

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE LEARNING NEEDS,  
STRATEGIES, AND NETWORKS OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULTS  
AGE 65 AND OVER IN  
RURAL TEXAS  
  
DISSERTATION

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Doctor of PHILOSOPHY

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Greg, for his unfaltering support and understanding while I was completing this project. Greg has shown remarkable patience with me over the past 10 years. His strength has been my anchor. His advice has been my guiding voice. I am glad I have him in my life.

Last, but not least, I have been very blessed in my life with two wonderful mothers: Mrs. Ethel Leoma Townsel Cleveland, my maternal grandmother (aka Mama) and guardian, and my mother, Mrs. Evelyn Laudell Townsel Goff (aka Momma). Thank you for the ways in which you have supported me through all of my endeavors.

Mama – You inspired this dissertation!! I hope you are proud.

Momma – I have always found comfort in your love.

To Aunt Gene, other family, and all friends - My life has been made infinitely richer because of you.

.

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For myself as a lifelong learner, I have always maintained that “greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4) and that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

To others as lifelong learners, I always ask everyone to live to be a bringer of peace through learning and education and a giver of joy through continuous learning and education.

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## **ABSTRACT**

# **AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE LEARNING NEEDS, STRATEGIES, AND NETWORKS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULTS AGE 65 AND OVER IN RURAL TEXAS**

by

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This study revealed that rural older Blacks have personal learning and related information needs. The study involved the process of researching the learning initiatives of 14 African American adults who were age 65 and over and residents in rural Texas communities. The study participants provided information about their learning needs and learning support contacts within their communities. A semi-structured interview guide

was used to help to gather data about individual learning needs and local resources, and a diagram of overlapping or concentric circles was used to analyze learning connections between the study participants and the people whom they trust. This study also explored the obstacles to learning experienced by the study participants and demonstrated how the availability of resources shaped the learning environment and the potential for success of study participants.

*Keywords:* adult learning, aged, aging, barriers to learning, African Americans, age 65 and over, Blacks, information needs, learning needs, learning networks, older adults 65+, race, rural, rural African Americans, rural older adult, social convoys, social networks, Texas.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

African Americans age 65 and over represent an intersection of three groups demonstrating growth trends in the U.S. population: adults age 65 and over, Blacks, and rural adults age 65 and over (Strom, Carter & Schmidt, 2004; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005a). From 1900 to 2000, the number of Americans over age 65 increased from 3 million to 35 million (Federal, 2005; U.S. Census, 2002). The 2002 U.S. Census estimates that by 2050 the number will be close to 85 million (U.S. Census, 2002). Adults age 65 and over are the fastest growing group among the Black population, and rural areas, especially in the South, have a higher percentage of aging population than do metropolitan areas (Strom, Carter & Schmidt, 2004; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005). Statistical data indicate a need to address the challenges that these groups face in optimizing their quality of life as they age (Childers, 1975; Parks, 1988; Strom, Carter & Schmidt, 2004; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005). Personal economic issues, information poverty, social isolation, and limited learning experiences present daily challenges to the growing population of rural African Americans age 65 and over (Childers, 1975; Parks, 1988).

## **Poverty and Rural African Americans Age 65 and Over**

Personal economic circumstances are often problematic for this group. Rural African Americans age 65 and over typically have limited incomes and experience higher poverty rates than rural Whites and urban older Blacks (Parks, 1988; Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003). Among non-metropolitan adults age 65 and over, Black non-Hispanics (33.3%) are most likely to be in poverty status (Roff & Klemmack, 2003). Rural adults age 65 and over are more likely to either be in poverty poorer or have a poverty status than their urban counterparts (Rogers, 2000). Childers (1975) argues that disadvantaged rural groups are often out-of-step with the larger society and this claim is clearly illustrated by their tendency toward poverty. Childers (1995) wrote in support of his thesis, “One major value in this country at this time—and therefore not surprisingly a major definition of ‘disadvantage—is economic’ (p.14). Childers recognized how socioeconomics as one of several factors could cause inequality in access to quality information for United States citizens in the early 1970s. The study I have conducted continues Childers’ examination of information-seeking behavior. The difference is that this study focused more on how ethnicity, being age 65 and over, being a rural resident, and having limited adult education resources contributed to information poverty in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another difference between the purpose of Childers’ research and this study is that Childers explored information needs only, and this study researched adult learning needs and the information-seeking experiences involved in fulfilling those learning needs.



### **Information Poverty and Rural African Americans Age 65 and Over**

Childers (1975) describes rural African Americans age 65 and over as disadvantaged and experiencing information poverty in his book on this problem. Heisel (1983) and Spink and Cole (2001) express similar perspectives. Rural living is associated with impediments to effective information delivery or acquisition. One example of the kinds of complications faced by the rural African Americans age 65 and over is that they often have adult children who could assist with information gathering but cannot because they live too far away from their parents (Li & Blaser, 2003; Parks, 1988; Scott, 2001). The remaining local social networks can govern the availability and exchange of informal services that can include the flow of information and other resources (Bezon, 1993; Gaudin & Davis, 1985). These *natural networks* as Banes (1991) and Watkins (2004) describe them are services within the immediate community that involve support from churches, family, and friends. However, Gaudin and Davis (1985) discovered that some level of isolation could occur for rural Black families from within their own informal community networks.

### **Social Isolation and Rural African Americans Age 65 and Over**

In addition to economic disadvantages and a lack of access to information through a formal provider, some researchers describe rural African Americans age 65 and over as negatively affected by society's tendency to ignore the needs of this group (Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003). An equally alarming outcome is that some experts also view rural African Americans age 65 and over as negatively affected by the group's inclination to avoid White formal service providers because of fears of racial discrimination. A rural community that is distrusting of outsiders may choose to avoid social service providers

(Barer & Johnson, 2003; Childers, 1975; Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003). Childers (1975), Parks (1988), and Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) suppose that communities of rural African Americans age 65 and over could improve their conditions more by being receptive to accepting formal support from outsiders than by resorting to home-grown solutions. Drs. Mikal Rasheed and Janice Matthews Rasheed have worked together to produce scholarly publications about social work practices and aging. Their report on the preference of rural older Blacks for informal caregivers is one example.

Rasheed and Rasheed's (2003) report puts rural African Americans' situation under the microscope, with those of social-services support to rural communities on one slide and rural Black culture on another. The article also compared support systems of rural Whites to rural Blacks with attention to resources. Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) described rural Black older adults as "one of the most vulnerable populations" (p. 138) within the Black community. They cited at least eight problems that supported their conclusion about the at-risk status of rural African Americans. As reported by Rasheed and Rasheed (2003), the survival of rural African Americans age 65 and over is threatened by their lack of local resources and knowledge of available support services. The authors question whether behavior characteristics of self-assistance, self-reliance, and independence can be detrimental to the populace in a community of rural older Blacks. Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) contrast the negative and positive experiences imparted by both Blacks and Whites concerning growing old in rural America. The social scientists used their theoretical observations to make an analogy between ethnicity and outcomes among rural adults when they compared statistical data on how well older

Blacks age to the well-being of older Whites in the United States. The analogy suggested that aging White Americans have fewer health concerns than Black Americans.

A second analogy produced by Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) provides insight about each aging ethnicity group's mental health wellness. Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) reported that Black Americans are more comfortable with growing old than their White counterparts, as cited by E.D. Holmes and L.D. Holmes in their work, *Other cultures, elder years* (1995). The possibility that Black Americans are more content with aging than White Americans could be a cultural phenomenon. Rasheed and Rasheed implied in their work that there may be a cause and effect relationship between Black Americans' "helping tradition" and their comfort level with living to advanced years. Rasheed and Rasheed noted how Black communities can be havens against racism and rural politics, and therefore, rural African American communities can find protection and support through their "helping tradition." Unfortunately, a community's cohesiveness can also come with a disadvantage. From that perspective, Rasheed and Rasheed expressed apprehensiveness about the absence of formal social services available to rural citizens. Their perspective is that large communities consisting of Rural African Americans age 65 and over also need access to formal services to help address chronic health conditions, economic issues, and information needs.

The Rasheeds' review of related literature includes statistics from other reports, revealing that rural older Blacks have shorter life-spans than Whites, more health restrictions and other health limitations, but less access to healthcare services than Whites. The message is that rural African Americans age 65 and over should not reject assistance from outside of their communities because of the importance of being seen as

having community needs and thereby having their needs formally attended. Additionally, Gaudin and Davis (1985) revealed that, unlike Blacks, the social networks of rural Whites usually contained connections to people with higher social statuses who could also provide more opportunities. For example, rural White families are more likely to have access to more “helpful information” (Gaudin & Davis, 1985, p. 1018) from their communities than Black families. Obviously, local social networks can fend off information poverty, but for isolated Black communities, external intervention may be necessary.

### **Educational Attainment of Rural African Americans Age 65 and Over**

The U.S. Census Bureau publishes educational attainment statistics through its *Current Population Survey and Annual Social and Economic Supplement*. The 2006 edition of the Supplement breaks down educational attainment by age, gender, ethnicity, and Hispanic origin and by metropolitan and nonmetropolitan residence. For residents age 65 and over living “outside metropolitan statistical areas,” an overall 68.7% have a high school education or less (2007). The percentage of White rural residents age 65 and over with a high school degree or less is close to the national average at 67.7%. However, there is a significantly higher percentage of Blacks age 65 and over with a high school degree or less at 82.6% (U.S. Census, 2006). This reflects limited educational opportunities historically available to older Blacks. The problem of lack of educational opportunities for rural residents, however, is not limited to African Americans age 65 and over. Data indicate that rural living is associated with lower educational opportunities for rural residents because of “lower economic returns to education, out-migration of more

educated residents to metropolitan areas, and lower per capita education experience” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003b, p. 1).

### **Rural African Americans Age 65 and Over and Their Learning Needs and Priorities**

It is important to understand the learning needs of the rural Black aged subgroup. Hales-Mabry (1993) links the relationship between information gathering and learning by observing that “learning is equated with the acquisition of information or behavior” (p. 25). The act of information seeking begins with the recognized need to learn. Humanist psychology explains why individuals have information and learning needs as well as the motivation to meet those needs (Grassian & Kaplowitz, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, from basic survival needs to self-actualization, and Albert Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy are examples of humanistic psychology that demonstrate the natural human desire to accomplish (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Maslow’s pyramid illustrates individual capacity and motivation to move beyond basic needs. Bandura’s theory illustrates an individual’s ability to control or influence his or her own destiny and to meet his or her own needs (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

### **Information Seeking and Gathering for Learning**

Information gathering is a necessary skill that can improve the overall ability of all adults age 65 and over, whether Black or in other ethnic groups, to adapt to a changing world. Because this study is about the learning needs and information needs of rural African Americans age 65 and over, the results of the 2000 American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) survey on lifelong learning are included in this report to indicate how learning needs and priorities and information seeking behaviors are related. When

asked to name their preferred way to learn, 84% of adults age 50 and older responded: “by gathering as much information as I can find and then teaching myself” (p. 14). This response shows how important effective information gathering techniques are for enabling older adults to self-actualize and become learning self-efficient. The AARP study is a good marker for understanding how older Americans learn. However, the telephone and online interviews of 1,019 participants in that study do not provide data about culturally isolated populations such as rural Blacks age 65 and over, even though the study was designed to include representation from rural areas. Furthermore, although the AARP survey attempted to explore all reasons for lifelong learning by older adults, the study results do not include information about the consequences to older adults who have continuous unmet learning needs. Thus, a follow-up study exploring lifelong learning by examining the information seeking behaviors of older adults with unmet learning needs from socially and culturally isolated populations could provide a more thorough understanding of the effects of lifelong learning on adults age 65 and over.

### **Significance and Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to research the information-seeking behaviors used to fulfill unmet learning needs of rural African Americans. Therefore, I explored the methods employed by Blacks age 65 and over living in communities that traditionally have 2,500 or fewer residents to satisfy their unaddressed learning goals (Walters, Iliffe, & Orrell, 2001).

### **Invisible Status**

Rural life is sometimes portrayed in the popular imagination as “idyllic” for the adults age 65 and over. In reality, however, this is not the case (Yenerall, 1999). “Aging

in place” occurs when older adults prefer to remain in their homes and communities as they age instead of moving away to nursing homes or living with adult children (Dalrymple, 2005; Prosper & Clark, 1994; Yenerall, 1999). Phenomena like “aging in place” in today’s harsh socioeconomic realities may complicate the lives of those who choose to remain rural residents and of those who, in transition, move to rural America (Parks, 1988; Rogers, 2000, Yenerall, 1999). Social isolation, for example, is a concern especially for rural minority populations. Parks’ (1988) historical study of rural life of the African Americans age 65 and over in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee noted this fact. Parks refers to previous research acknowledging the *invisible status* of rural African Americans age 65 and over. This invisible status could be an outcome of social isolation created by barriers to information flow (Bezon, 1993). Hales-Mabry (1993) warns that isolation for older adults begins with retirement as people lose daily informational contacts, indicating an association between social isolation, lack of information sources, and lack of visibility.

### **Geriatric Enclaves**

There are several sociological and economic terms used to identify unusual problems associated with survival in rural America. Yenerall (1999) refers to the development of *geriatric enclaves* created by the migration of older adults from areas with social support networks to non-metropolitan or rural areas with fewer social support network systems. The combination of these geriatric enclaves and Parks’ reference to an invisibility status could present challenges in monitoring the learning or informational needs of Black rural communities. These conditions are sufficient to justify conducting

this study in an effort to better understand the learning needs of an often-overlooked population.

### **Abbreviated Social Services and Municipal Underbounding**

Another indication of the need for this study is an investigation into the available social supports, social networks, and services for the population. According to Scott (2001), even though a large percentage of adults age 65 and over live in non-metropolitan communities, the population is often not large enough to justify developing or increasing social support services. Racial politics and the practice of “underbounding” block access to social services by manipulating annexation patterns. A paper written by Lichter, Parisi, Grice, and Taquino (2007) reports on the practice of *municipal underbounding* by small southern towns. Municipal underbounding occurs when municipalities refuse to annex largely minority-populated residential areas. The practice is motivated by racial politics and “excludes rural blacks from community governance and public services” (Lichter, et al., 2007, p. 50), leaving Black communities with limited access. Municipal underbounding leaves minority populations on the outskirts of rural towns and on the periphery of special services provided to the township.

In terms of supportive social networks, older rural adults can lose close connections with younger rural adults when they relocate. Youth leaving rural areas and moving to urban areas, usually in search of employment, can contribute to higher poverty statistics for non-metropolitan areas and can also contribute to the aging-in-place population (Rogers, 2000; Yenerall, 1999). The *Rural America at a Glance* (2006), available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, reports how the *outmigration* of younger rural residents and a decline in birth rate are causes for



a 5.3% drop in the age 20 and under subgroup in non-metropolitan areas. “Residents who remain in depopulating areas may face a number of serious problems, such as ...a declining economic base” (Donato, Tolbert, Nucci, & Kawano, 2007, p. 539). The effect of underbounding and out-migration combined leaves aging rural Blacks with a less significant presence and therefore a decreased ability to demand special services.

### **Information Poverty and Educational Impoverishment**

In addition to economic poverty, researchers are concerned about information poverty and educational impoverishment in rural areas. Childers included aging adults in his list of the information poor and minorities in particular because rural areas typically offer fewer educational opportunities than do metropolitan areas, and older adults are less likely to take advantage of those that are available. Educational gerontology recognizes the learning needs of older adults (Glendenning, 2000; Withnall, 2006). The literature in that area suggests that older adults will experience some barriers that would discourage their participation (Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003). Social gerontologist Frank Glendenning (2000) expressed his concern about contemporary society’s misperception of the learning needs of older adults in his literature review. Glendenning (2000) wrote in full support of lifelong learning and education for older adults and for a change in social policy to empower older adults to control their own learning. Through critical theory, Glendenning (2000) and the other contributing authors reported on the process and changes in reasoning necessary to develop an integrated curriculum that when offered to older people would give them opportunity to gain advanced knowledge, expertise, and even levels of certification as later-life learners. Furthermore, older adults tend to discount their own learning potential (Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003). These hurdles,

along with potential isolation, are mounting factors contributing to unmet educational needs for rural African Americans age 65 and over. Among a number of barriers to information seeking, Bates' (2004) study of information seeking in a lower-working class group in Dublin, Ireland, identifies the desire of older adults to avoid feeling vulnerable because of dependency on others for information assistance. A case study showed that for some adults age 65 and over, "needing information was regarded as a sign of vulnerability" (Bates, 2004, p. 23) and thus may be a significant concern for minority groups that may already perceive themselves as disempowered.

In sum, this study will take a closer look at the information seeking behavior of rural Black adults—a topic that has been the subject of little significant research. This study will look at the information learning needs of rural Blacks and the processes they use to meet those learning needs. It will also examine the barriers they encounter as they attempt to gather information and how they overcome those barriers. Learning more about the information-seeking behaviors of rural Blacks age 65 and over may help program planners develop appropriate modes for providing information to adult educators in the areas where adults age 65 and over have learning needs. "It is important not to become isolated in a changing world" (p. 53), Hales-Mabry (1993) warns. With growth in the aging population, addressing the social, economic, and political isolation of rural African Americans age 65 and over is critical. Degrees of isolation increase with factors like age, race, residence, and socioeconomics. Therefore, this study will investigate how social networks, despite isolation, support the learning needs of rural Black elder adults.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore the learning and related information needs of rural Blacks age 65 and over. Additionally, this study gathered data on the learning experiences, and learning strategies of rural older adults as self-directed learners. and barriers to their learning. This study was guided by the following over-arching research questions:

1. What types of learning needs and priorities do rural African Americans age 65 and over describe?
2. What resources and materials do rural African Americans age 65 and over report as available to them to fulfill their learning and related information needs?
3. What barriers to learning do rural African Americans age 65 and over encounter in their efforts to fulfill their learning and related information needs?
4. What learning strategies do rural African Americans age 65 and over use to gather information through learning networks?

### **Assumptions**

I adopted several assumptions about learning opportunities for rural elder Blacks and also about formal education programs for African Americans age 65 and over (Spence, 1997). I believe that aged rural Blacks have a right to formal education. Spence's (2007) article on home-based educational programs for rural Black older adults supports that premise. Despite the 20 years passage of time, I assume that the study group would be characteristically similar to Parks' (1988) research participants. Therefore, I expected study participants to live in their own homes and on their own land and overall to have had limited educational opportunities. In addition, Parks' "typical rural African

Americans age 65 and over” relied heavily on community churches for support, and I expected that my study group would be similar;. I also expected behavioral differences among subgroups. For example, I thought I might find that rural residents with some formal or more formal education would be more inclined to want to continue to learn more than those with less formal education (Kim and Merriam, 2004). I was also prepared to discover that all churches are not the same due to resources and locations, rural versus city. I also expected some level of ethnicity and racial distance between residents as a result of years and years of discrimination and bias (Bane, 1991) in these communities. In examining how African Americans age 65 and over responded to the availability of formal services to support their learning efforts, I presumed today’s African American aged might not always be aware of these services (Bane, 1991; Spence, 1997).

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are restrictions applied to a study’s methodology to ensure its success. Thus, delimitations of a study are those characteristics that determine the boundaries of the inquiry. “These delimitations usually restrict the populations to which the results of the study can be generalized” (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p.90). For example, a delimitation or boundary for this study is age related. All study participants were at least 65 years old. Also, the researcher has imposed ethnicity and lifestyle as limiters to further narrow the scope of the study. Delimitation 1 below lists characteristics of the study group. Delimitation 2 explains that initial efforts to identify potential study participants will come from association with religious organizations in rural Northeast Texas.

**Delimitation 1**

An intentional delimitation was that this study would only include Blacks who live in rural communities and who were at least 65 years old.

**Delimitation 2**

Some of the data for this study was from members of churches located in Northeast Central Texas. It is possible that participants that may otherwise fit the population profile could have been overlooked because they are not directly involved with a church. However, there is considerable support to suggest that the church is an appropriate focal point for many rural adults age 65 and over (Clay, Ellis, Amodeo, Fassler, & Griffin, 2003; Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003).

**Limitations**

Limitations are concerns the researcher views as problematic. Thus, limitations are usually concerns that may affect the results of the study. The limitations of the study are the constraints embedded into the characteristics and parameters of the methodology. The three limitations listed below are considered beyond the researcher's control.

**Limitation 1**

The success of the study is dependent upon relationships with community and church gatekeepers. Therefore, the support, availability, and influence of these gatekeepers could limit or skew participation.

**Limitation 2**

This population may not be openly receptive to an outsider, and thus, I had to be careful not to offend any participants. Even in the presence of a gatekeeper, I needed to be respectfully aware of social boundaries.

### **Limitation 3**

All study participants were 65 and over. While hardly anyone spoke directly about this, it is reasonable to believe that some, especially those over 80, were experiencing some memory decline. Thus, they may have had some difficulty recalling details about their learning experiences.

### **Definitions**

The following terms and definitions were selected for this study because they have consistently appeared in literature and research about rural America and aging populations. Some terms and definitions were taken from resources on aging and rural life and uniquely reapplied for purposes of this research project.

#### **Aging in Place**

As described previously, aging in place occurs when adults age 65 and over remain in their rural communities after adult children move away (Prosper & Clark, 1994; Yenerall, 1999).

#### **Elderly (or Adults Age 65 and Over).**

The term *adult elderly* is used to describe people age 65 and over (Federal Interagency Forum, 2005; Peterson & Maiden, 1993; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007) in this study. The literature also includes synonyms like *aged* and *older adults*. For example, “the terms older population and elderly are used interchangeably in U.S. Census reports to refer to the population aged 65 and older” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007, p. 1). The American Psychology Association (APA), however, does not recommend the use of the term “elderly” in social sciences research studies and reports intended for publication.

#### **Formal Networks and Services and Informal Networks and Services**

These are services provided by governmental and social agencies like Texas' Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) (Texas, 2006). Informal networks and informal services are found within the immediate community and involve assistance from local sources such as churches, family, friends, and caregivers. Bane (1991) calls them *natural networks*.

### **Information and Referral (I&R)**

This is the active process of linking someone who has a need or problem with an agency that provides services meeting that need or solving that problem. (McKinley & Netting, 1994, p. 23). For instance, an example of information and referral that supports the purpose of this study would involve social workers understanding when to refer rural African Americans age 65 and over to reference services from a library.

### **Information Need**

Case (2002) describes an "information need" as "a recognition that your knowledge is inadequate to satisfy a goal that you have" (p. 5). Case's concise definition is probably the best for this study. Childers (1980) contends that information need is affected by environment. On the definition of "information need," Childers (1980) wrote, "And, as we define 'information need' more and more specifically, a few differences in kind do begin to show up. Those who are disadvantaged, even though they aspire to the standard American dream, are impelled by physical, cultural, and personal realities to need slightly different kinds of information" (p. 36).

### **Information Seeking Behavior**

Such behavior is "any activity that is undertaken by an individual to satisfy a perceived need" (Ngcobo, 1994). For purposes of this study, information-seeking

behaviors are examined in relationship to responses to available informal or formal services as applicable.

### **Later-life Learner**

A description of later-life learner is an older person who chooses to continue to “learn during their later-life stage” (Clarke & Hornyak, 2012, p. 3). Later-life learners tend to reserve and dedicate time in their schedules to accomplishing learning goals (Russell, 2011).

### **Learning Need**

The definition of a learning need for this study is a learner’s recognition of a gap in his or her knowledge between what he or she desires to know and what they ought to know (Boone, Safrit, and Jones, 2002; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2011; Tyler, 1949; Tyler, 1971). This definition for learning needs is based on the contributions of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011) in addition to Boone, Safrit, and Jones (2002), who have published materials about developing adult education programs. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011) describe a learning need as a learner’s recognition of his or her own lack of knowledge or understanding and desire to learn. Boone, Safrit, and Jones (2002) cited R.W. Tyler’s (1949) definition of a need related to adult learning as “the difference between the present condition of the individual learner or learner group and a social norm that can be identified” (p. 12). The small difference between the definitions of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson and Boone, Safrit, and Jones is Knowles, Holton, and Swanson’s emphasis on self-assessment of their own learning objectives whereas, Boone, Safrit, and Jones’ review of other theorists’ “concept of need” (p. 143) is influenced by “psychological, social, cultural, and physiological factors” (p. 144). Boone, Safrit, and



Jones' also wrote, "needs imply a gap between what ought to be and what is." Kim and Merriam (2004) noted how adult learners were inspired by self-actualization, based on their examination of research about older adults and their motivations to learn. The adult learning theorists had a tendency to categorize the will of later-life learners as "learning for its own sake" (p. 445) or expressive learning, as opposed to gaining knowledge for "vocational reasons" (p. 445) or instrumental learning which are more often described as reasons for learning among younger adults. Kim and Merriam's (2004) input gave range to the definition for this study.

### **Learning Network**

The definition of "learning network" for this study is adapted from the convoy theory of social support (Kahn & Antonucci, 1981) and represents informal connections. A description of a learning network includes the transmission or flow of support services, information, and other resources through relationships (Bezon, 1993) and therefore demonstrates roles and relationships (Kahn & Antonucci, 1981) in terms of adult learning. For this study, a learning network refers to the supportive relationships with select family members, friends, and other formal contacts involved in the learning and related information needs of rural African Americans age 65 and over. Learning network is used interchangeably with "learning convoy," "learning support network," and "personal learning network." As appropriate, a learning network is used to describe a lifelong learning relationship over a lifespan and may suggest how a group of people live and learn together and exchange social support throughout their lives (Quadagno, 2002).

### **Life-course Versus Life-span**

“Life-course and life-span theoretical perspectives have important implications for gerontological studies. Both frameworks address patterns of change over time that inform our understanding of the process of aging. In considering health inequalities in later life, both life-course and life-span perspectives play an integral role in determining micro- and macro-level influences on health and well-being in late life,” (Fuller-Iglesias, Smith & Antonucci, 2009, p. 3)

### **Natural Network**

A natural network is support within a community from local sources such as churches, family, friends, and caregivers. (Bane, 1991). Bane (1991) asserted, “it is vital that rural minority aging programs support the natural networks available to the elderly rather than create new programs that do not fit the orientation of the community” (p. 65).

### **Need for Achievement**

An assumed basic human need is to strive for achievement of goals, and this objective motivates a wide range of behaviors and thinking (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002).

### **Perceived Need**

Yenerall (1999) introduced this term to describe when rural adults age 65 and over become aware of their own needs. He argues that rural adults age 65 and over are more inclined to “seek and use services developed to address” (p. 65) their perceived needs.

### **Outliers**

The *Cambridge Dictionary of Statistics* (Everitt, 2002) includes a definition for outlier that, when modified for qualitative research, would suggest that an outlier is an

observation that is markedly different in comparison from the others of the sample. An outlier is a singular outcome that is different from other data gathered from the research process or that, in the case of this qualitative study, is different from the resources and experiences of other study participants (Salkind, 2004). Salkind (2004) in like manner wrote, “Exactly what finding or result is an outlier is usually an arbitrary decision made by the researcher” (p. 386).

### **Poverty**

Poverty refers to situations in which an individual’s total income is insufficient to cover their basic needs (USDA, 2004b). In 2006, the poverty level in the United States for one person age 65 years and over was \$9,669 or less per year (U.S. Census, 2007b). Being poor was not a criterion for this study, and hence, participants were not asked about their income levels; nonetheless, it likely that a number of participants were living in poverty and this may have affected their information seeking options and behaviors. The Rural Sociological Society (2006) reports that the incidence of poverty increases with rural residence.

### **Rural**

The United States defines a rural area as a community of 2,500 or fewer residents (USDA, 2003a).

### **Rural Elderly (or Rural Adults Age 65 and Over)**

Rural elderly or rural adults age 65 and over are not necessarily official census terms. Rural adults age 65 and over are people, age 65 and older, living in a community of 2,500 or fewer residents. This group is often characterized as lacking economic and social resources like transportation, convenient health care services, and adequate

housing compared to their urban counterparts (Bane, 1991; Parks, 1988; Peterson & Maiden, 1993). Rural African Americans age 65 and over may experience racial discrimination (Bane, 1991; Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003) in addition to having limited formal services.

### **Summary**

This is a study about the learning needs and strategies of rural African Americans age 65 and over. Chapter I provides an introduction to the study in addition to the significance and purpose of the study, definitions for the study, and research questions. Additionally in this chapter, I discussed the elements of the study that were beyond my control and perhaps may have affected the results of the study or how the results are interpreted. Also, this chapter has offered some historical information about the topic of learning and related information needs of rural older adults and rural African Americans age 65 and over. Chapter I has also been instrumental in understanding the availability of support for rural African Americans as later-life learners as well as their perceptions of their hometowns as rural learning environments.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

This review of the literature first begins with a discussion of rural America, rural adults age 65 and over, and African Americans age 65 and over. The chapter includes research reports about educational backgrounds and learning opportunities for rural adults age 65 and over. There is also a focus on informal network support and formal network support to distinguish between types of services to rural residents. Next, the review presents information on social networks to understand the social interactions that help rural adults age 65 and over meet their learning needs. The final sections of this review discuss unmet learning needs along with related adult learning.

#### **Rural Adults Age 65 and Over Including Rural African Americans**

An overall profile of rural adults age 65 and over reveals a group of people with limited resources (Bane, 1991). For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's *2006 Rural America at a Glance* reports that rural America is aging, adding that these older adults face increasing problems with "health care, transportation, and housing" (p. 1) as rural and small town residents. The Rural Sociological Society (RSS) reports that the chances of rural poverty increase when rural residents are ethnic minorities and adults age 65 and over. The RSS begins its report about rural America by noting "one in seven residents live in poverty" (p. 1).

Statistics show a concentration of rural African Americans age 65 and over in the South (Clifford, & Lilley, 1993; Coward, Netzer, & Peek, 1998). A 1988 study of 510 Black rural adults age 60 and older from three southern states created what was at the time a groundbreaking profile of the population for general research purposes. As reported by Parks (1988), a typical rural Black older adult in 1960 and in 1980 owned his or her own home but could not afford household help. His report is based on U.S. Census data. In the 1960s and 1980s, rural Blacks age 65 and over lived on incomes below poverty level and had limited transportation. Almost 49% of the respondents from Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee had lived most of their adult lives in the South. Most were religiously devout Baptists who had not completed high school. Consistent with more recent research, Parks' participants maintained high morale and relied on local social networks for communication and support.

Coward, Netzer, and Peek (1998) expressed concerns over the lack of research on rural older adults 65 and over in their chapter on rural aging. To address this concern these researchers have published various reports about the results of their studies about rural society in gerontology publications. In their chapter "Older Rural African-Americans," they endeavor to construct a profile of the living conditions of Blacks growing older in rural regions of the United States. The chapter includes tables of data from the United States Bureau of Census, articles from gerontology journals, and content from a study Coward helped complete in 1997, as well as charts showing residential concentrations in the Southern United States. Coward, Netzer, and Peek's (1998) profile of rural older Blacks documents the poverty and health statuses of the residents. The

authors distinguish rural older Blacks as a “significant subgroup of the African American community” (p. 182).

Coward, Peek, Henretta, Duncan, Dougherty, and Gilbert (1997) wanted to investigate the aging wellness and health of older adults living alone. Coward, et al. completed 2,552 telephone interviews of Black and White respondents. Coward, et al. found some commonalities among the reports from older Blacks and Whites as residential types. Coward, et al. also examined the experiences of aging Black and White residents living with people. One finding seemed in contrast to what adult educators and social workers have come to accept about informal support systems for older adults. Blacks in this study reported as living with and among other people tended to regard their health as “fair or poor” (p. 158). Also, Blacks who lived alone believed that Whites’ residential cohorts were in better shape.

Coward, Netzer, and Peek (1998) proposed that more attention be given to rural older Blacks as a “significant minority subgroup” (p. 182). Harsh realities mixed with myths make it difficult for outsiders to understand the living conditions of the rural aged. In 1994, Krout conducted an in-depth study of rural older adults 65 and over and their dependency on community-based services which served to debunk some commonly held myths about rural older adults 65 and over. To give the reader a sense of context, Krout provides information about older rural populations, their means of making a living, ability to perform daily activities, and living proximity to cities. Krout reports characteristics of older adults 65 and over, including basic demographic information like age, race, gender, and marital status. He describes the dichotomy between the “bucolic” (p. 8) view of farm life and the “bleak realities.” From Krout’s perspective, rural older

adults 65 and over do not necessarily live better than those who live in cities as some assume. Krout points out some basic myths about rural life for older adults. One myth is that rural residents can provide for themselves more than city residents because they live on a farm. The truth is that farm life is difficult, and not everyone in the rural United States lives on a farm. Krout also indicates that rural older adults 65 and over are not necessarily healthier than non-rural residents. He also concludes that community-based services appropriate for one rural community may not be ideal for another. His investigation into the health support networks available to older rural residents indicated that the primary caregivers for older rural adults were typically spouses and family.

Bane (1991) focuses on diversity in rural America with multiple references to older minorities. Like Krout (1994a), Bane reports that the state of rural life for older adults 65 and over is grim in comparison to non-rural residents in similar age categories. He indicates that minority older age adults 65 and over have fewer services available, are more economically disadvantaged, and may have more health issues. Blacks represent a large percentage of the population of adults age 65 and over in the rural South (Bane, 1991; Coward, Netzer, & Peek, 1998; Parks, 1988; Roger, 2002). Bane suggests African Americans age 65 and over are at greater risk in terms of several economic and health indicators (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011b; DeNoon, 2005). Blacks have a higher incidence of diabetes, hypertension, and cancer than Whites (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007; National Medical Association, 2005; Pu & Chewning, 2012). Black men suffer also from cancer and musculoskeletal disorders more than White male older adults at age 65 (DeNoon, 2005; Mitchell, Hertz, & McDonald, 2005).



Rural African Americans can find life as residents in non-metropolitan areas complicated by the struggle to maintain sustainable income and good health because of lack of employment opportunities and formal services (Jolliffe, 2004; Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003; AoA, 2010). Consequently, the lives of older rural African American are the literal definition of living in “double jeopardy” (Bane, 1991). Bane uses the term “double jeopardy” to demonstrate how at risk a population becomes as it varies from mainstream society, philosophy, and thought. For example, if the iconic image of success in the United States is White, middle-aged, middle-class males living in large cities, then the survival and chances for success for any group that differs from that ideal is threatened. From Bane’s perspective, a group that is growing old in rural areas of America is an example of double jeopardy. There is an inference here that also suggests that ethnic minorities who are also women would be categorized as being three times at risk or even four times at risk of living in jeopardy. Furthermore, Bane contends that rural minority populations may be victimized because of “blatant discrimination” (p. 64) that could be exercised through population management policies. Bane reports that some rural ethnic minorities may experience obstacles because of their English language deficiencies. Social services providers, even with good intentions, may limit their own effectiveness because they are culturally insensitive or unaware.

Parks (1988) conducted a study of rural older Blacks from Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Park’s study involved over 500 African Americans, age 60 and over, and collected data about the study group’s socioeconomic factors, residence, social resources, basic needs, and support. Park pointed to the “lack of empirical research conducted on black aged populations” (p. 1) and asserted that most social gerontologists were more

interested in urban communities than in rural. He referred to several studies, including a 1981 mini-White House Conference report that concluded that rural African Americans age 65 and over were “people left behind” (p. 3). Parks’ study was a compilation of facts about the survival of African Americans age 65 and over in rural America. His research painted a clear picture of lives with limited education, limited transportation, limited social services, increasing health problems, insufficient housing and sanitation, and poverty.

Scott (2001) is one of several chapter contributors to L. K. Olsen’s (2001) *Age Through Ethnic Lenses: Caring for the Older Adults 65 and Over in a Multicultural Society*. Based on her literature review on long-term care for rural aged, Scott (2001) noted that some older adults who live on farms are more likely to be parents of adult children who have chosen to remain in rural residence. Scott (2001) offered several comparisons of support networks between rural older adults and family to those older adults living in cities. There is an underlying presumption from Scott’s literature review that rural older adults experience a higher exchange of reciprocity support from adult children than urban older parents. In summary, Scott (2001) surmised that (a) “rural elderly tend to have more children than their urban counterparts, (b) rural elderly are less likely to be childless than urban residents, (c) rural elderly are no more likely to live with family than their urban equals, and (d) urban elderly are more like to live with their adult children than rural older adults” (p. 246).

Scott (2001) also discovered that, in general, farm residents were more likely to have adult children living close in comparison to older adults who reside in rural towns and urban cities and that out-migration of young rural adults to cities affected older adults

living in rural towns more so than those who were farm residents. Additionally, Scott (2001) conveyed from her analysis that friendship networks among rural residents provided both social and "instrumental sources" (p. 247). In terms of long-term care, researchers found that friendship networks were less reliable over long periods and thus a probable outcome is that rural older adults receive more support from children during long periods of illness than aging adults in larger towns and cities.

Scott and Roberto (1987) investigated the conditions in which informal support networks consisting of family and friends exist for both rural and urban older adults. That study focused only on White adults age 65-99 in 1980 and 1981 and was a comparison of interactions between urban and rural older adults 65 and over with kin and friends. Scott and Roberto (1987) reported that rural widows generally rely on friendship networks. More relevant to my study, Scott and Kivett (1980) conducted a study on older adults 65 and over and included widowed Blacks from rural areas, ages 65-99. They reported that 85% of those they surveyed had social interactions with people they trusted and that 41% of 72 widowed Blacks would like to do more with their free time.

### **Learning Opportunities for Rural Older Adults 65 and Over**

A review of adult learning and adult education literature involves analysis of adult learning and educational opportunities for African Americans age 65 and over in rural America. This section contains the reported outcomes of research on the learning needs of rural older adults. For instance, Parks' (1988) classic study pointed to a population practically impoverished from lack of education. His study demonstrated that the average grade completed by the study group (rural older adults 65 and over) was just under the 9th grade at 8.62 years. More recently, Roff and Klemmack (2003) also observed that

educational attainment of grade 8 and less is more common in rural (or non-metropolitan) areas. More rural older adults 65 and over have less than a high school education compared to older adults 65 and over in urban centers (Roff & Klemmack, 2003), and rural Blacks have typically spent fewer years in high school than rural Whites (Clifford & Lilley, 1993; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005). However, Clifford and Lilley (1993) note that migration patterns have an interesting relationship with educational levels in rural America. They cite the March 1990 *Current Population Survey's* analysis of migration patterns that revealed that older adults relocating from cities to rural life tend to have fewer years of education but greater incomes. Although Roff and Klemmack suggest that aging baby boomers will have more education, these authors still believe that educational disparities will remain in the South.

Whether permanent residents or recently relocated, rural Blacks with limited education, especially older adults, may be more likely to have trouble obtaining reliable information for decision-making (Childers, 1975). While the RSS (Rural Sociological Society) promotes increased educational training to engage young rural residents (2006), such educational opportunities or similar training do not appear to be targeted at older rural residents. In the absence of structured training intended for aging rural residents, community centers are one of the more recognized sources for educational outreach for rural older adults 65 and over (Krout, 1994c).

Spence (1997) stressed the need for expanding educational opportunities for older adults 65 and over. She proposed a home-based education program for rural African Americans age 65 and over. Spence's article is a compilation of demographic data about rural aged Blacks in addition to a program proposal. She characterizes rural African

Americans age 65 and over as less educated than other age groups with Whites having more formal education than Black adults 65 and over. Spence speculated that having more formal education improves the quality of life for rural African Americans age 65 and over because there is a direct relationship between educational attainment and income. She also suggests certain elements of program planning to increase the effectiveness and success of her proposed educational program. She discusses two types of learning for the older adults 65 and over. Expressive learning is learning for personal enjoyment while instrumental learning is more about survival knowledge for aging adults. Her review of literature lists the barriers that community educators may encounter in developing a viable educational program for any rural older adult age 65 and over including Blacks. She suggests that a program coordinator of a rural, adult learning center intended for older adults should be prepared to accept that small communities will have less resources.

The reports from Spence (1997), Spink and Cole (2001), Spink and Cole (2006), and Strom, Carter, & Schmidt (2004) suggest that rural towns and communities may not have readily available learning centers and financial support to sustain a successful adult education program. If a program coordinator of an adult learning center for rural older adults obtains the physical assets and fiscal backing, they may yet have to contend with conflicting philosophies about the value and necessity of later-life learning (AARP, 2000; Borthwick, 1983; Glendenning, 2000). The receptiveness of residents could vary from person to person because of a lack of confidence in their potential to continue to learn (Roman, 2004). The chance of experiencing embarrassment could contribute to a lack of interest (Roman, 2004). The participation of invested community members may fluctuate

because of personal problems, health concerns, lack of reliable transportation, and lack of social connections (Withnall, 2006; Ziegler, 2008). An achievable curriculum needs to support the personal priorities of the learning community. Therefore, a program coordinator of an adult learning center for rural older adults would be more successful if he or she can demonstrate course relevance to improving life in rural areas (Kim & Merriam, 2004).

### **Formal and Informal Network Support**

Bezon's exploratory study (1993) investigated the reliance of isolated rural older adults 65 and over on informal networks and formal networks. She used a case study of a 96-year old rural elder to demonstrate relationships (transactions or exchanges) within his network of family, neighbors, and friends. Bezon's pilot study proved that more needs to be done to understand "rural social phenomena" (p. 28) and rural older adults 65 and over. Similarly, Parks' (1988) study of rural African Americans age 65 and over in the late 1980s revealed impressions of rural Blacks as being and having relationships with Whites that they described as paternalistic. Descriptive terms like invisible and isolated suggest a state of vulnerability due to a lack of social support or a formal social network that would affect the group's ability to have its needs—information or otherwise—recognized.

A number of authors have discussed the challenge of reaching older Blacks through formal services and networks. Barer and Johnson (2003), Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson (1986), and Childers (1975) acknowledge that there is a long-standing preference among Black older adults age 65 and over for informal networks. Barer and Johnson (2003) reported findings that African Americans exhibit a higher level of religiosity than

Whites. This suggests that African Americans age 65 and over are likely to feel more comfortable accepting information from fellow church members rather than from external sources. Furthermore, Black rural older adults 65 and over tend to live in and rely on communities that lack formal services (Kivett, 1993; Krout, 1994c; Li & Blaser, 2003). In the absence of formal services, African Americans age 65 and over will rely on each other as part of a "helping tradition" (p. 138) in the Black community (Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003). If this preference is the most common practice of seeking information, then a result could be that these older adults 65 and over are recycling dated and otherwise unreliable information among themselves.

Several researchers have attempted to explain why the lack of social services complicate the development of high-quality rural learning environments for rural older adults age 65 and over (Krout, 1994a; Krout, 1994b; Krout, 1994c; & Roman, 2004). Peterson and Maiden (1993) highlight the limitations of formal agencies like the Rural Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) (Texas, 2007) and the AARP (Hales-Mabry, 1993). In reference to the availability and use of community-based services, Krout (1994b) sees financing for both services and personal financing (for people) a major problem. The problem of insufficient funding for organizations can curtail services. Rural residents with low house-hold incomes need resources provided for them. Krout acknowledges the setback that can occur when the target group does not or cannot participate in community programs specifically developed for them. He determined that there are often negative results to outreach programs associated with low interest and community participation. Rural service providers are tasked to resolve problems related to inadequate participation to continue to exist. The service providers may lack strategies for promoting and

matching their services to residents' special needs even though the need is real. A solution is to identify a key problem within the targeted community. For example, Krout explains that older adults want to remain independent and this single concern is justification for continuing community-based services.

Krout (1994b) described community-based social services as varying in purposes from providing healthcare assistance to information source. Social services also exist to provide consultation and to make referrals to other agencies and service providers. One obstacle that prevents older rural adults from taking advantage of available services is a lack of information about their existence. (Coward, et al., 1997, Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003). Rural residents may not have been made aware about the availability of community services and therefore they do not realize their usefulness. The awareness problem is a constant theme related to the inadequate use of available services to rural older adults 65 and over. Bane (1991) uses the term "double jeopardy" to describe the complexity of aging in rural areas. Bane's (1991) reference to double jeopardy could also be used to describe the condition of any ethnic minority age 65 and over who is cutoff from available social services either because they do not know about them or do not understand how to take advantage of them. Li and Blaser (2003) offer a solution to this dilemma that involves integrating formal and informal services. They recommend ways to establish successful programs for the rural older adults 65 and over, including understanding the local culture and getting to know people in the community. They also encourage service providers like social workers to find a way to become part of the community. Li and Blaser (2003) instruct social-services providers that working in rural areas requires them to be "rooted in local communities" (p. 79) in order to motivate



residents to participate in programs. Service providers should also be prepared to experiment to discover the overall best approach to implement a program for a targeted population. Hence, Li and Blaser (2003) suggest getting to know residents. Additionally, service providers should work to learn as much about local cultures as possible. Social service providers can learn more about clientele culture by getting involved. According to Li and Blaser (2003), service professionals should participate in local activities like popular celebrations, school events, and community improvement initiatives to begin to understand the people they want to help.

Program developers should really get to know residents well. Li and Blaser (2003) propose that if program developers feel comfortable about offering their services because they understand their clientele then their programs will have much better chances of being successful. Following this formula for success, formal services can be prepared to help out when informal support networks exceed their capability (Li & Blaser, 2003). Li and Blaser (2003) report that 82% of rural older adults 65 and over use informal caregivers. These providers are probably members of the family or close friends. They may also be rural residents with their own critical needs. If we assess a situation based on Bane's concept of double jeopardy, an informal caregiver-an adult daughter or son-may also experience feelings of being removed from society because of their rural residence. An informal caregiver could also be at risk because of their gender, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, and personal finances. Additionally, the informal caregiver could be in jeopardy if he or she does not have the training they need to be effective in his or her role. In fact, a combination of stressors like lack of confidence, lack of proper training, lack of a support network and feelings of isolation could limit the capacity of a

person to provide assistance (Li & Blaser, 2003). As previously noted, formal services may be called to help out when informal support networks exceed their capability. After being contacted, the program developers for the formal service providers can assess the effectiveness of the informal support a person received and begin to provide additional support as needed to fill in gaps in service. Again, Li and Blaser (2003) recommend that formal service providers focus on having representatives who are educated about the local culture and respectful of it.

Coulehan and Block (2006) advocate the importance of developing cultural competence from communicating with patients and cultivating relationships with them in a professional manner. They describe cultural competence as “the ability to understand, accept, appreciate, and work with individuals of cultures other than one’s own” (p. 228). Coulehan and Block seem to agree with Bane (1991) that more cultural sensitivity is needed in the provision of services. They suggest that underserved populations will respond best to empathy, validation, patience, and details in explaining procedures, as well as encouragement and “positive feedback” (p. 239). If a service provider follows Coulehan and Block’s advice, then perhaps its staff will not be perceived as being insensitive to cultural and ethnic differences-if not racist. Bane (1991) claims that racism and discrimination are social problems that are barriers to access to formal services and support systems for ethnic minorities. Bane (1991) also expressed concern that some service providers practice discrimination against rural minorities including Blacks or do nothing to discourage it and therefore these groups are discouraged from seeking assistance.

## **Social Networks and Social Support Roles**

Bezon (1993) examined the social networks of isolated rural older adults 65 and over. According to Bezon, some older rural adults exhibit a “cultural style” different from that of urban residents and this style “precludes their use of services that foster healthy life styles” (p. 20). She conducted a needs assessment based on a pilot study involving 19 informants and researched the effectiveness of rural support systems for adults age 65 and over. Bezon (1993) created a descriptive profile of the population as persons who are at least 70 years old, who live alone, and suffer from three or more chronic illnesses. Bezon’s (1993) needs assessment proved that these older adults required minimal support to remain independent; however, a person’s self-reliant lifestyle becomes threatened when “he or she does not have the minimal assistance” (p. 20) or social support network “they need to be independent” (p. 20). Bezon defines a social network as a process involving links, nodes, information transactions, and people. She described the exchange of information as one transaction that could occur between a giver and a receiver and therefore depicts social networks as a process of social interaction.

Bezon (1993) defines several concepts important to understanding networks and for one of her case studies depicted an underlying network system for rural older adults. Networks are measured by density, centrality, and range and thus a dense network suggests “intranetwork support” (Bezon, 1993, p. 24). Centrality, according to Bezon (1993), indicates levels of dependence of one node on another and that range measures access to resources. Also, a functional network includes clusters of information, the flow of information, and some social processing. The clusters represent social connections

between members of a social network while the flow process involves the transmission of resources and information to the receiver (Bezon, 1993).

Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) introduce their theory of the *Black helping tradition* of older and rural Blacks. They express concern that existing racial, social and cultural environments may leave rural African Americans age 65 and over vulnerable due to lack of resources and lack of knowledge of critical support services. Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) recommend that social workers consider the importance of religion when developing community-based programs in Black communities. Their research indicates a strong connection between religiosity and older adults in the Black community, and they also note that aging Blacks tend to be very active in their churches because of the cultural significance of faith and religion.

For formal services to be successful with rural African Americans age 65 and over, agencies must educate representatives about the cultural factors involved in providing support to Black communities. In concert with advice from Li and Blaser (2003) and Bane (1991), Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) encourage program planners to involve the community. In this case, the formal service providers should solicit participation from adults in a local community who are age 65 and over. Additionally, Rasheed and Rasheed suggest supporting the informal support network by providing some type of financial aid for informal care providers who have been “recruited” (p. 148) by older adults.

Some research outcomes on information referral and sharing suggest that local culture at times establishes who within a community has authority to access, evaluate, and share information. The results of Benidir’s research (1991) demonstrated that certain

people within some communities are respected for their knowledge more than others.

Therefore, a society may have designated members who are trusted because of their perceived depth of knowledge and perceived authority. The focus of Benedir's (1991) dissertation study was about the reliance of adults on "second hand knowledge."

According to Benidir's findings (1991), information seekers have a tendency to rely on a "cognitive authority" for decision-making. In her study, a person was recognized as having "cognitive authority" when others relied on them for information and advice.

Similarly, Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson (1986) explored *helper choice* for aged Blacks. Their analysis was based on responses from 581 respondents age 55 and over. Chatters et al. gave respondents categories from which to choose an informal helper. The categories were spouse/partner, son, daughter, father, mother, brother, sister, friend, and neighbor. Study participants were asked to reveal who might help them when they were suffering from an illness or disability (p. 96). The study results showed that female relatives were depended on most (e.g., 41.5% for daughters compared to sons at 37.2%; 28.7% preferred sisters to brothers at 20%). They also collected data about education and income levels as well as residence and marital status. This study again is an example of the preference of African Americans age 65 and over for their own informal networks. While family members are most trusted, distant relatives and nonkin can play vital roles when closer relatives are not accessible.

Finally, Spink and Cole (2001) studied the informal and formal methods of information-seeking behavior of an urban low-income Black community. Three hundred residents completed a twelve-page questionnaire about their household and personal information needs. The results demonstrated that residents had established patterns for

managing everyday information needs, but they were not as successful at obtaining resources to improve their overall quality of life. Researchers noted that the quantitative design of the study limited their chance to learn more about the ways in which study participants go about finding educational information. However, Spink and Cole's work suggested that environment and culture can influence how groups approach information seeking for any learning project. A critical finding of this study was that recipients may prefer to receive information "informally" as a group.

According to Hales-Mabry (1993), it is important to keep all older adults 65 and over aware of their information needs in order to give them the ability to change the world surrounding them. She explained that she "relied strongly upon analyses of primary research and reviews of literature provided in monographs written by social science academicians" (p. vii) to develop her book. Her chapter on services to ethnic minorities is based on a literature review of resources about Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians who were also adults age 65 and over. The section entitled "Serving African-American Older Adults" covers discrimination, "kinship-and-friends network" (p. 155), and the role of the church in the lives of Black older adults. Hales-Mabry summarized from her review of the related literature that African Americans age 65 and over are more inclined to rely on their family and other Blacks for support. She advised information providers to recognize this behavioral tendency when planning for this group.

### **Learning Needs and Related Information Seeking Behavior**

Hwang (1971) explored the information interests of 277 older Oregon adults. The study is significant because it is an early work demonstrating when and why older adults might seek information for personal interests. Hwang's study also demonstrated that the

information interests of these respondents were not simply limited to issues related to aging but included various topics. Hwang also examined how social activity and disengagement affected information seeking behavior of the older adults age 65 and over. He conducted a mixed methods study using a questionnaire and interviews to collect data. The interviews were conducted as part of a research grant from the National Association of Broadcasters to understand media usage patterns and satisfaction of older adults. He drew his sample from the Eugene-Springfield, Oregon area and surveyed 188 persons age 65 and over as a subset of 277 participants. Hwang (1971) recognized a relationship between the role of “opinion leaders” and the role of “opinion seekers” and the relevance for this finding for his study on information-seeking behaviors. According to Hwang’s survey definition, an opinion leader is an older adult whose opinion or advice is sought on one or more topics. Therefore, an opinion leader could be actively involved in various members’ informal networks as an information provider. An opinion seeker is an older adult who solicits and requests the opinions and advice of opinion leaders. Hwang (1971) discovered that opinion leaders are often opinion seekers as well; although, opinion seekers do not necessarily also serve as opinion leaders. Additionally, he discovered that some adults age 65 and over, who were less socially active, were also less likely to seek out information sources from beyond their personal comfort zones. The study also reported little difference in level of interest between opinion leaders and opinion seekers on personal issues.

Wicks’ (2004) study investigated differences between the information needs of institutionalized older adults and those living independently. The study was an indication that all older adults regardless of residential style actively seek information for personal

interests but rely most on verbal and interpersonal communication to stay abreast of events and news. This study incorporated the use of “social networks and role theory” (p. 4). The survey results were based on observations of 29 participants. The study also suggested that 10 years difference in age could make a difference in how older adults seek and obtain information. The most notable distinction between the youngest of this older-adult population with an average age of 72.4 years and their older cohorts at 83.6 years was that the young-old were more comfortable using computers. In terms of access to information, Wicks (2004) concluded that institutionalized residents probably have access to more reliable material and resources.

Some researchers have studied the everyday information gathering approaches of older adults. Berg, Meegan, and Klaczynski (1999) studied how older adults use or rely on past experience to assist them in everyday problem solving. They compared information gathering requests and decision-making of 34 younger adults (mean age 20.9) and 27 older adults (mean age 72.9). Berg, Meegan, and Klaczynski (1999) determined that persons who made decisions based on experiences (typically the older adults) were less inclined to seek or request additional information. A twelve-month study supported by the Center for Studying Health System Change (Tu & Hargraves, 2003) revealed that Blacks were least inclined to seek information from the Internet compared to Whites, Latinos and other Americans. They were also less inclined to consult recognized health information sources and pursue additional information from doctors unless prompted compared to other health information consumers. Tu and Hargraves (2003) also discovered patterns of “passive” behavior among older adults as consumers. They defined passive consumers as those “consumers who will not seek



health information on their own” (Tu & Hargraves, 2003, p. 3). Additionally, Tu and Hargraves’ (2003) study demonstrated a relationship between the level of education and the effectiveness of information seeking. The better-educated consumers were more inclined to conduct their own personal research than those with less education. For example, participants with postgraduate degrees were twice as likely to pursue multiple ways to obtain accurate and helpful health information.

Roman’s (2004) case study on literacy and aging also revealed issues regarding educational levels, information gathering, and quality of life. Roman challenged standard definitions and impressions of what it means to be literate. Her article included definitions of functional literacy and health literacy. Roman reported two facts that are relevant to the current investigation. First, she stated that older adults have a higher level of illiteracy. Furthermore, Roman reported that “African Americans exhibit the highest prevalence of illiteracy, followed by Hispanics, Native Americans, and Whites of lower socioeconomic status” (p. 84).

Matthews, Sellergren, Manfredi, and Williams (2002) examined how culture and a history of distrust of medical practitioners could represent barriers for Black cancer patients. They conducted a focus group study of Blacks who had been diagnosed with cancer to investigate their methods to obtain quality medical and health information about their illnesses. When it came to health options, Blacks preferred methods that were familiar to them. The participants (average age of 51 years old) were reluctant to consider information about new health options because of their experimental nature and outcome of cases like the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment (p. 214). The Matthews et al. (2002) study showed that respondents depended more on “word-of-mouth” from friends

and family for health information, even though they had access to doctors and medical information pamphlets. The researchers found evidence of misinformation about cancer among focus group participants and “cultural distrust” (p. 215) of medical professionals. Furthermore, a concern was expressed that these patients’ reliance on informal networks for information increased their chances of disseminating and receiving misinformation.

Purdie and Boulton-Lewis’ (2003) study of 160 Australian older adults examined the learning needs of adults age 70 and over. They gathered information about Australian older adults’ learning concerns, feelings about later-life learning and their approaches to later-life learning. They also examined the difficulties of personal and social barriers associated with learning for people over 70. Purdie and Boulton-Lewis (2003) established that “participants were confident they would successfully address needs related to health, safety, leisure, and transportation ... but not those associated with technology” (p. 13).

Woo (2002) considered how optimism can affect information-seeking behavior. Woo used case studies, interviews and observation to collect data in her qualitative study on engaged learners age 65 and over. The Woo (2002) study was designed to explore information-seeking behaviors of older adults wanting information about the world around them. She also identified at least six characteristics (or attributes) of older learners: (a) creativity, (b) intellectual curiosity, (c) leader of thought, (d) taste, (e) passion to learn, and (f) resilience. Most importantly, she defined engaged learners as older adults with a passion for learning. Occasionally, rural minority adults age 65 and over may use service representatives to help them find resources and as outlets for communicating concerns and frustrations (Krout, 1994c). The recipients received information, guidance and counseling to resolve their adult learning needs. Krout (1994c)

has identified three possible responses from service providers including: (a) information and listening, (b) information and guidance, and (c) information and referral.

Information encountering is defined as “a form of information acquisition that is not planned or anticipated” (Erdelez, 1995, p. 3). The Erdelez (1995) study was conducted to understand information-encountering behavior and its findings are important to this study because “the process of data collection supported the researcher’s expectation that people commonly experience information encountering” (p. 149). Even though the research was conducted in an academic environment with younger adults, the findings have value for rural learning environments because they suggest that information encountering for older rural African Americans could come from “browsing (recreational and exploratory); information seeking (informal and formal); and social contacts (p. 139). Therefore, program developers, social workers, and social service providers could train to address any social and cultural barriers to incidental learning and coincidental information encounters in rural communities.

### **Adult Learning**

Only a few studies have examined the connection between adult learning theory and information seeking among older adults as means for healthy transitions while aging. Roberson and Merriam (2005) produced one such study that examined the cause and effect of self-directed learning (SDL) of older adults to manage the challenges of aging. Roberson and Merriam's study investigates how aging adults use data from SDL undertakings to comprehend and cope with age-related life changes. Their study was conducted in rural areas and included qualitative data collected by interviewing 10 older adults ranging from age 75 to age 85. Much like this study, Roberson and Merriam

(2005) concluded that there is more to discern about the learning process of older adults and the decisions they make as they contend with the complexities of old age. They asserted the importance of additional research on later-life learning, and as related to their study, supported conducting more research about why older adults choose to become self-directed learners.

Roberson and Merriam (2005) introduced several definitions or course of actions for SDL by citing Knowles's definition of the process. Knowles proposed that SDL occurs in "six consecutive steps: climate setting, diagnosing learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing, and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Roberson & Merriam, 2005, page 271). The research partners also listed Allen Tough's 1979 investigation as an example of linear learning strategies (Roberson & Merriam, 2005). Roberson and Merriam (2005) contrast the differences between what they refer to as linear designs of self-directed learning as distinguished from interactive approaches. Malcolm Knowles's concept of SDL is considered linear whereas Donald W. Mocker's and George Spear's, Lorraine Cavaliere's and D. Randy Garrison's is described as interactive (Roberson & Merriam, 2005).

A definition of linear problem-solving is deemed as a set number of logical steps or progressions (Roberson & Merriam, 2005). Roberson and Merriam's perspective on interactive learning is a method of problem-solving shaped by personal experiences, available resources, and learning environments.

In their study of septuagenarians, Purdie and Boulton-Lewis (2003) noted that learning activities could be crucial to productive aging. They cite Albert Bandura's

theory of self-efficacy. In addition, based on a lifelong learning survey (AARP, 2000) of adults age 50 and over, more than 90% of the respondents surveyed expressed an interest in continued learning. Other studies reveal that culture and religion could be factors in influencing why adults learn and how they learn. Merriam and Mohamad (2000) and Anwar and Supaat (1998) researched the relationships between Malaysian cultural beliefs and older-adult learning patterns. The researchers compared Malaysian approach to later-life learning to how it is done on the Western side of the world and in the United States. A distinct difference is Western cultural insistence on individualism and the importance of autonomy. Later-life learning for older Malaysian adults was found to foster group interactivity and was often a way for communities to socialize. The aging Malaysian elder is therefore suggested to live out their lives in dependence on each other in comparison to Westerners' cultural tendency to maximize self-sufficiency.

The comparisons between the research performed by Purdie and Boulton-Lewis (2003), Merriam and Mohamad (2000), and Anwar and Supaat (1998) resolved that learning and related information needs and seeking strategies within a community of rural older adults is first a product of culture and second, an outcome of older adults' needs to be independent. The point of focus is realizing that all aspects of Western culture (in the United States) are not accepted or shared by all U.S. residents. This research study can help determine if rural Blacks age 65 and over are more inclined to learn as a group or as individuals.

Best (2001) incorporated discussions of adult learning in her article on health education for older adults 65 and over. Her quote from Malcolm Knowles points to a connection between purpose and motivation to learn. Knowles, who believed that adults

desire to be self-directed learners, emphasized that “factors that can be immediately applied to the individual’s situation” (p. 47) will probably be learned. This idea of meaningful learning was also addressed by Coons and Mace (1996) who noted that “aging adults invest themselves in activities and work that are relevant and meaningful.”

Self-directed learning became the focus of Heisel’s dissertation study (1993) looking at the opportunities for learning available to urban African Americans age 65 and over. Self-directed learning theory posits that some adult learners demonstrate autonomy and personal drive to accomplish their own learning goals (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). She chose to devote part of her study to researching information-seeking skills of urban Black older adults. Heisel explained that little is known about the “informal learning activities and the self learning” (p. 4) of urban African Americans age 65 and over. Therefore, she conducted her study to fill in the gaps about “purposeful learning activities” (p. 4) for these urban learners. Her supposition is that self-learning efforts involve acquiring knowledge through information gathering. Heisel’s quantitative study involved 43 Black men and 89 Black women, ages 60 to 94. The participants’ self-learning concerns were measured by learning activity levels (LAL). The finding of the Heisel study suggested that higher LAL scores represented positive views by the study group about having personal learning activities. Overall, the study showed that “older adults of disadvantaged backgrounds” (p. 99) could achieve “purposeful learning activities” and could be “motivated to pursue educational interests” (p. 99).

Howard Y. McClusky is “often referred to as the father of educational gerontology” (Courtenay, 1994, p. 213). From the 1920s through the 1970s, McClusky showed diligence and dedication to the state of adult learning in the United States. Along

with his perspectives on adult learning theory, adult education legislation, and the birth of what is known to us today as lifelong learning, McClusky also believed that “education is the basic right of all persons of all age groups in society” (Waskel, 1982, p. 125; as cited in Kressley & Huebschmann 2002, p. 841). McClusky concluded that older adults had unique learning needs and developed an adult learning theory consisting of an hierarchical approach to understanding the learning needs of older adults (Einstein, 2011; Hales-Mabry, 1993; McFarland, 1993). McClusky’s philosophy is that people should engage in learning continuously and henceforth learning is “one of the ways of enabling older people to have a full and meaningful life, and as a means of helping them develop their potential as a resource for the betterment of society” (Waskel, 1982, p. 125; as cited in Kressley & Huebschmann 2002, p. 841).

McClusky (1954) also wrote that “older people cannot live by shuffle board and canasta alone” (p. 522), and later in his career developed his typology of learning needs for older adults (Jurich, 2010). The hierarchically arranged list begins with coping needs at the lowest level. Next, older adults must reach a satisfactory level of expressive needs, followed by influence needs, contributive needs, and ultimately, transcendence need (Campbell, 2005; Cusak & Thompson, 1998; Einstein, 2011; Hales-Mabry, 1993; Jurich, 2010; McFarland, 1993).

### **Summary**

This chapter has summarized the literature review focusing on information-seeking behaviors and learning needs of older adults 65 and over adults and more generally about information-seeking behaviors and experiences of rural America. This literature review examines aspects of information gathering from everyday information

gathering to quality of life and health care information for older rural populations. Additionally, the literature review reveals common concerns in regards to access to needed information and quality of life for African Americans age 65 and over. It examines educational backgrounds and learning opportunities for all rural older adults 65 and over. The literature review also highlights literature pointing to the role of social networks and relationships in information gathering including information about social networks (formal and informal) and social interactions of rural isolated older adults 65 and over. In the latter section, the literature review details how and why both formal and informal learning are important for older adults.

This chapter includes descriptions of lifestyle and demographics for rural older adults 65 and over and rural African Americans age 65 and over. It also contains examples of problems related to aging in isolated areas and growing old as a minority in rural America. This chapter also expounded on the learning opportunities for rural older adults 65 and over. This literature review was compiled to introduce resources about learning and culture.

In addition to cultural influences on adult learning practices, this chapter included examples of adult learning programs proposed and explored. Resources providing historical data about educational attainment of rural older adults demonstrate gaps in educational experiences of rural and urban Blacks and Whites. The chapter examined logistics of support programs intended for rural older Blacks and included advice to program developers on how to accomplish their mission. Chapter Two is concluded with data on information-seeking behaviors in relation to adult education, and adult learning theory.



### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how rural African Americans age 65 and over engage in information seeking within their community to satisfy learning needs. Although various studies have, in some way, addressed the state of everyday information gathering among rural residents (Anwar & Supaat, 1998; Berg, Meegan, & Klaczynski; Vavrek, 1990), older adults (Hwang, 1971; Wicks, 2004; Woo, 2002), rural Americans age 65 and over (Roff & Klemmack, 2003), and African Americans older adults (Heisel, 1983; Matthews, Sellergren, Manfredi, & Williams, 2002; Spink & Cole, 2001), there seem to be a limited number of research studies that are exclusively focused on the rural community of African Americans age 65 and over. Therefore, little is known about the state of everyday information gathering by rural African Americans age 65 and over

This study was conducted because other studies on the information-seeking behaviors of the adults age 65 and over did not substantially involve this population (Wicks, 2004). Previous studies have focused on the availability of information - digital divide issues for example - but have not offered much in terms of understanding the day-to-day information needs that adults age 65 and over experience (Case, 2002).

The study aims to investigate if, when, and how rural older Blacks find appropriate information as part of their learning strategy to accomplish later-life learning goals. This study was not about routine information-seeking on a day-to-day basis unless the outcome is to complete a learning need. An objective of this study is to explore the learning needs of African Americans age 65 and over living in rural areas. It is essential that possible adult educators, rural gerontologists, social workers, and librarians serving this subgroup become aware of the life-long learning potential of this population. Another objective of this study was to explore the patterns in which rural older Blacks seek information for self-directed learning. A desired outcome of the survey was an understanding of the circumstances under which African Americans age 65 and over turn to outsiders for assistance.

The study investigated several broad questions regarding the learning activities of rural African Americans age 65 and over. The research questions below were developed to accomplish the previously stated purpose and objectives of this study.

1. What types of learning needs and priorities do rural African Americans age 65 and over describe?
2. What resources and materials do rural African Americans age 65 and over report as available to them to fulfill their learning and related information needs?
3. What barriers to learning do rural African Americans age 65 and over encounter in their efforts to fulfill their learning and related information needs?
4. What learning strategies do rural African Americans age 65 and over use to gather information through learning networks?

### **General Design – Ethnographic Research**

The approach chosen for this study was ethnographic in nature. Wolcott (1997) categorized ethnographic research as a qualitative, data-gathering process. However, the process of data gathering is aimless without proper analysis and management of the research data. Thus, Wolcott stressed how the union of fieldwork and descriptive coding are necessary elements of an ethnographer's experience. According to Wolcott, “ethnography means, literally, a picture of the ‘way of life’ of some identifiable group of people” (p. 156). Based on that definition, an ethnographic approach permitted me as an opportunity to analyze the learning needs and information-seeking behaviors of rural, older, Black adults age 65 and over (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 2002).

In reference to Patton's (2002) position on ethnographic research, my purpose for pursuing this study was to investigate belief systems, to understand constructed realities, and to understand motivators for behaviors (Patton, 2002), in this case, of rural Blacks age 65 and over as later-life learners. In order to do that, my goal was to have study participants see me as one of their own. To accomplish that goal, I needed to gain the trust of community members (Monaghan & Just, 2002). However, I cannot describe my approach as fully ethnographic because the study was not designed to directly observe information-seeking behaviors as they occurred.

In reference to exploratory research, Patton (2002) writes that it is appropriate, “in new fields of study where little work has been done, few definitions or hypotheses exist and little is known about phenomenon, qualitative theory inquiry is a reasonable beginning point for research” (p. 193). Therefore, an exploratory study is a research design used to gain insights into a phenomenon. For the researcher, the success of this

researcher study does not require direct observation to understand a phenomenon nor is it essential that the researcher to experience a phenomena. Thus, the perspective of the researcher does not factor into the results as a participant.

Adler and Adler (1987) state that “field researchers should enter settings, announce their intentions, and begin to interact with the people they encounter” (p. 12). In accordance with Wolcott’s expectations of ethnographic researchers, I hoped to entrench myself into the rural communities on every possible level. In concert, both Adler and Adler and Wolcott provide instructions to ethnographers about integrating into “cultural systems” (Wolcott, 1997, p. 157). Adler and Adler (1987) also referred to the literal activity of “hanging out” in a community to develop relationships. The “hanging out” process seems similar to Dewalt and Dewalt’s (2002) description of the progression from “first contact” (p. 37) to finding a sponsor who is respected by the constituency they represent. The trust factor in qualitative research is equally important for study participants as the researcher. In fact, Dewalt and Dewalt’s (2002) and Patton’s reference to “entrée” and Adler and Adler’s conditions of membership all convey that a personal relationship based on trust has to develop between the researcher and someone from the community.

As a researcher, I never had an opportunity to directly observe information-seeking behaviors for self-directed learning by any of the study participants. Both Adler and Adler (1987) and Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) describe the types of participation roles that qualitative researchers can attain in the field. Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) match categories of participation-observation (level of activity) to the pertinent membership role

of ethnographers. The four authors describe the purposes of “peripheral”, “active”, and “complete membership.”

I would describe my role in the field as an ethnographer as peripheral membership. A peripheral status is the most accurate description because of the methods I used to establish relationships with gatekeepers. For instance, my early visits to local churches and participation in church activities leading up to conducting the study made me a person of interest to the community. In the rural African American churches, guests are always recognized during service. I was introduced by family members and I believe that church members felt more comfortable welcoming me to their churches as a result. I was asked to stand to be introduced or to introduce myself.

Additionally, I do have a “natural affinity” (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 40) for the population and the area that made it easier to assimilate into the community to observe phenomena, as I grew up in the area. However, I do not demographically represent the group I studied and would not have had a chance to meet them unless I was welcomed in to their towns, community, churches, and ultimately their homes (Adler & Adler, 1987). As I reflect upon my experience, I realize that should not describe my participation role as moderately involved because my real-life schedule restricted my access to the field.

### **Gatekeeper Participation**

The study would not have been as successful without the support, availability, and influence of community gatekeepers. Each gatekeeper used their knowledge of their community to help select potential study participants. According to Patton (2002), the first stage to fieldwork participation is entry. Adler and Adler’s (1987) advice is to begin the data collecting process by being open and overt about your purpose. Adler and Adler

(1987) maintain that honest and open transactions with a gatekeeper is the most favorable method for obtaining entry to field site and essential for maintaining permission to access. Farber (2006) joins Alder and Alder (1987), Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) and Patton (2002) in recommending to field researchers to develop a list of liaison roles suitable for spokespersons or representatives of the subgroups or communities being studied. These liaisons are often critical for gaining entry. I understood all along that I would need a personal contact, sponsor, key informant, or gatekeeper. Farber (2006) described a gatekeeper as "the person who will allow you access to the places, people, events, or documents that you wish to study" (p. 369). Through this study, I have had a chance to examine the learning culture of rural Blacks 65 years of age and older. I have had an opportunity to uncover if their culture and rural environment present barriers to accomplishing learning needs and information seeking efforts. Below, I expound on how I was able to engage openly and interview 14 study participants in their homes. The involvement of active gatekeepers put me in an ideal position to complete my study of older rural African Americans despite age differences and lack of church connections.

**Cultural connections with gatekeepers.** According to Patton "any human group of people interacting for a period of time will evolve a culture" (p. 80). If Patton is right, then perhaps I hoped I could claim membership to some of the small towns even though I had not lived in that area for 18 years. Again, I grew up in rural northeast central Texas and I came home to visit my grandmother. I realized that because I grew up in a small town that I could make some connections by being seen by the right people - local Blacks. I started asking directions to the "Black" part of town. Initially, the people I asked stated that they did not know where the "black" section of town was or if there was

a section that was predominantly Black. I was also told once by one person that she only worked in the town and did not know the residents. I was seemingly running out of options when I remembered that Blacks live on the east side in my rural Texas hometown. Hence, I went on a hunch and traveled east of each town and easily located where most Black residents lived with only one exception.

My research proposal required that I locate and interview Black residents age 65 and older. Once I found what appeared to be an area in each town that was predominantly Black residents, I still needed to find residents age 65 and older. I decided to slowly drive around the community. In one community, once I located the right part of town I got out of my car when I saw two women probably ranging from age 28-35 in appearance talking across the street from each other. I introduced myself and told them that I grew up in Holts, Texas. They immediately opened up and we began to exchange names. While they did not know my grandmother, they knew my mother and stepfather. One of the ladies had dated one of my brothers. I felt right at home. Next, I told the women about my study and in an instant, they gave me the name of a person who would become part of the study. However, I was not able to get either to introduce me to their neighbor.

Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) believe that recognizing and respecting local communication patterns is essential to developing the type of rapport necessary to complete an ethnographic study. As much as possible, I respected speech mannerisms and expressions. To be honest, I felt very comfortable with the way the study participants communicated. In this respect, I was just as much in my own cultural environment as they were. Therefore, the interview process incorporated the use of gestures and words commonly used by the rural residences of the Northeast Central Texas.

**Age difference between researcher and gatekeepers.** As a researcher, I was at least determined to minimize any differences between me and members of the study group. My first challenge was addressing the age difference between me and my population. In some cases, the differences between my age and the study participants' were more than 40 years. My grandmother, Letha Earl, was my first gatekeeper for obvious reasons. She is a resident of a rural community in Northeast Central Texas county like the other study participants. My grandmother was also more than 80 years old; and therefore, she was available to help navigate the age gap.

Although most of the people I met were closer to my grandmother's age, I did develop a relationship with a gatekeeper near my age. She was between 40-45 years old and guided me to three study participants. I met this gatekeeper when she chose to investigate my presence in her community while I was also observing her.

**Rural African American church culture and gatekeepers.** My second challenge involved finding gatekeepers who had affiliation with the local churches. Although I grew up in, around, and near the rural community, I am no longer a member of a congregation in rural churches. Yet, like Barer and Johnson (2003), Burton (2007), Peterson (1997), Rasheed and Rasheed (2003), I am convinced that rural older Blacks' are devout supporters of the African American church. Researchers from social work and gerontology fields suggest that African Americans age 65 and over are likely to feel more comfortable accepting assistance from fellow church members rather than from external sources (Barer & Johnson, 2003; Chatters, Taylor & Jackson, 1986; Childers, 1975). According to Mockenhaupt and Muchow (1994), "churches are often 'insiders' in rural areas, where outsiders may be viewed with suspicion. For rural minority elders, the



church may represent the community institution of greatest familiarity and acceptance” (p. 195). At best, I was an outsider to the church. Thus, I felt that I needed gatekeepers who understood the devotion of rural older Blacks to their churches and perhaps gatekeepers who felt the same devotion.

I was not surprised that the most common relationship between the 14 study participants in this study and community gatekeepers was through church membership. “The African American church is one of the primary structures in the African American community” (Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003, p. 145). I wanted to develop relationships with various gatekeepers with different access to church or had different roles in the religious community. My grandmother occasionally visits other community churches and therefore, has connections with other older Black in her area of rural Texas. Naturally, I relied on her relationships to aid me again. My grandmother’s connections led me to my first interview and indirectly to the second interview by referral. Before the study was completed, I would come to meet and interview 12 other people. I was introduced to most of them through church affiliations.

I visited the communities on weekends during academic semesters. As a result, my most productive workdays were Saturdays. I followed the same pattern of discussion that had been successful with the first two ladies. There are churches that hold services on Saturdays. Unfortunately, the churches in the Northeast Central Texas County held services on Sunday. I had to develop a method of connecting with church members on Saturday. I decided to visit the churches in hopes that church staff would be available. This did not work. I had no other alternative but to wait for an opportunity. I chose to park in the front of a church and I was visible to anyone passing by. I noticed that drivers

slowed down but did not stop. I was fortunate that each church was located (or built) near residential areas. I had not realized that people walking by might be more direct about finding out who I was. This is how I met another gatekeeper. A woman who noticed that I was parked in front a church came over to see if I needed help. She was between 40-45 years old. I followed the same pattern of discussion that had been successful with the other two ladies. When she asked how she could help me, I explained my reason for visiting her community and that I was looking to interview residents ages 65 and older for my dissertation study. She seemed impressed with me and what I was hoping to accomplish. She eventually invited me into her home after we spent about 45 minutes conversing in the sun. I understood then that I was being interviewed. She asked me if I planned to return to her town and how often. I did my best to explain my method for collecting data through interviews and that I would returning to various communities until I had completed enough interviews to analyze. She finally said, “We have lots of old people around here who ain’t got nothing to do. I’m sure we can find someone for you to interview.” She gave me a tour of the predominantly Black community. We walked around as she pointed out who lived where, how old they were, and which church they attended. There was a funeral that Saturday afternoon. She wanted to go into the church and see if any of the people she wanted me to interview were “alive” and inside. While, I waited outside I saw a familiar face. It was the presiding minister and I remembered him because I used to play with his daughter. I got another chance to make a “church-related” connection. I returned the next day. My new gatekeeper had already arranged several interviews for me. She introduced me to four people who agreed to be interviewed. As I

went from community to community, I repeated the steps above but never achieved the same level of success.

### **Demographic Profile of Study Participants**

Fourteen African Americans age 65 and over living in rural Texas were interviewed for this study. As shown in Table 1, the study participant's ages range from age 66 to age 97. As the study was intended to investigate the processes of information gathering and interpretation leading to informed decision-making by Blacks ages 65 and over in rural Texas. The study was scarcely started and I was already learning almost what it is like for African Americans age 65 and over in a rural community to gather information for learning needs. The interviews were revealing for the study participants who had information-seeking experiences to share. Again, the aim of this research study was to understand the commonalities of the participants' shared experiences as they draw upon various human and media resources in their quest to accomplish their learning goals. The study participants met the government's definition for elderly as adults age 65 and over. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005). Table 3.0 shows the age distribution of the study participants. According to what they reported, the majority of the participants fell into the 60s age group and 80s age group.

*Table 3.0 List of Study Participants By Descending Age*

<i>Study Participants</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>City</i>
<i>(Pseudonyms)</i>	<i>(Descending)</i>	<i>(Pseudonyms)</i>
Nancy Vesta	97	Animosia
Barbara Van Buren	95	Everblooming
Gracie Washington	89	Seeker
Donna Lincoln	84	Snowed
Dolley Grant	82	Wonted
Debbie Harrison	80	Sedans
Knox Jefferson	80	Skeen
George Clinton	78	Neserk
Kimsey Lyndon	76	Serkens
Grover Levi	68	Woodlot
Katherine Madison	68	Skeen(1)
Sherman Adams	68	Fremond
Kenedia Onassis	67	Seeker
Nellie Obama	66	Vanillas

Both men and women participated in the study. However, the study did not focus on differences in gender and there were no indicators that gender served either as an obstacle or positive factor to study participants' learning needs and the correlations to information seeking habits to fulfill their learning goals. This study involved people who identified themselves as Black or Negro ancestry. To meet the rural criteria, only Black men and women age 65 and over and living in communities with populations of 2,500 or less (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003a) were selected for this study. The participants included in this study are all residents of Northeast Central Texas County (pseudonym), a location selected in part because it is in many ways typical of small rural communities in the Southwest. Northeast Central Texas County was also chosen because

it is the community within which the researcher has some familiarity to gain trust with potential study participants.

Studies done by Barer and Johnson (2003) and Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) imply that there is a strong connection between religiosity and aging – especially in the Black community. Barer and Johnson found significant social differences between aging Blacks and Whites and, in particular, they discovered that aging Blacks seem to gain more emotional meaning from faith-related involvement. These studies suggest that understanding the loyalty of Blacks adults age 65 and over to their churches is beneficial toward getting their participation and trust. Thus, the vehicle for access to older Black residents in Northeast Central Texas county was the Northeast Central Texas Baptist Congress (NCTBC). The NCTBC is an association made up of religious congregations.

I also knew from growing up in this segment of Northeast Central Texas that many of the churches operated under an umbrella organization that extended up to the national level. For example, one of the largest church consortiums for predominantly Black Baptist church exist in Northeast Central Texas county. The Northeast Central Texas Baptist Congress (NCTBC) coordinated event planning for parishioners under its jurisdiction. Parent organizations like the (NCTBC) also monitored affiliate activities. There is a NCTBC-affiliate church in almost all of rural communities from where within the participants for the study reside. To that end, I was convinced that beginning with churches associated with the NCTBC was the best approach adults age 65 and over congregants to participate in this study.

Eventually, I visited several of the community churches during the data collection period. I contacted representatives from member churches of the NCTBC in hopes of

reaching aging adults among the churches' memberships. However, I did not want to completely rely on NCTBC representatives to meet rural Blacks age 65 and over. I decided that I should attend church events.

### **Data Collection Strategies**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 volunteers in their homes. The semi-structured interviewing format was chosen to offer participants an opportunity to communicate openly and flexibly and yet allow the researcher to cover certain key questions with all participants. In addition to the semi-structured interview guide, each participant was also given a copy of a diagram of concentric circles to complete. The concentric circles in part represented the personal convoys or learning support networks for these later-life learners. The diagram was added to gather data about the personal relationships between older adult learners and the people in their learning support networks.

### **Semi-Structured Interview**

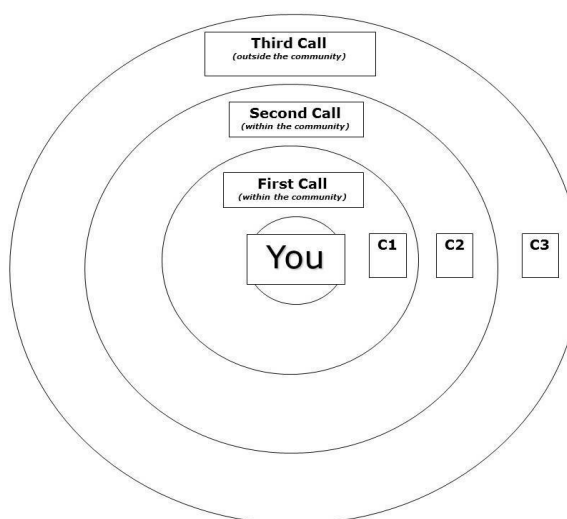
A semi-structured interview was the primary strategy used to collect study data about the learning and related information-seeking needs of the study participants. A semi-structured interview guide was the chosen method for data collection because it encourages dialogue between a study participant and the researcher. The semi-structured interview strategy also resembles the combined approaches of the interview guide and standardized, open-ended interview questions (Patton, 2002). Additionally, this qualitative method assured that all participants were asked a core set of common questions, allowed study participants to personalize their responses, and gave the researcher a chance to ask follow-up questions as needed.

I was particularly interested in how participants dealt with the unexpected and surprises they experienced while networking and during attempts to research and get relevant information. I tried to provide participants the flexibility to discuss topics that had meaning for them. My goal was to have real dialogue with study participants during the interviews. I constantly adapted my questioning approach to interact with study participants and maintain an open rapport.

### **Convoy Model of Social Support**

One method for gathering information about informal rural social support and networking systems is with a diagram called a “convoy.” My dissertation committee also suggested that I use models of concentric circles to investigate social and information support provided to study participants through personal networks called convoys (Kahn and Antonucci, 1980).

Figure 1 below is an example of the diagram of concentric circles used to gather data about study participant’s personal learning networks.



*Figure 1.* Modified learning support diagram used for interviews.

Robert L. Kahn and Toni C. Antonucci studied the dynamics of maintaining and building supportive connections with other adults over a period of one adult life-span (1930). The sociologists researched the personal attachments (personal bonding) and the supportive roles people can build and continue throughout a life-time (1980). As a result of their work, Kahn and Antonucci are linked to the development of the concept “convoy or personal network” (p. 255). The researchers examined research gaps about viable personal support systems for a person’s entire “adult life course” (p. 256). In addition to gathering essential facts about local publications, information services and adult learning centers in each community, the study was also conducted to understand how study participants’ convoys or personal networks met their learning and information needs. Thus, a diagram consisting of three concentric circles was the instrument used to gather knowledge of the supportive networks of rural African Americans age 65 and over relevant to their informal learning activities

Furthermore, Robert Kahn and Toni C. Antonucci (1980) studied the lifelong relationships of aging adults with other adults whom together comprised that person’s support systems - otherwise known as networks (National Research Council, 2006). The act of convoying is described as the protection provided by an escort. (convoy, n.d.). Kahn and Antonucci (1980) widened the definition of protection to describe the supportive connections that people continue as they journey through life. For this study, each convoy (network represented by concentric circles) shows participants’ perception about who in their community is knowledgeable and supportive. In some cases, but not all, the concentric circles symbolize lifelong relationships for this group of older adults but not all. Relative to adult development theory and the purpose of this study, the



completed convoys of social support “emphasize the importance of structure and function of social networks” (Antonucci, Fiori, Birditt, & Jackey, 2010, p. 453) for aging rural Texas residents.

All data were aggregated, reviewed repeatedly, and categorized through open and axial coding. An outcome of this study could be to help rural adult educators develop more adult education outlets for later-life adults learning in rural areas. In addition to surveying the learning needs of a community, the same adult educators may want to investigate if formal services are present and assess the reliability of informal means to adult learning.

### **Saturation**

Saturation, according to Rudestam and Newton (2001), is an assessment made by a qualitative researcher to decide if continuing to interview study participants will result in new data. In qualitative studies, adequacy refers to the condition of having collected a sufficient amount of data to conduct a thorough process analysis. According to Rudestam and Newton, the researcher has the responsibility of ensuring they have enough information for analysis. The researcher should also feel confident about the quality of incoming information. Thus, saturation can be described as a confirmation made by the researcher that no new data or better data are forthcoming.

The study participant group contained 14 participants. The proposal to this study estimated that at least 10-15 participants would be a sufficient number to gain the saturation needed to complete the study. Informal analysis as I proceeded with data collection led me to feel confident that by the fourteenth interview emerging categories had reached sufficient redundancy.

### **Protecting Confidentiality**

During data collection, every effort was made to treat data confidentially and protect the identity of participants. Consequently, participants' actual names have been withheld from the public in this document, and will be in future documents and presentations of this study. Pseudonyms have been used for people, geographic locations, and events to ensure confidentiality. Participants were asked to read and signed a consent form informing them of the purpose of the study, explaining their rights as participants and promising them protection of their identity. All field notes from observations are locked in a file cabinet until they can be discarded. All interview recordings were converted to text and the tapes are securely stored until they also can be destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

Both open and axial coding were used to analyze data and generate themes. During open coding, the researcher works to flesh out basic characteristics and properties of the data and develop categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding was used to identify different types of information seeking strategies reported by study participants. As part of open coding, the researcher read and re-read transcripts while making Excel spreadsheet tabs to monitor patterns. The tabs were labeled for each reported learning needs. During the beginning, a new tab was added with each new descriptor (or code). As analysis continued, these descriptors would be combined and sorted to show connections in the data. Quotes from the interview transcripts were embedded into the comment fields of the worksheets. The worksheet tabs were then grouped to help form categories that are loosely based on the library of congress classification and heading systems. The procedure was useful for ensuring that the appropriate transcript quotes were applied to

the correct descriptors and the reverse. The tab and embedded comments from transcripts also gave me the flexibility to match descriptors and tag quotes. Additionally, the use of an Excel spreadsheet also helped to limit mistakes in coding because the tab and the embedded message had to be connected to verify meaning and to assist in the data management.

As part of the axial coding, I used the study participants' responses to develop concepts and to assess phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, the axial coding process helped reveal differences in perceived barriers. The coding process also demonstrated how study participants differed in opinion about learning needs at their age. The axial coding helped me to categorize the context, conditions, and underlying assumptions inherent to the phenomenon related to information-seeking and study participants' learning needs.

Participants' responses were analyzed to understand the nature of relationships between study participants and information providers. Personal connections and relationships between study participants and formal as well as informal contacts were examined. They were also analyzed to check the effectiveness of these older adults' personal networks. In this study, the social convoys of diagrams may represent the *Black helping tradition* among older and rural Blacks (Rasheed & Rasheed, 2003). For example, the concentric circles might explain *helper choice* for aged Blacks, and demonstrate how neighbors, relatives, and close friends can play vital support roles with respect to information needs.

The concentric circles represent those whom the study participants would contact for information and advice. The concentric circles have been studied to establish why

some people were chosen as content experts and not others. Data analysis showed that the convenience of personal relationships between study participants and their information providers was a greater deciding factor for determining who could be trusted. Research data from field notes, interview transcripts, and data from the convoy of circles survey were cross-referenced and categorized, along with memos about artifacts that respondents brought to the interviews.

### **Researcher's Participation**

I also was concerned about how my own personal observations could influence the study. This is an extremely important aspect of qualitative research. The researcher is obligated to remain as impartial and unbiased as possible about the data to uncover true meanings. In this case, the researcher has an inclination to be neutral about information because of the education and professional background of academic librarians to recognize bias in resources. Academic librarians teach college students about the importance of noting biases or opinions in data. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), is a professional association of academic librarians and other interested individuals (ACRL, n.d., Grassian & Kaplowitz, 2001). In 1989, ALA's Presidential Committee presented a report on the importance of people knowing how to evaluate information. As an academic librarian, I have taught many sessions to college students about detecting biases contained within a document. From that professional perspective, I have confidence in my own self-correcting ability to recognize my biases and hold them in check. The strategy that enabled me as the researcher to maintain neutrality was to begin by carefully examining any interpretations of the data and the interview transcripts.

### **Trustworthiness**

Each research study has to reach a point at which readers are convinced that appropriate quality assurance procedures were adhered to during data collection.

According to Rudestam and Newton (2001), trustworthiness in qualitative data collecting and analysis indicates that the researcher has produced research results that are reliable and valid. Lincoln (1988) suggests there are specific techniques to establish trustworthiness (or rigor) in qualitative research. It is important to me that other researchers find my results believable.

### **Credibility Is Internal Validity From Prolonged Engagement**

One way this research demonstrates trustworthiness and credibility is based on prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement is the investment of sufficient time to understand the study participants' culture and breach inner circles. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used several strategies to accomplish prolonged engagement. When I attended church services, I met people who could become gatekeepers. My presence seemed to excite my family members and engendered an interest in me by others. I felt that I spent sufficient time in the field to make connections and most of all to be seen. I made repeated visits to the churches to be recognized as a returning visitor. In my opinion, these visits help me build trust. I used what I already knew about the church culture to be social and to express my interest in attending other church activities.

### **Transferability Is External Validity**

Transferability is another strategy for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Patton (2002) stated that "thick, rich description provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting" (p. 437). Thick description is a technique for

transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), given that it allows the reader to make their own judgments regarding whether the findings of the current study may have applicability in their own context. The reports from my field experiences show that I have an in-depth understanding of rural churches and the communities they serve.

### **Dependability Is Reliability from Assessing the Methodology**

For this study, dependability refers to the process of sorting, labeling and categorizing data from the interviews of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I accomplished the sorting, labeling and categorizing process through the use of spreadsheets. I used Microsoft's Excel software to monitor the frequency of words and phrases, analyze social and religious symbolisms, and to document and list reported barriers to learning. Spreadsheets are a valuable tool for cross-searching, tagging and categorizing related data.

Dependability is the "method in which the researcher attempts to account for changing conditions in the phenomenon chosen for study and changes in the design created by an increased refined understanding of the setting" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 194). Personal memos and retention of multiple drafts documenting my evolving interpretations, along with check-ins with my dissertation chair as my interpretations were refined, enabled me to increase the dependability of this research project.

### **Confirmability Captures The Concept Of Objectivity**

I believe keeping an audit trail of my data analysis provided one means of maintaining confirmability. I also introduce as evidence of objectivity the similarities of outcomes between Donald Roberson, Jr.'s and other studies to mine. For example, the findings of Roberson's study, like mine, prove that rural adults become self-directed

learners to adjust to changes from aging. The size of the groups are close. This study included 14 and Roberson included 10. The interviews were conducted in rural Texas and rural Georgia, both southern states. The findings of this study are similar to the outcomes reported by Roberson (2005) because the majority of older rural adults participating in both studies value learning at their ages (Townsel, 2013). The common themes that are verification of similar situations include “lack of resources and the experiences of being a minority” (Roberson, 2005, p. 32). African Americans reported downsides to living in rural America. Roberson noted that older Black participants reported more “negative situations” (p. 34) about rural life and living in rural towns. The complaints are common between Dolley Grants’ complaints about the lack of municipal services to the Black side of town to those of other older African Americans from small towns in Georgia. For example, Hallie, a study participant in the Roberson study, shared that she “feels that many in her community do not get their fair share of the tax base” (p. 34). Hallie also complained that city officials in Georgia had made promises that they have not kept. Additionally, faith-related learning was important to participants in both studies (Roberson, 2005; Townsel, 2013).

As previously noted, spreadsheets are a valuable tool for cross-searching, tagging, and categorizing data. In consideration of my responsibility as a researcher, the process of using the spreadsheets as a relational database to develop codes and categories was a feasible way of achieving neutrality in the study data. Lincoln and Guba decided that proof of neutrality should be evident from the researcher’s data (Krefting, 1991).

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how rural African Americans age 65 and over engage in information seeking to satisfy learning needs. Ethnography was the qualitative method chosen for creating a social-cultural representation of information-seeking behaviors of rural African Americans age 65 and over. An ethnographic approach using interview questions allows participants to share stories about their experiences from a cultural context. Semi-structured interview questions were combined with the use of concentric circles referred to as *convoys of social support* to examine social support roles and relationships. Data were analyzed through an iterative process including open and axial coding and conclusions were examined and assessed through reflexive analysis and peer debriefing to minimize bias.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **STUDY PARTICIPANTS' PROFILES**

Fourteen study participants met the criteria of this research study and were interviewed. They lived in rural towns with populations of 2,500 or less. They described themselves as African American or Blacks; all 14 participants were age 65 and over when interviewed. This chapter contains short profiles of each person. The profiles include some personal history about each individual, insight into their learning needs and educational goals, brief information about the learning resources they reported as being available to them, and a glimpse at the networks of individuals with whom they interact.

From this point until the chapter summary, this segment contains abbreviated accounts about the learning experiences of aged African Americans from rural Texas areas. The forthcoming data represent the personal responses of 14 African Americans age 65 and over to questions from a semi-structured interview and from results collected when they helped document their social support systems using concentric circles called convoys. The profiles are listed in alphabetical order beginning with the first-name pseudonym of Barbara for Barbara Van Buren.

#### **Barbara Van Buren**

Barbara Van Buren is a 95 year-old resident of Everblooming, Texas. Ms. Van Buren is also a celebrated resident of Everblooming, Texas. She had recently been

interviewed by local historians about the history of her hometown as she was one of its oldest life-long residents. The public library staff remembered the interview and recommended her as a candidate for my research study. Barbara Van Buren, as a local historian, was more of a community resource to others in her community than she was a patron for adult learning. Given her previous experience with being interviewed, Barbara Van Buren had no problems relating her stories and fond memories to me all over again. Pointing, she said, “Yes, I finished school here right down there by the Baptist Church.”

When queried about other personal contacts in her community which she relied for information and as learning resources, she responded that she had limited personal resources because “they all died out.” The available learning resources that Barbara Van Buren reported she most frequently took advantage of were located in her home. For example, Ms. Van Buren did not subscribe to any local publications because, as she noted, she could not afford the subscription cost. We did discuss watching television as a “free” and, therefore, affordable means of accomplishing some of her personal learning needs.

When asked about accessible adult learning sites in Everblooming, Barbara Van Buren listed the local church as a community learning center and eventually added the local public library. Although not a regular patron of the local library, Barbara Van Buren believed that the library was a community resource that was available to her as an adult learner:

Melinda: If you wanted to learn something new every day in this community, where would you go?

Ms. Van Buren: Well, I guess to the library.

Melinda: Oh, would you go to the library to learn something?

Ms. Van Buren: Whatever I can get to. There is one here, isn't it?

Melinda: I just learned that yesterday that there is one. You been up there?

Ms. Van Buren: No, not today.

Melinda: But you have you been up there?

Ms. Van Buren: No.

Melinda: Are you going up there?

Ms. Van Buren: I might do.

Barbara Van Buren also viewed her local resources as quite limited in terms of personal contacts, noting that former residents that she would have turned to for advice or consulted were all deceased.

### **Debbie Harrison**

Debbie Harrison is a licensed cosmetologist. Before coming to Sedans, Texas, Ms. Harrison graduated from high school and managed a cosmetology school. Ms. Harrison also managed a snack bar during her career as a cosmetology school manager. Thus, one of Ms. Harrison's learning needs is fueled by a desire to go back into the food and restaurant industry. She has dreamed of opening a small barbecue business with her son and needed information about starting a small business, including small business financing. Ms. Harrison also wanted to learn more about using computers and improving her personal health.

According to Debbie Harrison, there is an information divide in Sedans, Texas. She believed that the local Whites intentionally restricted or withheld information sources and news of services from their African American neighbors. Ms. Harrison stated this

claim when she responded to a question about information resources available to members of the African American population in Sedans. On the issue of race relations, Debbie Harrison indirectly referred to Whites as “they” as noted during the interview by the following question and answer exchange between her and the researcher:

Melinda: Do you think there are difficulties being Black in terms of getting information you need in this community?

Ms. Harrison: In Sedans, yes.

Melinda: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Ms. Harrison: Well see these people here in Sedans, they keeps everything to themself and they don't want you to know nothing.

Debbie Harrison expressed three learning needs, based in part on her dream of opening a small barbecue business. Ms. Harrison would need information about starting a small business and best options for obtaining financing. She also has another learning goal that, for purposes of this study, is classified as a physiological learning need. Like other study participants, Ms. Harrison is concerned about her personal health and well-being and needs information about health-related social services. She also wanted to learn more about computers. Ms. Harrison is serious about her goal to learn to use computers. “Well that's one thing that I’ve always wanted to learn—is computers. She went on to say, “I keep hearing people say that before it is over everybody has to have one.”

Debbie Harrison indicated that she relied on only two personal contacts when she needed information to address a learning need or desire. She would trust a local White banker as a resource of vetted financial information. She explained that the banker had career-related experience that would make him an approved authority in banking and

small business management. Ms. Harrison also reported that she had one trusted authority for general information and learning for fun. In addition to the local banker, Debbie Harrison also expressed confidence in her friend (and my gatekeeper) to help her locate basic information.

### **Dolley Grant**

Dolley Grant is an 82 year-old woman who has been a resident of Wonted, Texas for most of her life. Ms. Grant lived in Wonted along with some of her adult children at the time of her interview. Ms. Grant is concerned about the welfare of her community because, as she stated, there are households in the African American community that lack essential services like running water. In addition to not always having water running, Ms. Grant and her neighbors did not always have working streetlights and the streets often needed repair. “Yeah, because the Blacks don’t have nothing. We don't have the water running in here. We don’t have no streets lights. We don't have proper lighting here. Some have street lights and some don’t,” complained Dolley Grant.

In terms of social networking, Dolley Grant acknowledged that she relied on her adult children as resources to meet some of her information and learning needs. Ms. Grant was also one of several study participants who noted that the people she most trusted were deceased. During the interview, Ms. Grant indicated that she no longer felt she had contact with people she would normally trust because they had died. Ms. Grant (like other study participants) discussed how the death of a trusted community members had limited her reliable personal contacts within her community.

Dolley Grant believed that the African American church was the only learning resource in Wonted, Texas. Ms. Grant was consistent in her stance that, overall, Wonted

lacked learning resources for adults. Ms. Grant continued her assessment of her rural town as severely lacking in public services and amenities like learning centers. “Honey ain’t nothing here. There is nothing to learn nothing. There is nothing to do but go to church. That's all,” she repeatedly exclaimed. Although she never specifically stated as much during the interview, Dolley Grant’s concern about the lack of fresh groceries and city services implied that having those services was more important to her than addressing individual adult learning needs. Ms. Grant continued, “We need stores. We don’t have no grocery store. We don’t have no dry good store. We don’t have anything.”

### **Donna Lincoln**

Donna Lincoln, 84 years old, believes that she has gotten too old to learn. Ms. Lincoln expressed concern about physical changes she has been experiencing as she ages. For example, Donna Lincoln listed her deteriorating eyesight as a barrier to learning. “I done gotten too old to learn too much,” she determined. “You can’t half see and all that kinda stuff – once you get to that age.”

However, on the topic of helping others Donna Lincoln concluded, “Yes, I’d love to learn whatever I could learn.” Donna Lincoln expressed concern about the health of older adults in Snowed. Hence, she wanted to learn more about how to be a local health care provider. She is particularly interested in how to provide good home health-care to her aging neighbors and has felt a need to be trained to help her neighbors stay as healthy as possible. Ms. Lincoln information interests include learning to better manage her own personal health care and keeping abreast and knowledgeable about what is going in the world.

According to Donna Lincoln, a major challenge for the Snowed community was apathy, embodied in what she insisted was a lack of concern by townspeople for others. Donna Lincoln expressed her frustration and disappointment with the following statement, “We don't want to help each other if we can get around it.” To that point, Donna Lincoln’s disappointment with the lack of interest and desire of people in the community to help each other was not limited to specific populations with her hometown. Ms. Lincoln’s critical assessment applied to all Snowed residents irrespective of race or economics. Donna Lincoln remembered a different time (and place) in Snowed when “there was a time when you didn’t do it on your own ‘cause if you did on your own then you would be doing it all the time.”

Donna Lincoln recognizes teachers as information sources. In the past, she had asked a teacher for help on social security card services and information. Donna Lincoln recalled how the now deceased public school teacher came to her aid upon request. “It was things I was trying to find out about,” continued Ms. Lincoln. “I will tell you that I was trying to get my Social Security and that's when I went up there [Snowed Public School] and the lady was real nice.” Because of her success with getting a teacher to help with a personal problem that required information and learning how to access resources, Lincoln had continued to view the public school as a local learning resource and public good for anyone with learning needs.

### **George Clinton**

George Clinton is the study participant with the most college credentials. Mr. Clinton has degrees in science studies from a four-year liberal arts college in Texas and from two New York universities. He reported that his academic credits also included

matriculating at the prestigious Columbia University. George Clinton also shared stories about his family's educational status and accomplishments: "Now mostly my people on my daddy's side were very educated," he imparted. "My father was superintendent of the school there in Alexandria."

George Clinton's learning challenge is developing and extending trust in personal contacts in his community. Mr. Clinton did not feel comfortable trusting and relying on local peers as resources and would not consider community members reliable. When asked if there was a person in Neserk to whom he would turn for information, he replied, "You can't trust a lot of them." In addition to his general distrust of members of the African American community in Neserk, Mr. Clinton was equally uncomfortable seeking assistance from local Whites. Mr. Clinton's distrust of rural Whites stemmed from his belief that Whites feel superior to African Americans.

Mr. Clinton has wanted to learn to fly an airplane. He realizes that he cannot achieve this dream at age 89. However, he is fulfilling his other learning needs in building and repairing computers. Mr. Clinton's passion for computers did not include searching the web for online material. He did not consider the Internet a reliable resource of information. The Clintons had Internet access in their home but did not use it for information seeking or for adult learning. During the interview, he stated that and his wife listened to religious music through their computer and the Internet.

Mr. Clinton had not established many social networks or personal contacts in Neserk, Texas. Again, Mr. Clinton discussed why he felt uncomfortable confiding in others and explained how his trust issues interfered with his developing social networks



within his community. Mr. Clinton summed up his worries about eventually being betrayed: “They’ll turn on you.”

### **Gracie Washington**

Gracie Washington is 89 years old. Her family helped build the community of Seeker, Texas, her current hometown, of which she and her husband have been longtime residents. Aging, and possibly racism, are the two barriers to learning for Gracie Washington according to her own account. Ms. Washington explained how age was affecting her memory: “You see I am 89 so I forgets some things.”

With regards to race, Ms. Washington also alluded to difficulties encountered when working with local Whites on the board for the library. Gracie Washington noted, “Well, we did quite a few things but not things that really, truly last. You know, when you are working with a White group and you about the only Black in there.” Gracie Washington wants to improve her public speaking skills, her pronunciation of Bible names and verses, and to learn to write and publish a book

Gracie Washington discussed three places where information searchers could begin in the Seeker community. The small town had recently built a new, larger library. Ms. Washington also included local churches and the community center as learning resources for her community. She did not list the library as a local learning resource for herself. However, the local African American church has consistently supported the local library.

Gracie Washington’s personal contacts for convoys of social support circles were based on personal relationships as well as professional knowledge. She chose the ministers because of their knowledge of the Bible and biblical literature. She also has

multiple resources because of the number of ministers that are available to her. She also puts trust in a relative (her niece) because she is a teacher. Ms. Washington also reported that she puts a lot of faith in the Grand Marshall of her organization, the Eastern Star. Gracie Washington revealed that she values the wisdom of the Grandmaster for her Eastern Star chapter: "He is our grandmaster. Oh, yes, he's real good."

### **Grover Levi**

Grover Levi is 68 years old and described himself as recently retired. He stated that he believes that people are never too old to learn. Grover Levi had a career working in auto-mechanics and still enjoys working on automobiles. He explained that learning about cars and auto-mechanics has always been a natural interest for him. Mr. Levi's father was also a mechanic and Grover evidently followed in his father's footsteps.

Grover Levi lamented that he could not pursue some of his lifetime learning needs when he was younger because he did not have the resources. Mr. Levi also said that he acknowledges that there are opportunities for adults 65 and over to continue to learn. Mr. Levi offered an example of a recent news story about an older student returning to college and graduating. "You know about six months ago, it was either 61 or 62 when they went back to college and got their degree. So that's showing you that it can be done."

Mr. Levi did not have the finances to pay for training and college. He said that his path to earning credentials and getting training to advance his career as a mechanic was blocked in two ways. Along with his own financial status, Mr. Levi lived in a community that did not have a higher education center to provide the training he needed. At some point in his life, Mr. Levi wanted to pursue an interest in computers. "Well that's a field

that I wanted to get off into,” he added. “I had the opportunity to go into computers but I just wasn’t concerned [enough] at the time to get the training I need when I could,” he said in a regretful way. “Now, I wish I had gone,” he claimed.

Mr. Levi showed an interest in preserving his community’s history. He invested a lot of time talking during the interview about how local historians are a valued resource in Woodlot, Texas. According to Grover Levi, the local historians have contributed a lot to development of the Woodlot community. Mr. Levi expressed his interest in learning about Woodlot’s history through the local historians. He was also concerned that the residents of Woodlot were not taking advantage of these living resources. According to Mr. Levi, the knowledge from the local historians was essential to Woodlot being declared a historic site by the State of Texas.

Grover Levi saw the local historians as reliable and also expressed concern about the how Woodlot was losing these precious resources as they aged and died. Grover Levi reported, “We used to have some older people here that could give you a lot a history on the past but they have all passed on.”

At 68 years old, Grover Levi would like more automotive training and commented that he feels that it is important to keep learning in general. In terms of personal authorities for his learning needs, Mr. Levi imparted that he would be most comfortable trusting his retired friends. Thus he would turn to them during his information seeking phase. Mr. Grover also conveyed his faith in city and school employees as local experts to help him accomplish his computer training goals.

### **Katherine Madison**

Katherine Madison, at 68 years old, is still employed. She has lived in Skeen, Texas all of her life. She completed her high school education there. She once had plans of going to the local junior college to earn a degree in home economics. However, she could not because in 1958 African Americans were not allowed to take classes at the college.

Katherine Madison has learning needs that she has not been able to satisfy. Her response indicated that a job could be part of the problem. “I’m sure in the county seat they have places for arts and crafts. I just don’t know nothing about it ‘cause I work all the time. I work and when I come home from work, I am in,” she pointed out. In terms of learning needs, Katherine Madison wants to learn to play the piano, speak Spanish, and pursue her love for creating arts and crafts.

Katherine Madison did not list anyone in Skeen as a personal contact. Ms. Madison stated that there are two libraries in Skeen that are available to her as local learning resources. She would use either the local library or the school’s library as a city resource for information seeking. Katherine Madison is one of several study participants who view the public school—in this case the school library—as a local resource for adult learners. Katherine Madison may eventually attempt to enroll in college as noted here:

Melinda: If you wanted to learn something brand new in this community, who would you call first?

Katherine Madison: Well the only place I would think to call is really to the college.

Melinda: We are talking about persons right now. Can you think of experts or authorities? Who would you call? Who would you call first in the community?

Katherine Madison: I will call the library.

Melinda: So you would call a librarian then? And second, who would you call?

Katherine Madison: I guess I would call to the church.

Melinda: And then outside of the community, who would you call?

Katherine Madison: I would call the college.

Ms. Madison would need to travel 20 miles to another community center to continue working with arts and crafts because nothing comparable exists in Skeen, Texas.

### **Kenedia Onassis**

Ms. Onassis is a retired school teacher. Kenedia Onassis was the only study participant who has two residences. In addition to having a home in Seeker, Texas, Kenedia also has a residence in a large Texas metropolis. Consequently, she has resources available to her that other most small town residents would not have. She is an outlier compared to other study participants because she has more resources for information seeking and learning needs than other study participants who only reside on rural towns. For example, she seemed more comfortable with learning to use the Internet more than other 68 year-old women from Seeker, Texas. “I really can't speak directly because since I use the Internet resources quite frequently. I'm not sure other 70 and 80-year-old females or African Americans would do that because most of us are kinda just afraid—you know—of technology,” she declared.

Kenedia Onassis is motivated to become a musician. She wants to learn to play the piano and the cello. Ms. Onassis would seek the advice of public school teachers and

then church musicians to teach her to play the piano, but she would prefer to enroll in a college course for cello lessons. She would prefer to return to college to improve her typing and to learn to speak Spanish. Before she would enroll in college to improve her typing skills, Ms. Onassis would appeal to a business education teacher in the Seeker ISD.

### **Kimsey Lyndon**

Kimsey Lyndon may be the most active grandmother in Serkens, Texas, at age 76. Ms. Lyndon tries to keep up with her grandchildren's school needs and commented on how they vary from her own childhood experiences. "Because the whole time when I was in school, I never did have anything more to work with than an Indian head tablet. Oh no! I didn't have all of this!" she stated and laughed.

Kimsey Lyndon never attended an integrated school system as she noted, "I never did make it up there. They hadn't integrated when they still had the school down in Blackwoods Park." Kimsey Lyndon's grandchildren attend integrated schools and they are also several reasons why Ms. Lyndon continues to learn. The mother of eight children has 23 grandchildren and 24 great grandchildren and is a library user. As a concerned grandmother, she shared, "And it hurts me trying to raise some of them [her grandchildren] and they ask you something and you don't know how to answer. So, that keeps me going."

Kimsey Lyndon shared that she wanted to make a career change from nursing to mortuary science. "I done worked 33 years with home care and nursing homes. I want to work with somebody that won't talk back. You know what I mean," she again joked.

Kimsey Lyndon does not have many invested in her learning needs. She is a self-directed learner who motivated by her own career goals. She also motivated by the learning needs of family. Below, Ms. Lyndon responds to interview questions about learning resources and reasons for being an ongoing adult learner.

Kimsey Lyndon has some college credit in mortuary science as she noted here:

Melinda: Well, so here's my first question. What resources have you used in the past to learn something new or to get information about learning something new here in Serkens?

Kimsey Lyndon: Well, here in Serkens I went to school after I was 67 years old.

Melinda: You went to school after you were 67 years old?

Kimsey Lyndon: Uh, huh, yeah. You see I'm a nurse. I was lacking six credits and what I want to do is graduate with the six credits and work in what you call it, work in a mortuary with dead people.

Ms. Lyndon earned her credit from what she referred to as "the alternative" school. During the interview, Kimsey Lyndon disclosed how the State of Texas took the "alternative" school away. "I was first going to this Alternative school out here. The way the state was doing it meant that I didn't have to pay or nothing. They don't do it anymore."

### **Knox Jefferson**

Knox Jefferson, age 80, traveled the world before returning to Skeen, Texas. He talked about how he is very active in local community politics and activities. Mr. Jefferson is best described as a self-directed learner who taught himself welding, carpentry, plumbing, electrical, and automotive repair. He divulged, "I learn by doing it

myself. I learn how to do all that by doing things – by doing it myself." Even though he was a proven self-learner as an older adult, Knox Jefferson believes that people at some point near the end of their lives would have concerns other than adult learning. According to Mr. Jefferson, "When you get 80 years old then you don't worry about learning. You are trying to live. Your time is short and you start burning all your candles."

Mr. Jefferson insisted that the best way to learn is to become active and get involved with the community as some level. He faults members of the African American community for not participating or volunteering with groups and organizations. Mr. Jefferson commented, "That's our problem being Black is that people won't get involved." He later said, "They just don't seem to get involved. Well, some of them will go to church but not all of them will do that." Knox Jefferson believes in being active in the community, and his interest is helping children. Therefore, he stressed that he wants to learn more about how to talk to children and young adults. He imparted that his teaching experience has been a great learning experience in terms of understanding how school age children think and reason but that he needed to learn more.

When asked about his learning contacts, 80-year old Knox Jefferson responded, "I would have to call one of the ministers." Apparently, at least one local minister has the characteristics that Knox Jefferson most desires in the people he trusts. Mr. Jefferson continued, "I would call Reverend Bishop Sheen. Well you got talk to talk somebody who's knowledgeable and not afraid to give you their opinion about something."

### **Nancy Vesta**

Nancy Vesta is the oldest study participant, at 97 years old. She lives alone in her mother's home in Animosia, Texas. Nancy Vesta made a decision early in life not to



attend college. When asked why she chose not to go to college Nancy Vesta replied, “I felt like at that time that I should not go to college.” Nancy Vesta openly discussed how she determined that she was not college material: “I wasn’t apt like the rest of them. It seemed like that I wasn’t learning. I told my Mama I thought that was a waste of money.”

Nancy Vesta identified several learning needs in the last two years before the interview. Ms. Vesta’s learning needs include taking better care of herself and, thus, she wanted access to information about living healthy at age 90. She also wanted to keep good relationships with friends and neighbors and therefore, her intent for learning was to improve her personal style of communication. Nancy Vesta does not see her age as an obstacle to learning or teaching. She commented, “You can do a whole lot of things you don't think you can’t do.”

In terms of local resources, Nancy Vesta reported that Animosia once had a local newspaper but it was defunct now. “Oh, no, no, no, we don’t have a community newspaper. I guess it played out,” she questioned. The only other local learning resource for Nancy is the local church.

Nancy Vesta reported that her closest friends and neighbors on whom she relied on were now deceased. Nancy took time and explained, “You know to tell the truth, I’ve had some close neighbors around here that died.”

### **Nellie Obama**

Nellie Obama is 67 years old and resides in Vanillas, Texas. Ms. Obama moved to Vanillas to take care of her mother at the end of her life. After her mother’s death, Ms. Obama decided to stay in her hometown and took up residence in the family house.

Nellie Obama is an adult learner who enjoys reading. Fortunately for Ms. Obama, the local residents have established a community book exchange. Members of the community go the local grocery store to conduct book trades. Nellie Obama asserted, “I go down there to trade books. I’ll tell you like that. I have to trade books because I read a lot and I run out of books ... so I can’t buy them so I go down there and trade with them.” Nellie Obama’s learning needs seem to support her rural way of living. For example, Nellie Obama wanted to learn more about how to can food properly and would call on a local friend first for help. In addition to learning about canning, Ms. Obama actually cans the vegetables from her garden. She uses an encyclopedia information to help her recognize different types of animals and garden insects she finds discovers her garden. Nellie Obama also enjoys fishing.

Nellie Obama has a variety of friends, family and personal contacts whom she trusts for information-seeking purposes. She is surrounded by relatives and friends. Her brother and sister-in-law live close by. Nellie Obama would look to her local friends and neighbors for gardening tips and advice, and turn to family when she needs encyclopedia information to help her identify types of insects and animals she finds in her garden. On the topic of fishing, Nellie Obama sees the county game warden as her out-of-the-community source for information. Nellie Obama also reported that she had Internet access but she did not regularly use it.

### **Sherman Adams**

Reverend Sherman Adams and his wife live in a predominantly African American community of Fremond, Texas. Sherman Adams is a 68-year old minister. As a local minister, Reverend Adams maintained that he wants to learn how to effectively witness to

people outside of the church. According to Reverend Sherman Adams, the church is the primary learning resource in Fremond. Reverend Adams then communicated that he and church leaders, as a result of the church being a learning center in the community, are the teachers for the church. Reverend Adams described the local church as the school where people can learn more about Christianity as noted here:

Melinda: What would a person have to do to learn to become a witness? He would have to be saved. He is already saved?

Reverend Sherman Adams: If he is not saved, then he must come in to do what? The Bible says to do what? Come to school.

Melinda: That is exactly what I'm trying to follow. So he's back to school. He is back at the church. So, the church is the school?

Reverend Sherman Adams: The church is the school.

Sherman Adams hopes to continue offering church services through his community. He asserted that his church's learning program included: (a) weekly Mission Services meetings, (b) Brotherhood Services, and (c) prayer meetings. Reverend Adams expressed that he was concerned about how small churches like his manage do with limited financial resources to improve outreach.

Reverend Sherman Adams' use of conveys of social support circles demonstrates how he would rely on church deacons to teach religion to church members. "Just in case the pastor is out, the deacon would be able to carry on the service in teaching," he asserted.

### **Summary**

The participant profile of The Reverend Sherman is the last one depicted in Chapter Four. In this chapter, I describe the individual learning needs and related information needs of each study participant. Again, a brief profile was developed to include study participants' descriptions of the supportive nature of their communities as rural learning environments for later-life adult learners. As such, each profile is an insightful view of the tools and resources identified as available by this group of rural African Americans age 65 and over through their own lenses. The portraits reveal motives for later-life learning and relate some of the problems confronting this population about being adult learners. The access to information, adult learning resources, and the personal processes for searching for relevant learning resources vary enough to be noticeable but not necessarily predictable.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS: PART ONE**

The purpose of Chapter Five is to present the outcomes of the data as interpreted from analysis of common themes found in 14 interviews of rural African Americans age 65 and over (also referred to as later-life learners) as well as analysis of social convoys they were asked to construct to indicate those sources they relied on in meeting their perceived learning needs.

This dissertation inquiry was conducted as an exploratory study to discover if rural African Americans age 65 and over had learning needs, learning priorities, and educational goals. Another purpose of this exploratory research study was to learn about the research methods and information-seeking behaviors that rural African Americans age 65 and over used to accomplish their later-life learning needs, learning priorities, and educational goals. In addition to gathering information about their later-life learning priorities and information-seeking preferences and options, the data from this study also include content about the adult learning resources, from publications to members of their social networks, that the study group reported were available to them within their rural communities.

Chapter Five is organized according to the results obtained from the semi-structured interview guide that was used to determine if the study participants had learning needs.

Chapter Five contains information about the obstacles and barriers to their learning expressed by members of the study group. The first subsection is “Learning and Information Needs.”

### **Emergent Themes:**

#### **Research Question 1 – Learning and Information Needs**

RQ1 was posed to ascertain if African Americans, age 65 and over, and living in rural United States, had learning and related information-seeking needs. Fourteen study participants were interviewed about their learning needs in order to answer the research question, “What types of learning needs and priorities do rural African Americans age 65 and over describe?” The results of the study demonstrated a broad spectrum of learning needs for the older African Americans participants that ranged from food preparation to learning to fly an airplane. An unexpected outcome of this study was discovering that several members had information needs for later-life career goals.

Again, the purpose of the study was to add data to research in the fields of adult learning and gerontology learning needs and related information-seeking strategies of rural African Americans age 65 and over. The definition of a learning need for this study is a learner’s recognition of a gap in their knowledge between what they feel they desire to know and what they ought to know (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011; Tyler, 1949; Tyler, 1971). In 1974, Howard McClusky, proposed that learning needs of later-life learners could be classified as (a) coping needs, (b) expressive needs, (c) contributive needs, (d) influencing needs, and (e) transcendental needs (Hales-Mabry, 1993; McClusky, 1974; Cusak & Thompson, 1998). This chapter is a report of the study’s findings of the learning needs and related information needs of 14 rural Black

persons age 65 and over. McClusky's learning needs categories for older learners are listed in hierarchical order as he intended.

### **Coping Needs**

McClusky approaches the learning needs for older adults in hierarchical form. Therefore, coping needs represent the basic level of learning success for aging adults or, as Campbell (2005) expressed, would "involve the acquisition of basic skills" (p. 17) and Hales-Mabry assessed would include "practical life skills" (p. 118). Several authors developed lists to provide examples of coping needs for the aged learner. For example, Einstein's (2011) lists includes "adults engaged in physical fitness, economic self-sufficiency, and basic education" (p. 46) whereas Cusak and Thompson (1998) explained that coping needs are essential to manage "loss of power, as the result of loss of income, employment, energy, and physical health" (p. 44). The challenges of growing older for some older adults require developing new skills to keep up with society (Hales-Mabry, 1993; McFarland, 1993). Based on the examples, coping is learning to adapt and perhaps recreate oneself after retirement, learning to adapt to physiological changes, and develop ways of maintaining independence. See Table 5.1 below for a list of the study participants' coping needs.

Table 5.1

*Coping Needs*

	Reported
Learning new computer skills to keep up with society	
Basic computing	2
Typing skills	1
Aging well and adapting to physiological changes	
Self-care training	1
Food canning and preservation	1
Gardening in Texas	1
Develop ways of maintaining independence	
Motor scooter operation	1

*Note.* "Gardening in Texas" could also be classified as a "Leisure and recreational" expressive learning need.

**Learning new computer skills to keep up with society.** It is safe to say that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more and more resources will be converted from print to an electronic format. This means that a person may need to learn how to use a computer and the Internet. Debbie Harrison and Kenedia Onassis are taking steps to acquire the computing and typing basics.

**Basic computing.** Debbie Harrison and Grover Levi both realized that eventually everyone will need to know how to use a computer and neither adult wants to be left behind. Therefore, one of their learning and related-information needs is to develop basic computing skills. Ideally, a computer class could help Ms. Harrison manage the budget



and financing details for a new barbecue restaurant. Also career-related is Grover Levi's need to use a computer to conduct engine diagnostics when he works on cars and trucks. In the following excerpt from her interview, Debbie Harrison is candid about personal computing as one of her long-term learning goals.

Melinda: One lady - she was about 90 years old – said she wanted to learn a little bit more about computers.

Debbie Harrison: Yeah, yeah, that is one thing I would like to learn.

Melinda: I don't mean to lead you but that's gets you thinking. There are always things that everyone wants to learn. What are those things?

Melinda: That's true.

Debbie Harrison: Well that is one thing I've always wanted to learn is computers 'cause I couldn't find the first thing to do on a computer. And I keep hearing people say that before it is over everybody has to have one.

Debbie Harrison: That's what I would like to have. Well, I mean, that's true. That's true.

This study did not collect personal economic or socioeconomic data. Nonetheless the case of Debbie Harrison, who cannot afford to purchase a computer, supports research listing personal income as a barrier to accomplishing learning and related information-seeking needs.

In the next paragraph, Grover Levi expresses regret about a past decision.

Grover Levi: Well that's a field that I wanted to get off into. I had two back surgeries back to back. I really had to start all over again. My whole life style change -

you know. I had the opportunity to go into computers but I just wasn't concerned at the time. Now, I wish I had.

The work of Childers (1975), Parks, (1988), and Rogers (2000) are notable contributions to literature about low income levels of rural adults age 65 and over. Most of the studies repeatedly imply that rural minorities like African Americans are more financially at risk than Whites and urban African Americans. Debbie Harrison realized that some sacrifices have to be made and for her that meant not owning a computer. Ms. Harrison confided, "It was too high for me to handle because you see I am by myself here now. My husband is in a nursing home and I am just here by myself and I can't handle these big bills."

In addition to his communication skills learning need, Knox Jefferson also stated, I would like to have a computer. I have one back there but it's not working right." Knox Jefferson, Kenedia Onassis, and Nancy Vesta each ultimately described four learning priorities. Next, Knox Jefferson pondered out loud about available learning centers in his community for people in his age group.

Melinda: If you wanted to learn computers is there someone here that you can call in the communities to help you learn computers? A person, an actual person?

Knox Jefferson: Well, I'm not sure. They have something at the school. I think the school.

Melinda: Can you go use and use the school resources? Can you go?

Knox Jefferson: I think they have something like that. Yeah, I think they have something like that for older people. They have something. I'm not sure. I have never checked into it.

Only three years short of age 100, Nancy Vesta has lived long enough to experience the invention of many new technologies. She joins Debbie Harrison and Kenedia Onassis as one of three female study participants in the group of participants interested in learning about computers. Ms. Vesta used a rhetorical question to confirm her intent when she asked, “Well, you need to put down there to need to learn about the computers. Don't you?” Nancy Vesta and Debbie Harrison’s experience with computers and learning goals are similar. The first fact to consider is that neither Ms. Vesta or Ms. Harrison owned a computer on the date of the their interview. Second, Ms. Vesta and Ms. Harrison both feel they need to focus on learning the fundamentals of computing. The contrast between the two cases was the feedback they each received from community members about owning a computer. As one might expect, Debbie Harrison shared, “I keep hearing people say that before it is over everybody will have to own one.” Nancy Vesta received an opposite message from one of her computer savvy neighbors. As reported by Ms. Vesta, “He told me that I didn't need one.”

***Typing skills.*** Kenedia Onassis, age 68, from Seeker, Texas, is a retired mathematics school teacher. One of Ms. Onassis' learning priorities is to improve her typing skills for using the Internet. Ms. Onassis is one of three female study participants with computing and computer science related learning priorities. Ms. Onassis conveyed that she already used a personal computer to access the Internet. She wants to improve her typing (or keyboard) skills so that she can have a better experience researching and social networking via the Internet.

Melinda: Do you think there's any publications of interest to older learners?

Kenedia Onassis: I'm not sure. I don't think so because what I've noticed is that it focuses on those involved in the educational process.

Melinda: All right. If you said this to yourself, "I wish I knew how" or "I had always hoped to learn" then how would you fill-in the blank?

Kenedia Onassis: Probably to type better. I mean—you know—so I so that I could be much more faster on the Internet.

**Aging well and adapting to physiological changes.** There are always going to be physical losses and changes to the body associated with aging. One approach to coping with aging might be to simply get to know your body and learn how to take care of it. It may also be beneficial to consult a local expert, as applicable, on how to stay healthier and stronger as you age. In this section, Donna Lincoln discusses personal healthcare. Nancy Vesta explains the importance of good nutrition, and Nellie Obama shares information about her approach to a healthy, active, lifestyle.

*Self-care training.* Men and women both face physical health changes. However, each gender will have its own unique aging concerns. Therefore, the women in the study like Donna Lincoln, age 84, from Snowed, Texas, may want information to help them as females cope with the physical transitions associated with aging. Ms. Lincoln is interested in knowing how to maintain her personal health and how to age well. Although, Ms. Lincoln has a daughter and granddaughter with careers in health sciences, she would prefer to have the independence to see to her own health and medical needs. In reference to that learning need, she admitted that she wanted to learn "How to take care of me. How to see about me. How to go to and fro to whatever I want to do for me. And if I can help you, I'll help you." Later in the same discussion, Ms. Lincoln asserted that

her goal was to learn “how to keep myself healthy and clean.” Additionally, the octogenarian explained how to handle needles as a patient.

That’s great - you get to stick the needle, pump and go ahead on, tighten your fist.

I tell you that what my doctor always says to me. ‘Ms. Lincoln, you don't even flinch when I give you a shot. Naw!! What’s the use of flinching. While I am flinching, they can been done give me the shot. That’s too much. Way too much!

***Food and nutrition.*** At every age, people have nutritional health concerns. The lifestyle for an older adult may require adjustment in eating habits and a better knowledge of what it means to eat healthy. Good nutrition is important to aging well. Nancy Vesta knows this and stressed, “I guess I need to know how to go about my health.” Ms. Vesta revealed that she has a relative who is a licensed medical doctor. She conveyed how the doctor in the family warned her about consuming too much sodium.

Maybe I should have given you the doctor's name. He called himself telling me what to eat. “Yeah, you can eat all you want just leave all the salt out. And, it does not matter what else you do but just throw out all the salt or take all the salt out of the house. And I said, “You aren't talking to me then, are you?”

Nancy Vesta also has personal healthcare as a learning preference. Thus, she joins Donna Lincoln with that particular concern. Nancy Vesta and Donna Lincoln also have family members who work at health facilities and have careers in health sciences according to their interviews. In Chapter Six, Nancy and Donna’s completion of the convoys of social network exercise exemplifies how they rely on those family ties for healthcare support and information.

***Food canning and preservation.*** Ms. Obama's other hobbies or farm survival skills are canning fruits and vegetables and making chow-chow. These are areas that Ms. Obama feels comfortable in with an exception here and there. Case in point, Nellie Obama feels confident about her canning techniques and chow-chow recipe. She stated, "Well, you say 'learning' and I already knew how to can." She then explained, "But sometimes, my brains starts fretting away. I forget how to do things. So, I had to go to the library and look it up again because my brain wasn't functioning right. I find myself saying to myself, 'Think Nellie think!'"

The nearest library from Nellie Obama is more or less 25 miles away when you add in the miles it takes to travel the dirt and gravel road leading from her home to the closest rural route. The trip to the county library can be frustrating for Ms. Obama. Based on her comments, it is difficult to assess if her memory is the problem or the constant repair of city streets or both. "Every time I go to Northeast Central Texas City, I get lost because I don't remember where I went. And then, I go where I think I went before and they were fixing on the street. That just screwed me up and then I said, "Oh forget it."

***Gardening in Texas.*** For Nellie Obama, gardening is a priority and definitely related to her survival. She would like gardening advice to better manage weeds growing in her garden. "Now on gardening, I love gardening. I love to do that too. I wish somebody would tell me how to get rid of that grass without getting out there and hoeing it," she insisted. As she continued, Nellie Obama explained how she was becoming incapable of standing long enough to do garden work. "I got arthritis in my spine and I can feel it in my right side of my legs. When I was taking care of Mama, I pulled all those

muscles and ligaments,” she said while pointing to her legs. Her final note on the topic was “So, I get weaker by the year. I can't seem to stand up too long.”

**Develop ways of maintaining independence.** As we age, we have to learn to embrace our changed abilities and come to terms with limitations. Nancy Vesta never realized that she had a mobility that required needing a motor scooter. She explained during her interview that her brand new scooter was an unanticipated gift from the government. However, the mobility scooter is means to maintain her independence should she ever need it.

***Motor scooter operation.*** At almost 100 years old, Nancy Vesta finds herself needing to learn how to ride a brand new scooter. Nancy Vesta announced, in reference to learning needs, “Well, I have this brand new chair here. I have got to learn how to ride it and drive it.’ Ms. Vesta was awarded the scooter by a division of social services of the Federal Government. In the accompanying text from her interview, she narrated the event leading up to the arrival of her brand new red scooter and the reactions of others when they see it for the first time.

Nancy Vesta: Now, they coming over and teasing me about this chair.

Melinda: Who are they?

Nancy Vesta: My neighbors.

Melinda laughs.

Nancy Vesta: They don't know it's here until they get here.

Melinda: Oh.

Nancy Vesta: So, I forgot all about it until about two Sundays ago. He come calling me on a Sunday. I am bringing your scooter. And now, I have had two or

three people come out like the gas man. He had to work it. And he say, "It's got a horn on it." And I said, "Get out of my house because I'm busy. I'm busy."

Apparently, the scooter did not come with instructions. Nancy admitted how she barely survived learning how to operate the machine. "I damned near killed myself," exclaimed Ms. Vesta. She also added, "It will get away from you." According to appearances, Ms. Vesta had become more comfortable with operating her motored chair. During the interview, Ms. Vesta was able to demonstrate how to use the scooter's horn and how to move the scooter forward and backward.

Nancy Vesta: But let me tell you about this thing. This is the steering wheel and you can turn it. And so, I couldn't figure out how to turn it and the thing got away from me and went right it ran into the stove.

Melinda laughs

Nancy Vesta: You have to have a ramp to go outdoors. They know I won't go outdoors.

### **Expressive Needs**

McClusky felt that older learners must have opportunities to creatively voice their thoughts. Expressive needs is about enjoying oneself (McFarland, 1993), "taking part in activities for their own sake" (Einstein, 2011, p. 46), and include "activities in which older adults derive satisfaction" (Wacker & Roberto, 2007, p.109). Therefore, expressive needs are artistic, creative, spoken, written, and involve leisure activities for adult learners (Dittman-Kohli, 2005; Einstein, 2011; McFarland, 1993; Wacker & Roberto). Expressive needs can also be physical like dancing (Cusak & Thompson, 1998) and represent religious expressions if the learning activity is considered "enjoyable and



meaningful” (Campbell, 2005, p. 18). See Table 3 below for a list of the study participants’ expressive needs.

Table 5.2

*Expressive Needs*

	Reported
Artistic and creative expressive needs	
Arts and crafts	1
Faith and religion as expressive learning needs	
Bible names and pronouncing them properly	1
Bible scriptures and their meanings	1
Leisure and recreational expressive learning needs	
Fishing in Texas	1
Music instruction and performance	
Cello	1
Piano	3
Spoken and written voice as learning needs	
Book writing and authorship	1
Interpersonal communication	1

*Note.* The "Music instruction and performance" learning need can also be thought of as an "Artistic and creative" learning need.

**Artistic and creative expressive needs.** Several participants in this study expressed interest in creative-based learning projects. Katherine Madison had once hoped to develop a career involving creating decorative wreaths and other designs for households. In addition to arts and crafts, study participants also hoped to derive

meaningful experiences from music, writing books, and establishing and maintaining personal connections. Some cases, like Gracie Washington and Nancy Vesta, claimed their faith and religion as part of their self-expression and a learning need.

***Arts and crafts.*** Katherine Madison, age 68, from Skeen, Texas, shared that she had not given up on her lifetime passion to work in arts and crafts. After completing her high school education, Katherine Madison hoped to attend the Northeast Texas County two-year college to earn a degree in home economics. She planned to use her home economics degree to develop a career involving create arts and crafts. Unfortunately, Katherine had to forgo her educational goal because of segregation laws in the late 1950s because African Americans were not allowed to attend colleges along with White students. Katherine Madison explained what was happening in her life. She reported about her experience with racism, plans for college, and a missed opportunity to participate in higher education. Katherine Madison briefly reflected:

I had planned to take up home economics when I finished high school but I didn't get to do it because I would have to go way out of town. At that time Blacks could not go to Northeast Central Texas Community College.

Although racial politics of the time deterred Katherine Madison from going to college, she had not given up on arts and crafts. Ms. Madison's home was filled with many of her designs and creations. Katherine enjoyed talking about the home wreathes she created. During the interview exchange, Katherine Madison reminisced about finding the design for one of her home wreaths in a magazine.

Melinda: That's what I was wondering when you said arts and crafts. You did that one, didn't you?

Katherine Madison: No, I got that one for my birthday I guess about 10 years ago but I made a lot of wreaths. Yeah all of the rest of my wreaths I made.

Melinda: Really?

Katherine Madison: Would you get that wreath right above the chair on the back door? I made that one way before I started working at the school. I have been working at the school for 18 years.

Melinda: You just made that all on your own?

Katherine Madison: I seen it in a magazine. Well, I guess it was about 20 years old. I had it hanging on my back door.

Melinda: I have no talent like that. So, I really do mean it when I say it is beautiful.

Katherine Madison: And I made a lot of them. I would have to make another one to do all that. That's one is old. You can see how it has faded. I'm off into arts and crafts.

The prospects of college continued to fade as Katherine Madison's work responsibilities increased. The discrimination policies of the local two-year college soon changed and African American students were allowed to enroll. By then, Katherine Madison was fully employed.

Katherine Madison: I finished in '58 and about two to three years after they started letting us go but I had already got on at another job at the steakhouse—and I worked there for five years then I moved on to working for an electronics retail company.

Melinda: So that's the reason why you could not do what you wanted? Would it be good to have something here in Skeen?

Katherine Madison: Right! We are in a terrible situation here in Skeen still. We spend a lot of time working.

Ms. Madison described her hometown as lacking economic stimulus and employment opportunities. She also criticized Skeen for being stagnant. This was a viewpoint that was consistent with other interviewees. When pressed for details, Katherine Madison acknowledged:

I was just 17 years old when I came here and I have been here 51 years and it's the same thing. We still don't have nothing which you can see. Skeen has only but few places downtown. They tore them down or burned down. We have a few new places downtown where people can rent little shops and sell stuff. We don't have too much. Young people. I have been here 51 years and they need something. They need something too. Yeah, we need something here. Young people need something.

**Faith and religion as expressive learning needs.** This group of study participants is largely devoted to their churches. In addition to Gracie Washington and Nancy Vesta, other study participants listed the church as a local learning resources. Several of the study participants also conveyed deep faith in local ministers; however, only two listed Bible learning activities as personal learning needs.

***Bible names and pronouncing them properly.*** Gracie Washington, age 89, from Seeker, Texas, wants to pronounce Bible names better. Gracie Washington is active in her local church. According to her spouse, she owned a cd-rom set that pronounces

biblical names. Ms. Washington expressed her confidence in ministers to help best pronounce biblical names and words. She apparently loves to read her Bible aloud and therefore is continuing her self-directed learning goal to say Bible terms better.

Melinda: Anything else? In the last of couple of years have you had a learning concern? Something you want to learn new possibly?

Gracie Washington: Not necessarily.

Melinda: Not necessarily? That's a perfect answer

Gracie Washington laughs: I love to read.

Melinda: And so?

Gracie Washington: I wish I could pronounce more words in the Bible better.

***Bible scriptures and their meanings.*** The avid later-life learner, Nancy Vesta, also wanted to learn more about Christianity. She hoped that studying Christianity - as a learning need - would increase her understanding of biblical scriptures and meanings. In her own words, she described her resolve. Nancy Vesta related how she would rely on ministers and seek assistance from other Christians to accomplish her faith-based learning and related information-seeking needs.

Nancy Vesta: I want to learn more about Christianity.

Melinda: How did you go about that?

Nancy Vesta: I would like to know more about the different scriptures that I read in the Bible. I want to have a good understanding of just what they mean. I guess that's what I'm really trying to say.

Melinda: Who did you contact or who would you contact?

Nancy Vesta: I would contact pastors and ministers. I would say any Christian or anybody who comes by that would talk on the subject.

Melinda: That sounds good.

**Leisure and recreational expressive learning needs.** In the book of Ecclesiastes of the Old Testament, the author writes, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens” (Chapter 3: 1-9). The author includes “a time to laugh,” “a time to dance,” and “a time to embrace,” and “a time to speak,” and therefore there must be a time for leisure and time for recreation. On a more scientific note, all people experience types of emotional and physical development and wellness (Feldman, 2011). “The ability to remain physically, mentally, and socially active is dependent, in part, upon continued participation in learning and education” (Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003, p. 130).

***Fishing in Texas.*** Nellie Obama, age 66, from Vanillas, Texas has four learning needs. All four categories can be viewed as simple hobbies and yet, all four categories are also viable methods of survival in rural America. For the most part, Nellie Obama communicated that she felt knowledgeable about fishing. She is capable of hauling in her own catch but appears to be squeamish and uncertain about how to safely remove fish from the hook.

Nellie Obama imparted that she enjoyed fishing. She also indicated that she knew how to fish, yet she listed a learning concern for catching the fish. Ms. Obama would like some tips on from an experienced fisher about successfully removing large fish and avoiding the barbels of catfish when removing them from the hook. The catfish’s barbels

are like Below, Nellie Obama described herself as an adult learner with some anxiety about how best to unhook her catch from the hook she used to reel them in.

On the fishing, I know how to fish. I'd like to learn how to catch a fish without running from that sucker. I mean the great big ones. I don't run from them little bitty devils but not catfish. I just can't. Oh Lord, I wish someone could give me some nerves. Oh Lord, when it comes to that catfish, I do the Saint Sally's Day dance.

**Music instruction and performance.** Three of the 14 interviewees had musical learning desires. Katherine Madison and Knox Jefferson from Skeen, Texas and Kenedia Onassis from Seeker, Texas are looking for ways to take piano lessons. Kenedia would like to add cello lessons too.

**Cello.** In addition to learning how to play the piano, Kenedia Onassis divulged that she endeavored to become a proficient cellist as well. However, the prospects of her finding an instructor who plays the violoncello or simply the cello well enough to teach her were slim. Seeker could not serve as an appropriate adult learning environment for a budding cellist. Kenedia indicated that she was not aware of anyone in Seeker with the right credentials and training. Her assessment included all local musicians and music teachers.

**Piano.** Katherine Madison aspires to become a musician. Her desire to learn to play piano music is one of her four learning priorities. Ms. Madison has decided that the best instruction method for her is classes. However, she communicated that she had not investigated if classes at a local two-year college would accommodate her busy work life.

Katherine Madison: I would like to take some classes myself

Melinda: What would you like to learn?

Katherine Madison: I would like to learn a little about piano. I think they have it at Northeast Central Texas Junior College because I read it in the newspaper but I never did go and check on it.

Melinda: But would it be nice to have something like that locally?

Katherine Madison: Yeah.

Katherine Madison: Northeast Central Texas County?

Kenedia Onassis longed to learn to play the piano. Unlike Katherine Madison, Kenedia indicated that she would check around town and the local public school for music instructors. Kenedia Onassis maintained, "I will call a good music teacher from the school and ask for recommendations."

Knox Jefferson was raised by his aunt who as he stated "was a beautiful pianist." However, he also acknowledged that she "never could teach me." "So, I guess I could find someone who would," he suggested.

Knox Jefferson: I always did like music but I never could play. We always did have a piano in the house. When I was young, I'd go in there and play around and I would learn a few songs and I just forget. I guess I'm just not musically inclined for some reason

Melinda: Who would be the first person you would call in this community?

Knox Jefferson: Well for music?

Melinda: Yep, to learn to play piano. Is there a first call?

Knox Jefferson: We have a few older women here just people don't want to be bothered.



I don't have nobody specific.

Knox Jefferson in his own voice explained, “I learn by doing” but that method had not worked for him in terms of music. However, he has a lot to offer as a potential trainer based on his reported efficiency in “anything industrial.” He would be willing to trade talents with a piano teacher if he had a chance.

Melinda: Anything industrial? I don't know what that means really. Give me a list

Knox Jefferson: Welding, carpentry, plumbing, electrical, automotive.

Melinda: Let's say that you have a chance to trade skills with someone. You might teach them about plumbing in exchange for learning something else. What would it be?

Knox Jefferson: Yeah, show me how to play the piano.

**Spoken and written communication learning needs.** Self-expression is important to several study participants for their own well-being as older adults and for others. In the latter case, Knox Jefferson has the youth of his community in mind and at heart. Nancy Vesta values the people in her life and wants to improve how she communicates with them. According to Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine (2003), words are symbols that allow us to “communicate and share meanings” (p. 40).

**Book writing and authorship.** Gracie Washington, age 89, Seeker, Texas, is described by others in her community as a local historian. Ms. Washington and her sister are at least two remaining historians with full knowledge of the beginnings of Agalwood, Texas. Ms. Washington's pride stems from her family's accomplishments. Her ancestors founded Agalwood, one of several predominantly African American communities in Northeast Central Texas county. Naturally, as community historian, Gracie Washington

wants to capture Agalwood's history on paper. Ms. Washington cannot see herself completing the task alone and admitted as much. Telling her own story, Gracie Washington stated, "I am telling you I would write a book if I had somebody to help me to do it." Ms. Washington planned to title her book, *Being Reared in Agalwood*. In the next part of our interview, Ms. Washington appeared to be mystified by missing documentation for her book.

I'd love to write. And I spoke to one person and I started on it with her. The lady came and I don't know what happened. Somehow, all the materials, photos and everything was misplaced. I don't know how all of that material could have got misplaced in some kind of way. It never did get back to me.

The tiny-framed 89 year-old pointed toward a window in her home and interjected:

And, we were the last house down there. You see that was like about 80 years ago. All of these other houses was built in here since then. But now we are the only ones remaining. It is just Lizbeth and myself. We are the only ones that's here. All the rest of them are dead. So, that tells you that we got a whole lot of history and that's the reason why I say I wish somebody would help me write a book.

***Interpersonal communication.*** Nancy Vesta had lots of stories to share during her interview and did so while we hovered around her antique wood-burning stove to stay warm. The later-life learner indicated that she lived alone in her mother's home. Consequently, Nancy Vesta is interested in learning how to keep communications channels open with family and friends. She noted, "How do you say that? When you still want to stay in contact with people. Communicate." Ms. Vesta began the interview with a

similar sentiment representative of her hope to attain better communication skills. She declared very early in the interview, “I want to know more and more about how to get along with people.” Later in the interview, Nancy Vesta introduced a second reason for learning how to “stay in contact with people.” She disclosed that she had already developed some anger management strategies. She appeared both sincere and enthusiastic about already understanding how to “talk out problems a whole lot more.” Ms. Vesta also endorsed learning to “swallow things a whole lot more.” She used the comment to suggest that sometimes it is wise to say nothing instead of speaking out of anger without thinking. She emphasized that she wants to “gets along with everybody” and that requires her to understand “if something is wrong” and to work to “solve that problem and put it behind me.”

Nancy Vesta jokes: You didn't write about that shotgun, did you? I just about lost my Christianity. I said, “Shit, that’s what the shotgun is here for. To solve problems.”

Melinda: We have to learn some laws.

Nancy Vesta: Taking a gun is not going to solve a problem for you and that's why we need to talk out problems a whole lot more and learn to swallow things a whole lot more. I learned to do that. But, still I want to kill 'em until I can get it off my mind.

Nancy Vesta was capable of easily transitioning from serious-minded dialogue to light-hearted discussion and back. Despite her flair for weaving humor into her stories, Nancy showed every appearance of being sincere about the importance of moving on with relationships despite past problems.

Nancy Vesta: I want to dwell on the positive things and let the negatives go. Just work on the positives things. I can't say it right.

Melinda: It's okay.

Nancy Vesta: And, put it behind me.

Melinda: And move on.

Nancy Vesta jokes: And, not have to kill nobody.

Melinda: And, not have to go to jail.

### **Contributive Needs**

Altruism is when we put other people's needs before our own (Reis, 2007). Some people feel a sense of altruism and a need to help society throughout their lives. Hales-Mabry (1993) refers to “meaningful contributions” (p. 118) of volunteerism that may require older adults to seek out information resources. She also notes the existence of “intergenerational programs” (p. 119) and suggests how librarians can support these programs. Kimsey Lyndon and Knox Jefferson identified learning opportunities to help younger generations. Donna Lincoln, on the other hand, wants health and homecare training to help her generational peers and elders. See Table 4 below for a list of the study participants' contributive needs.

Table 5.3

*Contributive needs*

	Reported
Caregiver and community health	1
Helping grandchildren with their homework	1
Intergenerational communication	1

*Note.* All communication abilities and skills could also be considered "Expressive Needs" and at times "Influence Needs."

**Caregiver and community health.** Donna Lincoln may prefer to spend her days diligently attending to her own healthcare and to others as much as she could. Ms. Lincoln's answer reflects on the works of Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) about the tradition of helping others among rural African Americans. She passionately explained how with proper training she would do her part to help with the daily healthcare of older adults her community. She stated:

I would like to learn how to take care of other people. We got so many elder people around here that don't understand how to take their medication. I would like to learn to do all of that. Give them shots. Oh sure, that would be wonderful.

She went on to say, "You know to help out," and then provided an example of someone she was already concerned about. "And every time I think about shots, I think about Joe. He has to wait until somebody to decide that they can come and give them to him and he is already sick." Ms. Lincoln showed her sensitivity about the lack of daily care for her neighbor who needed insulin shots. "And that's the hurting thing. I know I got diabetes. I am diabetic and I know I got to have the shots but I got to wait until you

make up your mind to come.” During the interview, she questioned the laxity in the schedule of nurses who attended to her neighbor:

Yeah, it is just like I said those nurses that goes in over there...and those doctors too. They should fix it so that those nurses come every day and give him a shot every day. Medicare is going to pay for it anyway. Just make sure he gets his medication.

**Helping grandchildren with their homework.** Marvin Formosa’s (2011) review of literature shows intergenerational learning can be a significant part of life experiences for grandparents and their grandchildren. In this study, Kimsey Lyndon’s relationship with her grandchildren could serve as a model for the development of future intergenerational learning programs (Formosa, 2011). Kimsey Lyndon's grandchildren and great-grandchildren will never be described as children-at-risk academically if she has a say. Ms. Lyndon is motivated to continue learning as a later-life learner to assist her grandchildren with their school work. She is focused on their school work, and worries at times that she is not familiar enough with the current curriculum taught in Serkens’ public schools. When questioned about her learning need related to her grandchildren’s education, Ms. Lyndon had the following to say:

It hurts me trying to raise some of them. And, when they ask you about how to do something and you don't know. Well, that keeps me going. Because the whole time when I was in school, I never did have anything more to work with than an Indian head tablet. Oh no! I didn't have all of this. Oh, I bet you have. You got that tablet and one or two books and so that's all you was going to have. You

didn't have all the big book satchels. They must have about nine of this and ten of that!!

Kimsey Lyndon visits the library to help her grandchildren with their studies. This mother, grandmother and great grandmother believes that a trip to the library puts her in a better position to help grandchildren with their schoolwork.

Melinda: So, I am trying to see where you could go in Serkens if you needed information? Nothing like that here, right?

Kimsey Lyndon: Library?

Melinda: Is there one here?

Kimsey Lyndon: Yeah.

Melinda: There is one?

Kimsey Lyndon: Yeah, right there on the corner of Main Street.

Melinda: Oh, really. How long has it been here?

Kimsey Lyndon: It has been here all the time. Ever since I came here there was a library. Yes, there was a library here even when I was a girl. And, that's been a long time. I am 76 now. And, they just done built a new one, you know?

Melinda: Do you go there?

Kimsey Lyndon: Oh, yeah I go there a lot of times to learn. You know some of my grandkids can come up with book problems. And, I go to the library to catch up and try to learn more about the terms they use in school.

According to Ms. Kimsey, when she went to school the whole system was different from the experiences of her grandchildren. "Because the whole time when I was in school, I never did have anything more to work with than an Indian head tablet. You

got that tablet and one or two books and so that's all you was going to have," she insisted. In addition to supplies, Kimsey Lyndon commented on the differences in the math curriculum too. Below Ms. Lyndon remembers a particular type of math problem.

Kimsey Lyndon: They would give us a Johnny Lawson as they called it.

Melinda: Wait, wait, wait!! What is a Johnny Lawson?

Kimsey Lyndon: That would be a problem that we had to work out. Maybe it would require some dividing or multiplication. But when you got through multiplying, the problem might be as long as your paper. But you see, they don't have that kind of stuff in school now, right?

Melinda: Right.

Kimsey Lyndon: No, no. A chief tablet they called it. It was a red tablet that had an Indian head on it.

Melinda: I don't think I have ever seen one. So it's just a very different. Do you mind me asking what grade you finished?

Kimsey Lyndon: I went to the twelfth.

Melinda: Yes ma'am.

Kimsey Lyndon: Right here in Serkens

**Intergenerational communication.** "The benefits of intergenerational education are well known" (Formosa, 2011, p. 11) and important to Knox Jefferson, age 80, Skeen, Texas. Mr. Jefferson is a self-directed adult learner who also taught himself "industrial" trades like plumbing, electrical work, and automotive repair. Mr. Jefferson also discovered that he enjoys working with school age children. "I like to work with kids and I think that I can help these kids," claimed the former bus driver. Knox Jefferson



supplemented this statement with a little history about his employment and connections with younger generations.

Melinda: Can you list something you needed to learn in the last one or two years?

Knox Jefferson: Well, I enjoyed teaching school the last two to three years in Northeast Central Texas City. I never taught before. I was a teacher's substitute. When you work with kids, you get to learn how kids think. It helps. You can have your own family but when they go to school you are not with them. You are not with them in the classroom and it's a different ballgame. When you work with them, you learn a lot of different ways to make kids think, change their attitudes, and stuff like that. I have done more with the kids at the school since I've been back than I ever did even when I was raising mine. There is no limit to what you can learn everyday with kids.

Melinda: So, I am going to write that one thing you wanted to learn in the last two years was how to talk to school kids?

Knox Jefferson: Communicating with young adults.

The ability to connect with children was important to Knox Jefferson at the community level. He advocated learning through community involvement and recommended that rural African American adults age 65 and over could help children and continue to learn at the same time by participating in “the Boys and Girls Club over in Northeast Central Texas City.”

### **Influence Needs**

The need to influence other people is most often considered a matter of possessing leadership, political and social skills and involves activities like community

advocacy and political lobbying (Hales-Mabry, 1993; Wacker & Roberto, 2007). Study participants have learning needs that are socially and culturally related. For Sherman Adams, his necessary learning and related information support and resources must involve the church as an organization. His social action agenda is saving souls and involves community work and learning how to convert or witness to non-Christians. Katherine Madison, Kenedia Onassis, and Knox Jefferson have different reasons for wanting to learn to speak Spanish. Ms. Madison sees career opportunities to influence potential employers. Ms. Onassis' and Mr. Knox's goals are more in the category of general interest but still influential because of the power of language and words. According to Reyes, Castañeda, & de Vegas (2006), "language proficiency can be defined as the ability to say what you want to say in the manner you want to say it and to be comfortable that you said it appropriately," (p. 289), and if "language is a system of symbols that members of a culture use for representation and communication" (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003, p. 38), then being bilingual is an important social influence. See Table 5 below for a list of the study participants' influence needs.

Table 5.4

*Influence Needs*

	Reported
Christian ministry and improving outreach services	1
Spanish language learning	3

*Note.* Spanish is included because of a person's new ability to communicate and share meanings through self-expression in a different language.

**Christian ministry and improving outreach services.** The Reverend Sherman Adam, age 68, Fremond, Texas, wants to save souls. Reverend Adams is unique from the other study participants with career-related goals because his learning need is part of his spiritual mission as a Christian and his responsibility to the community as a rural minister. Reverend Adams and his wife live in the predominantly African American residential area of Fremond, and he is a minister to two rural church congregations. He maintained that his learning desire was to be taught how to effectively witness to people about the Christian faith.

Melinda: How would you complete this sentence: I wish I knew or I wish I had learned or I have always wanted to learn; would there be any answers to that?

Sherman Adams: Well, I would say yes, because there could be a lot you can learn outside the church to help the church.

Melinda: Tell me about that. What would you like to learn outside a church that could help the church?

Sherman Adams: Learn how to get more involved with those outside the church. We have a problem with that sometimes with our ... What you call it?

Melinda: Is that outreach?

Sherman Adams: Yeah, we have a problem with that because we sometime fail to get involved with people outside of the church because of our lack of faith.

Reverend Adams explained how some Christians are more concerned with their image in community than participating in outreach services. "We do not want to be seen with this person if that person is not of our faith. This is a great problem," he assessed. Reverend Adams described the action of some reticent Christians as "shying off" and

“failing to get out” of the church and “in the world.” Hence, Reverend Sherman’s solution is to enable himself and his members of congregations he pastors to learn to become better witnesses for Christ through teaching and learning.

Melinda: One of the primary things you wanted to do is primarily learn to witness so that you can?

Sherman Adams: Learn how to be an effective witness.

Melinda: An effective witness. I need to make sure I get that down.

Sherman Adams: When you witness, you want to be an effective witness. You want to take effect. The seed that you plant might come up next month or the month after but it will come up-you know. As you said, a while ago, you witnessed to a person and they might tell you I'll be there Sunday. Yes, Ma'am. I'll be there Sunday. He might not show up that Sunday. He might show up the Sunday after that or the Sunday after, you know, but this is what we got to say. This is what we got to look at when he say, I'll be there Sunday but he doesn't say what Sunday. You understand?

The greater problems for any charitable business, like a religious center, would be sustainability. Naturally, the capacity of any non-profit to continue is a matter of cause-and-effect linked to quality marketing techniques and outreach programs and services. The church, according to Reverend Sherman Adams, has many roles in the community including educational. Reverend Adams was given a chance to explain. “The church is the school,” he preached. Later in the interview, Reverend Sherman Adams listed some of the programs and services currently available to communities through the rural African American church.

Sherman Adams: We have weekly meetings. There are mission meetings. There's brotherhood and prayer meetings.

Melinda: You got mission meeting? Prayer meetings?

Sherman Adams: And on Wednesday night, midweek service.

Financial assistance to those in need is another responsibility of the church pastor, church deacons, and congregation. Reverend Adams explained that he expected church members to help the needy with this statement:

We are a small church financially. I tell my peoples that the churches is set up to help those less fortunate than we are. If someone gets burnout or if somebody needs food, I tell my Deacons to help me in the field. They should visit with people to see if somebody might need their light bill or gas bill paid. Something like that is a financial help.

Reverend Adams had indicated throughout the interview that he wanted to learn how to interact with people outside the Church. Later in the interview, Sherman Adams disclosed the motivation behind his learning need. He expressed an intrinsic desire to improve by doing more for others.

I never have been able to do that. I really want to be able to be where I can get out and be among those out there. But I want to do more than I do now. I know that what I am able to do now is limited. You know how it is? It is kinda like on account of your job sometimes. You have the desire but you can't always when you have other responsibilities. You know.

**Spanish language learning.** Katherine Madison is one of a few study participants who shared examples of their long-term learning needs. She also had taken other approaches to accomplishing her learning ambitions.

Melinda: Have you really ever really wanted to learn in the past?

Katherine Madison: Well, what we really need is classes on Spanish because we have so many Spanish people here now. I can speak just a little Spanish.

Melinda: Because Spanish speakers are just about everywhere you go?

Katherine Madison: Yes, because we have so many Spanish people here now.

Melinda: You might need someone who speaks Spanish to teach you some day.

Katherine Madison: I also think you may need to know how to speak Spanish to get a job.

Melinda: You may even need to know it in the churches, too.

Katherine Madison: But, I have some CDs. I haven't had time to listen to them. I was going to put them in my CD player and start learning.

Melinda: Again, what would you like to learn?

Katherine Madison: I'm serious. There are three things at my age that I would like to take classes and learn more about.

Melinda: What are those three things?

Katherine Madison: Ain't it true? At my age, I want to learn to speak more Spanish. I want to learn how to play piano a little more. I can play by ear a little. I would love to go to a hobby craft place.

Katherine Madison would prefer to enroll in a class while Ms. Onassis would be happy with being tutored by someone from within the community who speaks both Spanish and English well.

Kenedia Onassis would begin her search for a Spanish language tutor within the Seeker community. As she stated, “You know, I would probably try to find me a just good Spanish-speaking person in the community.” In her next response, Ms. Onassis clarified that the tutor she would choose would not be “just a Spanish-speaker but a good bilingual person that could, you know, start me from scratch.” However, she did not have a specific person from Seeker in mind.

Knox Jefferson joins Katherine Madison and Kenedia Onassis as another study participant who would like to learn to speak Spanish. Knox briefly noted, “I’d like to learn Spanish but I don’t think I’ll get a chance to learn it all.”

### **Transcendental Needs**

Self-transcendence is the final need in McClusky’s hierarchy (Cusak & Thompson, 1998). Theoretically, older learners have successfully navigated the life’s challenges in methods that are expressive and altruistic while successfully using their seasoned leadership skills for community advocacy. In practice, transcendence is about personal missions to re-invent oneself, to move from painful pasts toward forward thinking for the future, and re-examining of life experiences (Campbell, 2005; Hales-Mabry, 1993, Wacker & Roberto, 2007). As the originator of this study, I never imagined that I would meet so many people in rural Texas with educational and vocational intentions that would be impressive for rural Americans half their ages (Einstein, 2011).

Table 5.5

*Transcendence Needs*

	Reported
Airplanes and piloting aircrafts	1
Automotive maintenance and repair	1
Building and repairing computers	1
Career Building and vocational learning	2

*Note.* These learning needs are included here because they represent rather ambitious and advanced personal goals for later-life learners.

**Airplanes and piloting aircrafts.** George Clinton, age 78, from Neserk, Texas, has always wanted to learn to fly an airplane. There are two reasons why Mr. Clinton may never realize his dreams of flying. Mr. Clinton claimed that his health and aging has curbed that learning priority. In addition, George Clinton does not know anyone locally who can teach him how to fly an airplane. On that account, Mr. Clinton would have to travel to Northeast Central Texas County City, Texas (20 miles away) for flying lessons. While talking with Mr. Clinton, he disclosed why he has always wanted to learn how to fly an aircraft.

Melinda: How about you? Anything?

George Clinton: Fly.

Melinda: Oh, I like that one. Have you really always wanted to learn how to fly?

George Clinton: Yes. I wanted to learn how to fly when I was in the service.

Melinda: But in the last two years, you haven't wanted to learn how to fly, right?

George Clinton: No. I had replacement knee.



The semi-structured interview contained questions to ascertain how participants might go about accomplishing a learning need or priority within their community. Mr. Clinton stated that few adult learning resources exist in Neserk, Texas, and did not include a flight school. He admitted that he would have to leave Neserk to take flying lessons.

Melinda: You told me that you have a desire to learn how to fly. There is someone in Neserk who is qualified to teach you how to fly?

George Clinton: In Northeast Central Texas County City.

Melinda: Huh?

George Clinton: Northeast Central Texas County City. But, I have lost interest in flying now. I've gotten too old now. It's too much on you.

As a later-life learner, George Clinton had abandoned his interest in becoming a pilot.

He claimed that age was the problem but traveling away from home could be an obstacle too.

**Automotive maintenance and repair.** Grover Levi, age 68, from Woodlot, Texas, completed two years of trade school to build his mechanic career. Following in his father's footsteps, Grover Levi continued a family tradition by becoming an automobile mechanic. He was asked to indicate if he had experienced any learning needs in the last two years. Thus, Mr. Levi provided the subsequent response, "My dad was a mechanic and was kind of mechanically inclined. I went to two years of trade school. I just added that to what all I knew. Fortunately, the absence of a training program in Northeast

Central Texas county did not prevent Mr. Levi from becoming a successful automobile mechanic.

Grover Levi: Yeah, in the past there were things that I wanted to learn at the time but I didn't have the funds or didn't have the facilities local. I would have to go out.

I went to trade school in Los Angeles but just on the body. I really wanted to get off full time into mechanics and automobiles. But, I didn't have the facilities here. I would have to go Waco or North Texas Metroplex.

Melinda: You had to go to Waco? They didn't have it in Northeast Central Texas City?

Grover Levi: No. Now they got a little deal with Northeast Central Texas but it is not automotive. It is in commercial industry which is tractors.

Mr. Levi had once in his life seen the necessity to learn more about computers. Grover Levi admitted that he had considered other career options including learning more about using computers. Mr. Levi discussed his current dilemma.

Well that's a field that I wanted to get off into. I had two back surgeries kinda back to back. I really like had to start all over again. My whole life style changed, you know. I had the opportunity to go into computers but I just wasn't concerned at the time with computers. Now, I wish I had but everything now is gone.

Missed opportunities and the consequences are personal experiences shared by both Grover Levi and Gracie Washington. Grover Levi is an example of someone who does not see a way to start anew at this time in life. In contrast, Gracie Washington is full

of hope that she will be able to write publish a book about a community her family settled long ago and that remains even today.

**Building and repairing computers.** In addition to having once dreamed of flying, George Clinton is an experienced computer user. He stays busy building and rebuilding computers, and as he exclaimed, “I spend a lot time on the computer.” George Clinton and his spouse found some value for the Internet as a source of spiritual entertainment. Occasionally, they listen to Gospel music from the Internet. George Clinton wants to continue to improve his skills to maintain computers by rebuilding them. George Clinton’s acknowledged his accomplishment in this interview sequence.

Melinda: Have there been any other particular interests that you've had in the last two years?

George Clinton: I have messed with computers

Melinda: Computers? In the last two years?

George Clinton: Yeah. I have built one

Melinda: You built one? Or you are going to build one?

George Clinton: Yeah. I built it. Yeah. A whole computer.

Among the participants, George Clinton’s knowledge and understanding of the inner workings of computers was unique only to him.

**Career and vocational learning.** Three of the later-life learners hope to move into new careers. Debbie Harrison and Kimsey Lyndon aspire to change careers at age 80 and 76 years old respectively. Debbie Harrison has plans for her and her son to have their own barbecue business. The ambitious great grandmother, Kimsey Lyndon, hopes to earn the credits she needs to become a mortician or embalmer.

***Mortuary science career.*** Kimsey Lyndon, age 76, from Serkens, Texas, is a grandmother to over 20 grandchildren and again to 20 great grandchildren. Kimsey Lyndon conveyed why she hoped to start a new career in mortuary science. Ms. Lyndon has devoted over 30 years working as a nurse. She was clearly ready for a change. This was evident when she said, “I done worked 33 years with home care and nursing homes. I want to work with somebody that won't talk back.”

Kimsey Lyndon: Well, here in Serkens I went to school after I was 67 years old.

Melinda: You went to school after you were 67 years old?

Kimsey Lyndon: Uh, huh, yeah. You see I'm a nurse. I was lacking six credits and what I want to do is graduate with the six credits and work in ... What you call it? I want to work in a mortuary with dead people.

Ms. Lyndon earned her credits from the Serkens Alternative School now managed by the Serkens Independent School District. The State of Texas discontinued offering credit classes for adults at the Alternative School. Of course, a result of the State's decision was that Kimsey Lyndon has to find another way to earn the credits she needs for a mortician license. Sounding somewhat despondent, Ms. Lyndon said, “I was first going to this alternative school out here. The way the state was doing it, where I didn't have to pay or nothing. They don't do it anymore.” According to Kimsey, the Serkens Alternative School once offered GED courses and a variety of other types of classes. She explained how the Serkens' Alternative School program had changed.

Melinda: Is there any place here in Serkens for you to learn more about it?

Kimsey Lyndon: Not no more. I was first going to this Alternative school out here

Melinda: Okay, so anyone at any age can go there?

Kimsey Lyndon: Any age. I was 67 then.

Melinda: So, did they offer like a lot of different classes?

Kimsey Lyndon: Oh, yes... a whole bunch of different classes

Melinda: Okay, but they do not offer anything like that now?

Kimsey Lyndon: Yeah, they still have it for children

Melinda: Just for children?

Kimsey Lyndon: Children when they, you know, when they don't mind.

In Kimsey Lyndon's case, she would need facilities and learning materials to enable her post-secondary education and hopefully, find employment opportunities in her community.

***Restaurant business operation and ownership.*** Before coming to Sedans, Texas, Debbie Harrison, age 80, worked as a cosmetologist, managed a cosmetology school, and managed a snack bar. After a long career in the beauty business, Debbie Harrison decided to retire and move to the rural Texas. At the age of 80 years old, Debbie Harrison dreamed of going back into the food business but this time as an owner. She wanted to start a family business with her selling barbecue. Barbecue enthusiasts are always on the lookout for the next best BBQ meal, and Ms. Harrison considered starting a barbecue business a viable venture for a country community like Sedans. Below Ms. Harrison commented on her son's desire to own barbecue restaurant.

Yeah, I think they need one here. My son out there. He has always wanted, always talked about having a barbecue place here in Sedans. Now when I first came here, I want to put up a place here, a barbecue stand, that's what I was really

wanted to do. He is a good barbecue maker. He will be if I could just make up my mind.

Ms. Harrison transitioned to discussing how her age was a factor working against her and her son's success. "At my age, now that I am 80 years old, I cannot do the things that I used to do." Ms. Harrison thought out loud for moment to say, "Because I still cook like a devil. I don't know how to quit cooking," she announced. Ms. Harrison was convinced she could get financial assistance from a local banker to help start a small business.

### **Summary**

The learning needs are varied and differ from one study participant to another. The conditions under which their needs developed likewise are varied. Each adult learner's learning goals and priorities are grouped together to compose a new learning category which is a norm for this study. However, there were cases in which a learning category existed because of one person's learning preference. For example, Gracie Washington is the only person who expressed a longing to write a book and become published. Consequently, Ms. Washington is alone in that learning category. The other exception to note is the career and vocational learning category. These learners, for all the purposes, are anomalies in their own learning environments. Plans for retirement are typically the social norm for adults age 65 and over whether they are rural or urban residents.

## **Emergent Themes:**

### **Research Question 2 – Resources and Materials**

The focus of many of professional publications about adult learning is developing successful online learning environments. For example, Lee, Der Pana, Liao, Chenc, & Walters (2013) published an article about holistic learning and interactive learning environments for *digital natives*. The term digital natives “or the Net generation” refers to those people who “have been immersed in technology all their lives, imbuing them with sophisticated technical skills and learning preferences for which traditional education is unprepared” (Bennett, Maton, Kervin, 2008). In fact, online search results will overwhelmingly include articles about online courses, cyberspace learning, and online collaboration so that a researcher has to limit their options to find articles about resources to support rural leaning environments. In contrast to online learning, the information relayed in this section is a report of findings of learning resources, center or sites, and materials in the rural settings of 14 older Blacks.

#### **Adult Learning Sites in Rural Texas**

The study would be incomplete without listing all the learning sites identified by the study participants. The study participants’ list of adult learning sites includes a museum, a high school alumni social center, and an information center. Some types of facilities are more frequently listed than others. For example, the church is thought of as a learning site by many of the study participants. The following list is in alphabetical order.

**Alternative schools.** Kimsey Lyndon explained that there was once a place in Serkens where she could earn the credits she needs to complete a mortician’s license. As revealed by Ms. Lyndon, the Serkens Alternative School once offered a curriculum for

adults learners. The purpose of the Alternative School changed while Kimsey Lyndon was taking classes. The new emphasis and focus of the Serkens Alternative School is to provide children with special needs a chance to continue learning within the school system. The new direction of the Alternative School robbed Kimsey Lyndon of an opportunity to attain her career goal. She disclosed how the capacity of Serkens as an adult learning environment to adequately support her learning needs now fails.

Melinda: Is there any place here in Serkens for you to learn more about it?

Kimsey Lyndon: No, not anymore. I was first going to this Alternative school out here.

Melinda: Okay?

Kimsey Lyndon: But it won't do it now for old people. The state was doing it so that I didn't have to pay or nothing. They don't do it anymore.

Melinda: Well, it is now like any regular alternative school?

Kimsey Lyndon: Yeah, it's like any alternative school.

Melinda: Okay, but before it changed, anyone at any age could go there?

Kimsey Lyndon: Any age. I was 67 then.

Under the Alternative School's former mission, Kimsey Lyndon's daughter took GED classes there, so the change in services for the Alternative School affected another member of Ms. Lyndon's family. Consequently, Kimsey Lyndon and her daughter represent two adult learners who had established learning needs and who felt the impact of the program's redesign. They were actively participating through an formal venue in the community that no longer exists, leaving Kimsey Lyndon with few options.



**Alumni student associations.** George Clinton also recommends the NSA (Neserk Ex-Student Association), and the Kiwanis Club. Ms. Lyndon could only list two people in Serkens that she could turn to for help with her learning concerns. Her first call would be to Knox Jefferson. According to Kimsey, he does a lot for the Serkens community. She would rely on a close friend if Mr. Jefferson was unavailable.

**Churches.** Stubblefield and Keane (1994) quoted E.L. Ihle (1990) and others, on the heritage and history of the African American church as the preferred forum for the political and educational advancement of its community. As voiced by most study participants, the church remains a community institution that continues to hold an important place for rural adult learners age 65 and over. The findings further support the idea that rural residents may participate in church activities because they are spiritual, social, and learning based.

Barbara Van Buren spoke about what she learns in Church. In addition to learning to love others she enjoys the singing and praying thus adding entertainment to the purpose of the Everblooming church she attended.

Melinda: Other than the library, is there any other place you would go here in Everblooming if you wanted to learn something?

Barbara Van Buren: Well, I can go to church and I can learn a lot there.

Melinda: Really? What would you learn in church?

Barbara Van Buren: Well, I learn how to love your neighbor as yourself.

Debbie Harrison listed the church as part of her rural learning environment. She benefited most by having a pastor who helped the congregation how to stay focused.

Melinda: What does the Church do? Does the church offer any learning opportunities? I know you're very active in the church.

Debbie Harrison: Well, I don't know of anything. We offer nothing but now the pastor at times it, you know, gets us on the right track.

Melinda: Religiously?

Debbie Harrison: Yeah!!

Melinda: Spiritually?

Debbie Harrison: Uh-huh. But that's about all.

Dolley Grant's inventory of the learning centers in Wonted, Texas includes her local church. In Wonted, the church is the only learning center in town according to Ms. Grant.

Dolley Grant: Honey ain't nothing here but go to church. That's all.

Melinda: Okay. I'm going to put that down. Go to church.

All right. Let's make the best use of your time. I am going to ask about learning resources in the Wonted community? Then I am going to ask you about people as experts in the Wonted community that you could consult. But first, I want to know if you have wanted to learn something in the past two years or to tried to obtain information to learn something new.

Dolley Grant: Oh, what I learned?

Melinda: What you learned? Yes, and what resources have you used in the past to learn something new?

Dolley Grant: Honey, ain't nothing here. There is nothing to learn nothing. We can go to church. That's all.

Melinda: Okay. I'm going to put that down, go to church.

Dolley Grant: I go to church but I got to tell you, honey, we don't have anything here.

Donna. Lincoln, like other study participants, emphasized the importance of the church to rural African Americans age 65 and over as residents of Snowed, Texas. Ms. Lincoln insisted that Snowed did not have another adult learning center for her purposes except the church. Donna Lincoln's church offered classes from which she learned how to interpret Bible scriptures.

Donna Lincoln: I have learned how to interpret scriptures in the Bible. I've learned how to turn right to it. There have been times when I had to take my time. Sometimes, I get it wrong and then I have to start all over again.

Melinda: Yes, ma'am. What else did you learn in church?

Donna Lincoln: We have a Bible class and we have Sunday school. We just have several different things that we have but the pastor we got now. I don't know why she won't get the Sunday schoolbooks. She was ordering the Sunday schoolbooks and then she and the woman got into it.

Melinda: Oh my, God!!

Donna Lincoln: And, she just quit. So, we just get the Bible and go on.

Katherine Madison identified three locations in Skeen that she considered viable adult learning centers. The African American rural church is one of them.

Katherine Madison: I think the only other place that I know to go to around here would be the church. We have more churches than we do anything - you know. Well, some churches have programs but I've never been to them.

Melinda: How many churches does Skeen have?

Katherine Madison: Oh, my goodness! We have about five Black churches.

Melinda: I kinda like this topic. What do you think is educational about the churches?

Katherine Madison: Well, now, to me, I think going to church period is educational. I go to mission on Tuesday night. We have Bible study on Wednesday night. That's a teaching class. There is someone to teach you about Sunday school lessons and stuff like that is taught.

Nancy Vesta included the local church as a learning center. Nancy Vesta proclaimed that she attended church to get all the information she can from the preaching. She believes that the church material supplements her learning.

Nancy Vesta: And you know, I love to go to church. I can get all the information that I can.

Melinda: So, the church is another place you would go to learn?

Nancy Vesta: Yeah, don't you think you go to church to learn especially if the preacher preaches on Sunday?

Sherman Adams listed three ways in which his churches support adult learning within a community. Along with other study participants, he listed mission services, deacon services, and prayer meetings as opportunities for later-life learning in rural Texas. Sherman Adams' perspective of the rural church differs from others in the study group because he is a rural preacher whose teaching responsibilities and outreach roles are very important to him.

Melinda: What would he have to do to learn to become a witness?

Sherman Adams: The Bible says he has to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Melinda: So, he is now in school.

Sherman Adams: The church is the school. The church is just like a hospital too. It fixes souls.

**Community book exchanges.** Nellie Obama cited a community book exchange as one of ways she stayed informed and continued to learn. Ms. Obama was also the only interviewee who participated in a book exchange. Nellie lived approximately 10 miles from the closest paved road. Her home was surrounded by fields of grass divided by the gravel road went by her home. In the following segment, Nellie Obama explained how to get from her home to the Vanillas General Store's community book exchange.

Melinda: Is there anything in the community?

Nellie Obama: Vanillas General store. I go down to the book trade. I read a lot, and when I run out of books, I go down there and trade with them.

Melinda: Where is this?

Nellie Obama: This is The Farmer's Market Road. The Vanillas General store and café at The Farmer's Market Road.

Melinda: The store is on The Farmer's Market Road?

Nellie Obama: The store is on The Farmer's Market Road FM, Vanillas General store and café. There is a book trading place up there where you we can go and sit down and talk. They got photos all over the wall of these Army and Military people.

Melinda: So that would be a community resource?

Nellie Obama: Yeah, anyone can just go in and trade books.

Melinda: So, it kinda works out.

Nellie Obama: Yes, it's real good 'cause I can't afford books right now. I used to order them from the folks out there at Doubleday but then I ran out of money so now I just trade.

**Information centers.** Kenedia Onassis indicated that there is an information center in Seeker that she has used for learning and information gathering. Ms. Onassis was the only study participant who commented on the availability of information centers in Seeker.

Melinda: What resources in the Seeker community have you used in the past to learn to something new or to get information?

Kenedia Onassis: I have used Seeker's resource center here.

Melinda: There is a resource center here?

Kenedia Onassis: Yeah, it's kinda an information center. I think that's what it is called it. There is a new library also.

**Museums.** Nancy Vesta was the only study participant who listed a nearby museum as rural learning center for adults her age to learn about antiques. Her following comments on the museum in nearby Chapel, Texas, demonstrated that Ms. Vesta had mixed feelings about the educational benefits of visiting the museum for a rural later-life learner like herself.

Melinda: Are there places that you can go to learn something in this community?

If you wanted to learn something new, are there places here?

Nancy Vesta: Well, I'm trying to think of places that I could go.

Melinda: In this community? Yeah, that's the question. Where would you go in this community to learn something new if you had a brand-new, burning learning concern? I want to learn how to do this or I want to learn how to do that?

Nancy Vesta: What you want to know is what places in Animosia would I go to learn something?

Melinda: Yes ma'am. Where would you go?

Nancy Vesta: Yeah, I would love to go the Chapel museum but you'd want to know what I am going to learn when I get down there.

Melinda: What are you going learn?

Nancy Vesta: I don't know unless to learn more about antiques and what not to put in a museum.

**Public schools.** Several study participants assessing the learning environment and reported the public schools in some aspect as one of their resources for later-life learning. School teachers are confidants on personal matters. School teachers are seen as having talents that the community sees as desirable and available. The schools are seen as a public good because they are available to all members of the communities they support no matter their age or ethnicity.

Katherine Madison identified three places in Skeen that she would consider during information seeking to address a learning priority and listed the public schools as a learning center. Much like Ms. Madison, Kenedia Onassis would hope to find a local teacher. "I will call a good music teacher from the school I had asked for recommendations," she asserted. Later in our discussion, Ms. Onassis admitted the she

would also turn to the talent at the public school for find a business or office management teacher.

Melinda: Back to the business education school teacher. How would you do that?

Would you feel comfortable asking them? I guess that's what I'm trying to ask.

Kenedia Onassis: I don't know them personally. But, I do believe that if I walk in there and say - you know - that I've always wanted to do this and this and this.

Can you recommend or would you recommend a good music teacher? Would you recommend a good typing teacher where I could take some private lessons or something like that?

Melinda: Would you approach the school music teacher or the business education teacher even if you did not know them?

Kenedia Onassis: Yes. Yes.

Melinda: Why do you say that?

Kenedia Onassis: Because, I know that one day or two days a week that the churches go in and mentor students - you know.

Melinda: I am also interested in the school library as a community good. Do you think that the school library or that the school itself is open to the public of Seeker for education purposes?

Kenedia Onassis: I feel that allowing the churches to come in and help mentor students—you know—shows that school lends itself to having an open door policy.

Melinda: Do you teach right now?

Kenedia Onassis: I've been retired seven years.



Melinda: What did you teach before you retired?

Kenedia Onassis: I am a mathematics teacher by nature. I taught about six or seven years and then I went into administration and that's when I retired

Melinda: So, you really understand the inner workings of the Seeker public school system. In other words, you would feel comfortable going to the school to ask people to help you because you worked there.

Kenedia Onassis: Not necessarily. I just believe that I can plead my case. I don't know but I believe that I could communicate with a person that I needed help. I want to do this, can you help me? Can you recommend? If you can't, give me a name now. Then call me later when you've had time to think about it.

**Rural libraries.** Public libraries are perennial resources for life-long learning that for people like Kimsey Lyndon, have always been available. Vavrek (1995) presented the challenges rural librarians encounter to provide service to their community. Naturally, Vavrek's list included how librarians struggle to understand the information needs of their community users. Based on the results of the report, rural librarians in Northeast Central Texas County must be prepared to help rural African Americans age 65 and over with memory loss, resources on writing and publishing books, computers, and helping with the grandkids with their homework. But first, they would need to develop a marketing campaign to attract older people like Barbara Van Buren and other 90-year old users.

Barbara Van Buren's hometown of Everblooming, Texas, has a community library. However, she had not visited the library before being interviewed for this study

but determined that she might afterwards. She directly answered, "Well that's something - I don't know. I might do."

Gracie Washington tried to list three places in Seeker, Texas, where information searchers could get started. Her listed included Seeker's new library. The small town of Seeker, Texas had recently rebuilt their library. The new library was built across the street from where its predecessor existed. Gracie Washington had once served on the library board because of her church's commitment to supporting the learning center.

Melinda: I am trying to figure out where people over 65 would go here in Seeker to take a class or a workshop?

Gracie Washington: They don't have any of that here but we do have a new library.

Melinda: Well, tell me about the library.

Gracie Washington: I have not been in that one yet. But before it got to where it is now, I used to work with the library.

Melinda: It's been here for how long?

Gracie Washington: We had a whole library right across the street from where the new one is. I was on the board for years.

Melinda: Oh? Tell me about that.

Gracie Washington: Well, we did quite a few things but not things that really, truly last. You know, when you are working with a White group and you about the only Black in there.

Melinda: That's never easy.

Gracie Washington Laughs: No it's not easy. But New Harriet, my church, were interested in it. That's what kept me in it. That church has always funded the library.

Melinda: Does the African-American community support the library now or work with the library now? What's his name? Reverend Bishop Sheen. Is he involved in that?

Gracie Washington: He might be. I'm not that anymore. When my time was out, I was out and I just didn't go back. And, you know, I have not even been to the new library they got up there.

Grover Levi, later-life learner from Woodlot, Texas, listed the library as part of his rural learning environment.

Melinda: Would the library have any information about Agalwood?

Grover Levi: It would have some.

Katherine Madison alleged that she has two libraries available for her learning and related information-seeking needs. Ms. Madison, unlike other participants, indicated that either Skeen's public library or Skeen's school's library are available as learning resources. She explained that as a school employee, she felt confident about the availability of the school library as a public good.

Katherine Madison: The only one I've been in so far is at the school where I work.

Melinda: Can you – people from Skeen- use the library at the school?

Katherine Madison: Well, I don't know. I never asked that question. I am sure if anyone from Skeen could if they wanted to.

Melinda: You think so? Well then, could that be like a second resource in Skeen?

First, the public library and second, the school library?

Katherine Madison: Well, because we have a new library now, I guess we wouldn't need to go down to the school.

Melinda: Before the new public library opened, do you think people from the community could have gone down to school library?

Katherine Madison: I'm sure, yes!

Kimsey Lyndon has accessed a library since she was a child, the grand- and great-grandmother remembered. Kimsey, a later-life learner from Serkens, Texas, listed the library as part of her rural learning environment.

Melinda: So, I am trying to see where you could go in Serkens if you needed information about classes? Nothing like that here, right?

Kimsey Lyndon: Library?

Melinda: Oh, really. Is there one here? How long has it been here?

Kimsey Lyndon: It has been here all the time.

Melinda: How long has it been here?

Kimsey Lyndon: There was a library here even when I was a girl. And, that's been a long time. I am 76 now. And, they just built a new one.

Melinda: Do you go there?

Kimsey Lyndon: Oh, yeah I go there a lot of times to learn. You know some of my grandkids can come up with homework problems. And, I go to the library to catch up and try to learn more about the terms they use in school.

Melinda: So, you want to help your grandkids?

Kimsey Lyndon: It hurts me trying to raise some of them. And, when they ask you about how to do something and you don't know. Well, that keeps me going.

According to Knox Jefferson, the Skeen local library is a place where people can use computers and have access to the Internet, too. He does not know if the Skeen library offers classes for older residents but he does view it as a place for personal learning and information seeking.

Knox Jefferson: I'm a member of the library.

Melinda: You are a member of the library?

Okay, excellent. So how often do you go up?

Knox Jefferson: I don't go up there too often right now because I am working every day. I have to try to keep this house which is quite a job for that. I have not been up there in at least about two months. We've got it brand-new library

This concludes the findings on adult learning centers in rural communities as reported by rural African Americans age 65 and over. They are a significant part of understanding the availability and limitations of rural learning opportunities. The existence of churches, community book exchanges, and even a museum is encouraging for providing any type of adult education classes. However, the learning environment is not complete without discussion of available materials and instruction.

### **Available Learning Materials**

Because learning materials are important to any educational experience, the semi-structured interview guide included questions to determine how local publications and other resources could support study participants' learning needs. Consequently, the study findings on available publications, print material, and online resources reflect how local

resources were viewed by participants as sources of information. The context in which study participants' choose or are encouraged to seek out specific resources adds another dimension to shaping their towns and communities as rural learning environments. Because many of the study participants were concerned about understanding the Bible, participation in church activities, and their spiritual growth, the learning and information materials are divided or organized into the categories of church news and religious publications or non-religious news and publications.

**Church news and religious publications.** Several of these later-life adults conveyed that they were engaged in acquiring more knowledge about the *Holy Bible*, their religious beliefs, and spiritual identity. Three study participants reported the availability of church materials in their community for adult learning purposes. For example, Donna Lincoln noted that she attended Bible classes at her church. We have a Bible class and we have Sunday school.” Her next comment shows her concerns about not having access to literature for Sunday school training. Ms. Lincoln shared, “We just have several different things. But, I don't know why our pastor won't get the Sunday schoolbooks. She was ordering the Sunday schoolbooks.”

As reported by Katherine Madison, Skeen, Texas has a local newspaper. In terms of coverage, she described it as covering, “whatever happens in Skeen” including “community news like churches and all that.”

Nancy Vesta's church, like Donna Lincoln's, relied on subscriptions to religious material. However, Nancy Vesta wanted her own subscription.

Nancy Vesta: I'd like to have a *Daily Word*.

Melinda: Oh, a *Daily Word* from your church?

Nancy Vesta: Yeah.

Melinda: Gotcha! That's one. Are there other publications?

Nancy Vesta: How would I say this? I would like to read a church paper. I don't know how to best say that.

Melinda: You mean a church bulletin or church newsletter. You want to subscribe to a church bulletin or newsletter?

Nancy Vesta: Yes. I want to subscribe to a church newsletter.

Melinda: But you don't subscribe to one now?

Nancy Vesta: The church is getting that *Christian Recorder*.

Melinda: So the church gets the *Christian Recorder* but you would like your own personal subscription.

**Community and non-religious news resources.** In addition to religious publications, the study participants identified non-religious newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and television as potential learning materials. The participants' interviews affirmed that some knowledge acquisition could result from reading nationally popular subscriptions. This finding speaks to the study participants' self-directed learning abilities and learning motivation.

Barbara Van Buren does not subscribe to any local newspaper because she cannot afford the subscription cost. Ms. Van Buren's comments represented how subscription costs can create learning and information barriers for rural African Americans age 65 and over. This case is an example of how personal budget and socioeconomics can minimize the adoption of new knowledge.

Melinda: What about local publications? Are there any newspapers or magazines here in Everblooming that you could use for learning?

Barbara Van Buren: I don't take them because they cost too much but they sell them here.

Melinda: I understand.

Barbara Van Buren: Yeah, yeah.

With newspaper subscription costs being prohibitive based on her budget, Barbara Van Buren might also need to rely on the library for Internet services.

Debbie Harrison assessed the quality of information in one local newspaper as “discouraging.” Her obvious disappointment with the publication communicated that she would be cautious about using anything reported in the newspaper for problem-solving.

Melinda: Okay. What about publications like newspapers and periodicals, magazines? Are there any local newspapers or magazines?

Debbie Harrison: No.

Melinda: Do you subscribe to anything like that for basic educational learning purposes in your home?

Debbie Harrison: Well, the only thing is that we get that little Northeast Central Texas City paper. She is about that thin. It arrives every week. There is nothing in it.

Melinda: You're talking about the Northeast Central Texas City Daily newspaper?

Debbie Harrison: Yes, honey. It is so discouraging. You can't find nothing in it important.



Dolley Grant complained about the limited resources—for information, for learning and otherwise—in Sedans, Texas. In Ms. Grant's opinion, the main barrier to living in Sedans was its limited services and facilities, including local publications as learning resources and information materials.

Melinda: What about other resources like publications?

Dolley Grant: Lord, honey, nothing that I know of.

Melinda: No newspapers?

Dolley Grant: No, we don't have them. We have them in Northeast Central Texas City but we don't have them here.

Melinda: No magazines or anything like that?

Dolley Grant: What? No, nothing! We don't have anything!

Donna Lincoln established that Snowed once had its own newspaper. As she stated, the former newspaper was consolidated with another paper published in Buhr, Texas about approximately 6.45 miles away.

Donna Lincoln: Now, we used to have a Snowed paper.

Melinda: How long ago was that?

Donna Lincoln: Oh! That's been about 15 years ago. I think.

It has been a long time because it was same year that the man who owned the paper died.

Melinda: No one has taken it up since then?

Donna Lincoln: Naw, and from what I heard, both Buhr and Snowed went in together to create a paper.

Melinda: So, that's supposed to be the community paper? The Buhr paper is supposed to be the Snowed community paper too?

Donna Lincoln: I guess that's the way it is.

Grover Levi's responses to interview questions depicted him as someone who valued information about the history of his community. Unlike other study participants, Grover emphasized the importance of the historians for him as a rural African American age 65 and over while insisting that Woodlot did not have the "facilities" to produce publications for learning purposes.

Melinda: Let's talk about publications. Are there any publications here in Woodlot I could use to continue learning?

Grover Levi: Not really. I wouldn't lie to you.

Melinda: No?

Grover Levi: Because we don't have any local facilities that you could get that information from. The peoples who could have given you that information are deceased.

Katherine Madison identified one local publication in Skeen that she "very seldom" reads for learning purposes. During her interview Ms. Madison expressed that she could someday enroll in college. According to her comments below, the rural newspapers she has access to are insufficient for an adult learner who is driven to pursue post-secondary education.

Melinda: Okay. What about publications? Do you have any here in Skeen?

Katherine Madison: Very few.

Melinda: How about a newspaper?

Katherine Madison: Yeah, we have the *Skeen Tribune*.

Melinda: Do you read it for learning purposes?

Katherine Madison: Very seldom but I hardly ever have one.

Melinda: Why? What's it like? What kinda content does it have?

Katherine Madison: Well, whatever happens in Skeen they put in that thing.

Whatever events go on.

Melinda: It is like community news?

Katherine Madison: Community news like churches and all that.

Melinda: Anything else?

Katherine Madison: Anything happens in the school, the honor roll, and all that.

Melinda: Anything else?

Katherine Madison: We have the *Northeast Central Texas City Daily*.

Melinda: Well that's the county?

Katherine Madison: Yes, that's comes from Northeast Central Texas City. That's been here for years.

The local publications Kenedia Onassis described might address her special information needs as a rural resident. She had other ample additional resources available to her because she also owned a home in one of the largest cities in Texas.

Melinda: What about publications?

Kenedia Onassis: There is the *Seeker Herald*.

Melinda: Okay.

Kenedia Onassis: And, there is a little a paper. I can't think of the name of it. I probably put it in the trash. It's a little county paper. We get it in our boxes quite often

And other than that, you can get publications through the churches.

Kenedia Onassis' dual residence allows her to compare how well the urban newspapers she subscribed to meet her information needs in comparison to rural coverage of local news. The kind of news and coverage would differ. For instance, the publishers of The Seeker Tribune is probably more inclined to print church news, school news, and social events than large urban papers.

The benefit of newspapers is that they provide coverage of local issues and "are unsurpassed in regard to current events, and are highly important for other sorts of information as well" (Hales-Mabry, 1993 p. 78). In her interview, Kimsey Lyndon confirmed that Serkens did not have a local newspaper. Hence, Kimsey Lyndon and other residents of Serkens cannot benefit from having a community newspaper. A rural town newspaper could include an article about new programs available at local adult learning centers. An article about any new initiatives or possible career planning programs could help Kimsey make an informed decision about learning resources in her community.

Melinda: What about publications? Are there like any local publications you use if you're trying to gather information?

Kimsey Lyndon: Yeah, well they have that here.

Melinda: What do they have?

Kimsey Lyndon: Where they make the *Daily* newspaper. That's what you talking about?

Melinda: Well that's county. I am talking about city.

Kimsey Lyndon: Oh, that's county.

Melinda: Is there something in the city and the immediately community? Is there anything like that? No?

Kimsey Lyndon: No.

Melinda: No?

Kimsey Lyndon: No.

Knox Jefferson imparted that he found the rural newspaper in this community useful. Although his response was brief, Knox Jefferson's acknowledgment of the Skeen Tribune as a learning and information resource indicated that the paper has been valuable to meeting his learning objectives and information needs

Melinda: Are there any publications here in Skeen that you would use if you want to learn something?

Knox Jefferson: We have a paper here in Skeen. We get the Skeen Tribune.

Melinda: Okay.

Knox Jefferson: It's a help.

As confirmed by Nancy Vesta, Animosia once had a local newspaper. Consider the following account from Ms. Vesta's interview an example of the residual impact of the loss of a trusted source on one user. Nancy Vesta talked herself through her recovery process.

Melinda: Do we have a local newspaper here? Does Animosia have a community paper?

Nancy Vesta: Oh no, no, no, no. We don't have a community paper. They did once a while ago but I guess it played out. You know some of the Chapel people over there they take just about all of them. I did take the North Texas Metroplex Morning News because it was so high and then another thing, I couldn't read all of that anyway. That was too much to read. Mama took the Central Texas City newspaper.

Melinda: Okay.

Nancy Vesta: But since then, I've just been taking the Northeast Central Texas City paper. Now when I was driving, I'd always go down there to the store and get me the *North Texas Metroplex Morning News*.

Melinda: Oh, yeah!

Nancy Vesta: But it's closed now. So, I get a North Texas Metroplex paper every week.

Furthermore, Nancy Vesta makes a distinction between news and gossip. The inference from her statement below is that gossip is not news because there is no validity. She is serious about her information needs.

Melinda: What newspapers and magazines are there in Animosia? Are there any publications you use frequently?

Nancy Vesta: I'm not taking many of those. There's a lot of gossip.

Nancy Vesta has maintained a subscription to the county newspaper and has subscribed to other newspapers and publications to stay current with the news. She commented, "Well, I take the Northeast Central Texas City Daily Newspaper but

[occasionally] I'd always go down there and get me the *North Texas Metroplex Morning News*. Other than the *Northeast Central Texas County City Daily* newspaper.

Nellie Obama subscribed to several magazines including a monthly magazine from the American Association of Retired Person (AARP). The AARP publication contains information about social change, services, and articles for people age 50 and over. Additionally, Ms. Obama had a subscription to *Jet* magazine to stay abreast of entertainment news. She subscribed to the *U.S. News and World Report* to stay current on national and international news. *U.S. News and World Report*, and even a fishing magazine. Because of the subscription costs, Nancy Obama elected to subscribe weekly to the newspaper published in the county seat. She confirmed, "That daily subscription is too high. I get it weekly - every Wednesday."

**The Internet and online resources.** The number of study participants confirming they had access to the Internet was four. George Clinton, Gracie Washington, Kenedia Onassis, and Nellie Obama pointed out that they had a subscription to an Internet provider. The number of study participants who reported that they had ventured out onto the Internet was three. The list of interviewees who professed to have actually visited websites on the Internet were George Clinton, Gracie Washington, and Kenedia Onassis. In the following accounts, rural respondents with varying Internet experiences voice how online resources contributed to their learning environments.

One of Debbie Harrison's listed learning needs is how to use computers. She wants to understand computer basics. Ms. Harrison departed from the discussion of Internet access in Sedans to share that her grandson had knowledge of computers. Given her learning desire, he could become a valued member of her learning network.

Melinda: Do the people in Sedans have access to the Internet?

Debbie Harrison: I don't know.

Melinda: Really?

Debbie Harrison. Well, I know that we haven't gotten it. We are not on the Internet. My son has a computer back there but he is doing music.

Melinda: He's doing music on the computer? Wow!! Well, he'd be someone you could turn to if you when you are ready to learn more about computers?

Debbie Harrison: I guess.

In addition to spending lots of time working on computers, George Clinton stated that he and his wife had Internet access in their home. However, George Clinton's distrusted the Internet as much he distrusted people. For that reason, he did not consider the Internet a reliable information resource, as he avowed when interviewed.

George Clinton: I spend a lot time on the computer

Melinda: Do you go out on the Internet?

George Clinton: I don't spend too much on the Internet.

Melinda: No?

George Clinton: Sometimes it is trash.

Melinda: Most of it is trash, you think?

George Clinton: To me.

Gracie Washington admitted that she spends little time visiting the Internet with she briefly stated, "Not too much. Therefore, Gracie Washington is another study participant who had access to the Internet and also did not often use the service.



Kenedia Onassis is not limited to resources in Seeker, Texas. She has a second residence in urban North Texas Metroplex. Ms. Onassis communicated that her comfort level with Internet technology might differ from other rural African American women in her age range. She described the different options within her reach because of her urban and rural households.

Melinda: Have you wanted to learn something or had a learning goal in the last two years?

Kenedia Onassis: Using the Internet.

Melinda: What happened?

Kenedia Onassis: I actually I had one of those classes available thru AARP – American Association for Retired People.

Melinda: Okay. AARP?

Kenedia Onassis: They offer quite a few classes for seniors - you know. I got in one of those.

Melinda: So, then you took the classes here in Seeker.

Kenedia Onassis: I took them in Dallas.

Melinda: You went to Dallas?

Kenedia Onassis: Actually, I stay in Dallas.

Melinda: So, you are not just limited to Seeker.

Kenedia Onassis: I am not just limited to Seeker.

Melinda: I want to just focus on learning resources in Seeker for residents who are at least 65-years old.

Kenedia Onassis: Okay.

Melinda: Therefore, my next question is what resources in the Seeker community have you used in the past to learn to something new or to get information?

Kenedia Onassis: I really can't speak directly. Since, I use the Internet resources quite frequently. I'm not sure if other 70 and 80-year old African American females would do that because most of us are kinda just afraid - you know - of technology. But, I have used the Internet.

Nellie Obama is one four study participants who subscribed to an Internet service and had little use for it. She left the impression that she was more comfortable leaving Internet searching to her brother.

Melinda: Do you have Internet access?

Nellie Obama: I think it's up there.

Melinda: You don't go out onto the Internet?

Nellie Obama: My brother put it up there. He said it's been on there for year. I don't mess with it.

**Television.** Hales-Mabry (1993) wrote “There are good outcomes from watching television” (p. 81) and that means that Barbara Van Buren’s television watching “can be life-enhancing” (p. 81) for her as a later-life learner because television can be educational and informative. Ms. Van Buren was the only study participant who viewed television as a learning resource. She confidently noted,” And another thing, I can turn on the television and hear something.” From her perspective, she did not have to leave her home to learn. “I learn a lot every day on the television.”

### **Summary**

The previous commentaries represent an examination of learning and information materials reported as available within the rural learning environments of 14 African American study participants age 65 and over. The responders' opinions, explanations, perceptions, and descriptive accounts help add another element to understanding their rural communities as their adult learning environments.

No matter their age, ethnicity or culture, adult students need access to relevant learning materials to accomplish educational goals. In review, the analysis of the qualitative findings unearthed that rural newspapers, church bulletins, the Internet and television are all probable learning and information resources in use by respondents. Naturally, some study participants—as self-directed learners—have in their homes additional learning materials. Both, Gracie Washington and Katherine Madison respectively owned CD learning sets about Bible names and literature and Spanish language and grammar as well.

## **Emergent Themes**

### **Research Question 3 – Information Barriers**

The results of the study also include a listing of the cases that study participants reported as perceived barriers to their adult learning. Barriers to learning are the problems and situations that made it difficult or even prevented these rural African Americans older adults – by their own admissions – from accomplishing their educational goals, learning and information needs. For reporting purposes, this part of Chapter Five is arranged by “Physiological Stressors and Distractions” and “Sociological Stressors and Distractions.”

#### **Physiological Stressors and Distractions**

The rural African Americans age 65 and older will experience disabling moments as with any other aging adults. Theoretically, older adults who enjoy good health should not have problems going back to school or going to the public library. However, the physical conditions of aging process result in some biological impairment and these physical limitations can restrain an older learner’s access within their learning environment. The following accounts includes actual testimony from study participants whose learning and information goals have been hindered or limited due to growing old and aging.

George Clinton has concerns and complaints about growing older and said as much. He offered, “I’ve gotten too old now. It’s too much on you.” However previously in the same interview setting, George Clinton answered, “Fly,” to the question, “I’ve always wanted to know how to what?” Unfortunately, Mr. Clinton implied that he was prevented from realizing his dream to learn to fly an airplane because of knee replacement surgery.

Melinda: Have you really always wanted to learn how to fly?

George Clinton: Yes. I wanted to learn how fly when I was in the service. I wanted to get into chemicals also but chemical warfare wasn't for me. After that I didn't want it. I saw what was happening to people.

Melinda: But in the last two years, you haven't wanted to learn how to fly, right?

George Clinton: No. I had replacement knee surgery.

In her interview, that Gracie Washington mentioned how difficult it was for her to remember details because of growing older. Ms. Washington took time during her interview to share details of her family. While explaining how grandfather moved from Oklahoma to Texas, Gracie Washington admitted, “You see I am 89 and so I forgets some things.” Unlike, George Clinton, Ms. Washington did not list her memory loss as a barrier to achievement. She simply noted her concern about memory loss. She also accused her arthritis of having a mind of its own when she insisted, “My arthritis - it acts but just when you think you don't want to be bothered with it.”

Grover Levi recognized that there are opportunities for anyone age 65 and over to continue learning. Mr. Levi believed that his health had been an obstacle for him. Grover expressed that he had repeated back surgeries which was a good match for his learning ambitions in automotive engine and repair. In light of his new situation, Mr. Levi conveyed how he wished he had chosen a career in computers instead of automobile repair.

Well that's a field that I wanted to get off into. I had two back surgeries back to back. I really had to start all over again. My whole life style change—you know. I

had the opportunity to go into computers but I just wasn't concerned at the time.

Now, I wish I had.

Kenedia Onassis, one of the youngest participants, believed that she was the exception to the rule because of her learning prowess at age 67. Ms. Onassis was specifically questioned about the nature of adult learning resources available in her rural learning environment, Seeker, Texas. Kenedia then explained why her learning experiences differed from other female study participants largely as the result of her owning a second home in one of the largest cities in Texas and the United States.

Kenedia Onassis: I really can't speak directly. Since, I use the Internet resources quite frequently. I'm not sure other 70 and 80-year old African American females would do that because most of us are kinda just afraid—you know—of technology. But, I have used the Internet.

Age or aging was also was not a deterring factor to Kenedia Onassis's learning opportunities. In contrary, she used her age to take advantage of computer and Internet classes made available by the American Association of Retired Persons or AARP.

Melinda: Have you wanted to learn something or had a learning goal in the last two years?

Kenedia Onassis: Using the Internet.

Melinda: What happened?

Kenedia Onassis: I actually I had one of those classes available thru AARP – American Association for Retired People. I took them in North Texas Metroplex.

Knox Jefferson seemingly contradicted himself during his interview. On one hand, Mr. Knox communicated that he believed that people begin to lose interest in

learning as they age. Knox Jefferson concluded, “You know when you get 80 years old you don't worry about learning. You are trying to live. Your time is short and you start burning all your candles.” Yet, Knox Jefferson, at age 80, could describe his own learning style. He revealed, “I learn by doing. I have to do it myself.” Mr. Knox also presented himself as an older adult who also believed that people never become too old to learn even if they do lose interest with age.

Nancy Vesta does not see her age as an obstacle to learning. She confirmed, “You can do a whole lot of things you don't think you can't do” and in the next sentence added, “Because I am doing a whole lot of things I thought I couldn't do.” The oldest member of the group of participants confessed that for at least the past two years she desired to learn how to improve her memory. Overall, her specific message was that there were “so many things” she wanted to learn at age 97, including methods to improve her memory.

Melinda: I've got two things listed that you wanted to learn in the last couple of years. You wanted to learn about how to protect your health and ride your new scooter. Is there anything else? Did I miss anything?

Nancy Vesta: There's so many things.

Melinda: Yes, Let me write them down. Go ahead. What are those many things?

Nancy Vesta: One thing is to improve my memory.

In church, service leaders had called upon Nancy Vesta to participate by praying out loud. As she stated, “In church sometimes, it seems like that they call you right quick to pray and you not expecting it. People will ask you just off hand and you can't come up with it right away.” She needed more time to organize her thoughts and for Nancy Vesta that also that meant that she need more time to remember Bible text and scripture.

I can get it together. But, sometimes, you can't answer because all of your thoughts are gone. My sister's memory is not very good. Every once in a while she can remember things. She will ask a whole lot of questions. Later, she will start asking a whole lot of same questions over and over. Sometimes you want to say something or pray and you can't. I say to yourself, "Now, I know I can pray."

Despite how well they may be aging overall, participants are facing the physical results of their bodies growing older. The confusion that Nancy Vesta is experiencing from memory loss is an example of the aging process taking its toll. In respect to her own learning needs, Ms. Vesta planned to address her problem by spending more time conversing with ministers and other Christians about the Bible. George Clinton had changed his mind about learning to fly because of the effects of his aging. Grover Levi regretted not learning more about computers when he was younger and did not have back problems due to growing older. Gracie Washington struggles with the combination of not remembering details and the development of arthritis. Kenedia Onassis is not just growing older in rural Seeker, she is also growing older in one of the most populated cities in Texas. The learning and information goals of Ms. Onassis, who is from the age range that has been described as the "young-old," are not at risk because of her age.

### **Sociological Stressors and Distractions**

Information obtained from the interview data showed that study participants also experienced learning barriers because of their learning environments. The convoy (or learning support networks) components of the study participants' rural learning environment consisted of family and friends with rare exceptions. Those rare exceptions



and other study results in this section are categorized by communication processes, both socio-political and racially influenced.

**Community relations in rural learning environments.** Rural culture and politics can result in the construction of barriers to adult learning services and information resources. The following accounts include actual testimony from study participants whose access to information has been or was interrupted, blocked or screened because of community politics and relations. In order to ensure thoroughness in reporting, this results section includes content about scenarios and cases of learning restrictions and controlled access to information as reported by study participants.

Debbie Harrison viewed equitable access to information as the community issue preventing her from achieving her learning goals and meeting her information needs. On the availability of information, Ms. Harrison commented, “And I know it's out there” and she divulged, “I just don't know how to go about it.” Ms. Harrison is confident that some level of information resources exist in Sedans, Texas. Debbie Harrison would be happy to consider an outside source or resources if she knew who to call. “I don't know anybody outside of the community because when you see me I am right here at home.”

Donna Lincoln expressed her frustration with what she considered clear acts of apathy by all citizens in her community – Black, White or otherwise. Donna Lincoln suggested that she believed that people in the same community should help each other. Ms. Lincoln assessed, “There was a time when you didn't do it on your own.” Cause if you did on your own then you would be doing it all the time. Her commentary was also a criticism of healthcare providers and the lack of homecare for her neighbors. Donna Lincoln listed the facts of several cases in Snowed that caused her uneasiness.

And every time I think about shots, I think about Joe. He needs to take shots. He can't get them and he has to wait until somebody decide that they can come and give them to him. He is already sick and that's the hurting thing. I know I am diabetic and I know I got to have the shots but I got to wait until you make up your mind to come.

Donna Lincoln divulged that she was happy to help if she could by stating, You know I enjoy helping older people with whatever they be doing. I enjoy that.” From her perspective, Donna Lincoln was convinced that the people of Snowed really needed to cultivate an interest in the people in their community. Otherwise, Donna Lincoln saw little opportunity for educational advancement of the community if social problems and health issues were ignored. Donna Lincoln maintained that she was disappointed with detachment of residents and lack of communication. She warned, “Honey, we are in a sad situation down here.”

George Clinton did not identify specific personal contacts to support his adult learning and information needs. Mr. Clinton could easily argue that naming preferred information contacts from Neserk was an absurd notion given that learning how to fly and rebuilding computers are rather esoteric interests. George was not discouraged by the lack of persons in Snowed with aptitudes for offering classes on flying or computer hardware. His deepest concern was about the trustworthiness of people even with his basic information needs. George Clinton reported that he was not biased by race. “It don't make no difference with me,” he claimed. He did not trust people, “Because they'll turn on you.”

Knox Jefferson voiced his concern that the African American community may be its own worst enemy. Mr. Jefferson determined that members of Skeen's African American community needed to actively participate in community activities and events. Furthermore, Knox is assured that residents age 65 and over can learn while volunteering to help children.

Knox Jefferson: People at 65. They can go over there and help with kids.

Melinda: So you learn by helping someone else?

Knox Jefferson. Yes.

**Racial relations in rural learning environments.** According to some study participants, race relations can be obstacles to adult learning success and accessing information in rural settings. Findings obtained from study participants' interviews proved that these rural African Americans age 65 and over consider race an underlying problem in the communities. According to various accounts, the levels of racial politics in rural America determine if Black rural residents have the same quality of city services as Whites. The threat of backlash against Blacks increased so much during the 2008 presidential campaign that it could be felt. One study participant was victimized when she visited a library. This section of the study includes all references to cases in which study participants felt that race was used as a discouragement or deterrent against them as adult learners.

Debbie Harrison voiced her claim that the White citizens of Sedans were guilty of deliberately withholding information from African Americans. "Well, see these people here in Sedans, they keeps everything to themselves," stated Ms. Harrison. In terms of reaching her learning goals, Debbie Harrison communicated that her efforts along with

other rural Blacks residents are controlled. Debbie insisted, “You know there's so many things that Black peoples can do and there's so many things they don't want you to do - and they don't want you to know nothing. They want to keep us in this same shape we've been in.”

The Rural African American residential area in Wonted, Texas needs proper maintenance. Dolley Grant questions where the funds are to maintain and repair streets in her section of town. As stated by Ms. Grant certain areas of the Black neighborhoods are desperately in need of resurfaced streets and pavement. Dolley feelings about city services are reiterated below:

Blacks don't have nothing. We don't have the water running in here. We don't have no streets. Our streets have holes in them. Some of our street lights don't work. I know we don't have nothing and nothing from nothing leaves nothing.

The reality from Ms. Grant's perspective is that the City of Wonted has many priorities to attend to with the African American community. Along with the lack of consistent services like replacing street lights, Wonted does not have community or learning centers for any residents.

Dolley Grant: Honey, ain't nothing here. There is nothing to learn nothing. We can go to church. That's all.

Melinda: Okay. I'm going to put that down go to church.

Dolley Grant: I go to church but I got to tell you, honey, we don't have anything here.

Melinda: You don't think you have anything?

Melinda: Nothing here in the immediate community as a resource?

Grover Levi believed his African American community has experience various hostilities from its' parent city, Akene. Woodlot, which is predominately Black, was annexed by Akene in the mid-19980s. Grover Levi described the White residents of Akene as simply, "Prejudiced." He commented on the history of racism in the rural Texas town and his awareness that outward racism is now concealed. "It still holds like yesterday they just kind of modernized it." But in very recent history, Grover Levi sensed an anti-progressive sentiments environment with success of the Obama presidential campaign. Grover asserted, "And, I can sense that [change] since last year ago. It has got really gotten worse."

Nellie Obama opened up about an uncomfortable experience she had in Northeast Central Texas county public library that she believed was racially motivated. Ms. Obama is a repeat library user and before this encounter had not felt singled out because of ethnicity. She described an incident in the public library she often visited involving a group of White children.

I'll go down there in Northeast Central Texas City Library. I usually sit there looking but last time I went to that library, I ready to leave right quick. I was sitting up trying to get this stuff so I could take it with me and these kids were up there messing with me. They didn't think I saw them but I did. There were these little White kids talking about me.

Ultimately, Nellie Obama dismissed the children's behavior as being part of the Texas racial climate. "This is Texas!," she stated in an obvious tone. Ms. Obama explained that she was determined to ignore the children until she was prepared to leave.

In her defense Nellie contributed, “So, I kept on writing and thinking about getting out of that library. I guess they say of all persons, “I ain’t supposed to read. I guess.”

### **Summary**

The completed convoy models did not reveal any unique preferences for learning support and information providers. However, the results from an analysis of the interview indicated how study participants’ held confidence in their religious leaders (e.g., ministers and pastors). Hopefully, the learning and information barriers based on human relations do not exist or do not have measurable impacts.

The most important outcome from using the convoy model is having an opportunity to analyze the existence of learning relationships between later-life learners and preferred information contacts. The results are arranged by learning category, along with the nature of the relationship between an adult learner and their information provider, and the related expertise of the information provider. Figure 2 below is an example of the diagram of concentric circles used to gather data about study participant’s personal learning networks. With the exception of the section about deceased, the following is a brief, organized list showing relationships between later-life learner and member of their learning support network.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS: PART TWO**

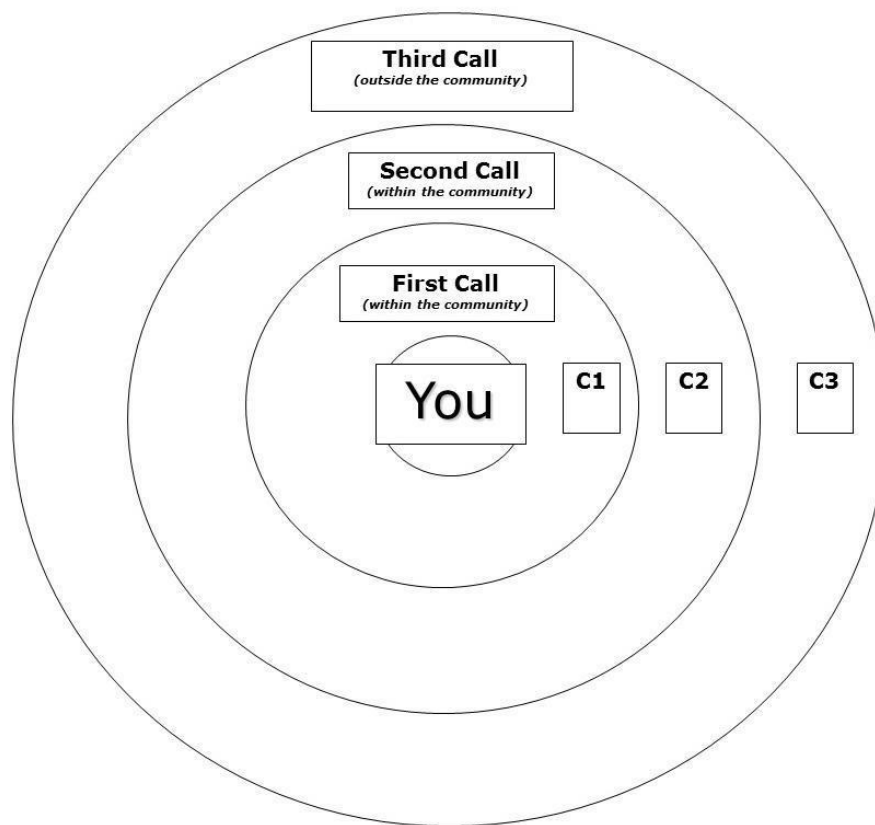
This study was designed to take into account the social contexts in which rural African Americans age 65 and over learn. Thus, an adapted version of R.L. Kahn's and Toni Antonucci's 1980 social convoy model was used for this study. For this dissertation, each convoy or network is represented by a diagram of concentric circles. The study participants were asked to complete the diagram model and by doing so identify people who would be consulted first and second within their community as members of their learning network. The third circle represented third members of the study participant's learning network who lived outside the community.

#### **Emergent Themes:**

##### **Research Question 4 - Learning Support Networks**

The most important outcome from using the convoy model is having an opportunity to analyze the existence of learning relationships between later-life learners and preferred information contacts. The results are organized according to the nature of the relationship between an adult learner and his or her information provider and the related expertise of the information provider.

Figure 2 below is an example of the diagram of concentric circles used to gather data about study participants' personal learning networks.



*Figure 2.* Modified learning support diagram used during interviews.

With the exception of the section of this report detailing how rural Africans Americans in this study have no consultants nor a learning support network, the following section contains brief organized lists showing relationships between later-life learners and members of their learning support network.

### **Association and Organization Leaders**

As members of learning communities, association and organizational leaders may serve well as respected information resources and providers. For example, Gracie Washington, one of the officers of a regional association in which she is involved, is also a trusted advisor. Ms. Washington was the only study participant who identified an



organization's leader as a member of her learning network. See Table 6.1 for learning networks consisting of associations and organizational leaders.

Table 6.1

*Learning Network - Associations and Organizations Leaders*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	None	None
Second	None	None
Third	Gracie Washington	Bible Names

### **Friends Only**

Based on the responses of study participants, most reported connections with people who they consider friends. The study participants believe that these friends care about them, and they also believe that they can trust and can confide in their friends for learning support. Therefore, the study participants conveyed that they would benefit from involving select friends in their goals to accomplish reported learning and information-related needs.

Two categories of relationships with friends were identified from study data. The two learning-network sub-categories are *friends only* and *friends with related expertise*. The friends only category includes those members of a personal learning network who are knowledgeable but who do not have relevant training or credentials. For example, the friends only members of Donna Lincoln's learning networks do not have backgrounds in healthcare but are informal experts who she trusts first and foremost in discussing health-related issues.

See Table 6.2 for learning networks consisting simply of friends without any related expertise.

Table 6.2

*Learning Networks - Friends Only*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	Donna Lincoln	Caregiving Skills
		Personal Healthcare
	Nellie Obama	Basic Computing
		Motor Scooter Basics
		Personal Healthcare
Second	Nellie Obama	Personal Healthcare
Third	None	None

**Friends with Related Expertise**

The majority of study participants seem to prefer consulting friends in their learning networks who have related expertise and credentials. Only three preferred contacts were listed in the previous friends only section whereas the number of preferred contacts with related training is twelve. In this section, the findings include personal learning supports for each contact level and across a number of different learning and related information needs.

See Table 6.3 for learning networks consisting of friends with related expertise.

Table 6.3

*Learning Networks - Friends With Related Expertise*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	George Clinton	Building and Repairing Computers
	Nancy Vesta	Basic Computing
	Nellie Obama	Fishing Basics
		Gardening Basics
		Home Canning for Preserving Food
Second	Grover Levi	Automotive Maintenance and Repair
		Basic Computing
	Nellie Obama	Gardening Basics
		Home Canning for Preserving Food
Third	Donna Lincoln	Caregiving Skills
	Grover Levi	Basic Computing
	Knox Jefferson	Piano Music

**No One**

The next category exemplifies the independent and self-directed motivation of some of the study participants as later-life learners. In a number of instances, participants did not identify anyone that they would call upon as part of their learning network for a given learning or related information need. Grover Levi has had a lifetime of working with cars and does not recognize anyone within his hometown as being more knowledgeable about automobiles than he. In other cases, study participants would prefer to take a credit class or visit local libraries to accomplish their learning needs rather than rely on residents within their communities.

See Table 6.4 for learning needs without support from rural learning networks for African Americans age 65 and over.

Table 6.4

*Learning Networks - No One*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	Grover Levi	Automotive Maintenance and Repair
Second	Knox Jefferson	Piano Music
	Nellie Obama	Fishing Basics
	Knox Jefferson	Piano Music
	Kenedia Onassis	Spanish Language
Third	Nancy Vesta	Basic Computing
	Debbie Harrison	Barbecue Restaurant
	George Clinton	Building and Repairing Computers
	Kenedia Onassis	Improved Typing Skills
	Nellie Obama	Spanish Language
		Home Canning for Preserving Food

**No One (Deceased)**

For this study, rural African Americans age 65 and over opened up about outliving close friends and family who were their personal confidantes. The loss of a significant member of an older person's learning network can have a crippling effect on that person's life and did for at least two of the fourteen study participants. Barbara Van Buren and Dolley Grant both experienced the deaths of people who were community resources and personal information providers.

Barbara Van Buren had recently been in the town news when she was honored for being one of the oldest living residents in Everblooming, Texas. Based on that background and personal history, Ms. Van Buren at age 95 had outlived most of the people with whom she had developed life-long relationships. She explained that no one was available at this stage to help her with her learning needs because, as she reported,

“They are all gone.” Ms. Van Buren also reiterated the same sentiment by stating, “They all died out” and repeating, “Most of them have died out or left.”

Dolley Grant has had to cope with losing functional members of what was her rural learning network. As a result, she did not name anyone in Wonted with whom she can exchange confidences because they have all passed on.

Melinda: You don't know any people who are knowledgeable in the areas you want to learn about?

Dolley Grant: No, I don't know anyone. They dead.

In another example from her interview, Ms. Grant reaffirmed her assessment that the people or individuals who could have assisted with her learning and information needs were deceased.

Dolley Grant: I'm telling you the truth. They dead.

Melinda: So you would not have anyone at the immediate level that you could contact?

Dolley Grant: In this community?

Melinda: Yes.

Dolley Grant: No.

For some study participants, the absence created by the loss of a relationship may represent a connection that had taken a lifetime to build and that therefore might also be irreplaceable. Along with Barbara Van Buren and Dolley Grant, the remaining study participants discussed how the deaths of family and friends had affected their lives, influenced their decision making, and created concerns. After her mother's death, Ms. Obama decided to stay in her hometown and then took up residence in the family house.

During his interview, Knox Jefferson mourned the death of a friend. Nancy Vesta reported that she felt the loss of her rural support network with the death of neighbors. Mr. Levi expressed anxiety about the aging of Woodlot's local historians. As he stated, "We used to have some older people here that could give you a lot a history on the past but they have all passed on."

### **Persons with Related Expertise (Professional Only)**

In some cases, study participants preferred to call upon an individual with professional expertise and/or credentials in looking for someone who could assist them in learning efforts. The option of soliciting information and assistance from *persons with related expertise* emerged as a contrast to turning to friends and family. The persons with related expertise are recognized for their professional knowledge and training and generally do not have a personal relationship with the study participant.

See Table 6.5 for learning networks consisting of persons with related expertise, meaning that these persons are only professionally affiliated with the study participant.

Table 6.5

#### *Learning Networks - Persons With Related Expertise (Professional Only)*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	Debbie Harrison	Barbecue Restaurant
Second	Debbie Harrison	Barbecue Restaurant
Third	Grover Levi	Automotive Maintenance and Repair
	Nellie Obama	Fishing Basics

### **Relatives Only (Family)**

As with friends, two categories exist for relatives who are members of study participants' learning networks. The two categories are *relatives only* (family) and

*relatives with related expertise*. Nancy Vesta and Nellie Obama are the only participants who identified learning contacts who could be classified as relatives only for members of their learning support networks.

See Table 6.6 for learning networks consisting of relatives without related expertise.

Table 6.6

*Learning Networks - Relatives Only (Family)*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	Nancy Vesta	Interpersonal Communication
Second	Nancy Vesta	Interpersonal Communication Motor Scooter Basics
	Nellie Obama	Fishing Basics
Third	Nancy Vesta	Interpersonal Communication Motor Scooter Basics Personal Healthcare

### **Relatives with Related Expertise**

Both Grover Levi and Donna Lincoln have relatives whose occupations, or opinions, make them suitable members of their learning networks. Mr. Levi had no problem listing Lilly Beadlow, his relative and a full-time employee of the city of Woodlot, as someone to teach him about computers. Although, Donna Lincoln's daughter and granddaughter are employed in health-related fields, Ms. Lincoln would not consult her children first to enable her to become a local caregiver. Thus, she did not choose to list either her daughter or her granddaughter as her first contact for advice on improving her own personal healthcare. Ms. Lincoln's daughter was a second contact for developing

both caregiving skills and an improved personal healthcare routine, and her granddaughter placed third as a consultant on caregivers' methods.

See Table 6.7 for learning networks consisting of relatives with related expertise.

Table 6.7

*Learning Networks - Relatives with Related Expertise*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	Grover Levi	Basic Computing
Second	Donna Lincoln	Caregiving Skills
		Personal Healthcare
Third	Donna Lincoln	Caregiving Skills

### **School Teachers (Relatives)**

School teachers who were also relatives of study participants were identified as information sources during participants' interviews. Gracie Washington explained that she would trust her niece, who is also a school teacher, to help her improve her public speaking ability. Nancy Vesta has a relative who is a retired school teacher as a member of her learning network. George Clinton, Knox Jefferson, and Gracie Washington also reported having relatives in the teaching field but not as members of their current learning networks.

The study participants seem to have a high regard for teachers. The affinity is probably due in part to several of the fourteen having teachers in their families and as friends and also because of their own careers in adult and public education. The list of occupations in public education for the group included school administrator, public school teacher, student advisor, teacher's aide, early childhood education coordinator, and school bus driver. Additionally, another study participant was an instructor who taught cosmetology classes.



See Table 6.8 for learning networks consisting of local school teachers who are relatives of study participants. Please note that these teachers in this category do not have related professional training.

Table 6.8

*Learning Networks - School Teachers (Relatives)*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	Nancy Vesta	Interpersonal Communication
Second	None	None
Third	Gracie Washington	Public Speaking

**School Teachers with Related Expertise (Not Family)**

An outcome of conducting this study was a better understanding of the importance of public school teachers in rural communities. According to evidence from the interviews, public school teachers are respected and valued as default adult educators. Additionally, George Clinton and Kenedia Onassis recognized the value of having computer science and computer technology teaching professionals within their rural community. Ms. Onassis found the availability of public school music teachers an attractive option for piano lessons.

See Table 6.9 for learning networks consisting of school teachers with related expertise. The teachers are neither friends nor relatives of the study participants who listed them. However, the teachers in this category do have related professional training.

Table 6.9

*Learning Networks - School Teachers with Related Expertise (Not Family)*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	Kenedia Onassis	Piano Music Typing Skills
Second	George Clinton	Building and Repairing Computers
	Kenedia Onassis	Typing Skills
Third	Kenedia Onassis	Piano Music

**Religious Leaders and Church Musicians**

As has been noted in the literature, rural older Blacks develop social relationships through community churches. This affinity is due in part to the historical significance of the African American church and its leaders in improving racial relations for their congregations here in the United States (Ellison, McFarland, & Krause, 2011; Lewis & Trulear, 2008; Swain, 2008). “The historical past of the churches and the rural ministers must be taken into account” (Bane, 1991, p. 65) by any adult educators planning to start a new educational program for older Black adults. Consequently, the relationships between study participants and local ministers have evolved into faith-based social support systems for them as church congregants. Additionally, the relationships between clergy and study participants have existed to support the learning and information-related needs of these older learners. For example, Gracie Washington stated, “I can trust Reverend Tensely. I don’t even have to make a complete sentence, and he knows. That’s the reason I say ministers when I am thinking about the Bible. I have three or four ministers who really listen to me. I have a lot of confidence in them. That is Reverend Tenseley, Reverend Bishop Sheen, Reverend Wilkerson, and Reverend Paul.”

Additionally, church musicians and laypersons can be included in this category. Kenedia Onassis introduced church musicians as potential members of her learning network. Nancy Vesta and Sherman Adams also revealed their respective dependence on deacons in the church as Bible teachers with an understanding of how to interpret Bible scriptures.

See Table 6.10 for learning networks consisting of ministers and church musicians. These are professional contacts with whom study participants may feel personal closeness.

Table 6.10

*Learning Networks - Religious Leaders and Church Musicians*

Level of Contact	Participant	Learning Need
First	Gracie Washington	Bible Names
		Public Speaking
	Nancy Vesta	Bible Scriptures
	Sherman Adams	Christian Ministry and Outreach
Second	Gracie Washington	Fishing Basics
	Nancy Vesta	Bible Names
		Public Speaking
	Kenedia Onassis	Piano Music
	Sherman Adams	Christian Ministry and Outreach
Third	Nancy Vesta	Bible Scriptures
	Sherman Adams	Christian Ministry and Outreach

Sherman Adams is the pastor for two rural churches. The Reverend Adams expressed a genuine trust in his colleagues, and therefore, his learning support system would include other local ministers. The Reverend replied, “I would just need to talk to the ministers” and also added, “I could go to the Ministers’ Alliance.”

### **Summary**

In this section, the presence of personal learning networks was explored for rural African Americans age 65 and over. The social convoy model, revised to represent a rural learning network for older Black adults, helped to disclose the significant roles of friends, family, and career professionals in assisting study participants in their learning efforts. The personal learning relationships are mostly informal because of study participants' connections with family and friends. The roles of clergy and public school educators are typically considered more professional than social or familial; however, these rural communities, the African American older residents in this study have seemingly cherished relationships with ministers and teachers that are both formal and informal. In addition, the study findings demonstrated that several study participants had lost significant members of their learning networks due to death. In other cases, participants identified no learning networks, either because of the scarcity of anyone knowledgeable in that field or because of their own perceived competence to continue learning independently in that area.

The findings reported in Chapters Five and Six describe the infrastructure and availability of resources in the rural learning environments of 14 African American later-life learners. The study participants with learning and information-related needs listed both informal and formal resources in their communities. In terms of adult learning centers, the church joins libraries, schools, and information centers. The results from the learning networks showed that religious leaders are as important to the learning needs of older rural Black residents as any other information provider. The Internet as a source of learning material is not highly valued as an adult learning resource, even in the three

study participants' households where it was available. The study shows that sociological aspects of the politics of life and the eventuality of death can immobilize learning support systems.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

After briefly reviewing the study's purpose, data collection methodology, and analysis, Chapter 7 contains four sections. The initial *Discussion of the Key Findings* is followed in order by *Recommendations for Practice*, *Recommendations for Research*, and *Concluding Thoughts*.

#### **Review of the Study's Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning needs of rural African Americans age 65 and over. Additionally, the study was done to explore the availability of adult learning resources and materials in small rural communities, to understand what circumstances posed barriers to learning, and to determine if study participants had existing learning support networks. The results of the study are important to recognizing whether the learning climate of these small towns and communities can be described as inclusive and supportive or intimidating and hostile from the perceptions of study respondents. The study also explored what learning activities and information-seeking behaviors were engaged in by rural African Americans age 65 and over. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What types of learning needs and priorities do rural African Americans age 65 and over describe?

2. What resources and materials do rural African Americans age 65 and over report as available to them to fulfill their learning and related information needs?
3. What barriers to learning do rural African Americans age 65 and over encounter in their efforts to fulfill their learning and related information needs?
4. What learning strategies do rural African Americans age 65 and over use to gather information through learning networks?

### **Review of Data Collection and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 volunteers in their homes. The semi-structured interviewing format was chosen to offer participants an opportunity to communicate openly and flexibly and also allow the researcher to cover certain key questions with all participants. In addition to the semi-structured interview guide, each participant was also given a copy of a diagram of concentric circles to complete. The concentric circles in part represented the personal convoys or learning support networks for these later-life learners. The diagram was added to gather data about the personal relationships between older adult learners and the people in their learning support networks. The learning support convoys exercise was also specifically included to gather information about the existence of supportive relationships over a lifespan for rural African Americans as later-life learners. The semi-structured interview guide and learning convoys exercise helped the researcher to gauge the importance of those relationships.

Thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted to interpret the results. The analysis process involved in examining 14 interview transcripts for common themes started with simply writing keywords, descriptors, and ideas in the margins of the printed

copies. During the next stage, I assigned the content descriptions from the margin notes to a tab and individual worksheet in an Excel spreadsheet. The quotes identified by study participants' pseudonyms were added to spreadsheets if the nature of the comments matched the tab descriptor or seemed relevant. The tabs that appeared to have many common elements were combined into broader learning and information themes based on responses to the interview questions and references to preferred information sources. Those information sources included people, agencies, publications, and learning centers.

### **Discussion of the Key Findings**

This discussion of study findings is crafted to highlight the learning and information needs, learning strategies, and barriers to learning for 14 older African Americans from rural Texas. In general, many of the study participants reported learning characteristics that are relevant to a chapter or section heading, or they reported learning experiences that have some bearing upon a particular learning process or adult learning theory. This section will involve profiling some study participants as later-life learners, and self-directed learners, and will highlight some of the study participants' personal learning styles and information seeking strategies. However, the purpose of the discussion of key findings of the study is to provide thorough coverage of significant events and patterns derived from the research data and not to review the repeated cases among study participants. Therefore, the scope of key findings sections is not intended to be an account of every study participants' learning needs, challenges, barriers, successes, failures, learning characteristics, and personal experiences.

In this report, rural communities are referred to as rural learning environments to better understand what adult learning is like in rural areas. Knowles first introduced the



importance of learning environment in the 1970s (Imel, 1995). Knowles suggested that “rather than learners trying to change who they are so that they will ‘fit in,’ adult educators must create learning environments in which all learners can thrive” (Imel, 1995, para. 2).

### **Rural African American Later-Life Learners**

Obviously, the most important part of these findings was the discovery of the variety of learning needs and priorities among study participants because it answers the first research question. The most unexpected outcome was meeting people with such varied learning goals and intelligence that it defied any “stereotypes of older” (Roberson, 2004, p. 213). Beyond the myths, the stereotypes, and idyllic impressions, this group of older adults has to be recognized for their many talents, technical skills, self-directed motivation, and learning readiness while either remaining true to the image of the respected, elderly matriarch or patriarch who offers sound advice and world wisdom. The findings of this study are similar to the results of the Roberson (2004) study because the majority of older rural adults participating in both studies continue to value learning. Therefore, these study participants want to contribute to their communities as mentors and historians and also make time for self-directed learning.

**Gifted and talented.** They are “old, gifted, and Black!” This description is included here as a contrast to a popular message alive in the consciousness of many Blacks, popularized by African American writers and entertainers. The opposite of “old, gifted, and Black” is “young, gifted and Black.” The history of this iconic cultural expression began when Lorraine Hansberry titled her autobiography and play *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* in 1969 (Lorraine Hansberry, 2013). The title became more

symbolic when it was resurrected in 1970 by Nina Simone to honor Hansberry's life (Moody, 2003). In the same year, Bob Andy and Marcia Griffiths, a Jamaican duo, ensured that almost all generations would sing along with them when they recorded the song *Young, Gifted and Black* (Henry, 2007). Later, Aretha Franklin was inspired to name her celebrated 1972 album and hit single *Young, Gifted, and Black* (Waldron, 2011). The phrase "old, gifted, and Black" is used to emphasize that having talent, wanting to learn, and being gifted at learning is also the domain of older adults.

**Knox Jefferson.** Mr. Jefferson returned to Skeen, Texas with a military career behind him and as a college graduate and communications major. He had years and years of learning and knowledge to share and for that reason agreed to participate in the study. As he said, "You can ask me anything. I'll talk about politics, sex, anything you want to talk about." He continued, "I am not one of those guys who just talks about one thing. You have to be well-rounded in this world." Mr. Jefferson, who conveyed that he valued learning because his aunt instilled that belief into him, had his own personal philosophy regarding learning support networks. As he expressed it, "You have got to have good peers to learn anything. You got to be around people who want you to succeed." In terms of talents, Knox Jefferson seemed to have many. Mr. Jefferson's useful skills, based on his interview responses, included basic carpentry, repairing roofs, revitalizing old homes, plumbing, and woodworking.

Knox Jefferson also desired to learn more about music with interests in singing, playing the organ, saxophone, and the piano. Incredibly, Mr. Jefferson had also held public office. "You know, in Northeast Central Texas City, I got to be judge over there for two years," and with that admission Mr. Jefferson added another success to his list of

accomplishments and occupations: teacher's assistant, bus driver, community leader, mentor to youth in the community, church leader, and member of the NAACP. Based on his experiences, Mr. Jefferson's trust in education was unwavering. He insisted, "You have to learn. You have to get your degrees and go to school to get involved."

**George Clinton.** As use of computers and social networking sites increases, "Many older adults have confidence and expertise in a variety of areas" (Roberson, 2005, p. 37). For example, George Clinton, from the small town of Neserk is probably the most academically accomplished of the study participants with a master's degree in chemistry and a master's degree in biology. He also brings to the table years of experience and good advice for younger African Americans in the workplace. Mr. Clinton believes African Americans have to find their own voices and represent themselves. "But see, you have to speak up for yourself. I was the only Black that had a title job. I was "company." I left when I got ready and came back when I got ready. I didn't care what happened," George Clinton laughed with satisfaction. George Clinton, like his father and other family members, was very well-educated. He prided himself on the fact and noted, "Everybody in that family had to go to school."

**Nellie Obama.** Ms. Obama visits the nearest public library and checks out 4-5 books at a time. "It takes me about a week and a half to read them," she said. She also admitted, "If it gets real good, I ain't got enough good sense to get some sleep. I'll go to bed and lay up there and think about that book. I swear, I have to get up from there and get that book and read it. Don't let me find a good Western."

**Debbie Harrison.** Ms. Harrison is willing to pass on some cooking tips. She confided, "Now, I still cook like a devil. I don't know how to quit cooking." Debbie

Harrison is also a licensed cosmetologist and offered me a mini-lesson on how to wave my hair. In reference to wave hairstyles, Ms. Harrison claimed, “Yeah, it was easy to make,” and then explained, “Yeah, you would take that hair and curl that hair. And then, you would you take that finger and put it there and do your wave and then move your finger down to do your other wave.” Debbie Harrison briefly and expertly explained the curling process as if she were teaching class.

***Gracie Washington.*** Ms. Washington had attended several colleges and worked for the U.S. Navy before accepting a Head Start position.

***Katherine Madison.*** Ms. Madison could play the piano by ear but also wanted to learn how to read music.

***Kenedia Onassis.*** Ms. Onassis was a retired school administrator who described herself as a “mathematics teacher by nature.”

***Kimsey Lyndon.*** Ms. Lyndon worked as an LVN or Licensed Vocational Nurse.

There are four study participants in this group who were responsible or had been responsible for delivering formal instruction. Kimsey Lyndon’s contribution to the educational development of her grandchildren qualifies more as informal instruction.

**Interested in computer technology.** As noted by Roberson (2005), “an increasing number of older adults enjoy using the resources of the computer and the Internet for self-directed learning activities” (p. 37). Some study participants in this group resemble Roberson’s claim about older adults and their increased familiarity and awareness of computers and online technology. In the section, I discuss how George Clinton and Kenedia Onassis forge ahead in understanding how computers work and how to access and use the Internet.

**George Clinton.** Mr. Clinton is especially notable because he knows how to build and rebuild computers. “I don't spend too much on the Internet,” said George, “because sometimes it is trash.” When asked if he had wanted to learn something additional in the last two years, he confessed that he had built a computer. “I have messed with computers.” In the last two years, Mr. Clinton confirmed, “Yeah. I have built one.”

**Katherine Madison.** Ms. Madison can help someone to use computers and send email like she does. However, she stated that her computer use is still limited. “Well, no more than at the school using the computers because when I was in school, we didn't have computers. I have learned how to look up my e-mail, you know,” confirmed Ms. Madison.

**Readiness to learn.** Self-directed learning readiness is when “adult learners prefer to self-plan their learning activities in order to choose the material that is relevant and appropriate for their immediate learning needs” (Knowles, 1978 as cited by Holt, 1995, p. 51). Holt (1995) emphasizes the elements of material relevance and state of learning readiness with adult learners. In the cases of the following study participants, Debbie Harrison, Katherine Madison, Kimsey Lyndon, Grace Washington, and Knox Jefferson are either always engaged in learning or have an unmet learning need that they are still prepared to fulfill. Their state of readiness to learn is more accurately described by Forrest and Peterson (2006) as being an internal need.

**Debbie Harrison.** Ms. Harrison showed a readiness to learn. Ms. Harrison explained during her interview that when she first arrived in Sedans, she wanted to start a barbecue food business. However, she became frustrated by the absence of resources in her community. In terms of recent learning experiences, she simply stated, “I have not

figured out anything that really impressed me around here. There's nothing I can do here in Sedans. I want to do a whole lot in Sedans, but I do not have the ability to do that.”

Ms. Harrison even suggested that the local paper lacked anything of interest for her to learn. She summed up the local newspaper’s quality by saying, “Well, the only thing we get is that little Northeast Central Texas City paper. She is about that thin. It arrives every week. There is nothing in it. It is so discouraging. You can't find nothing in it important.”

**Grace Washington.** Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2012) stated that for some adults, “a combination of psychological and social factors acts as barrier to participation” (p. 67). Gracie Washington reported having life experiences that required transcending the “psychological and social factors” that Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2012) noted. Her current later-life learning goals could also have some psychological impact on her. However, the social issues of the day are her greatest challenges. The presence of Ms. Washington and her sister has historical significance for their community. Ms. Washington is ready to cement her place in society and contribute to the social development of her community by learning to improve her public speaking skills by writing and publishing a book in her capacity as an historian. Unfortunately, the social reality is that her rural community does not have the resources to help Ms.

Washington address her learning needs.

**Katherine Madison.** Ms. Madison’s learning readiness seemed to have surprised her. Ms. Madison suggested in an amazed tone, “Ain’t it true?” and began to list her learning and related information needs. “At my age, I want to learn to speak more Spanish and learn how to play piano a little more. I can play by ear a little. And, I would love to go to a hobby craft place.”

**Kimsey Lyndon.** Ms. Lyndon had been in a state of readiness since age 67. She was 76 years old when she was interviewed and admitted, “I went to school after I was 67 years old.” She concluded our discussion with, “And now, I’m 76 years old, but still, that’s what I want to do!”

**Nancy Vesta.** When Nancy Vesta was first asked if she agreed with lifelong learning, she responded with a question: “How am I going to learn to play at 97 years old?” Only seconds later, she answered both questions : “You can do a lot of things you don’t think you can do.”

**Knox Jefferson.** Brother Jefferson, as some study participants called him, described learning as a daily routine. “For me, I have to say it’s a daily thing,” he revealed.

Forrest and Peterson (2006) revisit the differences between pedagogy and andragogy as they relate to readiness to learn and with the learner’s self-perception. From Forrest and Peterson’s perspective, pedagogy is the approach to teaching and learning intended for “learners dependent on external sources” (p. 115) and andragogy is the method of teaching and learning for individuals “who are aware of their needs and bring this knowledge to the educational activity” (p. 115). In respect to the study participants, they sought external resources to enable them to pursue needs derived from their lives, although they did not always find these resources.

**Lifelong learners.** If “lifelong learning refers to a lifelong commitment to continual learning and personal development and improvement” (Lifelong Learning, 2012, p. 234), then based on that definition, a lifelong learner is someone committed to continual learning and personal development and improvement. Kressley and

Huebschmann (2002) observe that “lifelong learning has been coined to describe a relatively new trend of seeking education throughout one’s lifetime” (p. 839). Perhaps, Kressley and Huebschmann (2002) are wrong about their historical description of lifelong learning as a trend. As early as 1954, Howard McClusky supported lifelong learning and revealed his opinions about it in a brief article titled *Cradle to Grave Education*. He shared, “In the past 50 years we have committed ourselves overwhelmingly to the idea of education for all. In principle and ultimately in practice this will require some instruction for both sexes, for all ages” (McClusky, p. 576). McClusky’s inclusion of “all ages” in his discussion of “education for all” is a reference to lifelong learning.

The lifelong learning styles of Kenedia Onassis, Knox Jefferson, Kimsey Lyndon, Donna Lincoln, and Barbara Van Buren are included because their interviews indicate that they (1) have always naturally enjoyed learning, (2) have always been consciously aware of learning opportunities, or (3) have substantial formal or technical education or an academic career that extends over a lifetime with plans for taking more classes and training workshops.

***Knox Jefferson.*** Mr. Jefferson, like Kimsey Lyndon, seemed to always have been involved with some type of learning goal. Mr. Jefferson and Ms. Lyndon are great storytellers. Knox Jefferson recounts stories told to him by the aunt who raised him and who was also a public school teacher. According to him, she always made getting an education a priority. “My aunt raised me,” he remembered. “I had to go to school with her every day.”



**Kimsey Lyndon.** Ms. Lyndon, like Knox Jefferson, is a great storyteller. Her childhood stories include tales of visiting the library, using different types of school supplies, and solving math problems. “There was a library here even when I was a girl.” She then added, “I go there a lot of times to learn.” Ms. Lyndon’s interview revealed that she is a licensed cosmetologist and a licensed vocational nurse.

**Kenedia Onassis.** If asked, I think Kenedia Onassis would describe her life as one learning adventure. The path of Ms. Onassis as a student of life can be chronicled from her beginnings in the cotton fields, to then going away to college, then graduating from college student to mathematics teacher, and finally from classroom instruction to educational leadership. The adventure has not ended with Ms. Onassis’ retirement.

**George Clinton.** Mr. Clinton attributed learning to wellness: “When you get to the place you don't learn, you die. You should always be looking to learn more. I don't know where it is going be, but I am always trying to learn something because when you get to the place where you can't learn anymore, you're dead.”

**Barbara Van Buren.** Ms. Van Buren is the first study participant who matches the condition of continuous learning. Barbara Van Buren announced, “I learn a lot every day on the television indicating her deliberate, continuous, and repetitive process for taking in new information.

**Donna Lincoln.** Ms. Lincoln stated, “I’d love to learn whatever I could learn.”

Lifelong learning by most definitions has to do with both the opportunity and commitment on a personal level. However, Field and Leicester (2000) contend that lifelong learning or “learning across the lifespan” is “learning which is worthwhile to the individual citizen and, therefore, to the society of which she is a part” (p. xvii). The value

to society of the learning aspirations of Barbara Van Buren and Donna Lincoln may be significant. Nonetheless, the interview comments convey satisfaction with their adult learning, which means there is learning that is of value to these two individual citizens.

**Self-directed learners.** According to Roberson (2005), “self-directed learning can be described as learning that is self-initiated, personal, and intentional,” (p. 29). For this section, the self-directed learning experiences of Debbie Harrison, Gracie Washington, Kenedia Onassis, Kimsey Lyndon, and Nellie Obama are instructive because their experiences are (1) clear examples of learning needs and information-seeking behavior, or (2) they referred to or recommended the use of libraries or information centers as part of their information seeking. The study participants also represent learners who are *deliberate* planners for learning. Their learning experiences are not limited to incidental or social learning.

**Debbie Harrison.** In reference to personal goals, Debbie Harrison reported, “There's nothing I can do here in Sedans. I want to do a whole lot in Sedans, but I do not have the ability to do that.” Ms. Harrison is characteristic of a self-directed learner because of her use of information-seeking strategies coupled with intrinsic motivation to succeed. Debbie Harrison is a licensed cosmetologist who managed a cosmetology school and a snack bar before arriving in Sedans. Ms. Harrison seems to have a strong desire to open a mother-and-son managed barbecue business. As an adult learner, Ms. Harrison has self-confidence and experience to draw on in fulfilling her goal. This means Ms. Harrison has reached the “readiness to learn” (Taylor and Kroth, p. 6) stage of the adult learning process. She and her son need information about how to start a small business to make the best of this phase of learning.

**Gracie Washington.** Ms. Washington worked on a library board; however, she said, “but before it got to where it is now.” Ms. Washington’s affiliation with the local library came out of service to her church. “New Harriet, my church up here, was interested in it. That's what kept me in it.”

**Kenedia Onassis.** Ms. Onassis felt more comfortable learning how to use the Internet than the other 65-80 year-old women from Seeker, Texas. “I really can't speak directly,” she clarified, “but I use the Internet resources quite frequently, and I'm not sure other 70 and 80-year-old females or African Americans would do that.” Kenedia Onassis planned to get the training she wanted and eventually took a class. “I actually had one of those classes available through AARP–American Association for Retired People. They offer quite a few classes for seniors, you know. I got in one of those.”

**Kimsey Lyndon.** Ms. Lyndon explained, “I was first going to this alternative school out here. The state was doing it, so I didn't have to pay or nothing but they won't do it now for old people.” According to Ms. Lyndon, the Alternative school in Serkens, Texas, had an open-doors program.

**Nellie Obama.** Ms. Obama preferred going to the library in Northeast Central Texas County City. “I can't think of the name of it. I got my card and things.” She discussed the book exchange in her community. “I read a lot, and when I run out of books, I go down there and trade with them.”

Despite consisting entirely of African Americans, the learning profile and general learning interests of participants from this study are in several ways very similar to the findings published by Roberson and Merriam (2005). For example, the Merriam and Roberson’s (2005) study included 10 study participants, ranging in age from 75 to 87 and

focused on their learning processes. The Merriam and Roberson (2005) study concluded that the complications of aging cannot necessarily be eased; however, the participants preferred growing old in rural areas.

The relevant findings from Merriam and Roberson's (2005) study are organized according to the subheading "accessing resources" (p. 277) and references to information needs in support of the participants' learning needs. One finding specifically related to this study involves information-seeking activities. According to the researchers, "accessing resources is part of the process of SDL" or self-directed learning. The participant feedback that supported this statement comes from a couple who recognized rural libraries' role as information providers. One study participant reported, "I have been to the library and pulled up lots of information on the computer."

Of the participants in this study, some including Debbie Harrison, Kimsey Lyndon, and Nellie Obama, demonstrated more active information-seeking than others. Ms. Lyndon and Ms. Obama reported visiting libraries for personal learning needs. Ms. Lyndon found the library useful for self-education to help her grandchildren with their homework. Ms. Obama visited the library for recipes and participated in a book exchange in her community.

The self-directed learners in this group are the kind of older adults who are seeking meaningful learning experiences. Study participants like Debbie Harrison analyze their options. Kenedia Onassis is a strategist who plans for achieving her learning goals. Kimsey Lyndon is independently trying to execute her learning plan.

## **Rural Learning Environments for Older Blacks**

Adult learning and education are vital to aging wellness. As Dalrymple (2005) noted, “communities that capitalize on educational facilities like reading, classes, and technology information sessions will help older adults stimulate their brains” (p. 11). An interesting finding from the interviews indicated that the “helping tradition” among rural Blacks reported by Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) was practiced in these rural communities. Rasheed and Rasheed (2003) discuss the helping tradition of older and rural Blacks. They express concern that existing racial, social, and cultural environments may leave rural Black adults age 65 and over vulnerable due to lack of resources and knowledge about critical support services.

**Adult learning centers.** The study indicated that some study participants have more adult learning centers available to them than others. Overall, the rural community visited for the purpose of completing this dissertation study has at least 10 learning centers based on the results of interviews with 14 rural African American residents age 65 and over. The most commonly noted rural learning center was the community church. Rural libraries were mentioned almost as often as churches.

“Local school systems in every segment of our society can integrate older adults” (Roberson, 2005, p. 37). That notion was consistent with the actions of some study participants who valued the public schools as adult learning centers. Other learning centers identified by study participants included a facility operated by an alumni student association and location Neserk’s Kiwanis Club. Kimsey Lyndon identified the Alternative School in Serkens, Texas. Nancy Vesta reported that a museum was available

in her community and according to Nellie Obama, the residents of Vanillas turned their convenience store into an adult learning center with a book exchange for all residents.

**Adult learning sources and materials.** According to Holt, “adult learners prefer to self-plan their learning activities in order to choose the material that is relevant and appropriate for their immediate learning needs” (1995, p. 51). The learning materials reported by study participants as being accessible to them range from general news and community newsletters to church news and religious publications. The study participants seem to prefer more religious material. For example, Gracie Washington and Nancy Vesta want publications about the Bible and biblical interpretation. Additionally, Donna Lincoln commented on the social value of church in her hometown. “We go to church and back home. We don’t have nowhere else to go,” she acknowledged.

The Internet is not heavily used as a source of information by members of the study group. George Clinton questioned the value of it during his interview. However, I observed that Mr. Clinton was using his computer to listen to gospel music while I interviewed him. Last of all, Barbara Van Buren reported that she learns when she watches television.

**Rural learning networks and personal loss.** For some study participants, the people who they trusted most or believed in most were deceased. The loss of trusted personal contacts compromised the informal support networks for study participants Barbara Van Buren and Dolley Grant. The information void experienced by study participants from the death of a close “supportive” family member or friend obviously could not be easily filled in some situations. Such was the case for historian Gracie

Washington and her sister, who reportedly were literally the last surviving members of their family or what Ms. Washington called “the old head.”

**Rural learning networks and social conditions.** Concerning rural later-life learning, the presumption is that older adults have lower chances for success because “rural areas typically have less economic opportunity, fewer social services available, and a higher proportionate number of older adults” (Roberson, 2005, p. 30). Some barriers to learning reported by the study participants were more political and social, and at times, some were perceived as racial.

Again, Debbie Harrison felt more information poor than Whites in her town because of her ethnicity and believed that a racial divide existed in Sedans, Texas. Nellie Obama shared her story about an incident in the library that appeared to be racially motivated and was directed at her. She believed that the whole issue was the result of her being a Black American and simply living in Texas. Grover Levi reported that he had felt the pressure of racism from Whites in his community during the first Obama presidential election. George Clinton had learned not to trust anyone, despite their race.

The findings show some study participants have natural bridges to information providers. As members of learning communities and associations, organizational leaders may serve well as respected information resources and providers. The study participants believe that these friends care about them, and they also believe that they can trust and can confide in their friends for learning support. Additionally, the majority of study participants seem to prefer consulting friends in their learning networks who have related expertise and credentials. Unfortunately, people do not always have the support they need. In fact, several participants did not identify anyone as part of their learning

network. Other categories of learning support include persons with professional positions in the community, like teachers and ministers.

### **Summary of the Key Findings**

Findings indicate that participants have many and wide-ranging learning interests. They exhibit a high level of self-direction and remarkable resourcefulness in identifying trusted members of learning networks, accessible learning centers, and trustworthy materials and books to support their efforts in gaining information. As anticipated, the rural environment did create some challenges and limitations impacting their abilities to pursue some of their learning goals without leaving their communities. However, these limitations were in some cases overcome. More notably and in contrast to some previous studies on elders, their access to information was often constrained by vestiges of everyday racism and economic realities.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Childers (1975) used the terms information-poor and information poverty to explain the conditions of “groups that, by virtue of their social, economic, cultural, educational, physical, or ethnic condition could be expected to suffer from more deprivations than the rest of the society” (p. 11). As recently as 1999, rural researchers have investigated the phenomenon of rural information deprivation upon non-metropolitan residents (Farmer & Williams, 1999). The latter case is significant because the affected group consisted of health professionals supporting rural areas. The reported concern, according to Farmer and Williams, was that this “indicated that health professionals at a distance from resources experience real problems in accessing



information, and there is no reason to suppose that patients would find it any easier” (1999, p. 209).

Based on data obtained, I agree with Roberson (2005) that rural librarians as adult educators need to actively work with their older patrons to create collections based on that population’s learning and related information needs, “especially the various changes in their lives” (p. 38). The current lack of information in small rural communities can be addressed if the towns have access to even a small library with librarians who have American Library Association (ALA) accredited Masters in Library Science (MLS) degrees or the equivalent. As a career librarian, I was excited to discover that two of the rural towns had libraries but discouraged to learn that the libraries were staffed by laypersons instead of librarians.

### **Knowledge of McClusky’s Learning Needs for Older Adults**

Adult educators and program developers for older residents should know about McClusky’s identified learning needs for older learners. A quick list of the *five basic needs* includes: “(1) coping needs to address the decline in individual and social power that occurs with age, including loss of income, loss of status, and the feeling of physical decline; (2) expressive needs to help older adults to maintain a pursuit of enjoyment and personal expression; (3) influence needs to encourage older adults to stay socially active and influence society; (4) contributive needs to integrate older adults’ experience and knowledge into the teaching-learning process; (5) transcendence need for older adults to have a more philosophical approach to life” (Jurich, 2010, p. 47).

Lewis and Mandinach’s (2008) definition of the purpose of lifelong learning supposes that lifelong learning is a necessity “for individuals to remain current, informed,

and survive in the global community” (p. 232). In my professional opinion, this definition is supportive of rural librarians who can assist older library patrons with understanding their information needs. Lewis and Mandinach (2008) defined lifelong learning as involving “survival skills” like good researching strategies and evaluation of information sources, skills that will be useful to learners for rest of their lives. As an academic librarian, I am always reminding college students that they will find their information literacy skills useful in the future.

### **Promote Little Libraries**

A current phenomenon occurring in small communities is the emergence of the “little free libraries” or LFLs (Stephens, 2012). According to Stephens (2012), LFLs are usually the result of a community interest in adult literacy and lifelong learning. An LFL is a type of a book exchange and would probably operate in a similar way to one which Nellie Obama explained is available to her in Vanillas, Texas. Ms. Obama indicated that she “traded books” and that the community book exchange prevented her from running out of books to read.

LFLs would seem to supplement rural adults’ ways of learning. Therefore, librarians as adult educators and other library staff members could work with rural residents like Nellie Obama to develop and promote existing LFLs. Perhaps, a weekly bookmobile visit from the largest nearby library could help refresh these small collections and also broaden the scope of the collection from general to varied topics. Stevens (2012) also suggested that the presence of LFLs helps to develop community connections and motivated participants to share resources, learning needs, and interests.

### **Information Awareness**

It is essential that those who provide services to rural African Americans age 65 and over, adult educators, rural gerontologists, social workers, and librarians as adult educators, learn to promote lifelong learning through the information services provided by the State of Texas. For example, not one of the study participants reported being aware of Texas' first call service known as 2-1-1 Texas (2-1-1 Texas, 2013). In many states, dialing "211" provides individuals and families in need with a shortcut through what may be a bewildering maze of health and human service agencies' phone numbers. By simply dialing 211, those in need of assistance are referred to and sometimes connected with appropriate agencies and community organizations" (para 1). In Texas, 2-1-1 is an integral part of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission's program for helping every Texas resident. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission's mission is "helping Texas citizens connect with the services they need. Whether by phone or internet, our goal is to present accurate, well-organized, and easy-to-find information from over 60,000 state and local health and human services programs" (para 1).

In addition to 2-1-1 Texas, adult educators and other individuals and agencies concerned with the aging populace should be familiar with the continued work of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) and the information available through its programs. In fact, more Texas residents in general should know about TSLAC's Reference Services. TSLAC's online catalog contains resources about aging, arts and older people, barrier-free design for older people, church activities and older people, computers and older people, physical fitness for older people, and even bodybuilding for older people. At present, any Texas rural librarian as well any rural

resident can contact TSLAC's reference desk by calling (512) 463-5455 or sending email to [reference.desk@tsl.state.tx.us](mailto:reference.desk@tsl.state.tx.us). It is critical for city officials, school administrators, and church leaders to at the very least find ways to inform their older residents about services and resources available from the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC).

College students earning adult education, library and information sciences, and rural sociology degrees and planning to have careers offering services to rural residents are available through innovative programs like Sam Houston State University's (SHSU) Texas Rural Internship Program (TRIP) and the University of North Texas' (UNT) Promoting and Enhancing the Advancement of Rural Libraries (PEARL) Project (Pearl Project, 2013). There are similar programs like TRIP and the PEARL Project nationwide. However, I have chosen to highlight programs that exist to aid rural Texans.

The Center for Rural Studies (CRC) at SHSU developed and oversees TRIP. The program is designed around the CRC objectives of "transforming rural places into vigorous communities," helping to "develop long-term social and economic strategies," encouraging and cultivating community and economic development, generating knowledge to allow residents to "overcome the obstacles facing rural Texas communities," and "providing data and information" (Center for Rural Studies, 2013, p. 2). "Any rural Texas community willing to host a student intern for one or two summer sessions is eligible" (Center for Rural Studies, 2013). Colleges and communities can work as a team to conduct learning and information related needs assessment and guide all rural adults age 65 and over to appropriate news, information, and resources.

The PEARL Project is an educational effort to strengthen support for rural librarians as adult educators and public libraries as places where learning takes place. The UNT Department of Library and Information Sciences has received grant funds to help rural librarian as adult educators provide outreach services, train library staff in program planning, and “provide educational opportunities for rural librarians as adult educators through semi-annual meetings and workshops” (Pearl Project, 2013, para. 5).

### **Park In Front of the Church**

Boone, Safrit, and Jones (2002) cover strategies for starting and maintaining adult education programs. One hurdle is to create awareness and stimulate interest in your program (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002). “In adult education, marketing can be defined roughly as gaining acceptance of, consensus on, or participation in any given educational venture” (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002, p. 185). Adult educators have to find ways to attract attention and to promote their services (Caffarella, 2002) to older African Americans such as those included in this study. It is likely that adult educators will need to “utilize various strategies” (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002, p. 185) to get potential students’ attention. As I reported in Chapter 3 of this study, personally, I personally vote for parking in the front of the church. Please see page 58 of this study.

In reference to librarians as adult educators and change agents, Vailey Oehlke (2013) stated, “we have so many opportunities to make a meaningful difference” (para 4). Oehlke (2013) developed a list for helping librarians as adult educators to understand community needs. In terms of program planning, she suggested that librarians work on building relationships. Oehlke (2013) advised librarians to remember to listen to library

patrons. She also explained that it is important for librarians to speak up, share their ideas, and build strong bonds with library users.

### **Partner with Baptist District Associations and Other Denominations**

Adult educators should discuss the importance of developing adult education programs in churches and promoting classes for adult learners with regional, state, and national religious-denomination leaders. As a result, perhaps the planners for national church conventions, states congresses, and district associations may begin to think about devoting more resources to *church-based adult education* (Isaac, Guy, and Valentine, 2001). Isaac, Guy, and Valentine (2001) use the term *church-based adult education* to describe both faith-based and non-religious learning activities intended for adult learners in the African American church.

In April 2013, the Harmony Baptist District Association (HBDA) Congress of Christian Education at Study held its 103rd Semi-Annual Session and Congress Mid-Session in the Northeast Central Texas County referenced throughout this study (Corsicana Daily Sun, 2013). When interviewed, many of the study participants were congregation members of churches belonging to the HBDA. The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. is the oldest and largest African American religious convention in the United States (National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., 2013a). One responsibility of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. is the governance of affiliated churches, district associations, and state conventions (National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., 2013a). The Convention's website includes a description of district associations like the HBDA. According to the Convention's definition, district associations are "autonomous organizations, supported by the voluntary membership of churches and individuals, that

are usually from a defined geographic region” (National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., 2013b, para 4).

Isaac, Guy, and Valentine (2001) actually studied modern-day approaches to programming for adult learning that stem from churches. They also analyzed data about the intrinsic and extrinsic motives that African Americans have for wanting to continue to learn as adults. Therefore, one strategy for working through African American churches to offer adult education programs is to use the findings of Isaac, Guy, and Valentine (2001) as a means for starting a discussion with the leaders of church districts.

If each church district has the autonomy claimed by the National Baptist USA, Inc. (2013), they could independently elect to expand the scope of their district meetings to include types of church-based adult education. Unfortunately, size does matter; therefore, a challenge for smaller churches, not regional districts, would be to fund and sustain innovative programs like church-based adult education. The rural towns and communities visited during my study had 2,500 or less residents to be considered rural communities. The membership sizes of the churches and religious institutions surveyed by Isaac, Guy, & Valentine (2001) “ranged from 1,500 to more than 9,000 people” (p. 26). Therefore, many of the churches included in the Isaac, et al. survey had congregations larger than 2,500, the population cutoff for rural towns in my study, and those churches would thus also have more financial resources than, for example a church in Fremond, Texas. Sherman Adams, a pastor of a rural church, reflected, “We are a small church financially.” This disparity in resources means that small churches with small budgets are significantly disadvantaged for offering effective adult learning programs compared to larger churches.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study points to several possible areas for future research. In consideration of the growth of older populations, I recommend further investigating how retirees can build rural learning networks to mutually support each other. Studies should be conducted in rural communities to evaluate the credibility of information sources. Town leaders and adult educators should conduct interviews, and some statistic surveys should monitor the success of information programs and develop new ones as needed. Better yet, I believe that leaders of small communities are willing to address long histories of social, racial, and digital divisions to move forward with meeting the learning and related information needs of all rural residents. Participatory research may provide an avenue for interested adult educators working with communities to address issues identified by members of the local community.

### **Retirement and Rural African Americans Age 65 and Over**

The data from this study suggest that several of the study participants could be described as in partial retirement, between jobs, or in other stages of employment and retirement. As early as 1975, educational leaders and lifelong learning advocates discussed the stages of retirement and adult learning needs (Cohen, 1975; Roiter 2008). Over the years, descriptions of the phases of retirement have included phased retirement, part-time retirement, total retirement, and re-careering in later-life (Cohen, 1975; Johnson, 2009), and now, “new adults living in their knowledge and reward era” has been added to the list (Roiter, 2008). Phased retirement and part-time retirement are essentially the same and refer to the “a transition from full-time work to full-time retirement by decreasing workload and/or responsibilities over time” (p. 64). Recareering is described



in an AARP publication that notes that “half of older workers who left their career jobs by the time they were ages 65 to 69 moved to a new employer” (Johnson, Kawachi, & Lewis, 2009). The development of rural learning networks among residents could potentially provide older adults advice about factors to consider during each stage of phased retirement and news as well as later-life career opportunities.

***Helping hands for post-careering.*** Knox Jefferson has retired at least once. He revealed that he has served in the U.S. military. “I left the community and I went into the military,” he established. He then chronicled a number of careers that kept him employed and working. His list included “working with the school system,” as he put it. “I have taught school here in Northeast Central Texas City as a substitute teacher about three years. I drive a school bus every day.” Perhaps, Mr. Jefferson could use his intelligence, talents, and experiences to help others find workable careers at age 80. A valuable research project might more specifically investigate the learning and information needs of individuals seeking to re-career as seniors as well as the obstacles they encounter.

***Professional development opportunities.*** It is imperative that we hear more about the learning and related information needs of retirees from this segment of the rural older population. With emphasis on *action learning* or active learning, I am interested in studying if community leaders or experts in certain fields emerge to help fellow residents re-train. Action learning is described by Swanson and Holton (2001) as an approach in which “learning is accomplished by working on a project or through a problem” (p. 249). Rural adult educators and sociologists should thoroughly investigate what motivates an African American person who is age 65 or over to consider a later-life career change.

Without question, adult learning theorists and gerontologists should conduct qualitative inquiries about how these people plan for the future and cope with the present. I would assume that these people would experience some amount of stress with their decisions to re-career. For example, such a new job may come with the normal stress associated with a new position and then additional stress that is aged-related. Hopefully, researchers will investigate more thoroughly the aspirations of rural aging adults.

### **Self-Assessment of Learning and Information Needs**

Adult learners should have the opportunity to self-assess their learning and related information needs. A study on the methods of self-assessment and self-auditing of learning goals of rural African Americans age 65 and over would help adult educators to construct theoretical models for future application. I think that adult learners would especially benefit from a guide designed to help them objectively assess if the learning and information resources within their community meet their immediate learning needs. For example, a follow-up interview with Debbie Harrison to discuss her learning experiences and outcomes could begin to distinguish between her real and perceived barriers to learning in her community. On the other hand, Kimsey Lyndon, with a little information consultation, could realize when she had exhausted all possibilities within her rural learning environment.

There have been research studies done on the learning activities of older adults living in an urban environments (Heisel, 1993, as an example) and on later-life learners in rural areas (Roberson, 2004, for example). Through this study, I met Kenedia Onassis, who is living and learning in both urban and rural locations. I support conducting more studies to determine if there is a significant difference in the aging wellness and learning

success of older adults based on place of residence. For example, I would recommend that newer studies examine how older adults in large cities address their learning needs and gather information. Researchers could first develop a checklist of urban resources and learning opportunities and a checklist of the urban groups' learning and related information needs. Second, the researchers could then duplicate their studies in rural areas with the same population and compare the checklists.

Adult educators could apply Howard Y. McClusky's Theory of Margin (McClusky, 1963; McClusky, 1970, McClusky; 1971; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2012). McClusky's Theory of Margin is based on his belief that there is a "balance between the amount of energy needed and the amount available" to participate in learning activities (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2012. p. 93). This balance is the ratio between the *load* of life, which uses up an adult learner's personal time and energy, and the *power* of life, which allows one to deal with the load. "More power means a greater margin to participate in learning" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2012, p. 93). Based on McClusky's Theory of Margin, a qualitative researcher could include a diagram during her interview of later-life learners to understand their load versus power status.

Taking both power and load into consideration, McClusky (1970, p. 83) explains how the theory works:

- Margin may be increased by reducing load or increasing power.
- Margin may be decreased by increasing load and/or reducing power.
- Adult learners can control both outcomes by modifying either power or load.
- When load continually matches or exceeds power and if both are fixed and/or out of control, or irreversible, the situation becomes highly vulnerable and susceptible to breakdown.
- However, load and power can be controlled.

- If a person is able to lay hold of a reserve (Margin of Power)
  - He [sic] is better equipped to meet unforeseen emergencies,
  - She is better positioned to take risks, and,
  - They can engage in exploratory, creative activities, are more likely to learn, etc.

To engage in learning, McClusky posits that an adult must have some margin of power or influence to activate “the processes which the learning situation requires” (McClusky, 1970, p. 84 as cited by Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2012, p. 93-95). Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2012) explained that the significance for adult learners, in cases in which their power and influence is the greater than their load, is that they have a “greater margin to participate in learning” (p. 93). In the opposite case, a later-life learner with a load-power ratio of 8:6 for example, may expect to experience some difficulty achieving their learning needs and may also have little ability to produce the learning conditions needed for their success. Therefore, the self-directed and later-life learners can use the results of an exercise based on McClusky’s theory strategically to reduce their burden (load) to learning or attempt to adapt as much as possible to increase their learning potential and opportunities (power).

### **How Death Impacts Learning Networks of Rural Old**

“As people age, their activities, family composition, and financial resources alter” (Dalrymple, 2005, p. 3) as do their learning support networks. Barbara Van Buren and Donna Grant reported that the personal advisors who they trusted were deceased. As Kalish (1981) explains it, “the meaning of a person’s death for the survivors includes not only the loss of someone to whom they are deeply attached, but the loss of someone who performed meaningful roles in their lives” (p. 285).

According to Whiting and Bradley (2007), “activities, contributions, and relationships serve as definitions of roles, identity, and meaning” for adults that can affect their “*productivity in life*” and *patterns of affiliation* (p. 122). Therefore, it is within reason that the personal losses of Ms. Van Buren and Ms. Grant would leave them needing assistance to rebuild their learning network. Bane (1991) would describe those patterns of affiliation as *natural networks*. The terminology natural networks in the literature is also synonymous with *natural supports* and “*natural helping networks*” (Bane 1991; Blieszner, Roberto, & Singh, 2002; Braithwaite, Runciman, & Merry, 2009; Cutrona & Cole, 2000; Young, Giles, & Plantz, 1982; Waltman, 2011). Natural supports networks consist of family, friends, or any group of people a person spend time with, like members of clubs, organizations, and other civic activities (Cutrona, & Cole, 2000). Braithwaite, Runciman, and Merry (2009) contribute that natural networks are also relationships that people participate in to resolve problems or attend to other needs. I recommend studies designed to understand how formal supports can supplement the learning networks of older adults, especially those left unattended when a close consultant dies.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Knowles advocated the view that adult educators must create learning environments in which all learners can thrive (Imel, para. 2). Several important elements in creating a learning environment for rural African Americans age 65 and over exist to provide ethnically-neutral access to materials and resources and community support of later-life learning. The options of group learning and self-directed learning are two more factors important to success of later-life learners in rural learning environments.

It is my assessment of the findings of this study that rural African Americans age 65 and over are not inclined to conduct self-assessments of their learning and related information needs. The discussions from this study suggest to me that the struggles of rural African Americans age 65 and over related to race and ethnicity take precedence over personal growth through learning. To resolve this problem, a process involving external intervention may be needed to help reduce the sociological barriers and sort through the problematic politics between rural peers. With some guidance, leaders of rural communities could reach begin to create conditions that maximize successful learning opportunities for all later-life learners. Adult educators and community leaders can create conditions welcoming to all ethnicities and offer diverse instructional methods as well. Ultimately, adult educators will need to work with program staff and volunteers to develop policies and procedures that maximize the educational benefits of students.

I suggest that rural community leaders would benefit from some intervention from trained and experienced adult educators to help them develop active and accessible learning programs. I hope that more adult educators act as change agents working actively to provide an open-door approach to adult learning through inclusive learning environments. I also hope that more research studies and program development will be done to help rural African Americans age 65 and over with their learning and information needs and in objectively assessing their rural settings as rural learning environments.

## APPENDIX A

### QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

1. Let me tell you about myself. I live in Austin, Texas. I am a college student as well as a reference librarian for Austin Community College. I was born on a farm in ...

- *Now, would you mind telling me a little about yourself, your community, your family, etc?*

2. I love stories. Please share with me stories about how you went about learning something new that you wanted or needed to learn in the last 1-2 years.

- [For each example] *Please share with me who you contacted or how you went about learning what you needed to know?*
- [For each example] *Please let me know if you ran into problems?*
- [For each problem] *Please tell me how it was resolved?*
- [For each problem] *Do you think you experienced any particular difficulties because you are Black?*

3. I have drawn three (3) circles. My FIRST circle represents who I would call if I needed to learn something new or get information to help me learn something new. For example, if I need to know how to balance my checkbook, I would ask my husband for help.

- *It's your turn. If you needed to learn something new, who would you turn to first in this community*

4. My SECOND circle represents who I would turn to next if people I seek help from first were either not available or were not able to help me.

*It's your turn again. Who would you go to next if you needed to learn something new in this community?*

5. My THIRD circle represents when I must turn to someone outside of my community.

- *Have you had a similar problem? What did you do?*

6. (Question for those claiming to not to have any learning needs)

- *Has anything happened lately that has caused you to need to go outside your everyday routine to get new information? Could you describe how you went about the process of getting information in that case?*

7. Sometimes nobody I know seems to have the information I need, or asking people I know just isn't the best way to get the information I need when I am trying to learn something new. So I have to use other resources, like when I used a historical map and when I checked out a textbook from the library to learn about the history of slavery in Texas.

- *Other than people you know, what resources have you used in the past to learn something new or get information to help you learn something new?*
- *What other resources can you think of that you might use to learn something new or get information to help you learn something new?*

8. I need to learn a little more about you.

- *May I ask just how young you are?*
- *How do you identify yourself by race?*



## **APPENDIX B**

### **CONVOY OF LEARNING SUPPORT DIAGRAM INSTRUCTIONS**

In this next section, the study participants used the Convoys of Social Support diagram, although modified for this study, to show what support systems they perceived as being available to them. All study participants, was presented with a sheet of concentric circles and the following instructions.

Here are three circles. The FIRST circle represents who you would call FIRST in this community, if you needed to learn something new or get information.

- *If you needed to learn something new and/or needed information related to that learning need, who in this community would you think of contacting first?*

The SECOND circle represents who you would turn to next if the people you normally seek out first for information were not available to help you.

- *After your first choice, who would you go to next in this community if you needed to learn something new?*

The THIRD circle represents a situation when your only option is to consult someone from another community.

- *Have you had a similar problem? What did you do?*

## **APPENDIX C**

### **EXAMPLE OF LEARNING SUPPORT DIAGRAM**

This is an example of a modified diagram that was used to collect data about study participants' learning support networks. The diagram has three over-lapping circles. The middle area represents one learning need and contains information about the study participant's first contact within their community. The second circle represents the study participant's second contact within their community. The third circle represents a contact from another community or town.

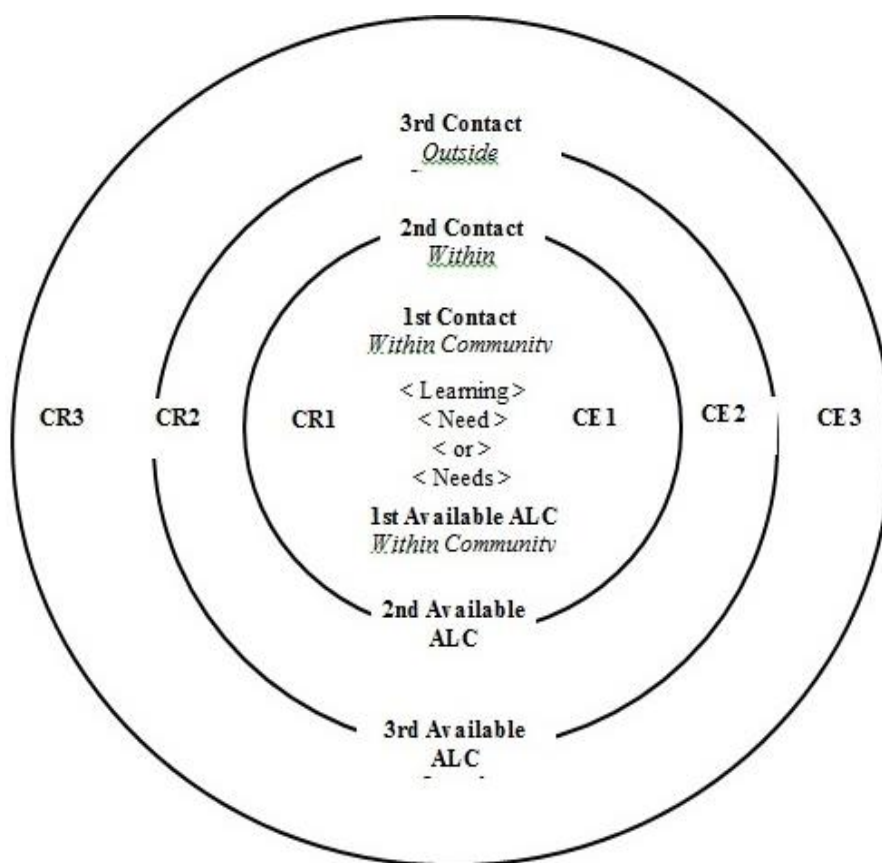


Figure 3. Modified learning support diagram from study findings.

Key: ALC: Adult Learning Center – CE:Convoy Expertise – CE:Convoy Relationship

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## **VITA**

Evelyn Melinda Townsel was born in Frost, Texas, the daughter of Mrs. Evelyn Townsel Goff of Mexia, Texas, and the granddaughter of Mrs. Ethel Townsel Cleveland, also from Frost, Texas. She graduated from Frost High School, and completed a Bachelor of Science in Public Relations (Journalism) before pursuing a Master of Science in Information Science degree from the University of North Texas University. Melinda also has an Associate of Art Degree in Spanish from Austin Community College.

Melinda has worked in academic libraries since 1978 and has worked in the libraries at Bishop College (now Paul Quinn College, Dallas, Texas), University of North Texas (Denton, Texas), San Jacinto College – North Campus (Houston, Texas), Baylor University (Waco, Texas), and Austin Community College (Austin, Texas).

Melinda is a member of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and the AFT-ACC Union of Professionals. She is also a lifetime member of the Texas Association of Black Personnel in Higher Education (TABPHE) and UNT's College of Information Alumni Society.

In her current job, Melinda is the Accessibility Facilitator for Library Services and on serves on ACC's College Accessibility Committee (CAC). Melinda is coordinator for Project Enable, an assistive technology petting zoo available to ACC students. Melinda Townsel is also the Head Librarian of the library at ACC's Northridge Campus.

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