Stress as a Cultural Tool in Higher Education

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STRESS AS A CULTURAL TOOL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

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This study focuses on how two groups of college freshmen, the traditional age and nontraditional age students use the word stress as a cultural tool in their college adjustment process. This topic is explored through Vygotsky’s concept of language understood as a cultural tool, enacting meaning as developed through socio-cultural relations (1978). Three research questions explore how students articulate stress in diverse ways: How do traditional and nontraditional college freshmen use the word stress as a cultural tool to mediate their experiences in the college environment: academically, socially, personally, regarding goal commitments, etc.? What are the factors that traditional and nontraditional freshmen attribute to high and low stressors? How do the two groups of college students comparatively use stress to mediate their college adjustment: academically, socially, personally, regarding goal commitments, etc.? The sample consisted of (N=100) undergraduate freshmen enrolled in a four-year private college. There were fifty traditional age freshmen ages 18-22 and fifty nontraditional age freshmen ages 23 and over. A mixed methodology approach was used including the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) and three narratives genres (meanings of stress statements; narratives of stressful experiences, and ranking of stress terms). An independent Samples t-Test, values
analysis, and plot analysis were performed to explore both groups of freshmen’s college experiences and adjustment. Results suggest that there were similarities and differences among the groups in relation to the SACQ and the three narratives genres. Findings indicated that age does not have an effect on college adjustment between the traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen. However, age does have an effect on the multiple roles and demands expressed by nontraditional age freshman students. The traditional age freshmen ranked academic as their most stressful term while the nontraditional age freshmen ranked financial as their most stressful term. In addition, the narrative statements of stressful experiences introduced how college freshmen used stress to mediate and make sense of their environment. The implication is to move away from the notion of stress associated with negative abilities and convey the importance behind each stressful experience.

*Keywords*: stress, traditional age college freshmen, nontraditional age college freshmen, cultural tool
DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this work to my family; especially, to my beloved late grandmother. My dissertation was inspired by my role as college advisor in a private college. By working in a college setting, stress captured my interest, because it was a popular word famously used by the freshman students. My curiosity was to explore what stress really meant for these students and how it impacted their adjustment to college. I felt that if I could understand and relate to my advisees it would be a beneficial way to communicate and foster their college development.
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First and foremost, I thank the Lord for his guidance, strength, and keeping my faith alive during this process. I am truly honored and blessed to have a loving and supportive family. Mom, dad, and brother without your constant encouragement, understanding, and support, it would have been impossible to achieve my educational goal. Thank you for all that you do and all the sacrifices that you have made to foster my education, I love you.

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CHAPTER 1
RATIONALE AND FRAMEWORK

Advancing on an Early Study

The American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology defines stress as a state of physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave (VandenBos, 2007). Today, in this twenty-first century world younger and older adults’ everyday struggles abound such as needing to pursue an advanced education, obtaining a job, finding one’s own independence, supporting a family, etc. Hence, it is important to understand the nature of emotional experience and its expressions across adulthood, in particular when studied in the college population of “traditional” age (18 -22) and “nontraditional” age (23 and over) freshman students.

I work as an academic advisor in a private four-year college. Based on that experience, I designed and implemented a research project entitled, “What does stress mean in higher education?” investigating the discursive use of the word “stress” by focusing exclusively on two cohorts of freshman students (traditional age and nontraditional age). In that study, I focused on the different meanings of stress and how it impacts the younger and older freshman students. There were 16 participants who were recruited from their Introduction to Psychology courses through flier distributions. Two focus groups were conducted consisting of eight students each. Focus group number one consisted of 8 traditional age college freshman students, while focus group number two consisted of 8 nontraditional age freshman students. In addition to the focus groups, as an icebreaker, each student was presented with a vignette, describing a hypothetical scenario of a student who had been exposed to academic discomfort/frustration in a given
context. Participants were then asked some questions on stress relating to the vignette, which were used to segue into having each participant define what stress means to him/her when he/she used the word stress. Analyses of each participant’s responses indicated that traditional age college freshmen reported experiencing more stress and added responsibilities than the nontraditional college age freshmen. For example, the traditional age students reported that after school they were subject to home chores and caring for younger siblings while their parents were at work, in addition to attending to their own college assignments. Meanwhile, the nontraditional age students reported that stress was a result of juggling the demands of work and school (Ramjit, 2013).

Interestingly, my previous study demonstrated that some of these emotions universally interpreted as negatives can conversely be reinterpreted as positives. That is to say, phenomena like stress emerges as a function of understanding one’s context and one’s role in it – in short stress appears to be a symbolic tool created, used, and transformed in culture. Functions that became evident in the previous study via individual and collaborative responses in the focus groups include, for example, stress as a communicative bonding agent, a means of sharing of experience, and a way of identifying and addressing problems. For example, one of the questions posed during the focus group sessions was: *When you use the word stress with someone, what are you expecting he/she will say to you?* Many of the students responded that they would expect the person to ask them “why they are stressed? because it makes them feel better.” Both groups of freshmen also hinted that they either welcomed companionship or that personal space is appreciated during stressful times such as “sometimes you just want someone to support you or give advice,” or “just to be left alone.” Here the students are using stress as a cultural tool, i.e., as an escape strategy to minimize some of their stress by communicating with others who were able
to offered support and coping advice.

Vygotsky (1978) defined cultural tools as the important human tool, language, our symbolic system. Through social interaction and communication freshman students are able to explore their college environment. Both groups of freshmen incorporated all aspects of their stress related experiences to mediate their college transitioning. Moreover, findings suggested that stress can have a positive impact because it serves as a bonding factor among the students. College freshmen used stress to create social and academic bonding by communicating with others. As Vygotsky (1978) posited, language creates a context for activity; especially, talking and reflecting by thinking about pressing situations such as stress. Hence, there are several relevant issues worth following up concerning both populations of freshmen in a college setting. These issues are focusing on how stress functions as a cultural tool by college freshmen, and scrutinizing the varying expressions of the diverse meanings of stress and stress related experiences as demonstrated in their narratives. Also, it serves as a springboard for comparatively exploring if any differences and/or similarities exist in the college adjustment process between the two groups of college freshmen. Understanding how each group adjusted to their college environment academically and socially, and how the students committed to this new environment advances our understanding of freshmen’s adaptability and will be beneficial to developmental researchers and college administrators.

The present study of stress adds to a recent increase in studying the young adult and adult populations of freshman college students in terms of academic ability and social and academic integration as predictors of retention (Oliver, Ricard, Witt, Alvarado, & Hill, 2010; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Tinto, 1997; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Krotseng, 1992). The impact of students’ [choice of] majors (Leppel, 2001), degree completion rates and financial
support among [traditional and] nontraditional students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005) are advance as well. Transitioning to college [as it] also changes the relationships among family members by focusing on the importance of emotional bonds for healthy development and adjustment (Rice, Fitzgerald, Whaley, & Gibbs, 1995). The focus [on] time and stress management for dealing with excess or unnecessary distress enhanced students’ development. Also the nature of psychological wellness concerns advanced how students are equipped to handle the demands for independent functioning that accompany transition and adjustment (Feldt, Graham, & Dew, 2011; Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008).

Previous research indicated that stress impacts and impedes students’ success in college at any age and across all demographic variables in a variety of ways (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Oman et. al., 2008; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005; Tinto, 1999). Research also indicated that stress presents through a variety of causal factors such as financial debt; lack of social support; personal concerns such as health, illness or death of a loved one; relationships and conflicts with roommates and/or parents (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Eggens, van der Werf, & Bosker, 2007; Tangiguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Rice et al., 1997).

A review of the past literature concerning the two groups of freshman college students, the traditional age and nontraditional age, advanced my interest in the topic because although they are comprehensive and informative, little is known about the nature and function of expressions of stress in everyday life. That is to say, this study’s emphasis was focused on students’ meaning of stress through the students’ individualistic language field employed in their narratives against the backdrop of their interaction with the socio-cultural college environment and their adjustment to college life. Hence, the prior literature contextualizes this study in terms of what we know about stress in relation to its causal factors, impediments to academic
advancement, demographic and cultural factors, coping strategies, etc. However, from the review of literature, there is a gap in understanding the nuances of the expressions of the language of stress in order to derive its discursive meanings through Vygotsky’s concept that language is a cultural tool.

**Literature Review**

In this section, I explore the fundamentals concerning stress and stressors in regard to traditional and nontraditional college freshmen through the previous literature. Each college student is dynamic and changes as he/she is influenced by the environment/society at large. The twenty-first century’s freshmen’s transitioning to college life faces twenty-first century issues including environmental, academic, personal, and financial. Therefore, it is important to understand how freshman college students use the word stress in relation to Vygotsky’s concept of language in its social aspect as a cultural tool to navigate the college experience and to facilitate adjustment and coping issues. Furthermore, we need to get beyond interpreting freshman students’ discursive uses of stress through collective language universals, and specifically focus on Vygotsky’s concept of language in its social aspect as a cultural tool in relation to a freshman’s unique expressive context concerning stress/stressors. Adjusting to the college environment can be a major challenge for freshman students. Traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen must be able to adjust to their new academic demands, establish social interactions, and create a sense of commitment to the college environment. By understanding the importance of why they are attending college, freshman students, will be able to cope with their challenges and adjustment process.

**The Traditional Student in Relation to Stress**

The conventional age for the traditional college student is cited as 18-22 (Oberts, 2015;
Giancola, et al., 2009; Giancola, et al., 2008; Strage, 2008; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Munday, 1976). According to Dill and Henley (1998), traditional age students typically do not have multiple roles and are enrolled in college directly from high school. Until the late twentieth century the traditional age freshman student comprised the largest segment of enrollment at colleges and universities in the United States. However, there were additional situated factors such as attending college immediately after graduating from high school [which] seemed to want college to be an extension of high school (Strage, 2008). For instance, some freshmen were living at home with parents while others were residing on campus. A few were working a part-time job, on or off campus, and had limited freedom from financial concerns. Therefore, age and environment played a huge role in terms of success as this type of lifestyle presupposed a student had more time to commit himself/herself to study and to participate socially in all aspects of the college culture. This lifestyle also assumed not only success in college, but a future outcome of a successful life and career. These positive qualities contributed in part to a less stressful experience transitioning into the college culture. However as observed by researchers, the traditional student is not without stress, yet, more traditional students reported pressure and expectation from parents (Skowron et al., 2004; Dill & Henley, 1998). Additionally, the late twentieth and now the twenty-first century has transformed the traditional freshman student in terms of lifestyle and priorities, but the prior stereotypical construct remains ingrained to a certain extent in the college culture, and is intimidating to the demographic outsider who does not fit the mold.

**The Nontraditional Student in Relation to Stress**

The nontraditional student is defined as older than the conventional age as 23 and older. This student enrolls in college years after completing high school, or, in some cases, did not
complete high school and has a GED, a high school equivalency credential. In recent years, there has been an increase in the nontraditional students and the classrooms have changed (Spitzer, 2000). He, or in most cases she, as a greater number of women are now pursuing post-secondary education, are employed full time, has and supports a family of his/her own. The nontraditional student faces greater time demands and responsibilities as college must be integrated into an already demanding life. According to Cavote & Kopa-Frye (2007) students who may be described as NT[nontraditional] face challenges such as no familial history of college, limited social or academic support, and commitments such as employment, that demand time and energy off campus.

Time constraints and financial concerns also factor into a stressful transitioning into the college culture, as well as the academic workload because in some cases students have been out of school for a number of years, and hence study and writing skills have been dormant. Lastly, one impediment the nontraditional student may face is prejudicial “ageist thinking,” which is explored in Lynch & Bishop-Clark’s study wherein they compared the experiences of nontraditional students on a main campus with those on two branch campuses (1998). Lynch and Bishop-Clark (1998) focused on the experience of the nontraditional student attending what is deemed a “traditional” campus where the student population is overwhelmingly the traditional age, [and] on these campuses faculty and administrators do not have as much experience with older students. Kassworn (1990) reported that faculty and staff who are not experienced with the older college student may hold biased attitudes which interfere with the successful participation of older students; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering (1989) discussed the classroom climate which allows ageist thinking (i.e., basing judgments of individuals on popularly held stereotypes about age) to bias faculty and others regarding the potential of adult learners (Lynch & Bishop-
Clark, 1998). However, the students participating in their survey presented a positive outcome. Students on both types of campuses enjoyed the mixed age classroom experience. Overwhelmingly, the respondents reported that they liked a learning experience in which both age groups are represented and enjoyed making friends with both older and younger students (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1998).

**The Transition to College: Coping with the Academic Culture Shock**

College is a time of transitions, change and new experiences for students and their families (Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004; Arnett, 2000). Transitioning and adapting to the college culture/environment can be stressful for both traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen and is manifested by a variety of factors both social and academic. In general, according to Alvan, Belgrave & Zea (1996), attending college may be a stressful experience for any student. For example, the freshman student is thrust into an environment that consists of interaction with professors, peers, and staff, a demanding academic workload consisting of research papers, exams, etc. with set submission deadlines, and attendance policies. Temperament, misplaced expectations, and lack of knowledge as to how the college culture operates coupled with familial and work responsibilities induce the stress level and can impede success in college.

Collier and Morgan (2007) contended that success in college resides not only in having academic skills but requires mastery of the college student role which is crucial in understanding the diverse professors’ expectations. Collier and Morgan (2007) advanced and applied a revitalized version of sociological role theory to the college experience. According to this approach, roles serve as resources that individuals use to pursue their goals through interactions with others. In the case of higher education, students who arrive at the [college or] university
with a greater mastery of the college student role possess an important resource for recognizing what their instructors expect of them and for responding appropriately to those expectations. The authors determined that the traditional age students have the edge when it comes to mastering the role of college student. This group of student comes from a more traditional background and enters the university with a level of cultural capital that makes it easier for them to become ‘role experts.’ Not only are they more familiar with higher education from listening to family members’ academic histories, but they are also more likely to have more appropriate approaches for dealing with teachers and other educational authorities because of parental coaching/guidance (Ramos-Sanchez et al., 2007; Cavote & Kopyera-Frye, 2007; Skowron, et al., 2004). Navigating the college culture through parental mentorship/guided participation, social role-playing, and intervention alleviates much of the stress associated with the student’s transitioning into college.

Giancola et al., (2009) in their study focused on major factors that induced stress in college students and identified adaptive and maladaptive coping behaviors. An area of particular salience for adult students is the stress of balancing multiple demands and roles at work, at school, and in their personal lives. Adaptive coping behaviors are those that lead to constructive, healthy psychosocial and physical outcomes for the individual. Conversely, maladaptive coping has a negative impact. Four types of adaptive (i.e., positive reinterpretation, instrumental social support, active coping, and planning) and maladaptive (i.e., venting, denial, behavioral disengagement, and substance use) coping behaviors were examined (Giancola et al., 2009). The authors, using a prior study as a springboard, contend that five factors should be taken into consideration when scrutinizing the impact of stress on adult college students. The model of college outcomes for adults (Donaldson and Graham, 1999) emphasized the importance of prior
experiences and psychosocial orientations in understanding adult undergraduates. This should include examining (a) adult undergraduate sources of stress, (b) the meaning of demands and interrole conflict, (c) the management of stressors, (d) personal moderator variables, and (e) psychosocial and academic outcomes (Giancola et al., 2009). What is of particular relevance here is relating factor b, which focuses on arriving at “meaning” or decoding the “demands” using language as a multi-associational symbolic system anchored in its social function as it is variously expressed to interpret the freshman’s individualistic articulations of stress. Similarly, communication is of the utmost importance for the student, so just as it is necessary for the professional to extract meaning from what is being said on the part of the student, so too, Giancola et al., (2009) posited that it is important to distinguish between positive and negative ways of expressing stress. For instance, some of the negative means of communicating stress, such as “venting” become a positive because it can be presented as a form of communicating, social bonding mechanism among peers, and a form of coping.

In any study of stress, academic or otherwise, what is of great importance is the resolution or outcome for the individual in terms of de-escalating the targeted stressor through coping mechanisms or strategies. Giancola et al, (2009) pertinently identified adaptive and maladaptive methods of coping, and advancing on these coping fields, Park and Folkman, (1997) explored “concepts of meaning” in relation to coping resolutions by deconstructing the psychology behind coping though the overlapping of an individual’s “global meaning” with his/her “situational meaning.” Park and Folkman (1997) referred to meaning as perceptions of significance. Whereas global meaning encompasses a person’s enduring beliefs and valued goals, and situational meaning as the meaning that is formed in the interaction between a person’s global meaning and the circumstances of a particular person-environment transaction.
Although there is some evidence that meaning is a critical aspect of people’s existence and their adjustment to life stressors, the whole area of meaning is currently poorly understood and not well-integrated with other mainstream approaches to stress and coping. Park and Folkman (1997) hoped for outcome is in realizing conformity between an individual’s global meaning and the appraised meaning of a particular event. For instance, this is understood by exploring the roles of beliefs, goals, and the functions of meaning in the processes through which people appraised and cope with stressful events and circumstances. According to Clark and Folkman (1997), there are three major components of situational meaning that individuals assess during stress-and-coping. The first component is the assessment of the personal significance between the person [student] and the environment [college]. The second component is coping processes in which people [college freshmen] search for meaning once a situation has been appraised as stressful. Lastly, the third component is referred to as meaning as outcome or what the individual ultimately derives as a potential product of their coping efforts. Therefore, the accumulation of life experiences is linked with global meaning, which mediates the individual’s focus on the importance behind each goal.

Similarly, Clark (2005) focused on the transitioning process of “first year students” overcoming both internal and external “challenges” by employing strategies as a means to cope. Students appeared to devise strategies in order to address challenges that they experienced within several different categories, such as classes, professors, academic responsibilities, grades, extracurricular activities, studying, and the relationship with family and peers. Deeper analysis revealed that the students’ challenges and related strategies reflected four broad themes: overcoming an obstacle, seizing an opportunity, adapting to a change, or pursuing a goal.

Dill & Henley (1998), focused on comparing traditional age and nontraditional age
college student (who were matched demographically as closely as possible) in relation to stressors among freshmen as well as upperclassmen/women participants to learn what events college students consider stressful. The authors categorized the stressful “events” as academic events; peer and social events; family and network events; autonomy and responsibility events; and intimacy, sex, and romance events. As an example, their findings demonstrated an expected uniformity between the two groups as the impact on “peer and social events” was much greater for the traditional age students. Also, more traditional age students than the nontraditional age students have reported going to parties and belonging to organizations. This reflects that social inclusion/acceptance and participation among traditional age students is a major factor in their well-being in the college environment. Another categorical example to illustrate the differences between the traditional age and nontraditional age students concerns the “academic category.” Here, the results are somewhat surprising in relation to the nontraditional age students relating to classes and professors and returning to school. The events of returning to college after time off and attending classes were viewed as more desirable by the nontraditional age than by the traditional age students. However, the traditional age students reported actually attending class more often than the nontraditional age students. The nontraditional age students also found doing homework more desirable than the traditional age students did, whereas the traditional age students worried about school performance more frequently than the nontraditional age students. The nontraditional age students reported greater impact from bad classes or teachers than the traditional age students (Dill & Henley, 1998). Similarly, Strage (2008) posited that older [nontraditional age] students described their ideal instructors as someone who is organized, flexible, and course work to be more serious, rigorous, and readily applicable to the real world. Whereas, traditional age students described their ideal instructors as someone who is funny and
an easy grader (Strage, 2008).

Pertaining to stressors and the transitioning and adapting to the college culture, Collier and Morgan (2007) focused on the importance of disconnect in communication/directives between faculty and students. They found that disconnect can lead to poor or failing grades, and thus creates enormous stress/pressure in succeeding in college. For the faculty, this is alarming because they expressed considerable frustration over the fact that their continued efforts to communicate their expectations often failed to produce the desired results. Thus, faculty members not only felt that they had clear expectations but also that they worked hard to share them. Yet, at the same time they also recognized that the things they said did not seem to mean the same things to students as they did to them (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Interestingly, the students’ perspective reflected that in some cases, they either discounted or ignored the importance of the things that professors said and thus ‘misunderstood’ the message that faculty members were expected to send (Collier & Morgan, 2007).

Selection of a major can also become a stressor for the freshman student, as this impacts future career decisions. Choosing a major where a student does not have an interest or an aptitude can be detrimental to a student’s self-esteem and perseverance. Leppel’s (2001) paper relates to choice of major, but she grounded her research in “economic theory.” Once a student enrolls, the student’s performance and decision to persist are simultaneously determined. Suppose a student is struggling to pass courses, obtain loans, and balance school, job, and family responsibilities. Then current costs, both monetary and non-monetary, may be high. Whether the student decides to quit school depends on whether future benefits are high enough to compensate for high current costs. Furthermore, Leppel (2001) considers “professionally-orientated majors” reflect higher “persistence rates” than the impact of majors driven by “social forces” which are
traditionally gender specific. However, there can be issues with the “professionally-orientated majors” wherein dealing with boring coursework represents a non-monetary cost. So, if the student with the professionally-oriented major is more likely to find that the coursework of the major is uninteresting, his/her assessment of the non-monetary costs of continuing in that major is likely to be higher. That student may, therefore, change majors or may even decide to drop out of college (Leppel, 2001).

The Institution’s Role in Students’ Transition. The first-year transition may be one of the most difficult challenges that college students will encounter in their lifetime. For a successful college outcome, it is important to become socially and academically integrated (Tinto, 1993; Feldt, Graham & Dennis, 2011). A review of studies on first-year college freshmen presents evidence that there is and will continue to be an increase in the number of nontraditional age students who attend institutions of higher education in contrast to the traditional aged 18-to-22-year-old (Bean & Metzner, 1989; Giancola, et al., 2009). Stress is common amongst college students, especially the freshmen population. Therefore, it is incredibly important for academic institutions to have certain resources in place to facilitate a smooth transition for both traditional and nontraditional college freshmen. Academic institutions need to adapt, understand, and provide resources to lessen transitional challenges for this population of students; especially, the nontraditional age freshman students. Outside of the classrooms, higher education staff members such as academic advisors, mentors, financial counselors, etc., must be able to practice patience when dealing with this population. For example, many traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen may be the first in their family to attend college. These students tend to become highly dependent on the academic institution’s staff members to be their guide, support and resources in fulfilling their academic goal(s) and adjustment. In accordance, Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton &
Renn (2010) posited that higher education should provide specialized services (adapted for adult needs), education (information and skills related to adult development, transitions, and the college experience), program planning (including support groups), networking, mentoring, and counseling (including outreach and peer support).

Similarly, Tinto (1999) stated that to be serious about student success, institutions would recognize that the roots of attrition lies not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings in which they ask students to learn. These resources are critical to both the students and the institutions since it is a time of transition, adjustment, and developmental processes to new changes and experiences. The more a student’s experiences serve to integrate the student socially and intellectually into the life of the institution, the more likely the student is to persist until degree completion (Leppel, 2001). By the same token, students must also understand the colleges and universities’ rules and policies. In addition, for students to master their academics, they must also become familiar with the institutions’ rules, policies and requirements. Collier & Morgan (2008) found that success in college is not simply a matter of students demonstrating academic ability, [but] mastering of the “college student” role enables [freshman students] to understand their instructors’ expectations and to apply their existing skills to meet those expectations successfully.

**Intervention, Support, and Retention.** Freshman students have been described as a vulnerable population (Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali, & Rogers, 2013; Crede & Niehorster, 2011; Giancola et al., 2009; Cavote & Kopa-Frye, 2007; Collier & Morgan 2007; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Skowron et al., 2004, and Tinto, 1993 &1997) in colleges and universities in terms of retention and succeeding in college. There are numerous reasons why freshmen have a high dropout rate including but not limited to tuition cost/finances, feeling
intimidated or overwhelmed by the college culture, inclusive of professors, peers, examinations, research papers with deadlines, and these factors, alone or in combination, are all precipitators of stress. Thus the stress evokes self-discouragement, which can lead to a student dropping out.

Both traditional and nontraditional freshman students need to be fully integrated, both socially and academically and made aware of support services, which serve as the collegiate safety nets to catch this vulnerable population before college for them is but an unpleasant memory rather than a positive experience leading to a career and a prosperous future. Bonding with peers, mentoring by counselors and professors are just some of the ways to help students who are experiencing high stress levels to develop a social support base or structure to cope with external and internal stressors. Many students are clueless concerning support service to help them deal with the pressures imposed by college life. As cited in Egan & Moreno (2011) although stress is common and consequential in college students, many college students are unaware of student health resources for evaluation and stress relaxation treatment resources. More than a quarter of all college students report that they feel unable to manage their stress (Egan & Moreno, 2011). Because many college students do not visit clinics where stress assessment may be performed, methods identifying students who may be experiencing adverse consequences from stress remain elusive.

In some cases students not utilizing support services is not due to the ignorance of availability, but there are certain obstacles that prevent them from doing so, and from integrating into the college culture at large. Keith’s (2007), research focused on nontraditional students and the preventive “barriers” that preclude them from fully acculturating into the college environment. According to Mercer (1993) and Keith (2007) three types of barriers confronted by older students are situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational constraints can
include family circumstances, employment, and civic involvement. These situational barriers may result in time conflicts with academic scheduling, work and other responsibilities. Dispositional barriers refer to intrapersonal attributes and are more difficult to define and measure. Some researchers believe adult students may have adjustment difficulties when they return to an educational setting and stress may be an outcome of dispositional barriers. Institutional barriers refer to aspects of the structure of educational organizations that may impede older students’ attainment and fail to meet their needs. These barriers may include inconvenient class times and office hours. Moreover, a question may be posed as to why some freshmen succeed and others do not. It is here I believe we need to listen not only to what is being said, but how it is being said and what is really meant in their stress narratives. In addition, (Skowron et al., 2004; Somerfield & McCrae, 2000), posited the question of how individuals cope with stress, and why some cope relatively well while others struggle, has continued to challenge the field.

Many researchers and practitioners focused on how social support served as a buffer for the influence of stress on motivation and enhancing freshman college students’ well-being (Eggens et al., 2007; Skowron, et al., 2004; Elliot & Gramling, 1990). In addition, other studies on stress’ focal points were on the health aspects of college students (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Oman et al., 2008). Through a medical and health related lens, stress has been studied by focusing on common sources such as classes, illnesses, relationships, death of a loved one, debt, and conflicts with roommates or parents (Egan & Moreno, 2011). These stressors increased the use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana. Despite linking these activities to negative health outcomes, they could possibly be perceived as a way of coping with stressors. Another way of expressing, assessing, and coping with stress is by Facebook profiles, where self-reported
personal information was evaluated to reference stress (Egan & Moreno, 2011). Language is a powerful way of expressing and communicating challenging experiences. Through social interaction and communication, college freshmen are able explore ways of coping and adjusting to their stressful environments.

**Theoretical Grounding and Contextual Base**

Vygotsky’s concept of viewing language as a symbolic system and a cultural tool becomes the twenty-first century’s Rosetta stone to decipher the college students’ definitions/expressions of stress. Applying Vygotsky’s concept of language as a cultural tool enables an exploration of the expressions and discourses of the word stress. The usage of the word stress provides a more exact and individualistic meaning rather than relying on universal and broad based definitions. Through the usage of the word stress, college freshmen attempt to determine the causal factors of their individualistic stressors and focus on ways of evaluating the importance. Meaning-making is a way of constructing and understanding ourselves and the world, and gives shape and coherence to the human condition. Moreover, we all experience the world/reality in our own unique way and have a need to share our own personal narratives with others. Vygotsky (1978) sees language as a “tool” a “mediator” between our psychological operations and the world/others. Hence, with language seen as a tool students are able to build a communicative network between their internal world and objective reality and/or others. In short, through the mediation of language, students are able to both construct meaningful expressive contexts, while navigating various communication channels. Vygotsky (1978; 1986) claimed that tools are the symbolic systems we use to communicate and analyze reality. Cultural tools include symbols, plans, body language, maps, but the most important of all is language.

Contextualized with reference to Vygotskian theory, a concept like stress becomes a
cultural tool in constructing an interpretative framework grounded in a variety of contexts, which are changeable depending on the situation/experience and our perception of them. [Freshman college students use of the word stress can be understood] as a cultural-tool, that is, a symbol, serving individuals [by] seizing an opportunity to insert their personal positions within broader landscapes (Daiute, 2010). In other words, stress functions as a cultural tool among college students because it is symbolic representation of their environmental context such as school, home, work, social groups, etc.

**Cultural Tool**

For Vygotsky (1978) language develops from social interaction. It is the specifically human capacity for language [that] enables [students] to provide for auxiliary tools in salutation to difficult tasks, to overcome impulsive action, to plan a solution to a problem prior to its execution, and to master their own behavior. For instance, a common word that is widely used very often by college students is stress. Stress seems to be an everyday word that has become embedded in our vocabulary. For many college freshmen, the transitioning into college is often described as stressful; especially, when it comes to navigating the college environment, understanding the college rules and faculty expectations, keeping up with their peers, etc.

The concept of Vygotsky’s “cultural tool” applied in relation to stress amongst both traditional and nontraditional college freshmen serves as a mediator between the students and the college experiences and adjustment. For Vygotsky (1986), “word meaning” reflects a generalized concept and “word sense” depends on the context of speech. A word acquires its sense from the context in which it appears; in different contexts, it changes its sense. Consistent with this theory, students might be using the word “stress” to understand their college experience to define its impact on their emotions and behaviors. For example a 19 years old female
traditional age freshman student was asked: *When you hear or say the word “stress,” what do you think that means? In other words, what is “stress”? Please explain here.*

“Stress means headaches and much complications to me. The word stress means to me that you have so much worries and problems in your life that it will build up and one day you can explode or do something crazy if you don’t try to help relieve that stress. Stress is school work, grades, amount of homework, money for students.”

Vygotsky (1978) argued that the effect of tools [language] use upon humans [students] is fundamental not only because it has helped them relate more effectively to their external environment but also because tools [language] use has had important effects upon internal and functional relationships with the human brain. Moreover, students use the word stress as a cultural tool to help them better understand the situation at hand and gain a sense of meaning making which allows these students to understand and make sense of their context, actions, conflict resolutions and development. In addition, through the use of cultural tools (language, narratives and symbols, etc.) students are able to engage in activities that are important on both social levels and cultural aspects, which enable them to develop and understand the college process and expectations through their interactions with others.

**Foci and Methods of Earlier Studies**

A study by Collier and Morgan focused on professors’ expectation of traditional age freshmen understanding/interpretation, or lack thereof concerning these expectations in relation to “mastery” of the students’ role rather than academic skills as a factor in student success and retention. In essence, mastery of the role of a college freshman student will be attributed to the student’s adjustment to the college environment. The authors contended that this mastery in conjunction with the utilization of their existing skills enables the students to succeed in college
(2007). This study advances and contextualizes my research in that they posit the idea that academic success and retention are based on a student’s integration in the college culture by understanding what is expected of the first year college student by the professor. They also explore time management and priorities in relation to submission of assignments. Their choice of first year college students as participants, i.e. traditional and first generation students, their design setting in relation to a large, urban, demographically diverse population, their exploration of the impact of culture, and the students’ responses concerning faculty presentation and demands are important components in academic well-being and retention.

Referencing stress as a cultural tool will provide us with a better understanding of our students and how they relate to stress. Moreover, stress, when used as a cultural tool, may mediate conflicts and challenges in the relevant environment. In short, a verbal tension develops between what can and cannot be expressed (i.e., traditional age freshmen having to do their own school work, but have to come home and assist their siblings with their assignments before embarking on their own). Hence, their diverse linguistic frustrations are collectively articulated as stress.

In my previous research, I found that traditional age college freshmen defined stress in terms of expectations and responsibilities (Ramjit, 2013). For example, the students in this group felt that they could not express their own “true” feelings, in regard to assisting with familial duties because “it is expected of them since they are the older siblings”, which is seen as cultural norm. These obligations at home interfered with the students’ school work and were considered to be added responsibilities. On the other hand, nontraditional age college freshmen defined stress as being overwhelmed with work (job) and school (they did not reflect so much on obligations concerning family, children, etc.).
Students must meet the challenges and demands that life inside and outside the academic environment pose. The previous literature on stress and the college student explored it from all demographic perspectives, variables, and causal factors, inclusive of both external and internal sources. In short, the previous literature on the topic is a bridge that makes possible future interpretive advances relating to communication in relation to the socialization aspect of stress as a cultural tool, manifested through language, which is base of this study.

In the literature review several different methods were used to obtain findings in relation to stress, first year college freshmen and the college environment. For example, Collier and Morgan (2008) used two focus groups to gather their data. The two focus groups were split between faculty and freshman students (consisting of traditional, nontraditional, and first generation). The goal of their interviews/focus groups was to hear about how differences in the fit between university faculty members’ expectations and their students’ understanding of those expectations can result in differential student academic outcomes (Collier and Morgan, 2008). The interview questions raised during the focus groups covered basic priorities that each group recognized with regards to students’ schoolwork; the kinds of problems that students’ encountered through not understanding expectations and how students should solve these problems. Mastering the instructors’ expectations demonstrated that students who have knowledge and understanding of the course material and what the professors intend/expect will significantly impact students’ academic success. In addition, both faculty members and students contended that communication plays a major role in the likelihood of student success. Students agreed that they should take the initiative and introduce themselves to professors to try and establish some rapport. Faculty members felt that the real issue was the students’ failure to communicate about problems when they encountered them. For instance, when faculty members
suspected students were having some kinds of problems, they would use lectures to offer tips on how to get better grades on assignments, promote their office hours so students can take advantage of the time to communicate, etc. Clearly, students should take advantages of the resources that are available to them to get help in areas that they might be experiencing difficulties. Moreover, not understanding or knowing your professors’ expectations can cause stress for students and can hinder their academic success.

Clark (2005) explored the concept of formulating strategies as a means for understanding how students negotiate the transition to college. In her qualitative study of eight, second semester freshman students, semi-structured interview sessions were conducted which began with a few predetermined open ended questions that continued in an unstructured manner. Students responded to general open-ended questions regarding success, student roles, social networks and responsibilities. Clark (2005) citing Bogdan & Biklen, (1992), advanced that interviews provide narratives that describe an individual’s actions, experiences and beliefs, and are an effective method for gathering descriptive data in the subject’s own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world. The findings of this study revealed that students encountered challenges throughout their first year that ranged from positive to negative and occurred both inside and outside of the college environment. Students devised strategies in order to address challenges that they experienced within different categories such as overcoming an obstacle; seizing an opportunity; adapting to a change; or pursuing a goal. Through these challenges students were able to find their strengths, meaning, etc., which helped with achieving the adjustment process of mastering academic and social college experience.

In Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols’ (2007) study, the authors examined whether self-efficacy mediated the relationship between generational status and two academic outcomes for first
generation college students and non-first-generation college students. In this study, the College Self-Efficacy Instrument (CESI) was used to assess the self-efficacy of students in relation to college activities. The CESI consisted of three subscales, Course Efficacy, Social Efficacy, and Roommate Efficacy, which address experiences encountered in college such as course work, roommates, and social encounters. A second instrument was also used to measure adjustment to college, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). The SACQ measures personality and environmental factors that influence adjustment to college. The SACQ consisted of four subscales, Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, and Institutional Attachment/Goal Commitment (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). The authors hypothesized that the mediation relationship would be supported by the data for both academic performance and college adjustment; first generation college students encountered more challenges; and non-first-generation students will have higher self-efficacy levels than would their counterparts. However, in their findings, a mediation effect was not supported with academic performance and college adjustment. The findings that a student’s level of self-efficacy at the beginning of the year predicted later college adjustment has implications for counseling interventions, particularly because at-risk students can be identified early on by assessing their level of self-efficacy. As they predicted, first generation students encountered more challenges than the non-first-generation college students. Overall, confidence in academic ability was related to better adjustment to college (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). In general, first year college students encountered more challenges in how well [they] meet the demands of college [and] has been labeled adjustment (Feldt et al., 2011). First generation students will encounter more problematic challenges in transitioning because they have to meet the demands of keeping up with their academic schedule, assignments, the social world of peers, and understanding the
faculty and college environment. These complex demands are deemed and seen as stressful situations by first year students, especially, first generation students. Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007 found that because these students don’t have the support at home to provide them with guidance and mentoring needed in this transitioning process, ultimately, this opens up room for stressful experiences such as keeping up with academic work, assignments, etc. The SACQ was used to measure first year students’ academic performance and college adjustment. If these students are able to keep with up situations that may be considered stressful and the first year academic demands presented to them; ultimately, their academic abilities will have a positive relationship in the college adjustment process. Hence, the concepts explored in the study and the overall findings indicate that the threshold of a student’s stress level can be reduced or mitigated by a positive social integration into the college culture and a conscious attempt at time management.

A study by Rice et al., (1997) examined stability and change in late adolescent attachment relations and the interrelationship among attachment, separation-individuation, and college adjustment variables. The researchers conducted two studies. A cross-sectional study which was called “study 1” and consisted of freshmen and upperclassmen. It was a replication and extension of an earlier work regarding age differences in attachment and the association between attachment and adaptive functioning. A two years longitudinal study which they called “study 2” and consisted of freshmen and upperclassmen was designed to address the prospective interrelationship among attachment and student development and adjustment. At Time 1 in the longitudinal study, a total 130 freshman students were recruited and the average age was 18. When Time 2 of the study occurred two years after the initial data collection, longitudinal participants were 20 year old juniors, and consisted of only 81 of the original students.
Instruments used to explore their findings were: the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) which was used to measure attachment to parents and attachment to peers; the Separation Anxiety scale of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA) was used as an indicator of separation feelings; the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) was used to measured student adjustment; the College Inventory Academic Adjustment (CIAA) was used as another measure for student adjustment.

Findings from both studies suggested stability in attachment to parents, over time, for both men and women. The authors noted that security of attachment to a parent was positively and pervasively associated with college students’ adjustment. Similarly, secure attachment assessed in freshman year also was positively associated with academic and emotional adjustment in junior year, although the longitudinal results were not as pervasive as the cross-sectional findings (Rice et al., 1997). In study 2, students categorized as having insecure attachment in freshman year did change to secure attachment by junior year. This change can be attributed to the developmental process; especially, since these students are away from home, adjusting to the college demands and transitions. These factors can alter their perspectives on their parental relationships. In this study the SACQ was used to measure how complex transitional situations such as coping with academic demands; interpersonal demands of societal-peer relationships; degree of distress in adjusting to college, and degree of commitment to educational goals to improve on their overall adjustment to college advances our understanding of freshmen adaptability. Therefore, it can be inferred from the findings that over time students’ stress is mitigated via social adjustment/adaption to the college environment.

**Study Objective**

The purpose of this study is to examine how traditional and nontraditional college
freshman students use the word stress to make sense of their college experience and the 
adjustment to college as measured in the SACQ. Most importantly, this study focuses on the 
students’ expressiveness in relation to meaning-making, the end product of mediational usage of 
language. Comparison between the two groups was important in understanding how each group 
handled the college adjustment process and life’s demands during their freshman year. To 
achieve this, the following research questions were addressed:

Research Questions

1. How do traditional and nontraditional college freshmen use the word stress as a cultural 
tool to mediate their experiences in the college environment: academically, socially, 
personally, regarding goal commitments, etc.?

2. What are the factors that traditional and nontraditional freshman students attribute to high 
and low stressors?

3. How do the two groups of college students comparatively use stress to mediate their 
college adjustment: academically, socially, personally, regarding goal commitments, etc.?

Hypotheses

1. Both traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen use the word stress similarly 
to express their college experiences.

2. Factors that are attributed to college freshman students’ high and low stressors would be 
significantly different for nontraditional age freshmen, since this group takes on multiple 
roles.

3. The adjustment process will be similar for traditional age and nontraditional age students 
during their freshman year of college.

4. The findings will reveal that both traditional age and nontraditional age students use the 
word stress as a cultural tool to signify their diverse experiences both inside and outside 
of academia through varying narrative constructs.
CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

Rationale Supporting Mixed Methodology

A mixed methodology design was used to learn about how traditional age and nontraditional age freshman college students use the word “stress” as a cultural tool in their adjustment to college. This design integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods. As noted in previous studies such as Hanson, Plano Clark, Petska, Creswell & Creswell, 2005; Brewer & Hunter, 1989; and Taskhakkori & Teddlie, 1998, when both quantitative and qualitative data were included in a study, researchers enriched their results in ways that one form of data did not allow. Furthermore, there were conceptual advantages to employing both methods in terms of this study.

These methods were design to address several major research questions:

1. How do traditional and nontraditional college freshmen use the word stress as a cultural tool to mediate their experiences in the college environment: academically, socially, personally, regarding goal commitments, etc.?

2. What are the factors that traditional and nontraditional freshman students attribute to high and low stressors?

3. How do the two groups of college students comparatively use stress to mediate their college adjustment: academically, socially, personally, regarding goal commitments, etc.?

To further explore how college freshmen uses stress as a cultural tool were explored through three narratives genres. Both traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen were asked to define stress, narrate a stress related experience, and ranked terms that were attributed to high and low stressors. The meanings of their stress statements were analyzed using values analysis, in which, college freshmen recognized the importance and values across their meaning statements of stress. The statements of stressful experiences were explored using plot analysis.
The plot analysis provided a way of focusing the causes of stressful experiences and the resolution strategy used by college freshmen to overcome these situations. Through the narratives genres, college freshmen are able to express, examine their stressors, and relate it to their college adjustment process. Results from the values and plot analyses can provide a deeper lens of the adjustment process of college freshmen.

Interpreting stress as a cultural tool through the narratives was focused on the nature of the students’ stress in relation to their surrounding environments and how it impacted their college adjustment. In order to interpret the college adjustment process in traditional age and nontraditional aged freshmen, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) was administered. By using only the SACQ, participants would be unable to further elaborate on the situation (s) that they considered as stressful in their college adjustment. For instance, on the SACQ questionnaire, college freshmen are only limited to select whether or not the questions “applies very closely to me” or “doesn’t apply to me at all.” In addition, the questions from the SACQ do not give college freshmen the opportunity to explain their selections. However, narratives provide college freshmen with the opportunity of expressing their beliefs, values, meanings, and experiences.

In the qualitative portion, each participant was asked to write narratives in regards to the definition of the word stress and recall a time when he or she experienced stress. According to Phinney & Haas (2003), coping with stress in college is a complex process whose outcome depends on the interaction of many factors related to the stressor, the context, and the individual. The use of narratives advanced how college freshmen formulated meaning making to express stressors, and to move toward a resolution or coping strategy. Narratives will broaden and aided in identifying how participants used stress experienced as a cultural tool to mediate the
conflict(s) or difficulty (ies) to transition and navigate through their first-year of college. This will provide a personalized way as to how each participant gauged what he or she would consider to be attributed to low or high level of stress.

The SACQ, meaning of stress statements, narrative statements of stressful experiences, and ranking stress terms by each participant provided valuable insights on how stress served as a cultural tool. The narratives approach extends the inquiry into students’ meanings of the college experience by offering participants the opportunity to define “stress”, to share their relevant stories, and to provide an explanation of stressful events they encountered though this transitional process during the first year of college. Moreover, the freshman students’ narratives are quoted verbatim and unedited from their questionnaires, so any errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. were the students and not the study’s author. These spontaneous and visceral expressions of stress convey the uniqueness of the responses and offer researchers a vast interpretative field. Using mixed method as a technique to explore how college freshmen use stress as a cultural tool as a measure of adjustment is an innovative way for studying this group of students.

Participants

The research sample consisted of a total of (N=100) undergraduate freshman students enrolled in a four-year private college. Students represented two groups of college freshmen: the traditional age and the nontraditional age students. The first group is the traditional age freshmen group which consisted of (n=50) college freshmen, ages 18-22 years old. In the traditional age group, there were (76%; n=38) female participants and (24%; n=12) male participants. Of the fifty traditional students, there were (24%; n=12) White; (30%; n=15) Black; (36%; n=18) Hispanic, and (10%; n=5) who classified themselves as other. The second group consisted of
the nontraditional age freshman students (n=50), ages 23 and older. In the nontraditional age group, there were (76%; n=38) female participants and (24%; n=12) male participants. Of the fifty nontraditional students, there were (24%; n=12) White; (26%; n=13) Black; (46%; n=28) Hispanic, and (4%; n=2) who classified themselves as other. The goal was to randomly recruit (N=100) participants (n=50 traditional freshmen and n=50 nontraditional freshman students), and as far as, having an equal number of female and male participants in each of the two groups this just occurred by chance. As illustrated in Table 2.1, the majority of participants in both traditional age and nontraditional age groups were females.

Table 2.1

*Traditional Age and Nontraditional Age College Freshmen Demographic by Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Freshmen</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Freshmen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Freshmen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 illustrates the type of freshman (traditional and nontraditional) students and their gender (male or female). There were an equal number of female participants (n=38) and male participants (n=12) for each traditional age and nontraditional age group. Due to random selection, there were an equal number of participants in each group of college freshmen.
Table 2.2

*Traditional Age and Nontraditional Age College Freshmen Demographic by Age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Freshman</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Age</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>19.18</td>
<td>.560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Age</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>6.383</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 illustrates of the 100 participants, the average age for traditional college freshmen was 19.18 (SD = .56) and the average age for nontraditional freshmen was 27.50 (SD = 6.38).

Table 2.3

*Traditional Age and Nontraditional Age College Freshmen Demographic by Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Freshman</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.3, illustrates the diverse student population of freshmen participants in this study. It is evident that the Latino is the largest ethnic group of freshman college students.

Students were recruited during the second semester of their freshmen year from Introduction to Psychology courses with their instructors’ permission. Students were notified of the study by classroom visits and flyers, which were distributed in their courses with a contact number and an e-mail address for interested participants.
Materials and Procedures

Narratives. Each student narrated an experience or a short story, which he or she considered to be stressful. Daiute (2014) reminds us the power of narrative is not so much that it is about life but it interacts in life. In that sense, narratives are cultural tools (Daiute, 2014). With these students’ recollection of stress and stressful events, we are able to examine their uses of the word and the concept to engage with diverse others, to develop personally, and to contribute to the development of society (Daiute, 2014).

Narratives were used as the qualitative measure which entailed analyzing the narratives that traditional age and nontraditional age freshman college students participated in crafting. Narrating is an activity people use to mediate-manage-interactions that matter to them (Daiute, 2014). When these students shared their narratives in relation to the meaning of the word “stress” and recalled a time that they had used the word or experienced stress, they were able to unfold a way of understanding the event(s) and factor(s) that caused such an experience. This was, thus, an opportunity for students to use the word stress in relation to the college environment (academic, social, etc.). With their narrations, they depicted causes of stress and strategies for dealing with it and, as appropriate, growing from it academically, socially, and personally. Narrating is also a mean of social relations and social change in part with the interaction of diverse values that organize meaning (Daiute, 2010 & Daiute, 2014). These students were using narratives as a way of understanding their world through current, past and future experiences. Similarly, Daiute (2014) presented the notion with expanding definitions of narrative as an account of event, a conversation in which a story unfolds, and a way of understanding the world [adjustment to the college environment], [because] narrative is understood to be a social process. College freshmen students were able to express and share their personal experiences through
their narratives. This insight captures how students (the authors) use narratives as a cultural tool to figure out what is going on in the environment, how one fits, and how situations might be better (Daiute, 2014). Both traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen may use the narratives to engage in different way with different aspects of their experiences, such as with peers, family, professors, the college bureaucracy, etc.

The meanings of stress statements were individualized by the traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen as they defined stress. College freshmen recognized that stress is a universal word and experience that interacts within our surrounding environments. For example, a traditional age student shared that stress is part of life and it shapes us in our developmental transitioning:

Stress to me means being overwhelmed by a situation or multiple situations. Stress is a word to describe emotional, physical and mental exhaustion. Stress is something experienced during a college student’s life. Also stress is something everyone around the world experiences at some point in there life.

Similarly, a nontraditional age freshman acknowledged the meaning of stress is something that is experienced by all:

In my opinion when I hear the word stress I think about how it applies to me and how I have gone through it. I also think about how it helped me out aside from how much it brings me down. Stress is something you go through and whether you like it or not it will come along some way some how.

The meaning of stress statements by college freshmen showed that stress is something that is experienced by everyone and is embedded in our language. We are able to apply a meaning to stress because we all encounter it within our surroundings. Our experiences contribute to the
meanings that are applied to stress and foster our adjustment to these experiences.

**SACQ.** In this study, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) was used as the quantitative measure because it is the best gauge of adaption as a survey of the prior research supports. According to Crede & Niehorster (2012), the SACQ is currently the most widely used multidimensional measure for students’ adjustment to college and the diverse adjustment to college literature has relied on this measure. For instance, several studies have used the SACQ to study and understand students’ adjustment to colleges and universities (Feldt et al, 2011; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Taylor and Pastor, 2007; Rice et al., 1995; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Krotseng, 1992). As we learned from previous studies, student adjustment to college is not only limited to mastering academic abilities (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Toews & Yazdejian, 2007), but more importantly, adjustment to college is multidimensional.

The SACQ acknowledges the multidimensional nature of the adjustment to college through (Crede & Niehorster, 2012; Baker & Siryk, 1989) the four subscales: *Academic adjustment* reflects the degree to which students have adapted to their academic demands as reflected in their attitudes towards their course of study, engagement, academic effort, etc.; *Social adjustment* reflects the degree to which students have integrated themselves into the social structures of universities [colleges] residencies, taking part in campus activities, meeting new people, making friends, as opposed to experiencing difficulties with loneliness or missing of family; *Personal-emotional adjustment*, reflects the degree to which students are experiencing stress, anxiety and/or physical reactions (i.e., sleeplessness) to the demands of the college environment; *The Goal commitment/Institutional attachment* refers specifically to the degree to which students identify with and have become emotionally attached to the university [college] community (Crede & Niehorster, 2012; Baker & Siryk, 1989).
The SACQ is a 67-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure the effectiveness of student adjustment to college, which can be administered, individually or to groups. Each of the participants responded to each of the 67 items using a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (applies very closely to me) to 9 (doesn’t apply to me at all). As a cultural tool, both traditional and nontraditional college freshman students use the word “stress” as a mediator between them and the college environment as an adjustment tool. Because of its multifaceted nature, each adjustment subscale will provide information that is relevant to understanding the demands of both groups of freshman students encountered in their quest for integrating and adjusting into college.

The SACQ has a built in demographic survey, which requires the student’s name, age, gender, ethnicity and academic status (freshman, sophomore, junior or senior). This will be used to gather participants’ demographic information. In general, items from the SACQ will provide further explanation on what factor (s) influences adjustment to the college environment for both traditional and nontraditional college freshman students. The SACQ will elicit information for a comparative study between both groups of freshman students, traditional and nontraditional, and reads to adjustments in each of the four adjustment subscales in relations to each participant’s narrative.

Data Analyses

Analyses of Narratives. In addition to the SACQ, students were given three questions to enact stress as a discursive process:

1. *When you hear or say the word "stress," what do you think that means? In other words, what is "stress"?*

2. *Please write about a time when you felt "stress" or "stressed"? What happened? Who was involved? How did it all turn out?*
3. Many college students have listed the following items to be “stressful.” What would you consider to be high (most) and low (least) levels of “stress” producers/situations? (Order the stressors in the table below from most to least with most being number 1. Academics; Job; Relationship/Marriage; Family; Financial; Added responsibilities such as home chores or caring for siblings or children)

Participants were asked to give a written account of how they interpreted the first two questions. In regards to the third question, students were given six terms and asked to rank the terms from most to least stressful with number one being the most stressful.

**Analyses of the Meaning of Stress Statements.** The values analysis was applied to analyze the students’ definitions and meanings of stress statements. Through each student’s definition of stress, insights are gained on what causes their stress, what they considered to be stressful and what are the meanings behind their stress. The importance of students’ values are express in their definitions, the cues in their language are used as a cultural tool to evoke interaction and guide their college adjustment. Values analysis is a way to consider interaction and changes of meanings in terms of culture, power, and dynamic societies (Daiute, 2014). For example, a college freshman defined stress as follow:

> When I hear the word stress that means I am going through a lot of things or situations and just need some time to clear my mind and think. Talking to someone usually helps me clear my mind and get a little advice on my situations/conflicts.

By examining the meaning of this stress statement through the value analysis, i.e., identifying the values behind the statement as: “It is important to recognize the relationship between stress and the power of support.” The author identified the importance behind the power of support to connect with other as a way to mediate stress.

**Analyses of Narratives of Stressful Experiences.** A plot analysis was used to analyze the narratives of both traditional age and nontraditional age freshman college students.
According to Daiute (2014), a plot analysis identifies the structure of a plot—most simply beginning, middle, and end—comprised of setting, character(s), initiating action, complicating actions, plot conflict/turning point/climax, resolution strategies, ending in some combination. By using this type of analysis in this study, it offers a way to identify the importance and differences in the experiences shared in a narrative’s meaning by both groups of college freshmen. Plot analysis was ideal for exploring question two of the narrative component of this study, Question 2: Please write about a time when you felt "stress" or "stressed”? What happened? Who was involved? How did it all turn out? Identifying the plot elements helped in determining whether the narratives of each student in relation to stress and adjustment are similar and/or different across the two groups of freshman college students. Stanley & Billig (2004) presented the notion that speakers often use narrative to re-present past events in such a way as to defend their conduct. For instance, some of these students might have reasons as to why they might have certain feelings and beliefs regarding what they might consider to be stressful or non-stressful events/experiences in their narratives by which they were able to find meaning and purpose. In short, the plot analyses illustrated how in the face of adversity, this author was able to use the narrative of a stressful experiences to enact solutions to the conflict. For example, this traditional age freshman shared the following statement of a stressful experience:

A time when I have felt stressed was while being at school. Knowing I have the potential to pass a class but struggling to go to class or do the assignments for it [sic]. Since I had given up on the class it was hard to make up all the work but talking to my professor about the situation, the job was accomplished. I completed all the work and was given a B in the class. My teacher realized my effort and worked with me.
Table 2.4

| Sample of Plot Analysis of Stressful Experience Statement by Traditional Age Freshman Student |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Plot Elements | Traditional Age Freshman |
| Setting | College |
| Character | Author & Teacher |
| Initiating Action | A time I have felt stressed was while being at school. |
| Complicating Action(s) | Knowing I have the potential to pass a class but struggle to get to class or do the assignments for it [sic]. |
| High Point | I had given up on the class; it was hard to make up all the work. |
| Resolution Strategy | Talking to my professor about the situation, the job was accomplished. My teacher realized my effort and worked with me |
| Coda-reflection on the entire narrative | I completed all the work and was given a B in the class. |

Narrator Stance

For instance, Table 2.4 illustrates a stressful experience statement by a traditional age freshman that was expressed into a basic plot analyses. Examining plot elements in [college freshmen’s] narratives bring the definition of plot to life (Daiute, 2014). Similarly, this author used the narrative to recall a stressful experience. The plot analysis is used as a tool for understanding the stress events as guided by the plot structures. The author organized the narrative within the frame of what caused the stressor and what was done to create a resolution.

*Analyses of the SACQ.* Each SACQ questionnaire had to be hand-scored and calculated. Once all the SACQ subscales were calculated, each of the questionnaire responses was inserted into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Data from the SACQ was analyzed to measure the relationship between the full-scale, which is the overall
adjustment to college and each of the four adjustment subscales: academic, social, personal-emotional and attachment. This was conducted for both traditional age and nontraditional age college freshman students. In this study, the Independent Samples t-test was used to examine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between college adjustment in traditional age and nontraditional age freshman college students and the standardized SACQ adjustment subscales. The statistical analysis data gathered from the SACQ focused on how scores from each of the subscales were related to each of the two groups of freshman college students.

**Analysis Integrating Narratives Genres and the SACQ.** The SACQ questionnaire and narrative genres are both important in studying and understanding college freshmen’s college adjustment and experiences. Connecting both techniques will enhance the findings and knowledge on the traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen. By interpreting stress as a cultural tool within various language activities, the narratives genres, explore college freshmen stressful meanings and experiences as it intertwine with college adjustment. The narratives genres unpacked events and experiences that are associated with college adjustment process across the SACQ’s four subscales. The SACQ examined the college adjustment process, the meaning of stress statements, the narratives of stressful experiences and the ranking of stress terms provided a broad exploration of how stress functions as a cultural tool in higher education. Both techniques are beneficial in understanding how stressful experiences encountered by each group of students are used as a cultural tool in their college adjustment process.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Similarities in the Meanings and Experiences of Stress in Higher Education

The purpose of this study was to examine how traditional aged and nontraditional aged college freshmen used the word stress to make sense of their college experiences and adjustment. In addition, earlier studies have contended that attending college is a time of transitioning (Skowron, et.al., 2004; Arnett, 2000), and that it may be a stressful experience for any student (Arnett, Alvan, Belgrave, & Zea, 1996). Therefore, meaning statements of stress and narratives of stressful experiences were explored to determine the existence of relationships between the two groups of college freshmen. Each unique narrative captures the students’ values, beliefs, ideas, and experiences that are embedded within them. To explore the meaning statements of stress, a values analysis was conducted to provide insights on how college freshmen construct and organize their meanings and definitions of stress. In addition, in order to examine the narratives of stressful experiences, a plot analysis, was conducted to study how college freshmen reconstructed their stories of stress events to make sense of the complexities in their personal lives. The focus of this chapter will be on the similarities that emerges across the two groups of freshmen will be addressed on the SACQ adjustment scale, meaning of stress statements values analysis, and plot analysis of the narratives of stressful experiences. For this chapter, research questions one and three guided this analysis and provided an understanding of how stress functions as a cultural tool in higher education included. The questions posed were as follow: (1) How do traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen use the word stress as a cultural tool to mediate their experiences in the college environment: academically, socially, and personally regarding goal commitments, etc.? and (3) How do the two groups of college
freshmen comparatively use stress to mediate their college adjustment: academically, socially, personally regarding goal commitments, etc.?

**College Adjustment Across Traditional Age and Nontraditional Age Freshmen**

Adjusting to college is a major developmental step in both traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen life. This process is a cultural shock for many students because they are unfamiliar within the new academic environment, expectations, and available resources. Like many of us, a change or something new is always deemed as a challenge to us. Similarly, both groups of college freshmen had to adjust to the new demands and responsibilities that come with attending college. Since stress is becoming more common among college students (Egan et. al., 2011), it can raise major issues and challenges for both groups of freshmen. For instance, Clark (2005), posited that multiple factors, both inside and outside of college may influence stressful experiences such as: students’ initial goals and commitments; their collegiate experiences including their academic performance, extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty, staff, and peer groups; their relationship with people and communities outside the college community, including parents, peers, employers, community organization; and their personal attributes and characteristics (p.296). Furthermore, students will have to adjust to the college rules and requirements, as well as making social interactions, establishing academic relationships with their advisors and instructors, and understanding the college environment at large.

The SACQ is a widely used survey designed to explore, assess, and understand the college adjustment process. The SACQ is used to study and understand students’ adjustment to colleges and universities as mentioned in Chapter Two. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare responses on the SACQ of by traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen. There was not a significant difference in college adjustment between the two
groups of college freshmen in any of the SACQ’s subscales: academic, social, personal-emotional, and attachment. As shown in Tables 3.1 and 3.2, results suggested that academic adjustment is similar for traditional age freshmen ($M = 112.78; SD = 11.74$) and nontraditional age freshmen ($M = 113.06; SD = 10.33$); $t(98) = -.127, p = .900$. Results suggested that there were no significant differences when it came to college adjustment in both groups of freshmen. Specifically, for this study, the results suggested that the age of a college freshman does not have an effect on their adjustment in college.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Freshmen</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Adjustment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Age</td>
<td>112.78</td>
<td>11.736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Age</td>
<td>113.06</td>
<td>10.334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Adjustment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Age</td>
<td>97.68</td>
<td>12.821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Age</td>
<td>96.68</td>
<td>11.532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Emotional Adjustment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Age</td>
<td>71.54</td>
<td>9.201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Age</td>
<td>71.72</td>
<td>9.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attachment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Age</td>
<td>75.86</td>
<td>12.864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Age</td>
<td>78.44</td>
<td>12.462</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>-.127</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>.410</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal-Emotional</td>
<td>-.094</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>1.019</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.311</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In brief, the SACQ is informative in a broad categorical way, but its responses are limiting as to whether or not an item on the scale either “applies very closely to me” or “doesn’t
apply to me at all.” The lack of differences in this study simply means that college adjustment is similar across the two groups of college freshmen. The traditional age and the nontraditional age freshman students adjusted similarly academically, socially, emotionally, and felt committed to the college environment. The SACQ measure apparently did not provide expressive items participants could use to elaborate on their college experiences. However, qualitative activities described in Chapter 2 provided more detailed lenses into both groups of college freshmen’s meanings of stress and stressful experiences.

**College Freshmen Meaning of Stress Statements**

The meaning of stress that is reported in this chapter comes from several analyses, including students’ definition of stress as explored through the qualitative activities. Concerning the meaning of stress statements, both groups of freshman college students shared that “stress is everything a college student goes through” and “stress is something experienced during a college student’s life.” As a result, freshman students were aware that stress is a norm in the college experience process. They knew what was expected in their new environment such as academic demands, purposes, intentions, and future plans. It was also evident that both groups of college freshmen perceived stress as a universal experience that is encountered by all college students. Similarly, both groups of freshmen used the words “overwhelmed” and “pressure” to define or relate to stress. For instance, a traditional age freshman defined the meaning of stress as follow: “Stress to me means being overwhelmed by a situation or multiple situations.” Then a nontraditional age freshman defined stress in a similar context: “Stress to me is when you are overwhelmed by influencing factors in your life and it is affecting you emotionally.” Despite the age differences between the two groups of college freshmen, they were able to identify that experiencing multiple demands can contribute to the feelings of being overwhelmed and
 pressured that are associated with stress. A nontraditional age student shared: “When I hear or say the word stress I think of all the pressure someone is under.” Across the meaning statements of stress, college freshmen characterized that the feelings of being overwhelmed and under pressure is a universal experience, experienced by everyone. The meaning statements of stress have specific values that college freshmen applied to their definitions. There were many different meanings of stress posited by both groups of students, but the statements across each group implied similar values.

The relationship between the meaning statements of stress and their identifying values are illustrated in Table 3.3 for both the traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen. Each meaning statement of stress reflected the student’s perspectives on the nature of his/her circumstances, experiences, demands, goals, purposes, etc., in response to his/her environmental, cultural, and social context. As a result, both groups of freshmen recognized the values that are associated with their meaning of stress statements. For example, some of the identifying values were interpreted as a focal point to address what stress means in their life context as well as in their personal feelings. For instance, both groups shared that “it is important to recognize the competing demands of time and health toll” and “it is important to recognize the relationship between stress and the power of social support.” Ideally, through this lens freshman students used their meaning of stress statements as a meditational solution to address their college experiences.
Table 3.3

**Values Analysis with Categories and Examples of the Meaning of Stress Statements by College Freshmen**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important to recognize the competing demands of time and health toll.</td>
<td><em>When I hear the word stress it means you have too much on your plate and don’t have enough time to do it. There is not enough hours of the day and you get crazy and grumpy and feel like your gonna [sic] explode.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to recognize the relationship between stress and lack of control.</td>
<td><em>Stress is worrying about not having control or a coping mechanism we use when we aren’t in control of a given situation.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to recognize the relationship between stress and things that have great significance in life.</td>
<td><em>I have learned that people tend to stress when something means a lot to them. Human beings don’t “stress” over things that don’t bring good to them.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to recognize the relationship between stress and the power of support.</td>
<td><em>When I hear the word stress that means I am going through a lot of things or situations and just need some time to clear my mind and think. Talking to someone usually helps me clear my mind and get a little advice on my situations/conflicts.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to recognize the contribution of stress on motivation.</td>
<td><em>Stress comes when deciding to push through illness and serve as an example to my little sister and nieces that no matter what, education is important and should be sought after.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to recognize that stress is a universal experience.</td>
<td><em>It’s something everyone experiences for one reason or another.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.4

*Examples of Values Experienced by Traditional Age and Nontraditional Age College Freshmen*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Traditional Age</th>
<th>Nontraditional Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value 1: It is important to recognize the competing demands of time and health toll.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value 2: It is important to recognize the relationship between stress and lack of control.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value 3: It is important to recognize the relationship between stress and things that have great significance in life.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value 4: It is important to recognize the relationship between stress and the power of support.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value 5: It is important to recognize the contribution of stress on motivation.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value 6: It is important to recognize that stress is a universal experience.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* X indicates that a majority of meaning of stress statements by both groups of freshmen expressed this value.

In the meaning statements of stress, the values categories were similar across both groups of freshmen as illustrated in Table 3.4. All the values were identified in both the traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen as indicated by X in Table 3.4. Both groups of students recognized the relationship between stress and how it occurred in their lives, both inside and outside of the college experiences. The meaning of stress statements expressed college
freshmen’s understanding of the changes in their lives were attributed to experiencing stress and the values used to guide their experiences as emphasized in the values analysis. For instance, the majority of college freshmen interpreted time as an important value in their meaning of stress statements. This can be attributed largely to the multiple roles (student, parent, spouse, employee, etc.) taken on by the nontraditional age freshmen. Whereas, for the traditional aged freshmen balancing of time between college and added responsibilities (home chores, peers, etc.). In the meaning of stress statements, college freshmen recognized the challenges that were encountered and they adopted values to guide them through these challenges. By applying values to their meaning of stress statements, college freshmen were able to relate, interact, and figure out what was happening around them. Overall, both groups of freshmen understood the values that were attributed to their meaning of stress statements. Therefore, the meaning of stress statements allowed both groups of students to share their emotions, thoughts, relevant contexts, and the stressful challenges they have encountered during their freshman year of college. In addition to identifying values that were attributed to the meaning of stress statements, college freshmen identified situations that caused them to experience stress.

Narratives of Stressful Experiences

Because stress is an experience, its meaning and impact may be accessible in narrative form, as well as or instead of, a definition. College freshmen crafted their narratives to reflect on situations that caused them to experience stress. Through this activity, freshmen were able to recalled and bring to life experiences that were stress related. To capture the lived experience of stress, students were asked the following question: Please write about a time when you felt "stress" or "stressed"? What happened? Who was involved? How did it all turn out? The first year of college is by far the most difficult year for students. In the narrative statements, both
groups of students used their narratives to recall times when they had encountered and experienced challenges that were considered stressful. A traditional age freshman shared an example of a stressful experience:

A time I felt stress is now, a time that I am overloaded with work from most of my classes due to finals being around the corner. The school and my friends are involved and apparently I am not the only one feeling this way. Its [sic] turning out fine, not so great, but I think I can get passed it in order to maintain good academic standings.

The following is an example of a narrative of a stressful experience contributed by a nontraditional age freshman:

The time I have felt stressed is right now between school and workload. The stress and anxiety have not only affected one [sic] but it has affected my family and loved ones as well. Hopefully after I get my degree my level of high stress and anxiety will subside.

In the narratives of stressful experiences, both groups shared their lived experiences of academic stress as it was affecting them, their families, and friends. Both traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen’s lives were being impacted by their stressful experiences, but they still perceived the importance of maintaining good grades and completing their degrees. To further explore college freshmen’s narratives of stressful experiences, a simple plot analysis was conducted. As indicated in Chapter Two, the plot analysis is relevant to this narrative activity because it identifies the nature of the authors’ stressful experiences, while allowing them to reflect and open to finding a resolution. Similarly, Daiute (2014) posited that narrators [authors] use plot to create possibilities within the frame of the mundane to interact with their environments, to reflect on them, and, sometimes, to act on problematic situations they narrate. Examples of narratives of stressful experiences by traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen illustrated their...
challenging demands and the plot structures used as a way of interpreting their solutions.

Here is an example of a narrative of stressful experience shared by a traditional age freshman:

I felt stress during a busy time at school when I was having trouble at work worrying about doing all my school work and getting mad at work all the time. I was very stressed out. I was getting mad with my parents for no reason, and had no social life. I wanted to quit my job or just try less in school. I talk with my manager got that situation fixed [sic].

Relaxed more with schoolwork, still working hard but not worrying so much. I also went to the gym more to relieve all the anger I was having.

Here is an example of a narrative of stressful experience shared by a nontraditional age freshman:

I haven’t been stress in a very long time, which is good, I’ve learned not to let things stress me out anymore. But, I do remember being stressed out when I decided to go back to school. I was worry [sic] if I would fit in, if I could keep up sure I’ve been out of school for a long time. I was also concerned on how I was going to fit school into my daily routine. I worry about it fitting into my work schedule since I work in the medical field, sometimes you don’t know if you have to work late, or if your going to run into an emergency at work. I have to say my job accommodated my school’s schedule which is great, and X college offers great evening hours. So I have to say that reduced my stress level, and so far everything is going smoothly.

In Table 3.5, both narratives of stressful experiences were explored through a plot analysis.

Across the narratives, the plot was used to identify common structures between the two groups of college freshmen.
Table 3.5

Sample Plots Analysis with Examples of Stressful Events from Narratives by Traditional Age and Nontraditional Age College Freshmen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plot Elements</th>
<th>Traditional College, work, and home</th>
<th>Nontraditional College, work, and home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting</strong></td>
<td>Author, parents, and manager</td>
<td>Author-student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character—primary, secondary plot-crucial Initiating Action</td>
<td>I felt stressed during a busy time at school when I was having trouble at work and getting mad at work all the time.</td>
<td>I do remember being stressed out when I decided to go back to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicating Action(s)</td>
<td>I was very stressed out.</td>
<td>I was worry if I would fit in…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was getting mad with my parents for no reason…</td>
<td>If I could keep up sure I’ve been out of school for a long time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>worrying about doing all my school work…had no social life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High point (turning point, climax)</td>
<td>I wanted to quit my job or just try less in school.</td>
<td>I was also concerned on how I was going to fit school into my daily routine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I worry about it fitting into my work schedule…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution Strategy (ies)</td>
<td>I talk with my manager got that situation fixed [sic].</td>
<td>I have to say my job accommodated my school’s schedule which is great…and X college offers great evening hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I also went to the gym more to relieve all the anger I was having.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda—reflection on the entire narrative once completed; moral of the story</td>
<td>So I have to say that reduced my stress level, and so far everything is going smoothly…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 3.5 there was a common trend in the narratives of stress events by both groups that suggested that the initiating actions of stressful experiences came alive during
the semester and were academically related. This was evident in the narratives of stressful experiences shared by the traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen. For the nontraditional age freshman students, they were faced with other demands that resulted in more stressful experiences such as finding their place in the college environment and avoiding scheduling conflicts between their jobs and classes. Students used narratives as a way of sharing their stressful experiences and stories, and focused on exploring solutions to mediate the complications that arise. Across the narratives genres there were common trends in the stress related events experienced by both traditional aged and nontraditional aged freshmen in their college experience and adjustment.

**Stress Functions as a Cultural Tool in Higher Education**

The narratives by the traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen expressed the demands and factors that caused them to experience stress. In this chapter, focusing on the meaning of the stress statements and the narratives of stressful experiences provided a window into addressing the research questions for this study. From the qualitative aspect of this study, both groups of freshmen used the different protocol activities to reveal different aspects of challenges in their college lives. Participants used the meaning of stress statement overall to identify, and recognize the values behind their definitions as they were applied to the context of their stressors. They used the narratives of stressful experiences to explore their situations and in hopes of finding a strategy to regulate the situation. The authors tailored their narratives to express their stressful experiences by including a beginning, middle, and an end. These different expressive activities, thus, served as cultural tools for engaging with different dimensions of stress. As a cultural tool, stress was filtered through different expressive media. Across those expressive media are the meaning of stress statements and narratives of
stressful experiences, stress emerged as a focal point for students by connecting their feelings to their environment within and beyond college.

**College Experiences Mediate Stress.** By exploring each student’s definition of stress statements, it is evident that students expressed personalized meanings from their definitions to keep them motivated to overcome their challenges or obstacles. Even though stress is difficult to define because it has a different meaning(s) for each of us, both groups of freshmen’s definitions of stress had similar values. Students were very responsive in recognizing the values that they placed on their personalized meanings of stress statements. The meaning of stress statements and values analysis was used to address the first research questions: How do traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen use the word stress as a cultural tool to mediate their experiences in the college environment: academically, socially, and personally regarding goal commitments, etc.? Findings suggested that both the traditional age and the nontraditional age freshmen recognized that stress is expected in life and it is a norm that is embedded in the college experience. A traditional age freshman shared: “Stress is something everyone around the world experiences at some point in their [sic] life.” Similarly, another traditional age freshman shared: “I just think that everybody goes through this especially when you work and go to school… I suppose students just want to express this feeling because everyone can related [sic] to his word.” The word stress is a common buzzword used to refer to unpleasant situations, and college freshmen are aware that this is something that everyone can relate to inside and/or outside of academia. College students are aware that if they expressed the notion of feeling overwhelmed or under pressured others can relate to their experiences. Both groups of freshmen used their stressful experiences to create social interactions or social bonding with others (peers, family, professors, etc.) to mediate their stressors in their environments (college, home, job, etc.).
College freshmen of both traditional age and nontraditional age shared the values that they found in their meaning statements of stress. Students recognized the competing demands of time and health that stress caused them when it came to juggling their many priorities. In honoring the many demands life imposed upon these college freshmen, they were able to recognize that stress contributed to their motivation. Stress mediated their motivation to strive for things that have great meaning and significance in their lives. An example by a nontraditional age freshman captured the meaning of stress in his narrative statement:

When I hear about “stress”, [sic] I think of the issues I have in my personal life. I have AIDS, and I am a 34 years old man. My health hasn’t been good lately b/c of it, and it’s stressful. I’m also a cancer survivor. I’m always tired and always hurt. Stress comes when deciding to push through illness and serve as an example to my little sister and nieces that no matter what, education is important and should be sought after. I am enrolled here in a pre-med program, and I may literally die before I graduate…but at least I’ve tried. And it’s never too late to try.

This nontraditional age freshman used stress as a motivator to keep pursuing his goals despite all his competing health issues that he has been experiencing. This student acknowledged that it is never too late to try for things that have great meaning such as an education. All of the stress experiences were used to create a social academic bonding, which served as an inspiration to his relatives to value the importance of education and perseverance.

**Role of Stress Narratives on College Adjustment.** The narratives of stressful experiences by traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen influenced their actions on how to approach and handle stress related issues such as their college adjustment and experiences. To address the third research question: How do the two groups of college freshman
students comparatively use stress to mediate their college adjustment: academically, socially, and personally regarding goal commitments, etc.? The narratives of stressful experiences captured the transitional process from high school to college, and the new experiences and social changes perceived by the traditional age freshmen. Similarly, the nontraditional age freshmen shared their challenges of trying to get back into the routine of studying and managing multiple roles. Based on the narratives of stressful experiences, it was evident that the majority of the nontraditional age students recognized that their “stress” was related to the great number of roles they played. For example, a nontraditional age freshman shared her varied roles of being a mother of three, a student, working a fulltime job, and all the other responsibilities that comes with the multiple roles:

I am currently trying to balance a full time job a family at home since I am a mother of three young children and also attempting to finish a degree and being a fulltime student.

Trying to find enough time in the day to get all things done [sic].

The stressful demands that were experienced by the nontraditional age freshmen were very diverse in each perspective role (student, mother, wife, employee, etc.). From their stressful experiences, this group of freshmen constructed an interrelationship between them and their multiple demands. They recognized the importance behind each of their multiple roles and despite the stressors encountered, they tried to fulfill their demands. Similarly, in Carney-Crompton and Tan’s (2002) study, they posited that some studies have found that increases in roles, demands, and time conflicts are associated with higher stress (p. 141). The nontraditional age freshmen seemed to be honoring their multiple demands and were not trying to force a simple, or linear resolution strategies.

By looking at only the high points and resolution strategies, they provided an alternative
perspective on how college freshmen developed strategies to resolve their stressful experiences. For instance, as shown in Table 3.5, the traditional age freshman took the approach of communicating with the instructor. Through communication, by talking to the instructor, the student was able to resolve the stressful experience of falling behind on class work. Another example where communication is perceived as a mediator between the students and their stressful experiences is exemplified by a traditional age freshman:

I had 4 finals in one day and never got the chance to really sit and absorb my information and sufficiently study because I kept getting called to work. They day before the 4 exams came and I still did not get the proper time to study. I cried and my good manager saw the stress everyone was putting on me and sent me home for the first time in the whole week to study.

The actions of this student (e.g., tried to study; cried; communication with manager) served as a tool to overcome the stressful experiences. The student’s good manager functioned as a mediator between experienced stress and the student. The manager observed the difficulty based on the student’s interaction with others.

The nontraditional age freshmen’s approaches to resolve stressful experiences were perceived as self-motivating since they emphasized on gradually adjusting to all of their multiple demands. Therefore, it is evident that the traditional age freshman students looked for instant resolutions to address their stressful experiences, while the nontraditional age freshmen looked for gradual ways to resolve their stressful experiences. As suggested by the narratives of stressful experiences, both groups of college freshmen used resolution strategies to mediate their stressful experiences in the college transitioning and adjustment process. The notion that human interactions with their environment cannot be direct but are instead always mediated through the
use of tools and signs (Vygotsky, 1979; Igira & Gregory, 2009) is evident in both freshman groups’ strategies for navigating the academic environment. Furthermore, the actions of the students using tools (language, communication, creating social-relations, and resolution, etc.) influenced them in relation to mediating their stressful experiences and individual transformations.

**Summary**

In conclusion, it is evident that despite their age difference, traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen’s adjustments in academic, social, emotional, and sense of college commitment were similar across the four subscales of the SACQ measure. Across the qualitative genres college freshmen related similarly to meaning of stress statements and narratives of stressful experiences. In the meaning of stress statements, there were different definitions of stress across the groups, but they all implied similar values. Identifying values were interpreted as a focal point to address what stress means to both groups of students. Despite their age differences, both groups of college freshmen associated stress with the feeling of being overwhelmed or being under pressure. College freshmen used narratives as a way of sharing their stressful experiences and stories, and focused on exploring solutions to mediate their stressors. Indeed college freshmen used stress to enhance their social interactions and communications with others because everyone can easily relate to the word stress. Stress serves as a common language, a cultural tool that is universally recognized by everyone. In brief, stress functioned as a mediational tool to guide the demands and experiences expressed across both groups of college freshmen in their narratives. Findings indicated that freshmen used these narratives genres to fostered their developmental understanding, interactions, and relations within the college experience and adjustment process.
CHAPTER IV
EXTENSION OF RESULTS:
DIFFERENCES IN STRESSFUL EXPERIENCES AND STRESS TERMS

Highlighting Differences Within the Narrative Activities

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the qualitative activities related to students’ meanings of stress, the narratives of stressful experiences offered the richest information about how stress plays out in this sample of college students’ lives and in offering insights about differences between the meaning of stress for traditional age and nontraditional age students. For that reason and to complement the lack of differences between the student groups on the SACQ, this chapter offers an in depth analysis and discussion, in particular of the narratives of stressful experiences and ranking of stress terms. The rankings of stress terms were based on the college freshmen’s context, culture, understanding, and experiences of what they perceived to be most stressful to least stressful. Ranking of the stress terms analysis guided research question (2): What are the factors that traditional and nontraditional freshman students attribute to high and low stressors such as academic, financial, family, friends, relationships, jobs, and related concepts as these mediate their experiences?

College Freshmen’s Accounts of Stressful Experiences

The narratives offered reasonable solutions for stressful experiences encountered both inside and outside of the college atmosphere. Each narrative was neatly tailored to offer some kind of solution for the stressful experiences that were encountered academically, financially, socially and/or personally (e.g.: home, family, job, etc.). The authors used the narrative genres as a way of constructing a resolution for dealing with their daily stressors associated with their surrounding environments. The narratives illustrated the type of stress experienced, source (s) of the stress, and the actions taken to explore a resolution. The narratives genres, especially the
statements of stressful experiences conveyed detailed information on the stressors that contributed to the authors’ college adjustment.

In the stress experience statements, many nontraditional age college freshmen shared that there is more to them than just attending college at a later time in life. This group of freshmen illustrated that there were many obligations that must be fulfilled other than adjusting to college. A nontraditional age freshmen presented her stressors in the following statement:

I am currently trying to balance a full time job and a family at home. Since I am a mother of three young children, and also attempting to finish and get a degree and being a fulltime student. Trying to find enough time in the day to get to all things…

This example illustrated the multiple roles that must be honored including but not limited to being a mother, a student, an employee, and a spouse. The author expressed the hope of “trying to find enough time in the day” to fulfill the many obligations that each role warrants. Similarly, the author pointed out the desire to complete college and earn a degree expressed as follows “attempting to finish and a get a degree.” On this topic of multiple roles, another nontraditional age student summed up the following:

Having a child at a young age straight out of high school made it harder. Not enough support, then going to college late, having financial problems, and living on my own. Working more that [sic] one job at once, now being in college and juggling 3 jobs, school and a child. But I meditate to deal with the stress. Time is stress because there is [sic] never enough hours in a day.

As noted, the nontraditional age freshmen had many demands and responsibilities that must be prioritized along with their academic role of being a student. For example, across the narrative we have a single mother negotiating her environmental demands by working three jobs,
supporting her child, balancing her financial problems, and keeping up with her academics. Again, this author highlighted the importance of “time” by stating “time is stress because there is [sic] never enough hours in a day.” In essence, having many responsibilities to accomplish in a short amount of time can be complicated in the college adjustment process. Evidently, the nontraditional age freshmen conveyed through their narratives that the lack of time became a stressor especially when it came to juggling family, work, school, and other responsibilities.

For the traditional age freshmen, their main responsibility seemed to be focused on fulfilling their academic requirements. Across the several narratives of stress statements, for this group, academic became the primary stressor. Similarly, in the ranking of stress terms, the traditional age freshmen attributed academic as their most stressful term, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The following statements illustrated why traditional age freshmen perceived academic to be their most stressful experiences:

A time I felt stress is now, a time that I am overloaded with work from most of my classes due to finals being around the corner. The school and my friends are involved and apparently I am not the only one feeling this way. Its turning out fine, not so great, but I think I can get passed it in order to maintain good academic standings.

The traditional age freshmen experienced their academic stressors toward the middle and end of the semesters, which corresponded to the times during mid-term and final examinations. Interestingly, the author acknowledged that stressful experiences are a universal part of college experience and adjustment process, “apparently I am not the only one feeling this way.” The author expressed a feeling of being overwhelmed, which had an effect on other students as well; therefore, this is a common sentiment of all college freshmen. Moreover, college freshmen communicated with each other, they exchanged, and shared their experiences, feelings, hopes,
and purposes. Similarly, another traditional age freshman illustrated the feeling of stress during finals: “A time that I am [sic] felt stress is currently. I am trying to stay positive and get through it. I am hoping that it will turn out good [sic] after taking my exit exams and receiving my final grades.” Despite the stressful experiences encountered by both authors, they hoped of fulfilling their academic expectations, “its [sic] turning out fine, not so great, but I think I can get passed it in order to maintain good academic standings,” “I am hoping that it will turn out good after taking my exit exams and receiving my final grades.” College freshmen’s stressful experiences had a relational meaning and purpose because they recognized the importance behind the stressors from their surrounding environments.

Our actions can reflect the true importance and meaning behind every situation. A traditional age freshman took the lead role in order to resolve the following situation:

I felt stressed this semester in my health science class, my teacher assigned group projects and it was worth 55% of our grade. And everyone in the group was given the same grade. And of course, I got stuck with the worst group ever and ended up doing all of the work.

The author understood the importance of completing the project because of the effect on the final grade. Despite being assigned to “the worst group ever,” the author understood that the only resolution would be “doing all of the work” to fulfill the desire of earning a good grade. To avoid jeopardizing the final grade, the author resolved the situation by taking control of the assignment. These narratives hinted at what traditional age college freshmen attributed to the academic stressors. Through communications, actions, and making relational connection concerning academic importance, freshmen were able to find hope, desire, and resolutions to aid in their adjustment process.
Stress Mediates Coping

In brief, many sources of stressful experiences were revealed in the authors’ narratives such as adjusting to new roles, new responsibilities, environmental transitioning, and creating new social relationships. In order to cope with the many demands and changes, college freshmen must be able to find a way to address their stressors. The narratives illustrated many differences that were not made evident with the SACQ. Another unique quality of the resolution strategies that were presented in the narratives was the process used by traditional age male freshmen to address their stressful experiences. For instance, there were some who may say that there is no such thing as stress because for them situations that may be deemed as stressful or that causes stress can be avoided. The following narrative stress related statement was perceived differently by the author:

Stress is not good for you. People stress all of the time. Stress is when you become mentally overwhelmed and let all of your thoughts get to you. I don’t believe in stress. I believe that everything happens for a reason and that we go through what we go through to make us stronger. It’s all about your perception. You can perceive a bad situation or time negatively or you can take a moment sit back and look at all the positive things that come out of it. If I am going through a bad time, I just think to myself, “it is all going to be alright…there is no need to stress.” It took me a long while to actually be able to say that and believe it. But as I got older and experienced more and more, I realized that things could be and have been much worst [sic].

For this author, stress only exists depending on the individual’s perception and approach. Here stress was a process, “you can perceive a bad situation or time negatively or you can take a moment sit back and look at all the positive things that come out of it,” so the options must be
valued depending on what it means to the person. The author identified that through experiences meanings, values, and the importance of coping methods are established. This promoted a realistic view that we learn from our experiences which is a developmental process that allows us to continue to grow and transform. This author used stress as a coping tool, “if I am going through a bad time, I just think to myself, “it is all going to be alright…there is no need to stress.” The author tailored the narrative to reflect a positive means of addressing negative or bad situations. By looking at only the positives of the situation, it offered resolution and the hope for addressing stressors, and suggested that over time our experiences strengthen our coping abilities.

Similarly, in relation to good and bad stress, a traditional age male student expressed: “There is good and bad stress, such as stress over a wedding which is positive an [sic] stress over school which may be a negative.” This author identified that there are two types of stress, positive and negative. Positive stress is associated with “stress over a wedding” versus “stress over school” which is perceived as a negative stress. Again, the author acknowledged the different types of stressors and demands that were associated with each. For example, a wedding is considered to be something celebratory and pleasant, but all the details that go into planning of the event are considered positive/happy stress. Whereas, stressing over school is perceived as negative and unpleasant stress.

College freshmen were able to identify the situation(s) or context(s) that caused the stressful experiences in their college adjustment. Across the narratives, each stress statement functioned as a coping tool to mediate the stressful experiences between the freshman students and their surrounding environments. Through the coping mechanism college freshmen were able to mediate their challenges, negotiate their environments, discover their purposes and understand
meanings in the adjustment process.

Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), posited coping as the thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful (p. 746). Similarly, Daiute (2010) conveyed that narrators [college freshmen] face the pressure to resolve as the time or space for conclusions approaches (p. 127). Throughout the narrative statements, college freshmen were motivated to find a way to resolve their stressful experiences. In essence, college freshmen used their unique crafted narratives as a form of coping, a navigational tool, in search of resolutions for their stressful experiences. A traditional age freshman illustrated the stressor of finding out a speech course is a requirement.

I felt stress when I found out that it is requirement to take a speech course. I feel like I have a lot of anxiety and I just keep avoiding that class. The way I am going to try and deal with it is by getting medication to calm me down. My anxiety is taking over my life and it just makes college more stressed ok makes me want to drop out.

This author acknowledged that eventually the speech course would have to be taken; however, the focus shifted to establishing resolutions to address the stressful experience. From the author’s standpoint, speech was associated with stress and anxiety. The author’s resolutions for coping with this stressful experience was first to avoid the course as long as possible and then perhaps seek medication, albeit an extreme and possibly addictive coping mechanism. In brief, freshman students recognized the importance of what college means to them, so finding resolutions to cope with their stressful experiences gave them hope and encouragement.

In relation to the stressful narratives by both groups of college freshmen, Daiute (2010) posited that stories are communication with a variety of features that narrators use not only to share specific messages but also to hint at why they are telling this story in this way at this time.
In regards to coping, college freshmen used their narratives as a way to illustrate the stressful experiences they encountered and create resolutions to address what is causing their stressors. Focusing specifically on the high points and resolutions strategies of the stress event narratives, it provided new a new platform of understanding about how college freshmen used coping mechanisms to guide their stressful experiences. By looking at only the high points and resolution strategies from the plot analyses, there were diverse patterns in the way both groups internalized, processed, and applied the use of stress. For example, a noticeable pattern in the traditional freshmen plot analyses, was that the authors provided hints of opting out, the hassle of commuting, and were in a limbo of emerging adulthood. Meanwhile, the nontraditional age freshmen plot analyses’ high points focused on balancing multiple roles, fear of being judged, the importance of time, and avoiding being dragged down. To further explore the plot highlights across the traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen, Table 4.1, was created to illustrate the differences and similarities in both groups. Table 4.1 shows the high points and resolution strategies each group of college freshmen used as a coping tool to mediate their college adjustment process.
Table 4.1

*Plot Highpoints Across Narratives of Stressful Experiences by Traditional Age and Nontraditional Age College Freshmen*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Points</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Nontraditional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opting Out</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing multiple roles</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassel of commuting</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limbo of emerging adulthood</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of being judged</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time is precious</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid being dragged down</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Resolution Strategies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Nontraditional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attempt to resolve</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflected but allows</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unresolved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty about the</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping is a part of growing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masking unhappiness for</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pep talk for confidence</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stress Mediates Coping in Traditional Age Freshmen.** Interestingly, the traditional age freshmen conveyed in their stress narrative statements the notion of finding a quick resolution for addressing their stressors. For instance, a traditional age freshman shared the notion of almost opting out of biology to avoid the academic stressors:

A time I felt stressed was during my spring semester when I was now starting with my biology courses. The work was more difficult than I realized. It was stressful to a point where I was ready to drop the class, but there was only 6 weeks left so why drop it now.

No one really was involved, except for my mentor whom was somewhat helpful.

The author conveyed academic underestimation for the course requirements. Since the author
was unable to fulfill the course expectations, rather than seeking assistance, the quickest solution would be to opt out and drop the course. By communicating with the mentor, a form of social relation, the author was able to embrace the challenges, while continuing to process and react towards fulfilling the course expectations. Another developing pattern in the high points category among the traditional age freshmen was the hassle of commuting, which was viewed as time consuming. The hassle of commuting for traditional age students can be attributed to lack of financial affordability for a car and not having a driver’s license. In this example, a traditional age freshman recalled the stressful and learning experiences encountered commuting to and from classes.

My first semester of college, I remember being a bit stressed. The reason being [sic] is because I was commuting three hours from Jamaica, Queens everyday. Having to travel via bus after bus and train after train for a total of six hours every day really started to wear me out. I had to commute because I was not able to take out loans due to my parents not being eligible to co-sign for me. Now, I live on campus and I am very thankful. I look back at first semester as a good thing. I am so glad that I was able to experience that because it honestly made me much stronger as a person.

The author begins by recounting events that were considered stressful such as “having to travel via bus after bus and train after train for a total of six hours every day really started to wear me out.” The author expressed the hassle of traveling by public transportation for six hours daily and then shifted into the toll that the commute placed on his health. The narrative ends with the author’s reflections from across time weaving together how the past semester shaped the present semester. The author recognized that the stressful events of commuting for long hours impacted his life positively despite being viewed as a hassle. In this setting, the author shared: “I am so
glad that I was able to experience that because it honestly made me much stronger as a person.”

It is interesting to see how traditional age freshmen used their stressful experiences as a coping strategy to enhance their strengths, motivation, and as a developmental means to move forward with life demands.

College transitioning is a developmental process necessary for any college freshmen. For many of them, this process is viewed as stressful and overwhelming. There will be students who are certain of their journey to college, but then they are others who express uncertainty. For example, when you ask young people in high school “what makes you an adult?” most would reply going to college, being away from parents, independence, working, etc. However, for some freshmen, the feelings of uncertainty can instill fear and stress. A traditional age freshman explained the stress of being in limbo between adolescence and adulthood.

I personally use stress differently. It’s not as simple as a problem and a resolution. I’m technically an adult, but not fully. I stress mostly about my future because I am not sure what it will entail.

The author acknowledged that stress if not an easy fix, but that it is something that takes time and is a process. The idea of being in college hints at the role of an emerging adult, but at the same time signals uncertainty because of the life after college. The author implied that stress came from not knowing what the future entails, but in the author’s eyes, only adults can relate to this experience. Therefore, traditional age freshmen need to clarify that the role of being an adult takes time and is a process, a form of coping to aid with their transitioning and development.

Similarly, across the narratives, traditional age freshmen understood that coping is a part of growing up. In order to overcome stress related events, college freshmen must find a resolution by applying their experiences to other situations. For example, a traditional age
freshman shared the following:

I have been feeling a bit “stressed” lately because my semester has not been the same. I have classes pretty early and recently I began working…I am learning to cope with everything and it is apart [sic] of growing up. This is a huge responsibility, and I am happy to experience this for myself. I know some day I will be out it, [sic] but in the end it will be all worth it.

In this setting, the author reflected that stressful experiences were a form of responsibility and growing up. Learning to cope with these experiences only shapes the developmental process positively. The author used stress as a form of coping to instill hope “I know some day I will be out it [sic], but in the end it will be all worth it.” The author conveyed that experiences were a learning process that produced relational meanings and self-assurance for a successful future.

**Stress Mediates Coping in Nontraditional Age Freshmen.** Across several narratives, balancing multiple roles was a major high point expressed by the nontraditional age freshman students. As previously mentioned, many nontraditional freshmen had other obligations and priorities outside of the college environment. In addition to the student role, they are wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, and employees. For many of the nontraditional freshmen, there were multiple demands and needs that had to be addressed. In this case, the author illustrated the expectations that were attributed to each role.

Stress to me is worrying about raising my five children, paying the bills by myself and setting good examples for my family. I love going to college but sometimes juggling college, two jobs, kids afternoon and some evening activities give me so much stress!! I am a strong woman and have been on my own for three years so in the back of my mind I know I am doing the best job ever. Stress can be handled if you breathe deeply and take
The author started the narrative by listing the demands that must be fulfilled. The author was aware of the expectation(s) that were attributed for each role: as a mother, she raises five children while equally contributing to after school activities. As a student, the author enjoys college but finds it challenging when it comes to competing with other demands. As an employee, time management served as a scale for balancing working two jobs. The author expressed that stress was attributed to the multiple roles, but at the same time, used the stressful experiences as a means of staying motivated. Despite several roles and stressful experiences, the author embraced the notion of fulfilling and honoring the demands by positing “I am a strong woman and have been on my own for three years so in the back of my mind I know I am doing the best job ever.” By resolving the demands, the author reflected “stress can be handled if you breathe deeply and take one task at a time.” The author used the stress related experiences as a form of coping to embrace the multiple roles and demands. Reflecting on the many roles and demands instilled hope, strength, courage, and motivation towards the author’s belief that “in the back of my mind I know I am doing the best job ever.”

The nontraditional age freshmen reflected on other high points such as fear of being judged, avoiding wasting time, and being dragged down. Returning to college at a later time in life can fuel mixed feelings and emotions. Nontraditional students may feel that they will not be able to keep up with their traditional age counterparts academically and socially. In the stress statements, the nontraditional age freshmen shared their fear of being judged evidenced across the narratives. This nontraditional author shared:

The first day of school at [X] college. It was intimidating and gave me anxiety and made me fearful. Although by the end of class it was ok because I thought I was going to be
judged, but it didn’t happen the way I pictured it. People in my classes were warm and welcoming.

In this setting, the author created a personal scenario of what the first day of college might be like. The narrative first reflected on unpleasant expectations such as ageism and being unwelcomed by her peers. The author’s expectations were unfilled because “people [other students] in my classes were warm and welcoming.” Through social interactions and exchanges, the nontraditional age freshmen were able to relate to their classmates. This author imagined alternative ways of coping with unpleasant experiences as expressed in the narrative. Overall, students understood and related to the notion of what it means to be a first year college freshman. Nontraditional age freshmen were able to interpret and process their stressful experiences in the hopes of finding resolutions to manage their societal demands. The narrating of stress related experiences provided new and diverse ways of understanding how nontraditional college freshmen cope with their multiple demands. These authors expressed their unique ways of coping with their stressful experiences such as invoking self-praise, using pep talk for instilling confidence, reflecting on their stressors but allowing unresolved issues to surface while keeping their hope alive for a positive outcome.

Similarly, this author exemplified the benefits in finding ways to cope with stress related issues:

Well right now, I’m going through a stressful time because I’m going to need to take a leave of absent [sic] from work next semester. I might get fired because there’s no union or job security. However, my priority right now is school because I feel that this is the time my kids are big and this is the time that I choose for me. I just really pray that come September they don’t fire me.
This informative narrative highlighted the multiple demands this particular freshman has been experiencing. The author managed to assess what was of great importance in life in the current time and space. At this time, attending college was something that this nontraditional age freshman has been waiting patiently to accomplish. By fulfilling a long-term goal, there were other hindering events that this author took into consideration such as “get [sic] fired because there’s no union or job security.” This narrative exemplified that the nontraditional age freshmen have many decisions, adjustments, and new approaches that they must considered before enrolling in college. College freshmen recognized that both strength and hope were necessary when it came to channeling their stressful experiences and demands. This nontraditional freshman was committed and determined to attend college over possibly being fired from work, but hoped that everything will work out. Similarly, Folkman (2008), found that goals motivate choices people make and reminding oneself of these higher order goals can help sustain efforts to achieve them, even when those goals are threatened (p. 9). Coping served as a vehicle for these nontraditional age freshmen to travel through their distressful journeys, while making distinctions between what was important, and working to develop a satisfying outcome or resolution. It is evident that both groups of college freshmen have different demands that they considered to be most and least stressful.

Rankings of Stress Terms by College Freshmen

The meaning of stress statements and the narratives of stressful experiences identified different demands encountered by each group of college freshmen. To capture a representation of each group’s stress related experiences, participants were asked to rank the following terms: academic, financial, relationship, family, job, and other (added responsibilities such as home chores, etc.) from most to least stressful. A frequency distribution was computed to rate the stress
terms from most stressful to least stressful. Results suggested that differences existed between the traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen in relation to the ranking order of their stress terms. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, there were differences in the order that freshman students ranked their stress terms.

Figure 4.1

*Ranking of Stress Terms by Traditional Age and Nontraditional Age College Freshmen*

The rankings of stress terms by the traditional age freshmen from most stressful to least stressful were: academic, financial, family, relationship, job, and other. As shown in Figure 4.1, the traditional age freshmen ranked academic as their most stressful term and other as their least stressful term. However, for the nontraditional age freshmen, the rankings of stress terms from most stressful to least stressful were: financial, academic, family, job, other, and relationship. The nontraditional age freshmen ranked financial as their most stressful term and relationship as their least stressful. Results suggested that both groups of college freshmen considered academic, financial, and family as their three most stressful terms while job, relationship, and other were
ranked as their least stressful terms in regards to keeping up with their academic and personal lives.

**Terms College Freshmen Attributed to Stress.** Each crafted narrative provided a deeper intuition behind the shared values, meanings, and stressful experiences by both groups of college freshmen. The narratives articulated the terms that college freshmen attributed to high and low stressful experiences. The second research question focused on: *What are the factors that traditional age and nontraditional age freshman students attributed to high and low stressors?* The findings suggested that the ranking order between the two groups of freshmen were slightly different, but both groups’ high and low stressors were similar. For instance, the traditional age freshmen ranked terms from high to low stressors as: academic, financial, relationship, family, job, and other. Subsequently, the nontraditional age freshmen ranked terms from high to low stressors as: financial, academic, family, job, other, and relationship. As a result, the two most stressful terms that both groups of freshmen attributed to high stress were academic and financial. For the traditional age freshmen, academic was the most stressful term followed by financial; whereas, the nontraditional age freshmen ranked financial as their most stressful term followed by academic.

Indeed, the first year of college can be a challenge for any student. The traditional age freshmen had to keep up with the academic demands that are expected of any college student. For instance, a traditional age freshman shared the academic stressors of classes, assignments, and scheduling conflict:

One time, well every week, I get stressed because of the way my schedule is set up. My online class, when we get assigned something its [sic] due on Tuesday. Mondays and Tuesdays I have class all day, so being able to do everything on time and dealing with
classes all day is stressful. Also, having to commute is also very stressful. Having to run to the train or thinking about how long it’ll take to get home and getting up to go to school, very annoying.

In fact, traditional age freshmen considered academics to be their most stressful experience. Time management became an issue for this group because they were in the transitional stages from high school to college, where the academic expectations were more rigorous. Nevertheless, another traditional age student shared that stress occurs twice a year during final exams:

There are approximately two times in the year where I become “stressed” and it’s always final exam time. I am mentally tired of everything. I start to slack off and sleep a lot and also I get annoyed very easily. However, over the years, I’ve just learned to hold on and push through it. I think of my beautiful island that I’ll be returning to, God Spare life, and I push through it.

Because these stressful experiences were encountered during the school year, traditional age freshmen were aware of what was expected of them. Despite ranking academics as their most stressful experience, college freshmen had learned how to use their stressful experiences to mediate their academic demands. Over time, college freshmen used their stressful experiences to keep them motivated, and helped them to navigate/overcome their academic challenges. Besides academic, the traditional age freshmen ranked financial as their second most stressful term, and this can be attributed to the fact that the majority of the traditional age students in this study were commuter students. Narratives from the traditional age freshman group provided us with a deeper lens into this group’s world of financial related stress. For instance, there were rare cases where traditional age freshmen had to self-support themselves financially. Here is an example of one of those rare cases, a traditional age student shared the narrative of working two jobs while
attending college fulltime: “I have classes pretty early and recently I began working. I have another job as well and it has taken so much out of me…” Meanwhile, another traditional age freshman shared:

I have, do and will feel stress. I am 100% on my own. In order to afford school and life expenses I need to work. I need to make rent, gas, car insurance, food, utility bills every month aside [sic] from money for school.

Many of us might be under the impression that traditional age college freshmen were being supported by their parents, which is similar to Dill and Henley (1998) findings that parents of traditional age freshmen are usually paying for their children’s education. Parental financial support may have prevalent at the time this study was conducted, but today as evidenced by this study, narrative statements of financial stressors differed from Dill and Henley’s (1998) findings. Nowadays, most students lack this financial safety net. Therefore, college freshmen used their financial stressors positively, as a mediator to enhance their ability to establish a balance between themselves and the demands of their environment.

In contrast, the nontraditional age freshmen ranked financial as their most stressful experience. For this group, financial issues were stressful because they have to support their families and prioritize their expenses. In addition, returning to school was a financial burden for the nontraditional age freshmen especially since they now have to worry about their tuition and other college related expenses. In this situation, a nontraditional age freshman shared the dilemma of taking out a loan to cover the tuition for perhaps failing courses:

I feel stressed because of my schedule. I work full time and the school doesn’t have option [sic] to choose later classes so I can’t make it on time. I am taking [sic] loan for classes that I don’t know if I am going to pass. I don’t want to waste time, money, and I
really want to finish the college. I can’t quit the job either.

Despite the financial struggle and perhaps possibly failing the course, completing college is very important for this student. Again, another nontraditional freshman shared the stressor of student loans but looked forward to a debt free future:

I feel as if I am always stressed out. To me it seems as if it has been going on for years. The fact that I am a mother of four children b/w [sic] the ages of 7-12, makes it stressful. Also I am a full time student and have to take care of a household, on top of owing my student loans!! (I think this is the worst part of all. The way I manage my stress is not to pay it too much mind and look forward to a better debt free future.)

College freshmen used their stressful experiences to mediate their environmental context. For example, students used their experiences as a tool to guide their current situations and keep them motivated to overcome their many complications and hope for a promising future (e.g. degree completion, debt free, successful, etc.).

In addition, the nontraditional age freshmen ranked academic as their second most stressful term. This group of freshmen focused on keeping up with their academic expectations in regards to their multiple roles:

In my first semester I became stressed a little after I had started classes. My classes were back to back and I never caught a break. I started getting really bad headaches, something I never usually get. I was told I started getting tension headaches and the only ways I was able to get rid of it [sic] was through rest. Struggling to keep up with all my classes and find time for sleep just made things worse. When it came down to the weekends, that when [sic] I was able and my mom was very understanding to it. But I didn’t think it would be this hard, transitioning into college.
For this student, the college transition was challenging in relation to keeping up academically which took a toll on her health. Luckily, this student was able to receive support from her mother because she understood the stressful experiences that her child was encountering. Through support and social interaction, students were able to balance and cope with their stressors. It is evident that freshmen used their stressful experiences to enhance their actions towards improving their college transitioning process.

Summary

This chapter focused on the narratives of stressful experiences in more depth than in Chapter Three, in part to highlight differences between the groups. Of the three narrative activities related to students’ meanings of stress, the narrative of stressful experiences offered the richest information about how stress plays out in this sample of college students’ lives and in offering insights about differences between the meaning of stress for traditional and nontraditional age students. The narratives of stressful experiences highlighted and described a more personalized stance of differences encountered across the groups of college freshmen. For instance, age had an effect concerning the multiple roles and demands were associated with the nontraditional age freshmen as expressed in their narratives of stressful experiences statements. In addition to fulfilling the requirements of a college student, the nontraditional age freshmen have to cater and dedicate their time to other obligations outside of the academic environment. For example, some of these other obligations included caring and supporting their families while prioritizing their job commitments. Despite the many obligations, college freshmen organized their narratives in ways of seeking out resolutions to handle the nature of their stressful experiences. These resolution strategies functioned as a coping tool for creating adjustment pathways to fulfilling environmental expectations. In regards to coping, both groups of college
freshmen used their narratives of stressful events to organize their experiences and to react to their experiences to create resolutions. College freshmen used their resolution strategies as a coping tool to mediate between themselves and their societal demands (college, home, work, etc.). By creating resolutions to aid in stressful experiences, traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen used coping as a new tool for transitional spaces they embodied.

The plot highlights honed in on the different types of resolutions approaches used by both traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen. The traditional age freshmen expressed finding quick resolutions for coping with their stressor while the nontraditional freshmen left some issues unresolved and invested in hope. By “hoping that everything will turn out ok,” the nontraditional freshmen used optimism as their coping strategy. This is the same group of freshmen that expressed the importance of time because college must be prioritized with other important responsibilities. With lesser demands, traditional age freshmen prioritized academic demands as their major stressors. Interestingly, traditional age male freshmen developed a tolerance for examining and possibly finding resolutions of how to react to the perceived stressful situations. Similarly, Daiute (2015) posited that narrative is an interactive process of meaning making during story interpretation, generation, and transformation (p. 40). Over time, through experiences and social activities, college freshmen were able to understand how their stories were constructed and the meaning behind each story. In their narratives and coping resolutions, stress functioned as a cultural tool because it allowed college freshmen to create ways of mediating their stressful experiences.

Other differences between the traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen were highlighted in their ranking of stress terms. The rankings of stress terms were based on the college freshmen’s context, culture, understanding, and experiences of what they perceived to be
most stressful to least stressful. The findings indicated that the traditional age freshmen ranked terms from high to low stressors as: academic, financial, relationship, family, job, and other. Subsequently, the nontraditional age freshmen ranked terms from high to low stressors as: financial, academic, family, job, other, and relationship. Traditional age freshmen implied that academic is their most stressful term and this can be attributed to the transitioning process from high school academic expectations to the unknown college expectations. This could be perceived as an academic culture shock because the traditional age freshmen are not used to the rigorous course requirements and assignment deadlines. The second ranked stress term was financial and this can be attributed to the fact that majority of the traditional age freshmen in this study were commuter students. In rare cases, there are traditional age freshmen that work part-time jobs and are self-supporting. In contrast, the nontraditional age freshmen ranked financial as their high stress term. Attending college can be attributed to additional financial expenses, perhaps receiving limited tuition assistance, and having to take out student loans to cover the cost of tuition. This contributed to already existing expenses that causes this group to experience financial burden. In addition to the financial stressor, nontraditional age freshmen ranked academic as their second stressor. In the narratives of stressful experiences, this group highlighted that transitioning to college after being out of school for years was challenging. Many were concerned with their academic performance and keeping up with their academic requirements.

Overall, the three qualitative activities related to students’ meanings of stress, the narrative of stressful experiences and the ranking of stress terms offered more depth into exploring college freshmen’s stress. However, the narratives of stressful experiences offered the most information about how stress intertwined in the lives of traditional age and nontraditional
age freshmen. Stress as a cultural tool is filtered through different expressive narrative activities such as the meaning of stress statements, narratives of stressful experiences, and ranking of terms, which conveyed that stress emerged as a focal point for students connecting their feelings to their environment within and beyond college.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how two groups of college freshmen, traditional age and nontraditional age students used the concept “stress” (literally and narratively) to make sense of their college experiences. Three narrative genres were used to explore the college freshmen’s experiences. Meaning of stress statements, narratives of stressful experiences, and rankings of terms associated with stress were sampled, analyzed, and compared to explore whether traditional age and nontraditional age students would differ on these expressions. Narratives by traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen captured a holistic view into the nature of each freshman’s values, beliefs, purposes, and expectations embedded within their college experiences. College freshmen shared their stress meanings, experiences, and the stress terms, which provided an understanding of how stress functions as a cultural tool in higher education.

Three research questions were posed to the students. The first research question examined how traditional age and nontraditional age college freshmen used the word stress as a cultural tool to mediate their experiences in the college environment. Findings indicated that both groups of college freshmen recognized that stress is a typical experience encountered by all college students. Similarly, college freshmen developed personalized definitions of stress and coping mechanisms as a facilitating means for motivating themselves and for addressing their perceived obstacles and challenges. Despite their age differences, traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen expressed that stress is associated with multiple demands, both within and without the academic environment that contributed to the feelings of being overwhelmed and pressured. For example, the values analysis of each meaning statement by
traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen across the narratives reflected on different meanings of stress that implied similar values. These identifying values were interpreted as focal points in addressing the meanings of stress for college freshmen. Through this lens, traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen used their meaning of stress statements as a meditational solution to address their challenges inside and outside of the college environment. 

Each narrative was uniquely constructed to reflect the events that these college freshmen associated with stressful experiences. The plot analysis was used to explore the issues around which the plots of stressful experience narratives revolved and the resolution strategies offered to address those issues. For instance, the challenges that emerged in the high points of the narratives of stressful experiences were catering to multiple roles and fulfilling academic expectations. College freshmen used coping as a form of resolution strategy to evaluate the meaning and importance behind their stressful experiences. Although there were some similar high point issues and resolution strategies across the groups, the plot analysis revealed some differences between the two groups of college freshmen. Findings suggested that nontraditional age freshmen encountered more complicated situations, such as managing their time between school, family, and work because they had to honor multiple roles and demands. This group of college freshmen was faced with the roles of being a parent, spouse, student, and an employee including other responsibilities that were associated with each role. In contrast, traditional age freshmen did not take on as many roles and demands as their nontraditional age peers, but this group was more consumed by their academic demands. Across the narratives, the findings implied that both groups of college freshmen have different demands that were associated with most and least stressful experiences.

The second research question addressed factors that traditional age and nontraditional age
college freshmen attributed to high and low stressors. As a result, the two most stressful terms that both groups of college freshmen attributed to high stress inducers were academic and financial. The traditional age freshmen ranked the following as their stress terms from high to low: academic, financial, relationship, family, job, and other. Relatively, Dill & Henley (1998), Tinto (1999), Clark (2005), Collier & Morgan (2007), and Strage (2008), emphasized that academic events were overwhelming the major inducing factors in relation to stressors among college freshmen. Meanwhile, the nontraditional age freshmen ranked the following as their stress terms from high to low: financial, academic, family, job, other, and relationship. Academic was ranked as the most stressful for the traditional age freshmen because the demands and expectations were different from the high school experience. Financial was ranked as the second most stressful and could be attributed to the fact that the majority of participants were commuter students who were responsible for their own expenses such as tuition, books, meals, transportation, etc. Whereas the nontraditional age freshmen ranked financial as their most stressful term, largely because, this group was, in most cases, the sole breadwinner, and this crucial responsibility of maintaining employment was coupled with other financial expenses such as supporting a family, paying rent and utilities, etc. Financial could also be attributed to the cost of attendance for college since this would be an additional costly expense to their already existing financial burden. The nontraditional age freshmen ranked academic as their second most stressful term. This could be attributed largely to expectations and notions of the academic demands when attendance is postponed in some cases years after graduating from high school. A common factor that seemed to impact college freshmen’s academic transitioning is time management. For the traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen, keeping up with deadlines in relation to their academic demands and expectations can be conveyed as stressful. The
nontraditional freshmen were concerned with fitting into the college environment amongst their younger peers; whereas, the traditional age freshmen were concerned with keeping up with their academic requirements. Also, with age came many different responsibilities outside of the academic setting that nontraditional freshmen must address.

The third research question addressed how the traditional and nontraditional age freshmen comparatively used stress to mediate their college adjustment. Findings from the SACQ indicated that age does not impact college adjustment on any of the four subscales: academically, socially, personally-emotionally, and goal oriented (attachment).

I also explored the possibility of differences in adjustment to college by the two groups of students, in part to offer a possible integration of qualitative methods constituting the major approach in this study as a standardized measure of adjustment to college. Should such a difference have emerged, then any group differences in any of the narrative expressions would have been fruitful for considering relationships between conceptions of stress (assessed qualitatively) and adjustment to college. The findings from the SACQ presented in this study did not reveal differences across traditional and nontraditional age college freshmen adjustments.

Analyses of the narrative genres, however, did reveal differences in how stress functions in the lives of traditional and nontraditional age college students. However, the three genres of narratives highlighted and illustrated a more personalized mediation strategy from both groups of college freshmen towards their college experience, albeit in different ways. College freshmen crafted their narratives of stressful experiences in unique ways by constructing resolutions for addressing stressors associated with their surrounding environments. Across the narratives, the stress statements served as a form of coping to mediate the stressful experiences between college freshmen and their environment. By coping with their stressors, college freshmen were able to
mediate their challenges, negotiate their environments, discover their purposes, and establish relational meanings in the adjustment process. In relation to coping, Park & Folkman (1997) and Giancola et al., (2009) contended that coping involves constructing meanings in the interactions between person-environment transactions. Findings in this study also suggested that students used the different qualitative genres to enact values and meaning relevant to everyday realities. College freshmen used their stressful experiences to connect to and embrace their roles, demands, hopes, and expectations to mediate their college adjustment.

It is these different functions emerging from the three narrative activities that offer insights about how stress might be serving as a cultural tool. For example, for the traditional age students, stress appeared to mediate their communications with peers, faculty members, and mentors. By communicating with peers and college administrators, traditional age freshmen created social and academic bonding mechanisms to mediate their stressors. In this group, stress also mediated their coping strategies to enhance their strengths, motivation, and developmental means to move forward with life demands.

In contrast for the non-traditional age students, stress appeared to mediate confidence, invoking self-praise from reflecting on their many roles, developed social relations within the college environment, and instilled hope for pursuing their goals of earning a college degree. Vygotsky (1978) posited that cultural tools are the symbolic systems we used to communicate and analyze reality. In this study, stress functioned as a cultural tool for college freshmen as presented in their narratives genres. The narratives illustrated that college freshmen used the word stress to define, communicate, organize, and analyze their stressful experiences. In the narrative genre of the meaning of stress, both traditional and nontraditional age freshmen used their carefully defined definitions as a means of communicating and expressing their feelings of
being overwhelmed and under pressured. Findings suggested that college freshmen used their meanings of stress definitions to relate to their peers, which fostered relationships between the students and their social surroundings. The most universal cultural tool is language; similarly, stress served as a universal experience shared by all college freshmen. College freshmen used their judgments to express that stress can be understood by individuals who can relate to their shared experiences. In the narrative statements of stressful experiences, college freshmen built on past experiences to address, adjust, and cope with their present stressors. In fact, findings revealed that students were able to understand the importance of their stressors and applied a realistic resolution for coping with their stressful experiences.

In situations where challenges exist, people use cultural tools, including language, to identify their challenges and explore every possible opportunity to reach their goals. This is true in academics as well. Comparatively, both groups of college freshmen used their narratives as an activity to express their stress, to emphasize their goals, and to articulate the purposes behind their stressful experiences. The authors’ narratives were tailored to express the meaning of a specific word, stress, and situations that incorporated stressful experiences. By all means, Vygotsky (1978) conveyed that the meaning of a specific word [stress] is determined by the way in which language emerged in a particular historical context. Additionally, these college freshmen implied that they used past experiences to think of ways to address current stressors that would possibly acts as a precursor for handling future situations. Leppel (2001) posited that college student experiences will integrate them socially and intellectually into the life of the institution, and the more likely students will progress to their degree completion. The freshmen students in this study used stress in their narrative genres to create a context for them to reflect, think, and act on the demanding attention that was driven by college adjustment and the desire
for earning a college degree.

Differences across the genres by all the participants and differences for the students across the two age groups were consistent with findings from other research employing narrative methods to learn about how college students were making sense of the college environment and their own participation in it (Daiute, 2014). While personal narratives (such as the narratives of stressful experiences in the present study) provided participants with a positioning in relation to their participation in society, other genres such as stating the meaning of stress in this study, provided participants with a different positioning for interpreting the meaning of institutions.

**Limitations and Implications**

This dissertation applied mixed methodology to focus on how both traditional and nontraditional college freshmen used the word stress as a cultural tool to mediate between their experiences and the college adjustment process. While the findings presented in this study provided support documenting the influence of stress on freshman college students’ adjustment, there were some limitations that this study cannot and was not intended to address. First, the study relied on the supplemental demographic survey from the SACQ, which only limited the participants’ demographic information to name, age, gender, academic standing, and ethnic background. Knowing more about the participants’ socioeconomic status, profession, parental level of education, martial status, number of children, military status, and college major could have contributed to more avenues of interpretation within the narrative genres. Perhaps providing a deeper understanding behind the ranking of stress terms across the group. For example, why did the traditional age freshmen rank academic as their most stressful term? Could this be attributed to the selected major or perhaps, this student is the first in their family to attend college and received no guidance from home/family.
A second limitation to this study was that the data were collected during the second semester, spring semester, of the participants’ freshman year of college. Although college freshmen were still in their transitional and adjustment stage of college, collecting data during the first semester of freshman year, i.e. fall might have presented different meanings of stress, ranking items of stress, and stressful experiences as the students would be new to college. Perhaps the students in this study were becoming familiar and situated within their new environment. A third implication of this study was the small number of male participants. The results of this study were interpreted based on traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen enrolled in a private four-year college that had a higher percentage of female students than male. There were a very small number of male participants in both groups of college freshmen versus the female participants. Having an equal or similar number of male participants would have enhanced the comparison between both genders. This is apparent especially, when examining if male freshman narratives involved more thinking and conceptualization when it came to addressing and internalizing their stressful experiences. A fourth implication to this study would be the limiting SACQ measure, which only allowed participants to select whether or not the statements for each subscales “applies very closely to me” or “doesn’t apply to me at all.” The purpose of this measure was to capture college adjustment across the four subscales; however, it does not require the participants to elaborate on their selections, which would further assess their adjustment process.

**Implications for Research**

The findings present an exciting next step for researchers. Firstly, this dissertation adds to the discussion of how both groups of freshman college students use the word “stress” as a cultural tool to navigate their college experiences, process their adjustment, and foster their
development. From the perspectives of the cultural tool, college freshmen used stress to mediate, and make sense of their environment, and to master and transform their lives. Secondly, despite the age differences, traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen’s academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal and emotional adjustments were similar across the four SACQ’s subscales.

Findings from this study highlighted “stress” in a positive stance that influenced freshman students with navigating their way through college. Given the framework, below are recommendations and implications for continued exploration:

1. Future researchers would benefit from this design by expanding on a longitudinal study following both groups of freshman college students from their first semester of college through graduation, as it would go a long way to illuminate the college adjustment process. Additionally, it would be beneficial to assess if this specific group of students continue to use the word “stress” as a mediator throughout their college experiences and how they apply their past semesters stressful experiences to present and future semesters.

2. It would be quite intriguing for future researchers to collect data during the first semester to see if there are any similarities and differences in regards to college freshmen’s experiences as shared in their narratives and/or changes in adjustment based on the subscales of the SACQ (please refer to Appendix A for the SACQ questionnaire).

3. There has been an increase in the number of veterans returning home from their military duties and enrolling in colleges across the country. Expanding the study to include or limit it to just veteran freshmen would provide college administrators, faculty members and developmental researchers with the resources they need to better assist this group of
students; especially, since many of them have been subjected to highly sensitive and devastating experiences.

4. There is a need to expand on how freshman students use their stressful experiences to advance their college adjustment, transition, and development. As researchers we need to move away from the notion of stress as associated with negative abilities, and convey the importance and values behind each stressful experience. As reflected in this study, stress is positive when viewed as a bonding agent.

5. Expanding the demographic parameters to include a more informative demographic survey may be taken into consideration regarding factors such as socioeconomic status (SES), level of parental education/profession, student’s marital status, the number of children they have if any, student’s employment status/profession, and veteran status.

**Implications for Educators**

I began this dissertation research from experiences I had as an academic counselor in an urban college serving students of diverse backgrounds, including many who begin or return to college in their twenties or later. The findings presented in this study will be beneficial for educators, developmental researchers, and higher education administrators. Attending college comes with many challenges that are contextualized as stress by students. This study highlights the importance behind what stress really means when expressed by college students; especially, the freshman group. Higher education administrators, support staff, and faculty can use these findings to address issues such as retention, improve graduation rate, provide the necessary resources that will promote and enhance students’ adjustment, learning, and developmental processes. Support staff and mentors must be able to connect and establish a communicative relationship between themselves and their mentees. There are students who may be timid or
afraid to communicate their challenges with their instructors. When students are not proactive or forthcoming in communicating their challenges, sometimes, mentors and instructors must take the initiative to establish a channel of communication with these students. By communicating with students, it provides a sense of support, hope, reassurance that establishes a relational means, which creates an opportunity for them to adjust to their environment and work towards achieving their goals.

Conclusion

There is a common saying that the “college years are supposed to be the best years of your life.” Well, for many first year college freshmen this saying gets lost in their transitional and adjustment processes. The college classroom is no longer predominantly made up of the traditional age freshmen, because now there are also students attending in the nontraditional age group. Both the traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen are shocked and overwhelmed by the expectations from their new environment. In this new demanding and unfamiliar environment, there are other demands that must be addressed as well. All of these multiple demands and adjustments causes college freshmen to experience stress. In the context of their environment, the word stress is referred to as meaning being overwhelmed and pressured which has become a universal definition for both groups of college freshmen. College freshmen used their stressful experiences to enhance their development as they transform and satisfy their environmental needs academically, socially, and moreover to establish a sense of belonging. This study will contribute and provide further evidence of how stress, when contextualized as a cultural tool, aids in college students’ adjustment and development in higher education. More importantly, findings from this study enhanced my own knowledge and understanding on how to relate to traditional age and nontraditional age freshmen. Similarly, the findings can foster
interactions and developmental opportunities for educators and students.
Appendix A

Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)  
Baker and Siryk (1999)

Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)

Directions

Please provide the identifying information requested on the right.

The 67 statements on the front and back of this form describe college experiences. Read each one and decide how well it applies to you at the present time (within the past few days). For each statement, circle the asterisk at the point in the continuum that best represents how closely the statement applies to you. Circle only one asterisk for each statement. To change an answer, draw an X through the incorrect response and circle the desired response. Be sure to use a hard-tipped pen or pencil and press very firmly. Do not erase.

I feel that I fit in well as part of the college environment. .................................................................
I have been feeling tense or nervous lately. .........................................................................................
I have been keeping up to date on my academic work. .................................................................
I am meeting as many people, and making as many friends as I would like at college. ........
I know why I'm in college and what I want out of it. .................................................................
I am finding academic work at college difficult. ...........................................................................
Lately I have been feeling blue and moody a lot. ..........................................................................
I am very involved with social activities in college. .................................................................
I am adjusting well to college. ........................................................................................................
I have not been functioning well during examinations. ..............................................................
I have felt tired much of the time lately. ........................................................................................
Being on my own, taking responsibility for myself, has not been easy.................................
I am satisfied with the level at which I am performing academically.................................
I have had informal, personal contacts with college professors..............................................
I am pleased now about my decision to go to college.................................................................
I am pleased now about my decision to attend this college in particular............................
I'm not working as hard as I should at my course work............................................................
I have several close social ties at college........................................................................................
My academic goals and purposes are well defined.................................................................
I haven't been able to control my emotions very well lately....................................................
I'm not really smart enough for the academic work I am expected to be doing now..........
Lonesomeness for home is a source of difficulty for me now....................................................
Getting a college degree is very important to me......................................................................
My appetite has been good lately.................................................................................................
I haven't been very efficient in the use of study time lately.....................................................
I enjoy living in a college dormitory. (Please omit if you do not live in a dormitory;  
any university housing should be regarded as a dormitory.) ................................................
I enjoy writing papers for courses.................................................................................................
I have been having a lot of headaches lately ............................................................................
I really haven't had much motivation for studying lately........................................................
I am satisfied with the extracurricular activities available at college.................................
I've given a lot of thought lately to whether I should ask for help from the Psychological/  
Counseling Services Center or from a psychotherapist outside of college.........................
Lately I have been having doubts regarding the value of a college education....................
I am getting along very well with my roommate(s) at college. (Please omit if you do not have a roommate.) ..............................................
34. I wish I were at another college or university.
35. I've put on (or lost) too much weight recently.
36. I am satisfied with the number and variety of courses available at college.
37. I feel that I have enough social skills to get along well in the college setting.
38. I have been getting angry too easily lately
39. Recently I have had trouble concentrating when I try to study.
40. I haven't been sleeping very well.
41. I'm not doing well enough academically for the amount of work I put in.
42. I am having difficulty feeling at ease with other people at college.
43. I am satisfied with the quality or the caliber of courses available at college.
44. I am attending classes regularly.
45. Sometimes my thinking gets muddled up too easily.
46. I am satisfied with the extent to which I am participating in social activities at college.
47. I expect to stay at this college for a bachelor's degree.
48. I haven't been mixing too well with the opposite sex lately.
49. I worry a lot about my college expenses.
50. I am enjoying my academic work at college.
51. I have been feeling lonely a lot at college lately.
52. I am having a lot of trouble getting started on homework assignments.
53. I feel I have good control over my life situation at college.
54. I am satisfied with my program of courses for this semester/quarter.
55. I have been feeling in good health lately.
56. I feel I am very different from other students at college in ways that I don't like.
57. On balance, I would rather be home than here.
58. Most of the things I am interested in are not related to any of my course work at college.
59. Lately I have been giving a lot of thought to transferring to another college.
60. Lately I have been giving a lot of thought to dropping out of college altogether and for good
61. I find myself giving considerable thought to taking time off from college and finishing later.
62. I am very satisfied with the professors I have now in my courses.
63. I have some good friends or acquaintances at college with whom I can talk about any problems I may have.
64. I am experiencing a lot of difficulty coping with the stresses imposed upon me in college.
65. I am quite satisfied with my social life at college.
66. I'm quite satisfied with my academic situation at college.
67. I feel confident that I will be able to deal in a satisfactory manner with future challenges here at college.
Appendix B

Survey: Follow up questions about stress (page 1 of 3)

In my job as an academic advisor students talk about a lot of things. A common word I hear is “stress.” I bet that you have used that word a few times yourselves.

1. When you hear or say the word "stress," what do you think that means? In other words, what is "stress"? Please explain here.
1. Please write about a time when you felt "stress" or "stressed"? What happened? Who was involved? How did it all turn out? Please write here and use the back of the page if you need it.
Survey: Follow up questions about stress (page 3 of 3)

2. Many college students have listed the following items to be “stressful.” What would you consider to be high (most) and low (least) levels of “stress” producers/situations? (Order the stressors in the table below from most to least with most being number 1.

Academics; Job; Relationship/Marriage; Family; Financial; Added responsibilities such as home chores or caring for siblings or children

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Reference


of the student adaptation to college questionnaire. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 44* (2), 92-104.


[http://www.irma-international.org/viewtitle/35845/](http://www.irma-international.org/viewtitle/35845/)


American Psychological Association.


