender impacted their self-efficacy and influenced their career pattern. Tom, a Caucasian male, stated “my race, culture, and gender has not impacted my thoughts on career; I don’t care about that stuff so it doesn’t affect me” (personal communication, February 8, 2013). Deborah, an African American female, who is still considering a career in criminal justice observed “you don’t see a lot of black people on the criminal justice television shows” (personal communication, February 7, 2013). Wendy strongly felt that her race and gender are a hindrance to her career. She described the challenges of being an African American female, “I have to know who is coming into the office that day, so I know how to wear my hair and dress that day” (personal communication, January 17, 2013). Wendy was very concerned that people will perceive her dress and hairstyle as being symbols of “radical black power”. Although she is very proud to be an African America female she acknowledges that people make judgments on appearances. Phil, an African American male, who grew up in
an upper middle class community shared “it gave me an opportunity to interact with (upper middle class) people; I also had family in other situations, so I got to see another side of life and that helped build my perspective” (personal communication, February 11, 2013).

April stated that gender roles did not impact her thoughts regarding careers, “I never wanted to be a nurse or a teacher, even though those are traditional female jobs” (personal communication, January 22, 2103). Julie felt “empowered as a woman, I think the sky is the limit” (personal communication, January 28, 2013). Wendy did not feel the same way “as a male, I would be taken more serious about my career” (personal communication, January 17, 2013). George shared that his culture helped shape his perception of a male’s role, “the man is supposed to work hard and make money honestly, so my culture shaped me to work hard and be respectful” (personal communication, February 8, 2013).

The females in the study wrestled with their gender identity role as a mother and professional. Growing up with a grandmother who did not work, Mary stated “I always thought that women didn’t have to work” (personal communication, January 19, 2013). She also shared that watching her grandmother receive an allowance from her grandfather impacted her thoughts about working and earning her own money. She stated “I’m not going to fight with my husband over a $30 shirt, if I want it, I’m going to buy it, because I work” (personal communication, January 19, 2013). Heather wished she had become a teacher, because “having a family and looking at the schedule of a teacher, that would have been great” (personal communication, January 15, 2013). Lisa shared “I love working, but if I’m anything like my mom something in my brain will switch when I have a baby and I will stay at home” (personal communication, February 12, 2013). Lisa also shared “there is something to be said for my kids seeing me work” (personal communication, February 12, 2013). The participants in the study confirmed that
gender does not negatively impact career aspirations, but it does impact career patterns especially with regards to working and raising a family.

**Be successful, go to college.** The majority of the participants in this study were strongly encouraged to attend college by their parents, grandparents, teachers, and mentors. Bill shared “my parents went to college, I always planned on going to college, there was never a question if I was even going to college” (personal communication, January 15, 2013). The decision to go to college was also never in question for April, “I grew up in an affluent area where everyone was expected to go to college; if you did not go, people thought, there was something wrong with you” (personal communication, January 22, 2013). Although Wendy had high aspirations and viewed college as a pathway to economic advancement, her parents and stepfather did not understand her desire pursue a college education, “they kept asking me why; they could not understand why I wanted a college degree” (personal communication, January 17, 2013).

The participants in the study all had an idea of what they wanted to study and what type of career they wanted upon graduation. Although these decisions were made based on limited information, the participant’s college major reflected their tentative career plans. Table 4.4 presents each participant’s college major selection and their reason for selecting this course of study.

Table 4.4

*College Major Selection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Reason for selecting major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>I was a history major. I wanted to study History because of a teacher in high school. I wished I had better math skills, do you know how much engineers make?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>I have two bachelor degrees, physics and mechanical engineering. I selected physics because I enjoyed it in high school. It would have been nice if someone told me that I need to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deborah - I studied political science. I was going to study business management, because I wanted to own my own business. But my Mom was like “I think you should do political science because you watch the news and you care about politics and people.” The idea of studying criminal justice was my own idea, my Mom thought of the FBI because she was like “you know they are always looking for minorities.”

George – I studied mechanical engineering, because it was easy for me. Math and science was easy for me. At first I wanted to be a pharmacist. I liked the methodology of chemistry, you follow a recipe and you mix it. It was straight to the point. What excites me about mechanical engineering is that you could create something and test it. See if you get what you expected. I wish I knew how hard it was to lead older people. If I knew more of that, I would have taken more courses outside of engineering such as business and communication.

Heather - I studied business administration/marketing. I did not really know what I was going to do when I graduated. We were just ready to get out (high school) and were not really thinking very much about the future. I think that if someone had guided me that would have been better and I would not have selected what I majored in.

Julie – I got a degree in business administration, my concentration was in marketing. I studied marketing because I wanted to be a fashion designer and know how to sell my brand. My goal was to graduate from college and go to a fashion institute in New York or DC. Originally, I planned to be an engineer. When I went to orientation they showed me the curriculum and I said ‘that is not what I want to do for the next four years of my life’. So I choose business.

Lisa – I studied business administration and economics.

Mary – I studied sociology. I thought it was extremely interesting and I actually went to the
career center and got a flyer on sociology majors. The flyer showed all sorts of careers—office work, managers, social work, working for insurance companies. I thought this is a fairly general degree and it seems like people are getting jobs with this degree.

Mike - I studied political science. I was hoping to go to law school after that or some type of public administration. If I could turn back time and was a bit smarter, I would have studied engineering. My parents never told me what I should study; they just said get a four year degree.

Phil – Honestly, when I graduated from high school, I did not know what I was going to do. I thought about the teachers route to coach, but at the time two of my older brothers were accounting majors and they were successful, so I thought might as well jump into accounting.

Tom - I studied computer science. Originally I wanted to be a video game designer, but because it is such a competitive market I decided to go with something broader and computer science was a good back up.

Wendy - My associates, bachelor, and master degree are all in business administration. I wanted to be like the professional people I worked with. That’s what got me serious about going to back to college.

The table above demonstrates the variety of degrees pursued. The participants in the study all valued their education. However, some questioned whether or not the experience would provide the economic advantage they were expecting. April and Mike both attributed their ability to write and think to their liberal arts education. Tom and Bill thought their technical course work provided them the foundational knowledge and technical skills needed for their fields. Mary had strong feelings regarding the value of her liberal arts education:
I got to experience college in the sense of what college is. I think I could have spent less
time and less money had I gone to a technical college and gotten a dental hygiene or a
nursing degree. I would be making a lot more money than I'm making now. It’s
frustrating. I'm obviously never going to make that much money having a bachelor
degree; it just seems that I'm stuck. (personal communication, January 19, 2013)

Most of the participants also perceived that earning an advanced degree would open the
door to greater promotion and career opportunities. However, many of these participants were
holding off pursuing an advanced degree due to time, money, and commitment concerns. Table
4.5 highlights comments shared by participants regarding their perception of an advanced degree.

Table 4.5

*Perception of an Advance Degree*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>But to get a job in anything with a good salary you need a masters. I was burned out on school and not ready to financially commit to getting a masters, take out more loans. I think an MBA would help me, but what sucks is that I don’t have those prerequisite courses in business. Honestly I could not imagine juggling work, my extracurricular activities and working on a degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>I decided I wanted to become a nuclear engineer. I applied for the master degree program in nuclear engineering and I had a good GPA going in and I did really well on the GMAT, but I did not get accepted because I did not have the background. So I decided to get another bachelor degree in engineering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>So I have been online looking for anything to make money because my goal is to get back into school and earn my masters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Heather – I hope to get my masters degree one day.

Julie - I am pursuing a master in public administration.

Mary - I needed a master degree for everything I was looking at.

Mike - But after deciding that would be a few more years of school, I decided that was not for me. More education at this point in life is not what I need.

Wendy - After getting my associates, I thought I could make more by earning my bachelors. It wasn’t that bad so I have continued even on to a master degree.

Table 4.5 presents the participants perception regarding the value of an advanced degree. Although the participants acknowledge the value of advanced education, many are reluctant to pursue based on cost and time. The majority of the participants did plan on pursuing advanced degrees in the future to enhance their career.

**A taste of the real world.** The majority of the participants in the study were engaged in some type of internship program while in college. According to the participants, this experience was essential in preparing them for the workforce. Internships also provided an experiential learning opportunity that complemented their classroom education. Table 4.6 highlights comments shared by participants regarding their internship experience.

Table 4.6

*Internship Experience*

April - I had an internship that was amazing and worked with the education program director. It was fascinating and made me feel that my degree was going to be put to use.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>The internship influenced me a lot, the research kind of made me realize I did not want to pursue a master degree. The internship was great, I got to understand how business and manufacturing works. I learned that people are driven by the bottom line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>I did not have any internship, I was a regular student just trying to get out of there, I look back and wish I had done that. I wanted to be out in four years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>I interned at (a manufacturing facility). Some of my peers had bad internship experiences where they got coffee and made copies. But I was a part of the team, you got projects and worked. It was a real structured program. In college, the classroom, they teach you about the books. Internship teaches you real world solutions. One of the hardest things at work was being 19 years old and you are working with people your dad’s age. My biggest obstacle is telling an older person what to do. The internship really helped me with that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>My internships really helped me as well as the reality that my parents were not going to support me. I did a work study in high school and I worked at the bank and that prepared me for work. Especially, working with people and working with adults. I went to Toronto, Canada and designed a retail store logo. We were first runner up. I was also involved with Walmart and Walgreens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>With my internship I was just interning. I was filing and making copies, and people thought that was boring, but I was learning. The filing allowed me to learn every aspect of the business. As I filed things, I would read that file. People would look for things, but I knew where everything was. It gave me knowledge of everything that was going on. I would read the files. I understood and I learned a lot.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lisa - I think working 40 hours per week for the internship was vital. We were not treated any different; I learned to work with people in groups and all different types of groups and people of different ages and attitudes.

Mike - My internship was in the planning department (of a local municipality).

Tom - I did an internship (during college). You can’t get a job without experience, but you can’t get experience without a job. What I learned in the internship was surprising. Likeability, despite all of your technical ability, is important. If your coworkers don’t like you they are going to want to get rid of you.

Wendy - I got real world benefits. Most college student only had internships. My internship was my job. If I was taking a human resources class, I would meet with (the HR Director at work) and she would explain the dynamics of human resources to me.

The internship experience as presented in the above table demonstrates the power of experiential learning and the excitement of the adult learner. For many of the participants, this experience was positive as they began to experience the real world and how their education was going to be used. This experience also helped them in making the transition from college to the real world.

**You can’t go home.** The participants in this study who moved back home with their parents after college all described how this experience was disheartening as well as motivating. April shared her experience “I moved back home with my parents which was a traumatic experience; financially it was best for me” (personal communication, January 22, 2103). Heather also moved home after college because she “was engaged before I found a job, so I moved home to get everything planned” (personal communication, January 19, 2013). Deborah was the only
participant who was at the time of the interview still living at home. She stated “I am at a down point, I’ve never just sat at home, this was not part of my game plan” (personal communication, February 7, 2013). George shared how moving home motivated him to find work, “I stayed at home for six months and then said I cannot do this” (personal communication, February 8, 2013).

**My parents were encouraging, but vague.** The participants in the study shared that parents and in some cases grandparents were the most influential aspect of their formative years in the shaping of their understanding of careers. Participants shared their experience of thinking about a career and using their parents and grandparents as a sounding board. Heather shared that her mother still plays this role. She contemplated becoming an early education professional, but her mother reminded her that she really does not have the patience for such a job. April described long conversations with her mother regarding the benefits of a liberal arts degree.

As stated in the description of the findings, parents often did not tell their children what to do or even what to study. However, the parents’ actions sent a stronger message to these early career professionals then their words. Even the parents that were cited as providing a negative example still influenced their children in a positive manner by serving as a negative role model.

**I had a few role models in high school.** Participants in the study were mixed regarding the degree of influence that a particular teacher or coach played in shaping their career. Participants described how some teachers influenced their decision to study a specific subject in high school. April and Bill both shared how one teacher made them fall in love with a particular subject and influenced their decision to study that subject in college. Lisa described a positive relationship with her English teacher and how this person pushed her to do her best. Phil also described his positive relationships with coaches and their tough love approach with character
development. These individuals served as role models versus mentors. Although the relationships were beneficial, the messages that the participants received were still vague with regards to careers.

None of the participants stated that a high school guidance counselor or career specialist positively influenced their career decision. These professionals were described as either uncaring or irrelevant. In some cases they were described as showing favoritism to the students who were college bound. Mary shared “I wasn’t a problem child, but I wasn’t an AP student, so I was ignored” (personal communication, January 19, 2013). Julie also shared her perception “the guidance counselors only spent time with the top 10%” (personal communication, January 28, 2013).

**Getting a feel for the real world.** The majority of the participants in this study described experiencing professional mentoring relationships during their college and immediate post college years. These mentors were described at various levels from role model, to supporter and confidant. Table 4.7 highlights the comments shared regarding mentors in professional life.

Table 4.7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentoring: Professional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill - My mentor (work) mainly taught me about how to deal with people, how to do the work and how to find resources. I also observed people and watched how they did things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George - For work I got pretty lucky, I had an engineering manager in my internship. He would sit down with you one on one. He would always say you need to do better. He was big on goal setting. He encouraged me to continue to set goals for my career. You set them as high as you want and you go for it. I set five year goals….my long</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
range goal is to be an engineering manager.

Heather - I had one professor; she really liked me and led me to like marketing. She would encourage me to apply for internships. She would always include me on projects even if I was not in her class. After graduation she, provided me a letter of recommendation for jobs. We are connected via Facebook.

Julie - One thing I admire about my CEO is that he gives young people a chance. He’s not going to hold your hand along the way. He is most definitely a mentor.

Lisa - A mentor at work took me under her wing and invited me to Rotary. She was supportive of me. My new boss downtown is very interested in helping me grow and develop.

Phil - My pastor, the way he carried himself. He was someone who led by example, someone to model my behavior after.

Tom – I had a professor who was an entrepreneur that really made it. He taught an entrepreneurial class. He is an example of what all of us in the technical field want to become, go out on your own. He is really who I would like to be like, as far as my career goes.

Wendy - Going into the work field, I started with (a state agency) and there is where I got serious about my career. I got the job two years after high school. Working as a temp, I saw the professionals in the office and I wanted to be like them. My parents wondered why I wanted to go to college after high school. They did not know any better. They both had decent jobs. They have a home. They have cars. So they felt like that was a way to live. My mentors at work are getting slim and that’s because my level of education is exceeding the people who have mentored me. So I am
looking for people who are going the extra mile, getting their master and doctorate, but my mentors don’t know how to guide me.

The table above presents the experiences of the participants with regards to mentors in a professional setting. These experiences were different from their experiences in high school. Mentors in the professional world provide real world sound advice regarding career development, goal setting, and professional growth.

**Phase 4: Research Question Analysis**

This section provides the data report of inclusive integration used by the researcher in stage three of the data analysis process. Stage three used inclusive integration to align the 12 themes to answer the research questions and develop final conclusions. Interview and probing questions were developed and deployed to answer three main research questions (see Appendix C). Table 4.8 provides a graphical representation of the alignment between the research questions and themes.

**Table 4.8**

*Research Questions and Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What are early career professional's perceptions regarding their career patterns? | 1. I felt prepared, but then reality set in.  
2. I literally fell into this gig.  
3. Should have been an engineer.  
4. Should I stay or should I go.  
5. What it takes to succeed. |
| 2. What critical events shaped the career patterns of early career professionals?  | 6. Be successful, go to college.  
7. A taste of the real world.  
8. You can’t go home.  
12. Who I am and who I am going to be. |
3. How do early career professionals describe the impact on career patterns from their social network?

As presented in the above table, the researcher first aligned themes related in critical events to answer the second research question. Next themes associated with social networks were aligned to answer research question three. Finally, all remaining themes were aligned to answer the main research question one. This next section provides the answers to the research questions based on an inclusive integration of the themes.

**What are early career professional’s perception regarding their career patterns?**

The participants in the study described their career patterns as progressive, emergent, and adaptive. They shared stories of thinking about careers in high school, developing a plan in college, and then adapting their plan to reality. They also shared their reflective thoughts regarding what they should have done as well as their plan for the future based on their current situation and post college experiences.

During their high school years, the participants thought about potential career options. The level of detailed thinking varied from in depth to general. Julie had a very specific plan of becoming an engineer, whereas Heather simply wanted to get out of her home town. Others described thinking about careers based on an attraction to a subject in school, such as April who loved history and Bill who enjoyed mathematics and science. Both of these individuals developed vague plans to incorporate their interest in a particular subject with a career.

Career thinking in high school then turned into tentative plans in college. However, upon graduation, these tentative plans were adjusted or abandoned to meet the reality of the job market. The participants in the study experienced varying levels of success in finding work after
college. Those who earned a technical degree found work in their field. For the majority of participants the pathway from college to employment was not as clear.

The participants in the study expressed frustration with the initial job search process and lack of a clear pathway from their tentative plan or major to a viable job. Their frustration soon turned into acceptance as they realized that they would need to adapt to the job market. Some of the participants relied on their network of parents and contacts to secure employment. Others accepted positions that did not require a college degree, but would provide experience to build upon.

The participants provided reflective thoughts regarding their choice of college major. The general consensus was that a college degree was valuable; however, college major selection was equally as important. Mary was the most vocal regarding her frustration of earning a college degree and not finding employment that matched her credentials. Several participants wished that they understood the job market and how the “real world” worked before selecting a major. Although the majority of the participants were frustrated with the job search process, they did not display attitudes of entitlement.

Based on their initial job search experience, the participants viewed their future career patterns in terms of emerging opportunities, self-direction, and networking. The participants acknowledge that the days of working for one company are over. Even though many of their parents had experience such career patterns, the participants in this study understood that they were in charge of their careers and success was dependent on capitalizing on opportunities, continuous professional development, and building a strong professional network.

April shared that her strategy for building a career included meeting people at the corporate office. She viewed her opportunities at the local Aiken office as limited. She had
capitalized on every opportunity that had been given to her. For her to move up in the company, she felt she needed to connect with people at the headquarters. Lisa also shared that she intended to stay with her current employer because they were committed to her professional development. Phil was on the fence regarding his next move. As long as his current company offered him new opportunities, he would stay employed with them. Phil also contemplated the idea of one day owning his own business.

These ideas regarding future career patterns were developed based on their internship and post college experiences. They learned that “what you know” is important, but “who you know” is equally if not more important. The participants also learned that things don’t work out like they expected, but that is okay. These experiences have shaped their understanding of careers and the job market as well as shaped their actions for the future.

What critical events shaped the career patterns of early career professionals?

The participants in the study shared how critical events shaped their career patterns. Critical events are defined as interpersonal dynamics and external forces, as well as experiences and events that impact one’s life such as race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, and defining moments. With regards to interpersonal dynamics, participants provided various perceptions regarding the impact of how race, culture, gender and socioeconomic status shaped their career patterns. They also shared how their internship experience positively influenced them. Finally, those participants who moved home with parents after college described how this defining moment was humbling and motivating.

The participants in the study confirmed that interpersonal dynamics of culture and race do not impact career aspirations. However, they may impact perceptions of career barriers and choices. Regarding race, those participants who were Caucasian did not consider their race as
having any impact on their career patterns. Tom stated that race was immaterial to his thinking about careers. Heather and Bill also did not perceived their race as having an impact on their career patterns. Those participants of African American heritage were mixed regarding their perception of race and its impact on career patterns. Julie and Phil did not see their race as having limits or advantages to their careers. They believed that opportunities were limitless for all. As Julie exclaimed “the sky is the limit”. Wendy was more cautious. Being an African America did not impact her career ambition; however, she is conscious of how her race will impact perceptions of her. She is very proud to be an African American woman, but she also understands that she works in a racially diverse environment.

Lisa and George both shared how their culture shaped their understanding of careers. Lisa described her experience of growing up as an Asian American female. She shared that her parents placed the traditional pressure of earning good grades, but she acknowledge that they did this out of love. Her parents did not pressure her, however, to pursue a high status career. George, a Latino America, also discussed how his culture has shaped his understanding of careers. He grew up in a traditional Latino family were the man was to provide for the family. He admired both of his parents for their dedication to providing for the family. He fondly remembered his mother working full time and then coming home to make dinner for the family. This cultural experience shaped George’s value system. He intends to provide for his family and conserve his money even as he progresses in his career and earns more.

Discussion of gender also varied among the participants. Participants were not consciously aware if gender stereotypes impacted their career decision. Gender did play a role in perceived future career patterns, especially with female participants contemplating starting a family. Lisa verbally wrestled with herself during the interview as she discussed what will
happen when she and her husband start a family. Although she acknowledges she will probably stay at home, she also feels there is value in children seeing their mother work. April, who observed her father sacrifice career opportunities for the family, was not so sure she would be as selfless as her father. Heather also debated leaving the world of business and pursuing a teaching career. Her perception is that a teacher’s schedule is in line with her children’s schedule and the synced time would be beneficial. These discussions demonstrate that people’s career patterns change with time and various life roles.

There was limited discussion regarding socioeconomic status. April shared that she came from an upper middle class community. The expectation of this community was that everyone was going to earn a college degree. Only Wendy shared that she grew up in a lower socioeconomic environment. Again this did not impact her career aspirations. In fact she made a decision to earn a college and master degree against the wishes of her parents. Her parents did not understand her desire to pursue higher education opportunities and wanted her to go straight to work. The majority of the participants identified growing up in a middle class environment where going to college and building a professional career was an expectation.

The majority of the participants in the study took part in an internship during college. This critical event positively shaped their understanding of careers. The participants in the study demonstrated excitement when they described their internship experience. For many, this was their first experience applying knowledge gained in college to a real world application. They described experiencing work and becoming excited to take part in it as a full time member. April shared that she felt for the first time her degree was going to be useful in building a career. Bill discovered that business was about the bottom line and his skills as a mechanical engineer had a direct impact on a manufacturing firm’s ability to generate revenue. The interns also discovered
the value of social skills and getting along with co-workers. Tom, a computer science major, realized quickly that you have to get along with others to build a long term career. George received real world advice about the importance of goal setting. Those who participated in an internship felt the experience completed their formal college education experience and was essential in preparing them for the real world.

Half of the participants in this study moved home after college. This defining moment was not part of their plan. It was a humbling and motivating experience that shaped their understanding of careers. Although they described the experience in negative terms, those who returned home were thankful for their families support. The experience shattered any notion that building a career was a linear process or that there was a clear pathway from college to work. The participants who eventually found work and moved out were humbled by the experience and appeared to be more ground and realistic about navigating the job market.

How do early career professionals describe the impact on career patterns from their social network? The participants in the study described their social networks during their formative and professional years. They shared that while growing up their parents were supportive, but vague regarding career decisions and choices. Majority of the participant’s parents and grandparents encouraged them to go to college. They were silent regarding what to study, what the job market demanded, and how a college degree was going to benefit them. Simply going to college was enough. The participants also shared that their experience with mentors and role models outside of the family was beneficial, but again these individuals were silent regarding what career to pursue.

This pattern shifted when the participants entered college, especially those who participated in an internship program. Those who had mentors in college and during their
internship described having meaningful discussions. George had a professional mentor that discussed the importance of setting and achieving professional goals. These discussion positively impacted George’s ambition and thoughts regarding career growth. Tom also benefited from a professional mentor in college who served as an entrepreneurial role model. The participants also described experiencing deeper mentoring relationships once on the job. Lisa was excited that her firm and her boss openly discussed her career plans and needs. Julie also found a mentor in the CEO of her company who took the time to give her critical feedback on her performance. These relationships are perceived as different from the relationships that the participants had in their pre-college years.

Summary

The participants in this study were asked in the final follow up email to use a metaphor to describe their career. April said her “career is like how water transforms a rock over time. It started out looking like one thing, but after persistence and time, it has changed” (personal communication, March 13, 2013). Similarly, Heather described her career as a jungle gym, “It is all over the place. However, I’m learning as I go from a variety of individuals with very diverse backgrounds, hopefully, it will help in the long haul” (personal communication, March 5, 2013). Mary described her career as “quicksand, the harder I try to pull myself up, the more I feel like I’m sinking” (personal communication, March 6, 2013). Their metaphors describe and support the fact the early career professionals are building a career in an emergent and ever changing job market. They also support the idea that careers patterns are not traditional and linear as previous generations experienced.
Chapter 5 – Discussion of Research Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the career patterns of early career professionals living in Aiken County, South Carolina. Specifically, the researcher wanted to understand how these early career professionals conceptualized their career patterns and experiences, as well as the role of critical events and their social network in shaping their understanding of careers. The study centered around three research questions:

1. What are early career professional’s perception regarding their career patterns?
2. What critical events shaped the career patterns of early career professionals?
3. How do early career professionals describe the impact on career patterns from their social network?

The researcher adopted two theoretical frameworks to provide a lens for study perception of career patterns; Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory and Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Theory. An inductive analysis of the transcript data produced 16 categories and 12 themes. This chapter presents the final conclusions developed in phase three of the data analysis process. These conclusions were developed using Weiss (1994) inclusive integration process and Thomas (2006) final step of creating models for incorporating the most important categories. The development of the conclusions was based on a review of the research questions, theoretical frameworks, and literature review. This chapter also explores implications for theory and practice as well as recommended further research.

Discussion of the Conclusions

Today’s early career professionals are striving to establish and build a career in an emergent and changing job market environment. Upon leaving college, many of these early
career professionals experience an unsettling reality check regarding their career plans and ideas. Some have found that there is not a clear pathway from their selected major to a viable job. These individuals find themselves accepting positions that do not require a college degree or experiencing temporary unemployment. Others are immediately employed within their field (Souto-Otero, 2010).

The participants in this study described their personal experiences of striving to establish and build a career in Aiken County, South Carolina. Their experiences confirm Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory which states that career patterns of individuals are developed based on multiple internal and external forces. The participants also shared stories regarding the impact and importance of their social networks. After further analysis of the data, theoretical frameworks, and literature review, Ginzberg’s and Super’s career development models stand out as the most compatible theories in line with the participant’s experiences.

Throughout the 20th and 21st Century, modern career development researchers have explored the career patterns of workers. Ginzberg and Super both introduced developmental theories in the 1950s. Both of these researchers argued that career patterns develop over time throughout a person’s life as they move from childhood to adulthood. Ginzberg mapped a person’s career through three stages; fantasy, tentative, and realistic. Similarly, Super outlined five development stages that influence career patterns; crystallization, specification, implementation, stabilization, and consolidation. As individuals progress their thoughts regarding careers change (Patton and McMahon, 1999).

Julie’s story provides a clear example of Ginzberg and Super’s developmental career patterns. Based on conversations with a beloved teacher, she fantasized about being an engineer.
She liked the idea of being a professional and the idea of earning high figure salary. Julie had the grades and ability to become an engineer, but this fantasy came to a halt after she discovered that pursuing an engineering degree would involve a heavily course load of advanced mathematics. Although she excelled at math, she realized that she was not passionate about the subject. Julie decided to pursue a degree in marketing so she could start her own fashion design business. During her college experience she interned with a company and was hired on full time after college. Her current position is not related to fashion design, but she is excited about her assignments and what she is learning. Although she is not currently working as a full time fashion designer, she is still pursuing this dream on the side.

All of the participants in the study described the process of fantasizing about what they “wanted to be when they grew up,” entering college with an initial plan, and changing their plan. For some, change was a dramatic experience, while others experienced slight adjustments to their expectations. All of the participants conformed their ideas and plans to reality. Based on the participant’s stories and analysis of the qualitative data collected for this research study, five conclusions emerged. These conclusions are presented in table 5.1 with corresponding career development phases.

Table 5.1

Conclusions and Career Development Stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusions</th>
<th>Career Development Stages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Parents, educators and early mentors provided vague or limited career advice.</td>
<td>Fantasy Phase – Ginzberg Crystallization – Super</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Participates expressed limited recall to formal career counseling.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Students try on career identities during college</td>
<td>Tentative Phase – Ginzberg Specification - Super</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Internship was an enlightening experience.</td>
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The conclusions presented in the above table were developed based on the answers to the research questions, the theoretical frameworks selected for this study, and a review of the literature. The researcher identified five conclusions that have implications on theory, research, and practice. These conclusions at first glance appear to be similar to previous generation’s experiences. What is unique about these conclusions is that the new emergent job market requires people to think differently about education, jobs, and the skills required to build a career. The conclusions also provide insight at the local level for scholar practitioners, educators and industry leaders in Aiken County, South Carolina. The next section presents a detailed description of the conclusions.

**Conclusions #1: Parents, educators and early mentors provided vague or limited career advice.** Ginzberg (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999) argued that career pattern development begins in childhood. Children, from an early age, begin to think about what they want to be when they grow up. According to Brown (2004) these ideas are shaped by their environment and the people in their lives. Both Ginzberg (1999) and Brown (2004) argue that parents are the most influential dynamic on a person’s thoughts and ideas regarding career development. Children often use their parents as sounding boards to bounce off ideas when thinking about possible careers.

The participants in the study shared stories that confirmed parents and early mentors played a role in the development of initial career ideas. However, the messages received were vague and limited. The majority of the participants stated that they did not really have in-depth conversations with their parents or grandparents about their future. Messages regarding the
importance of attending college were present in eleven of the stories, but what to specifically study or how a college education would lead to a career was absent in the discussion. Only a few participants shared stories of bouncing ideas off their parents regarding career plans. Some of the participants wished that their parents and grandparents had provided more direction during the fantasy stage.

According to the participants, observing their parents and grandparents in day to day action was far more influential than verbal messages. They learned the importance of commitment and responsibility of working professionals through daily observation of their parents’ actions. The participants also developed their value system regarding life style, money, and education through family life observations. They even developed ideas of what they would not do or become based on these same observations. It was their parent’s actions that had the most significant impact of their career pattern development.

Chope (2005) argues that children and adolescents are also influenced by mentors and role models outside of the family. The participant’s stories of role models outside of the family were few. Some shared how a teacher, coach or pastor exhibited the attributes of someone they wanted to be, but again verbal messages regarding careers were vague. “Go to college” was the main verbal message that the participants heard from role models outside of the family. They also heard this message from guidance and career counselors. Again, as with their parents and grandparents, messages about what to study and the connection to the job market were almost non-existent.

Based on the data collected and using Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Typology, the majority of the participants had developed “receptive” networks during their formative years. A “receptive” network is defined as having a few mentors with soft
relationships. For example, the participants developmental network was made up of parents/grandparents and a few mentors outside of the home. These relationships were soft in the fact that these mentors served more as role models than active mentors in their lives. However, these relationships were influential and provided the participants with a resource to develop initial career plans and test them against what they observed in their world. Mike fantasized about being a lawyer. This initial career idea was in line with his parent’s professional status. Mary originally wanted to be a nurse, which would have provided her an income and allowed her to earn her own money. Parents, grandparents, and early mentors provided the participants in the study with a first glimpse into the real world.

**Conclusion #2: Participates expressed limited recall to formal career counseling.**

According to Super (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999), individuals begin to formulate ideas regarding careers based on resources, interests, and values during the crystallization phase. Although the participants did describe their experience muddling through the crystallization phase, what was absent from their stories were experiences of engaging a career or guidance counselor in high school. The participants appeared to avoid these resources. They also did not share their experience utilizing a personality inventory and occupational fit assessment to understand their natural talent and interest.

Career development research conducted over the last century has led to the development of a variety of personality and career assessment tools. Parsons, Holland and Roe were early pioneers of these types of assessments (Patton and McMahon, 1999). None of the participants in the study cited occupation assessments as useful in the development of their career patterns. Most did not recall ever taking these types of assessments and those that did dismissed their importance. Mike remembered taking a personality and occupational fit assessment in high
school, but shared his doubt regarding the value of such assessments stating “because I like animals, now I’m supposed to be a vet, really?” (Personal communication, January 21, 2013).

The participants were also silent regarding the use of college career development resources. April said “I’m a little embarrassed to admit, but I did not even know where the career center was at my college until my last semester” (Personal communication, January 22, 2013). She also shared her experience of visiting the career center and being handed a book with job postings. Despite the amount of research and available career development tools, the participants in this study did not share that career counseling or occupation fit assessments were influential in helping them discover or prepare for their career.

**Conclusion #3: Students try on career identities during college.** Lopez and Andrews’s (1987) argue that young people select a college major based on limited information was confirmed in this study. The participants in the study provided a variety of reasons for going to college and selecting a specific college major. Some had a firm career plan in place while others just wanted to get out of town. Their stories showcased the struggle of individuals moving back and forth through personal discovery to making career decisions. This was the case for April who studied history because she was interested in the subject. Throughout her college experience she fantasized about what she would do with her degree upon graduation i.e. teacher, museum administrator.

All of the participants described their college years in terms of testing career ideas and learning more about themselves and the real world. It was a time of making tentative decisions based on interest, capabilities, and value. Wendy created tentative career plans and tested those plans while working full time and attending school part time. She described those years as a time of great exploration regarding her interest, capabilities and value system. George studied
mechanical engineering because he was interested in the subject and had the capabilities to be successful. His plan to become an engineer also fit with his value system.

All of the participants in the study experienced trying and eliminating career ideas during their college years. Some of the participants had the benefit of having a professor as a mentor. Heather described a professor in her marketing program who took great interest in her. She would keep Heather aware of guest speakers and special projects that would develop her capabilities and confirm her interest in marketing. Tom also shared his experience with a professor who served as a role model for what he wanted to be. Using Higgins and Kram’s (2001) typology, these relationships can be described as opportunistic. They were important in helping the participant progress during the tentative stage.

**Conclusion #4 Internship was an enlightening experience.** The majority of the participants in the study experienced a structured internship program while in college. For these students, this experience was essential for transitioning to what Ginzberg (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999) refers to as the realistic phase of their career. During their internship, the participants were able to connect what they were learning in the classroom to practical applications. They were also exposed to the intricacies of working with different people and different generations. Finally, their internship experience provided them access to professional mentors who, unlike their mentors during high school, provided detailed information regarding career development and success.

The stories shared by the participants support Malcom Knowles’ (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2012) adult learning assumptions. The participants were excited about what they were learning in their internship program as they could see the direct applications in their life and work. Throughout their internship experience, the participants
described being self-directed and finding value in what they were learning. Their experiences also demonstrated action learning through experience (Kolb, 1984). The participants had concrete experiences through their internships. The participants reflected on their experience and developed new mental models regarding the world and their career.

Those who had internships described the experience as vital to their development and entry into the world of work. These participants had a chance to really test their career interest and begin to make specific career decisions. Super (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999) refers to this process as the specification phase. Bill shared that his internship opened his eyes to how business and manufacturing really works. He also discovered that he was not interested in a purely academic research career. Lisa worked 40 hours per week and learned the intricacies of working with different personalities and generations in the work place. Tom also learned that likeability was essential to building a career. These experiences were invaluable in helping the individuals continue to solidify their career plans and make the transition to life after college.

The participants who had internship experiences also began to develop richer mentoring relationships. Prior to their internship, the participants had soft mentoring relationships. During their internship, they received real world practical advice. George met a senior engineer during his internship. This person spent time with George discussing the world of work and the process of building a career. He gave George sound advice regarding goal setting and establishing career development plans. Although their social professional networks remained limited, the internship experiences provided access to professionals that were willing to share information regarding career development.

The college years were a time of trial and error. The participants in the study described their experience of creating tentative plans and gaining the specific training for their field of
choice. Participants who had an internship or work experience had a chance to test their plans in the real world. The end of college marked the beginning of the realistic phase.

**Conclusion #5: Career plans conform and solidify to reality.** All of the participants stated that they felt prepared to enter the workforce. However, their experience searching for work in their field of choice affirms their entrance into what Ginzberg (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999) refers to as the realistic phase. Super (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999) also refers to this as the implementation and stabilization phase. The stories shared by participants in this phase of their career also demonstrate that they had become adult learners.

During this period, the participants struggled to implement their tentative career plans as they face the reality of the job market. Some had to abandon their initial career plans altogether to meet the reality of their environment. They also had a chance to look back in retrospect on what they should have studied in light of the current local job market. The participants also shared their plans for the future and what they believe it will take to build a career. These experiences demonstrate experiential learning in action as they described the process of adapting to the world as they learned through experience.

The job search experience was the initial step into the realistic phase for these early career professionals. Although they intuitively understood that obtaining their first job may be challenging; for many of the participants, this step challenged their beliefs regarding career patterns and decisions. Even those who earned a technical degree in a high demand field found themselves living at home while applying for jobs. Those who earned a liberal arts degree had an even more difficult challenge of finding a work in their field. All of the liberal arts majors in this study abandon their original career plans to take work that was available.
April and Mike’s stories demonstrate the process of conforming one’s tentative career plan to reality. Hoping to use her degree in history and obtain a position as a museum administrator, April found herself living at home while searching for employment. She eventually secured a position as a buyer for an engineering firm. Similarly, Mike studied political science with an original plan of going to law school. He worked for several firms after high school before securing a job in procurement. Although both participants are far from their original career plans, they both plan on building a long term career with their current employer.

Other participants entered the realistic stage by accepting positions that did not require a college degree or even a high school degree. Lisa, Phil, and Heather all worked in the restaurant industry before securing employment within their field of business. Although these positions did not require a degree, they provided a decent living. Phil used his restaurant experience to network with local business executives. Lisa valued the experience of working with the public. For Heather, this experience was motivation to find work that fit her degree and interest.

Wendy entered the realistic phase at an early time in her life. She was the only participant to enter the workforce full time after high school. Similar to those who entered the workforce after attending college full time, Wendy observed her surroundings and adjusted her career plan to meet reality. At the time of the interview, Deborah was the only participant who had not found full time employment. She studied Political Science with a plan to build a career in law enforcement. She was currently living at home and working occasionally in retail. Deborah shared that she did not work or participate in an internship during college. Based on her current state, she regrets not gaining work experience.

What is unique about the experiences of the participants in this study is that they entered a job market that is heavily manufacturing and nuclear oriented. Their perception of the Aiken
County job market is that it is viable, but limited. Aiken County has been growing over the last few decades attracting new manufacturing facilities to the area. The area is also known for its growing nuclear industry. The Department of Energy Savannah River Site was built in the early 1950s. There are also two new commercial nuclear reactors being built in nearby Augusta, GA and Fairfield, SC (Thomas P. Miller and Associates, 2012).

For those who obtained a technical degree in engineering, the Aiken County job market was a fit. Bill found employment with one of the nuclear sites before graduation. George relocated to the area when he accepted a position with one of the manufacturing firms. Both are using their engineering degrees. Participants who studies business or liberal arts also found employment in Aiken County, but they are not sure that the area provides long term growth opportunities. Mike reflected that Aiken County provides engineers and production workers with ample opportunities for career growth and development. However, for those with business or liberal arts backgrounds, the job market provides limited opportunities.

This has caused many of the participants in the study to question their tentative career plans and college major selection. Both April and Mike shared that they should have studied engineering. This reflective thought is based on their entrance into the realistic phase. They both work with engineers and they observe the opportunities that are available to these professionals. Even though the salaries and opportunities are attractive, they both dismiss the idea of being an engineer because the field is not in line with their interest. Heather also questions her decision to study marketing. She wished someone would have told her what job opportunities would be available.

Based on her experience of searching for work, Mary questions the value of her college education. Following the advice of her grandfather, she attended college with the hope of
building a successful prosperous career. She studied sociology because she was interested in the field and believed the degree was broad enough to provide her with several career options. Following her husband to Aiken County, Mary has been frustrated and discouraged with her occupational prospects in the area. She currently works in administration, but shares that her position does not require a college degree. Reflecting back, Mary seriously questions her decision to attend a four year institution. She stated “someone should have told me that my degree would not make me marketable” (Personal communication, January 19, 2013). Based on personal experience, Mary believes she should have attended a technical college and earned a practical degree in a field such as dental hygiene.

Entering into the realistic phase also provided an opportunity for these early career professionals to reflect on their value system and how this is in line with their career. According to Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons (2010), the millennial generation workers are searching for more than just a paycheck. The participants in the study shared their values and motivations while discussing their career patterns. Mike shared that staying connected with family and friends was important to him. He knows that he could find another position that is more in line with his professional goals, but that would mean moving out of the area. Mike views his career as a way to fund his lifestyle and desire to stay in the area. Other participants also shared their desire to stay because of family and friend connections. Phil and Tom both said they would move out of the area if they had to, but are not actively looking to leave.

The participants also reflected on their changing roles. Super (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999) argued that people take on different roles throughout their life, such as homemaker. The female participants were the only ones to share their thoughts of how children will impact their career plans. They provided a variety of thoughts and ideas regarding the role
of motherhood and working. Lisa loves working, but acknowledged that when she has children she will probably want to stay at home. She also thinks that it is important for children to see their mothers working. Heather, who has already started a family, wants to balance her role as mother and professional. This has impacted her thoughts regarding her current career. She has entertained the idea of becoming a teacher because the summer schedule. April observed her father turn down career opportunities in favor of spending more time with the family. She is not convinced she would make such a sacrifice when she has children.

The majority of the participants are moving into what Super (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999) refers to as the Stabilization phase. During this phase individuals are confirming career choices, assessing their values and make decisions that begin to solidify their future plans. As Mike shared regarding his future as a procurement specialist, “I’m almost to the point of no return, if I stay on for a few more years, I will make this my career” (Personal communication, January 21, 2103). Julie plans on staying with her current company with hopes of obtaining greater responsibility as the company grows. After working for a number of years, Wendy has decided to become a career counselor and has started her own part time consulting firm.

The general sense from the participants in this study is that they are in control of their careers and they are beginning to establish roots and make connections. Based on their job search experience, many of the participants expressed the value of professional connections. April shared “you are only as valuable as your network” (Personal communication, January 22, 2013). A major part of her strategy for building a career is connecting with influential people in her organization. Several of the participants in the study are active members of the Aiken Chamber’s Young Professional Association. This organization provides them an opportunity to
build a network of other young professionals in the area. Lisa is also benefiting from developing relationships with senior professionals at her current employer. Based on Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Typology, these relationships would be described as entrepreneurial and opportunistic. Their networks are vastly different than the networks developed in high school and more beneficial in the development of their career.

According to Super’s (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999) career development process, the consolidation phase is the final stage where individuals establish themselves and build their career through advancement and seniority. Although the majority of the participants in the study were planning on staying with their current employer, they would leave if offered the right opportunity. Even those who desired to stay in the area did not close the door on the idea of leaving for a better offer. The future was still tentative, but the participants had a greater grasp on the reality of building a career.

Implications for Theory

This section explores the implications for theory. This study demonstrates congruency with the theoretical frameworks of Patton and McMahon (1999) as well as Higgins and Kram (2001). This study also demonstrates the usefulness of Ginzberg and Super (as cited in Patton and McMahon, 1999).

The experiences of the participants in this study are aligned with Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory which argues that career patterns are shaped by internal and external forces. As shared by the participants in the study, interpersonal influences such as values, beliefs, gender, personality, ethnicity, skills, and world of work knowledge all shaped their career patterns. External forces such as family, geographical location, educational institutions, and employment markets also shaped the participants career patterns. The
participants in the study did not discuss interpersonal influences such as disability, sexual orientation, and physical attractiveness. They also did not share how globalization, political decisions, peers, and socioeconomic status shape their understanding of careers. Figure 5.1 is a graphical depiction of Patton and McMahon’s (1999) Career Development Systems Theory and the results of this study.

Figure 5.1

*Patton and McMahon (1999) and Interpretation of the Conclusions*

Patton and McMahon (1999) Career Development Systems Theory provided a social constructivist view of career development. Although the participants entered a global recession, they were silent regarding this external force. Their focus was on their educational credentials and the link to the local job market, as well as the importance of social networks.
The conclusions also are aligned with Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Theory. The participants during the fantasy phase had receptive networks which were defined as few connections and low in quality of information. This is evident in the first two conclusions. During the tentative phase, participants started building opportunistic networks among college contacts and through their internship experience. These relationships were numerous, but still low in quality of information. The participants began to develop entrepreneurial relationships upon leaving college and entering world of work. Figure 5.2 is a graphical representation of Higgins and Kram’s (2001) Developmental Network Typology and the interpretations of the conclusions.

Figure 5.2

*Higgins and Kram (2001) and Interpretation of the Conclusions*

**Higgins and Kram (2001)**

**Interpretations of the Findings**

- Participants had receptive networks during high school years.
- Participants branched out into opportunistic networks during internship and college experiences.
- Participants developed entrepreneurial networks in workplace.

Higgins and Kram (2001) provided a framework for understanding social networks and how these networks changed over time. The participants had receptive and weak networks during their formative years. These transformed and expanded as they entered the professional
The participants also recognized the importance of developing stronger professional networks as they continued to grow in their careers.

**Implications for Research**

The researcher recommends further explorations of career patterns based on the conclusions and implications for theory. Three areas for consideration include: effectiveness of the South Carolina Education and Economic Development Act 2005, replication of this study in an urban setting, and conducting a longitudinal study of mid-career professionals. This section explores the implications of this study on research.

The participants in the study did not believe that traditional career counseling techniques were effective. They also felt that parents and high school educators provided vague messages regarding career choice and selection. These vague messages support the United States of America’s comprehensive education model. Students in the U.S. comprehensive system take a broad range of course. They are not pre-selected and trained for specific vocational tracks as compared to their German counterparts. American students often delay making career decisions until their junior year of college (Brint, 2006).

This was the case for many of the participants in this study. As discussed, many of the participants lamented that high school and college did not prepare them for the current job market. Many, especially the liberal art students, came to the conclusion that what one studied in college was even more important than simply earning a degree. Those who did not pursue an engineering and technical degree perceived a gap between their education and opportunities in the job market.

The State of South Carolina recognized this issue and signed into law the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) in 2005. Beginning in the 8th grade, all South Carolina
public school students develop an individual graduation plan in partnership with their parents and guidance counselors. Guidance Counselors and Career Specialist act as advisors throughout the student’s high school education. The first cohort of 8th graders under the EEDA graduated in 2011. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of this legislation. The researcher recommends a duplication of this study with early career professionals who graduated high school under the South Carolina EEDA.

The focus of this study was on Aiken County, South Carolina. This focus was also a limitation with regards to exploring this topic at the national level. This study, therefore, should also be replicated in an urban setting. The participants did not discuss how disabilities, sexual orientation, or physical attractiveness shaped their career patterns. They were also silent regarding external forces such as globalization, political forces, peers, and socioeconomic status. Further research is needed to determine if these interpersonal dynamics and external forces are more prevalent for early career professionals living in an urban setting.

Finally, the researcher recommends that a longitudinal study be conducted to assess mid-career professionals as well as late-career professionals. These professionals have worked in the emerging job market. They have seen company loyalty vanish and a transient mobile workforce emerge (Colakoglu, 2011). Further research is needed to assess their perceptions of careers and what has shaped their career patterns.

**Implications for Practice**

Career development is both an individual process and a community responsibility. Individual members of society need to be gainfully employed and organizations need workers. Therefore collaboration and community partnership is the key in preparing the next generation of
workers. This section explores three implications for practice. Table 5.3 presents a graphical depiction of the implications for practice in alignment with the conclusions.

Table 5.3

*Implications for Practice*

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<th>Conclusions</th>
<th>Implications for Practice</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents, educators and early mentors provided vague or limited career advice.</td>
<td>Students, parents, educators and early mentors must become exposed to and aware of job market opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants expressed limited recall to formal career counseling.</td>
<td>To assist students with making career decisions, stronger partnerships between business and higher education is needed to foster internship type experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students try on career identities during college.</td>
<td>To attract and retain top talent in today’s emergent job market; employers must develop formal career development programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship was an enlightening experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career plans conform and solidify to reality.</td>
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</table>

The table above outlines the implications for practice in alignment with the conclusions. At first glance these implications may appear to lack innovation, however, based on the current emergent job market these implications must be revisited by parents, educators, industry leaders,
and policy makers. This next section provides a detailed description of the implications for practice.

**Students, parents, educators and early mentors must become exposed to and aware of diverse career opportunities.** Several of the participants in the study were employed in a field that was similar or identical to the work their parents performed. Mike was a procurement specialist as was his father and grandfather. Phil studied accounting because both of his brothers studied accounting. Others had a general sense of what they wanted to do, but it wasn’t until they were exposed to the opportunities in the job market that they were able to make serious career decisions and plans. Mary and Heather both would have made different decisions regarding their college major had they known what opportunities existed in the job market. Clearer messages and understanding of job opportunities is essential for preparing the next generation of workers.

**To assist students with making career decisions, stronger partnerships between business and higher education is needed to foster internship type experiences.** To assist students with making career decisions, stronger partnerships between business and education is needed to foster internship and apprenticeship type experiences. The majority of the participants in this study participated in an internship program while in college. This was a defining and beneficial experience. During their internship experience, the participants were exposed to the real world and had a taste of what working in a particular industry was like. They were exposed to the intricacies of working with diverse people in a non-academic environment. This experience opened their eyes to workplace realities. Communities of practice would do well to foster more of these types of experiences.
To attract and retain top talent in today’s emergent job market employers must develop formal career development programs. The participants in this study believed that lifelong employment with one company is an outdated concept. They would, however, remain loyal to a company as long as there were professional development and growth opportunities. Participants in the study who stated they intended on staying with their current employer were those who were involved in formal training and career development programs. Those who were on the fence about leaving shared that their company did a poor job in providing professional development opportunities. Therefore companies that want to attract and retain top talent must develop structured professional development programs.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

The experiences of early career professionals in this study demonstrate that career patterns are an extension of the human development and learning process. Human beings are open living systems that are impacted by internal dynamics and external forces (Patton and McMahon, 1999). The participants in the study shared stories of great exploration. These individuals with their unique characteristics and interest were shaped through experience by their environment and social network as they tried to make sense of the world and their place in it. Their career patterns began with fantasies of what they want to be when they grew up. These fantasies turned into tentative plans during college and post high school years. Finally, they were forced to adjust and even abandon their plans in the face of reality. Society has a responsibility to partner with these early career professionals and assist them with the continuation of their career journey. Local communities also need to discover and implement effective strategies to assist with the development of the future workforce.
References


Higgins, M.C., & Kram, K.E. (2012) WSJ.


Appendix A

Recruitment Script

Hello:

My name is Steven Simmons and I am graduate student at Northeastern University, beginning the data collection phase of my dissertation. My proposed study is focused on understanding college educated professionals perception regarding how they choose their career, what events and people influenced those decisions and their perception of the current job market. My data collection plan includes a one hour interview followed by two emails. I am searching for participants aged 22 -28 who have earned a college degree and are living in Aiken County, South Carolina. I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you for an hour to discuss your career choices, plans and expectations for the future.

If you are interested in participating, the next step is to review and sign the informed consent form. Please be aware that you are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

Thank you.
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a qualitative research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a college educated adult between the ages of 22-28, living in Aiken County, South Carolina.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand the perception of college educated young professionals regarding the current job market and their careers.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a one hour interview. This interview will be conducted at the Aiken County Public Library and will be recorded using a digital recorder. Following the interview, you will be asked to respond to an email asking for any additional thoughts. You will also receive a summary of your response, approximately 3 weeks after the interview, and will be asked to review the summary for accuracy and offer any additional thoughts.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at the Aiken County Public Library. The interview will take approximately one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

We do not foresee that you will experience any risk, harm, discomfort or inconvenience by participating in this study.
Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study; however, the information learned from this study may help you with future career decisions.

Who will see the information about me?

Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known. Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. Your statements during the interview will be transcribed by the researcher and sorted into themes or codes. The audio recording and transcript will be maintained by the researcher until the thesis has been approved, afterwards all transcripts, audio recordings and data files will be destroyed.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Please contact Steven Simmons at 803-552-2441 (voice mail is confidential) or by email at simmons.stev@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Margaret Gorman Kirchoff at M.kirchoff@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________ ________________________
Print Name/ Signature/Date

____________________________________________ ________________________
Print Name/Signature of person who explained the study/Date
## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ice breaker:</td>
<td>What are early career professional’s perception regarding their career patterns?</td>
<td>Career Development Systems Theory (Patton and McMahon, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please tell me about yourself.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Developmental Network Typology (Higgins and Kram, 2001)</td>
</tr>
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<td>What did you study in college?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please describe your family (formative years) and your high school experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please describe your work and career experiences since leaving college.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is your perception of the current job market, specifically in Aiken County?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is your perception regarding the process of selecting and building a career?</td>
<td>What are early career professional’s perception regarding their career patterns?</td>
<td>Career Development Systems Theory (Patton and McMahon, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probing Questions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Please describe your feeling of workforce preparedness based on your college</td>
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<tr>
<td>experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What career development tools were you exposed to in high school and college?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Were they effective?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you feel that you have the knowledge, skills and ability to build a career in</td>
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<td>the current job market?</td>
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<td>Please describe the people who shaped and influenced your understanding of work</td>
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<td>and careers.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Probing Questions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did your parents influence your understanding of work and careers?</td>
<td>How do early career professionals describe the impact on career patterns from their</td>
<td>Developmental Network Typology (Higgins and Kram, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>social network?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


How did mentors such as coaches, youth leaders, and teachers influence your understanding of work and careers?

Please describe any events or defining moments that shaped and influenced your understanding of work and careers.

Probing Questions:

How has your culture/race/gender impacted your thoughts regarding careers?

How has your socioeconomic background impacted your thoughts regarding careers?

What critical events shaped the career patterns of early career professionals?

Career Development Systems Theory (Patton and McMahon, 1999)
Appendix D

72 Hour Follow-up Email

Dear XXXX,

Thank your time and willingness to share your experiences with me on (date). As we discussed, I am sending you a follow-up email to solicit any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections you may have had since to conclusion of our face to face interview.

Please respond to this email with any additional thoughts, ideas or reflections since our face to face interview. If you prefer, you can contact me at (803) 552-2441.

Sincerely,

Steven F. Simmons
Appendix E

Summary Vignettes Follow-up Email

Dear XXXX,

Thank you again for your time and willingness to share your experiences with me. Attached is a summary of your statements from our face to face interview session as well as your follow-up statements. Please review the attached document for accuracy. Also, please share any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections.

Please respond to this email or if you prefer, you can contact me at (803) 552-2441.

Sincerely,

Steven F. Simmons