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Magister Artium Thesis

Working Mothers' Experiences & Perceptions of Learning in an Adult Support Group: The case of the Working Moms of Athens Lean In Circle

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Supervisor:
Associate Professor
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Summary

This thesis aims to investigate the forms of learning taking place amidst working mothers who participated in an adult support group, the factors influencing this, and the impact this learning has had on them. To address the above, this study has captured the experiences and perceptions of the working mothers participating in the research. A case study approach was adopted, following an empirical qualitative research paradigm, drawing on the experiences and perceptions of its participants. A semi-structured interview approach was applied, followed by a thematic analysis of the findings.

The research took place in the context of the "Working Moms of Athens Circle", a free monthly support community that was founded in Athens and has been operating since March 2021. This support group is part of the LeanIn.Org circle network, a global non-profit initiative promoting female empowerment. To date, more than 75 working mothers have joined the "Working Moms of Athens" circle. Participating working mothers are exposed to a series of activities, seeking support while they juggle their roles as both mothers and professionals.

Learning in the context of the working moms of Athens support circle was both informal and non-formal. It was unintentional, yet conscious. It was generated through planned socialization during group meetups, from the incidental sharing of information between the members through the additional communication channels, and through self-study projects that members take up, inspired by the themes shared.

Although the Working Moms of Athens Lean In Circle was designed for the empowerment of women, the latter does involve learning. This learning was facilitated by different aspects, among others: by commonality, the presence of shared purpose, and the cultivation of trust. Also, routines and ceremonies found in the group process positively influenced learning. Affiliation with the global network of Lean In served as a quality standard for the group process and as an indirect enabler to learning.

As findings revealed, working mothers experienced a boost in confidence and a strengthening of their self-image which contributes to their empowerment. This type of socialization influenced participants' perspectives around work-life balance and the importance of female groups. Working mothers developed a type of internal motivation that was translated into actions taken towards the betterment of their lives.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

This thesis aspired to explore the adult learning that took place amidst working mothers who participated in adult support groups, based on their experiences and perceptions. This first chapter serves as an introduction to the context and rationale, presenting the research components, and outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.1.   Thesis Rationale

Learning is a biological capability, and at the same time a dominant human process. Knut Illeris argues that humans are "*doomed to be learners*" and accumulating enormous amounts of learning throughout our lives is inevitable (2018, p. 86). This is not only attributed to compulsory education, but also to the human need to learn a great deal of things to run our daily lives. Learning is a driving force for individuals, especially adults for whom learning "*is both about being and becoming*" (Jarvis, 2004, p. 117).

Learning can occur everywhere. Any experience has the potential to generate learning (Kolb, 1984). And although there is no global academic consensus on what the exact process of learning looks like, the world's most esteemed learning theorists agree on one thing: the socio-cultural context is a significant factor in the learning process (Jarvis, 2004, p. 137). What we learn is equally important to where and how we learn it.

Choosing a research topic oftentimes reflects the values, attitudes, interests, and autobiography of the researcher (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 112). Having spent a generous portion of my own life exposed to a wide variety of learning experiences in several contexts, especially in formal learning setups (i.e., schools and universities), I wondered where else learning could manifest. The concept of formality within learning and its various stances (formal, non-formal and informal) intrigued me. Living in a Western society, where formal and institutionally based learning is favored (Merriam, 2018, p. 93), I could not help but wonder around non-formal and informal learning setups more. Learning embedded in everyday life activities, which is valued more in non-Western societies (Merriam, 2018, p. 93).

Becoming a mother was a breakthrough experience for me. It helped me get closer to the shocking realization that I knew a lot less about life than I thought I did. And although I do not claim to have gained eternal wisdom through motherhood, the experience did help make one thing truly clear to me: learning can occur everywhere, even in places where we are least looking to find it. This is my epistemology and, perhaps, my bias.

This thesis came to be out of my genuine curiosity and profound interest to explore the dimensions of learning in atypical setups, outside of the classroom, beyond the workplace. In small groups or communities that do not necessarily come together with a purpose to learn something. Groups of people whose members have no shared goals or assigned projects to deliver.

Of course, this is not the first time someone decides to research adult learning in non-formal or informal setups. A substantial body of knowledge exists, in a wide variety of contexts (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; Marcisk & Volpe, 1999; Fevre et al., 2000, Illeris & Associates, 2004; Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira, 2015). But there was one setup that was present in my life after becoming a mother around which I could not find existing research to satisfy my curiosity around the presence of learning: the context of an adult support group.

For almost two years now I have been facilitating an adult support group for working mothers. Setting up this group came out of my own personal need to connect with other working mothers and feel a sense of belonging. Every month, in the context of this group, working mothers come together to discuss, to socialize, and to support each other. Being exposed to the principles of lifelong learning through my master's degree studies, I could not help but wonder: How does learning manifest within that support group where none of those who join expect to learn something? And, if learning does manifest, what forms does it take, and what factors influence it? What impact – if any – does this kind of learning have on the participants?

These questions shape the logic of the primary research conducted for this thesis looking to study non-formal and informal learning in the context of an adult support group for working mothers. The initial literature overview conducted to primarily explore if there exists academic room to study this topic has uncovered two things: how little we know about learning in the atypical setup of support groups, and how untapped topics around the impact of such learning and the factors impacting learning for working mothers remain.

1.2.   Main Concepts and Research Aims of the Study

The thesis sought to explore the experiences and perceptions of learning for working mothers who participated in an adult support group in Greece. To date, no prior research has been uncovered to build upon.

The central concepts underpinning the study and their relationship are presented in the Venn diagram of Figure 1, and consist of the following three concepts: informal and non-formal learning, working mothers as adult learners, and the context of adult support groups. The research area is, in effect, the middle ground where the three concepts overlap.
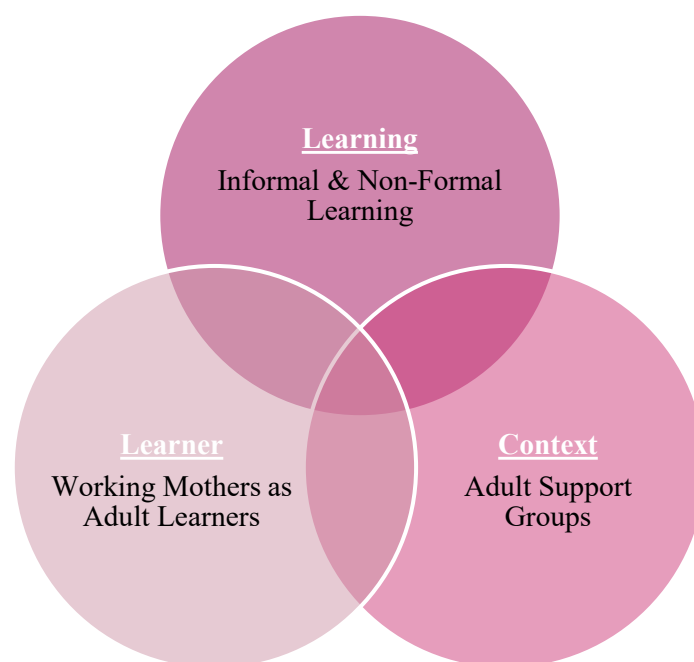
Figure 1 Research Concepts and their Relationship

All three distinct concepts are broad and comprise multiple dimensions. Therefore, relying on these has helped the study remain focused and at the same time effective in analyzing captured information in ways that will lead to drawing meaningful conclusions.

The main aims of the study are presented in what follows. They consist of three areas which are crucial to understanding learning for working mothers in the context of a support group. The three aims are:

1. To explore the type of learning that takes place amidst working mothers who participate in adult support groups.

2. To identify the factors influencing learning for working mothers who participate in the above groups.

3. To highlight the impact that this type of learning within that context has on the working mothers.

1.3. Context of the Study

The research took place in the context of the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" a free monthly support group that I have founded in Athens, Greece and have been facilitating since March 2021. This support group is part of the LeanIn.Org circle network, a global initiative promoting female empowerment.

LeanIn.Org (also known as "LeanIn Foundation") is a non-profit organization founded in March 2013. As mentioned on their website, the mission of LeanIn.Org is to "*help women achieve their ambitions and work to create an equal world*" (LeanIn.Org, 2021). The organization is known for developing the "Women in the Workplace" study, in collaboration with an American worldwide management consulting firm (McKinsey & Company, 2021). The "Women in the Workplace" study is published annually, examining "*the state of female leadership and diversity management across organizations in corporate America*" (Leinwand Leger, 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2022). The organization frequently partners with other organizations to run annual national campaigns advocating various dimensions of gender diversity and female representation.

The best-known pillar of LeanIn.Org activities are the "LeanIn Circles". LeanIn Circles are "*small groups of women who come together regularly to support each other*" (LeanIn.Org, 2021). Facilitated by a "Circle Leader", the interactions within these support groups are interactive by nature, involving discussions on gender issues and work. Supporting material such as videos, articles and guides can be retrieved through the LeanIn.Org openly available library of resources. Reportedly, more than 50,000 women have been mobilized to date to set up and facilitate such groups, in a global community spanning 184 countries with more than 700,000 members (LeanIn.Org, 2021; Salesforce, 2021). Setting up and participating in a LeanIn Circle is a fully voluntary engagement.

The "Working Moms of Athens" is one of the support groups of the global LeanIn. Org initiative and is part of the Hellenic LeanIn Network (i.e., the sub-part of the Lean In collective

of Circles who operate in Greece). It was initiated in March 2021. The support group consists of working mothers who reside in Athens, Greece.

The mission of the "Working Moms of Athens" support group (as was mutually decided by the members who took part the first time the group got together) is to "*to energize, empower and enable [participating working mothers] to grow into the most fulfilled and empowered versions of themselves, and generate ripple effects for cultivating a purposeful growth mindset*" (LeanIn.Org, 2021). Each support group meetup has a theme: a discussion topic around which all interactions and materials revolve around. The members decide what topic they wish to address each month.

Right before the end of each meetup, participants are prompted by the facilitator to disclose their "one action": an action that they will take for the next month which will contribute to their personal growth and life betterment. Members are the ones who decide what their one action will be. During each meetup there is also a recap ceremony addressing the progress of the "one actions" the members decided to focus on each passing month.

To date, 16 meetups have taken place, and more than 70 working mothers have joined the "Working Moms of Athens" support group. Discussion themes vary, and all revolve around some aspect or challenge present in the life of a working mother, such as managing guilt, challenges working mothers faced during the lockdown period, the impact of multitasking on productivity and well-being, career progression opportunities, and work-life balance.

Support group meetups occur monthly, with a maximum duration of two hours on the 2nd Friday of each month. Most of them took place through a digital videoconferencing platform (Zoom) due to the pandemic-imposed social distancing rules applicable due to the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2019). The group also shares instant messaging and closed social media channels for impromptu and periodic information sharing. From my role as the facilitator of the circle activities, I take care of the meeting coordination, design all group activities which take place, facilitate both the activities and the discussion, capture members' feedback, and compose and distribute additional informative material related to the discussion topics: articles, videos, related books, and hand notes.

Participating working mothers are exposed to a series of activities such as reflection exercises, open group discussions, conversations in pairs or in triads (using Zoom's breakout room functionality), answering short polls and narrating stories. The interaction of members that

takes place in this support group is, in effect, a social transaction where members of the group are "*informing, persuading, telling, influencing, advising and instructing each other; and deliberately seeking out information, advice, instruction, wisdom and enlightenment*" (Groombridge, 1983, p. 6), as in the definition of informal learning.

1.4. Thesis Structure

This first chapter has presented the rational of the thesis, the main concepts and research aims as well as the context of the study. The second chapter contains a critical review of the literature as well as the research framework which ultimately leads to the research questions. The third chapter outlines all aspects of the research methodology, including ethical and validity concerns and limitations. The fourth chapter presents the research findings and the respective discussion around the key themes emerged. The fifth and last chapter is where concluding remarks, recommendations and future research areas are discussed.

Chapter 2
Literature Review & Research Framework

In this chapter the relevant to the study literature will be critically reviewed, namely: non-formal and informal learning, learning in adult support groups, and working mothers as adult learners. This chapter aims to critically review the current body of academic knowledge as well as uncover gaps which will serve as the basis for the research questions that this thesis will address.

2.1. Timing of Literature Review

There exist different academic positions as per the timing when literature review should be conducted. Some scholars argue that early reading narrows a researcher's "*analytic field of vision, leading focus on some aspects of the data at the expense of other potential crucial aspects*" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 17). Other academics claim that conducting literature review early on "*sensitizes the researcher to details which will be present in the data during collection*" (Tuckett, 2005, p. 79). Therefore, it becomes evident that this matter is left to the discretion of the researcher.

For this thesis, given the notable lack of focused academic knowledge on working mothers as adult learners (as will become evident by the end of this chapter), engaging in literature review early on was considered beneficial to the study. It would   enrich the research methodology to be proposed and inform the research process.

2.2. Adult Learning

Although frequently referenced, the term "adult learning" is hard to fully conceptualize. It consists of two terms which are multidimensional by nature: "adult" and "learning" (Gravani, 2015). When does one become an adult? What constitutes learning? There exist many approaches to addressing both questions, and some of them will be presented in this section.

The works of German American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson have vastly influenced our contemporary understanding of adulthood. In his book "Childhood and Society" (1950) Erikson extended Freud's developmental theory to describe a life's course paradigm which consisted of eight stages. This approach would serve as the dominant theory on psychosocial development for many decades to come. According to Erikson, adulthood is the phase which starts when one turns 20, right after one's adolescent years, when the time comes for one to address existential questions around love and romantic relationships. Still, this paradigm, which may have made sense in the industrialized societies of the 20th century, has been revisited multiple times since then.

Malcolm Knowles (1984) has argued that adulthood is the psychosocial state where people move from being dependent on others to becoming self-directed. Bee and Bjorklund's work (1996) outlines eight different domains of human functioning to pin down the extents of adulthood (namely: physical, cognitive, family and gender, relationships, work roles, personality and meaning, and major tasks). Jarvis (2004, p. 67) ponders that "*adulthood is reached when individuals are treated by others as if they are socially matured*". More recent scholars (Arnett, 2007) propose terms such as "emerging adulthood" to address weaknesses of previous terms trying to pin down when adulthood really begins. The bottom line is that it is hard to pin down exactly when adulthood begins.

Learning is an equally broad and perplexing concept. Sociologists perceive learning as "*an active behavior rather than an esoteric product, a psychological and social process through which learners construct reality*" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Lerner et al. (1986) as cited by Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira (2015, p. 2), view learning as "*an activity which can lead to a permanent change in behavior as a result of the learning experience*". Jarvis argues that learning is an "*existential phenomenon*" (2004, p. 37), and at the same time as an active individual process through which the person is changed (2006). As Gravani (2015, p. 176) puts it, *"[learning] is both the action of acquiring knowledge and the knowledge acquired*". Learning is both a process and an outcome, hence the innate complexity when trying to define it. The current study adopts this as its working definition of learning.

2.3. Forms of Learning

Learning does not limit itself to the extents of a classroom. It can take many forms and occur in a variety of contexts. Three commonly accepted definitions for the various forms of learning

out there come from Groombridge (1983, p. 6), who distinguishes between "Formal", "Non-Formal" and "Informal" learning.

Formal learning is set up and provided by the State in the form of an institutionalized education or training system (Groombridge, 1983), and it comes with a teacher or trainer, a prescribed learning framework, a series of organized learning events, and awards qualifications or credits (Eraut, 2000). Non-Formal Learning comprises many deliberate, organized, and systematic educational enterprises set outside of the State's educational system (e.g., other ministries or agencies with primary objectives which entail education such as trade unions etc.) (Groombridge, 1983) and, "*although it could be deliberately organized, it cannot be universally acknowledged or institutionally recognized*" (Papadimitriou, 2019, p. 397). Lastly, informal learning is incidental. It is unplanned, and it may occur during social transactions where people interact in the context of sharing information, offering advice giving instructions and sharing knowledge (Groombridge, 1983).

Out of the three types of learning mentioned above, we will dedicate some paragraphs to non-formal and informal learning, the two types relevant to this thesis and which, like adult learning, do not come with a straightforward definition.

2.3.1. Non-Formal Learning

Coombs and Ahmed (1974) were the first ones to use the term "non-formal education", to describe learning that did not occur within the context of a specific school setting or was offered to learners of a specific age group. For Coombs and Ahmed non-formal education is equal to learning "*regardless of where, how or when the learning occurs*" (1974, p. 8). They go ahead to define non-formal learning as "*any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population*" (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). "*Agricultural extension and farmer training programs, adult literacy programs, occupational skill training given outside the formal system, youth clubs with substantial educational purposes, and various community programs of instruction in health, nutrition, family planning, cooperatives, and the like*" are some examples of non-formal learning referenced by Coombs and Ahmed (1974, p. 8).

As is reported by the European Commission and summarized by UNESCO (2009, p. 27), non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution, and typically does not lead to a certification. However, the learning content is structured, there exist learning

objectives, learning time is appointed, and learning support is provided. In his own typology of non-formal learning, Michael Eraut argues that the fundamental trait that discerns non-formal learning from other forms of learning is learner deliberation: the learner has a clear intention to learn and sets aside specific time for that purpose (Eraut, 2000). The learner is, therefore, intentional about participating in non-formal learning. And even though these ideas paint a clear picture about the concept of non-formal learning, there still exists a good deal of confusion among scholars with regards to its definition.

Rogers (2014, p. 16) mentions two contrasting approaches to the mainstream definition of non-formal learning, namely "*formal learning in non-formal contexts*" (e.g. driving instruction or private music lessons outside of school, training programs in the work-place, or structured learning taking place in voluntary bodies such as youth clubs and scouts), and "*non-formal learning in formal settings*" (e.g. extra-curricular voluntary learning activities in schooling contexts such as choirs and drama groups). Some of these programs may even be accredited and acknowledged by the State, like in the case of foreign language schools or computer training agencies.

Based on the above, we conclude that non-formal learning is not unstructured. On the contrary, it corresponds to a broad range of practices that can be taught and learned outside of the narrow formal educational setup and imply a notion of curriculum (Sefton-Green, 2012). Having said that, lack of formal accreditation is, perhaps, the most notable trait of non-formal learning and the reason why it is often characterized as a "*secondary-knowledge domain*" (Sefton-Green, 2012, p. 26).

2.3.2. Informal Learning

Informal learning is less of an individual and more of a sociocultural process (Callanan et al., 2011). This definition is particularly suited to this thesis which studies the presence and potential impact of informal learning in the context of an adult mutual support group, because it highlights the connection of a person's knowledge with the time, place, and social context where it is produced. As Marsick and Watkins put it, informal learning is "*at the heart of adult education because of its learner-centered focus and the lessons that can be learned from life experience*" (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 25).

In contrast to Eraut's taxonomy for non-formal learning where learner deliberation was an instrumental part of the definition (Eraut, 2000), Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira note that most

of informal learning occurs through daily interaction, and without learners realizing that learning is happening (2015, p. 3). Learners being unaware of the presence of learning, however, is not an indication that learning does not occur. On the contrary, we read in Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira (2015, p. 3) that renowned scholars such as Malcolm Knowles support the idea that "*most learning of adults is experienced informally, through the daily interactions among people in their everyday lives*". Bancheva & Ivanova (2015, p. 157) also report that informal learning accounts for over 75% of learning in the workplace, even though most organizations focus only on formal learning programs.

As Fevre, et al. (2000, p. 79) note, informal learning has little to do with qualifications, and a lot to do with acquiring necessary knowledge and skills. Self-directed learning, networking, coaching, mentoring, and performance planning are some types of informal learning that Marsick & Watkins (2001) highlight. Schugurensky went on to create a taxonomy for informal learning (2000) which consists of three categories: "Self-Directed Learning", "Incidental Learning" and "Socialization" that differentiate from one another based on the levels of intentionality and awareness at the time of the learning experience.

According to Schugurensky (2000), self-directed learning occurs by taking up "learning projects". Such projects are not accompanied by the presence of an educator, however a resource person (who does not regard oneself as a teacher, instructor or facilitator) could exist (Schugurensky, 2000). Partaking in self-directed learning could occur alone or as part of a group. In any case, participation is intentional and conscious: the learner engages with the purpose of learning something (Schugurensky, 2000). Reading books, going to museums, doing independent research and speaking to other people about a particular topic of interest is such an example.

Incidental learning is conscious, yet unintended. This means that the person does realize that they have learned something, but only after the event that triggered the learning has occurred (Schugurensky, 2000). Watching other people take part in group activities and learning by their paradigm, or watching a random documentary on television, both fall under this category of informal learning.

Socialization (also referred to as tacit learning) is the last informal learning category in Schugurensky's taxonomy. It is the unintentional process through which values, attitudes, skills, and everyday behaviors are internalized. Schugurensky argues that "*not only do we have*

no a priori intention of acquiring them, but we are not aware that we have learned something" (2000, p. 4). This category does not just include cases where people slowly learn things through routine and repetition and become skillful at them, but also people's social perceptions, biases and experiences that derive out of social conditioning.

Informal learning can complement existing knowledge or even contradict it, and a variety of sources can be used for learning, including (and not limited to) books, newspapers, TV, the internet, museums, schools, universities, friends, relatives, or their own experience (Schugurensky, 2000). And although omnipresent, informal learning is a complex area to academically investigate, especially in an adult support group setup. The following paragraphs will explain why.

2.4. Learning in Adult Support Groups

For one to conceptualize learning in the context of adult support groups, one inevitably needs to dive into the individual parts that constitute it, namely: groups, adult support groups, and learning in groups. Each of these concepts will be briefly reviewed in the following paragraphs.

2.4.1. Groups and Group Processes

A group is another concept seemingly easy to grasp, and at the same time conceptually illusive. One might think there exists a straightforward academic definition, only to find how theorists and scholars still debate around it: what it is, and if it even exists (Brown & Pehrson, 2020, p. 1). Still, group experience is life-long, therefore common among humans, and is oftentimes taken for granted (Douglas, 1995, p. 14).

In Brown & Pehrson (2020, p. 2) we find Turner's 1982 definition that "*a group exists when, two or more individuals perceive themselves to be members of the same social category*". Douglas (1995, p. 14) focuses on a group's opportunistic side arguing that groups occur "*when individuals realize that in order to gain some fairly well-defined end, it is absolutely essential that they have the help of others*". Tsimpoukli (2012, p. 16) sees the group as "*a gathering of people within which each person is conscious of the presence of others with whom they interrelate, accepts there are rights and obligations stemming from that membership, shares a common identity and experiences some sort of codependence for a finite period in time*". Mc Grath et al. (2000, p. 95) define groups as "*bounded structural entities that emerge from the purposive, interdependent, actions of individuals*". Although distinct, all these conceptualizations have a common ground: they view groups as complex adaptive systems

within which individuals interrelate in some manner. As Bion states (1961, p. 143), groups meet "*to do something*", signaling a requirement for in-group mental activity and cooperation.

In the preface of his first book "Principles of Topological Psychology" Kurt Lewin, one of the modern pioneers of social, organizational, and applied psychology (considered to be the founder of Social Psychology and first to study group dynamics), wrote a sentence which meant to forever change how we view groups: "*Psychology, dealing with manifolds of coexisting facts, would be finally forced to use not only the concept of time but that of space too*" (1936, p. vii), fascinated by topological entities and their mathematical formulations, was the first to notice how, when found amidst one another, people affect each other. As the American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology puts it, groups consist of "*interdependent individuals who influence one another through social interactions that commonly include structures involving roles and norms, a degree of cohesiveness, and shared goals*". (American Psychological Association, 2022) And this interdependence does not manifest linearly, or in pairs: it occurs in a group's entirety. A group is not merely the sum of its individual parts: it is a social system with unique characteristics.

The oldest citation on what characteristics groups have can be drawn from Cartwright & Zander's work (1968) as referenced by De Board (1978, p. 14). Cartwright & Zander argue that groups are inevitable and ubiquitous constructs that mobilize powerful forces which produce effects of the utmost importance to individuals, and that these effects can have both good and adverse consequences. But why do people form groups?

Groups are formed to serve a variety of purposes, and respective theoretical distinctions vary among scholars (Douglas, 1995, p. 15). One theoretical distinction that has been made by Lewin (1948, p. 63) distinguishes social groups (identified by a certain class of individuals who share certain characteristics) from dynamic groups (bound together by patterns of interdependence rather than similarity). McGrath, et al. (2000) differentiate groups based on the motivation to form them: either to complete a group project or to fulfil member needs.

To better understand the occasions that lead people into forming groups, Lickel, et al. proposed a respective taxonomy based on "*a systematic empirical examination of the degree to which perceivers make identifiable distinctions among groups*" (2000, p. 223). Based on this taxonomy, groups fall into one of the following four categories: "Intimacy groups" (such as family, two people in a romantic relationship or a small group of friends), "Task Groups" (such

as work groups and committees), "Social Groups" (formed by established social categories such as "women" or "Europeans"), "Loose Association Groups" (characterized by weak social relationships such as people who enjoy the same type of music, or people who live in the same neighborhood), and "Transitory Groups" (which are formed for limited periods of time and disband afterwards, such as the people waiting at a bus stop, in line at the bank etc.). Groups are social constructs that are not only characterized by the reason they come to be, but also by what happens within them.

Social psychologists and sociologists are equally interested in what happens in group contexts. Both academic fields perceive groups as dynamic social constructs where group processes occur, both within the group (group dynamics), and outside of the group (intergroup relations) (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018; Forsyth, 2000). Three kinds of processes exist simultaneously in every group: intrapersonal processes (which occur within the person, such as attitudes, decisions, or self-regulation), interpersonal processes (pertaining to actions, events, and feelings between two or more individuals), and group processes (which refer to the interpersonal component of a group session) (Kepner, 1980, p. 5). It is important to remember that group processes are not just things that happen to people as group members: they are "*the means by which people act on the world to change it*" (Brown & Pehrson, 2020, p. 10). This is especially important in adult support groups who, as we will see in the next section, are destined to help people evolve.

2.4.2. Adult Support Groups

Adult support groups are a sub-category of social groups, where all participating entities are adults, and the group processes revolve around the provision of support. In literature, support groups go by many different aliases depending on the context and the content of their meetings, such as "self-help groups", "mutual-support groups", and "peer-led social support groups" (Worrall et al., 2018). These aliases, although similar in nature, bear some distinguishing features with regards to the group processes taking place and to the roles that group members may play.

Self-help groups, for instance, consist of individuals who meet on a regular basis to help one another cope with a life problem (American Psychological Association, 2022). Self-help groups are not therapy groups. They are not held by professionals and do not charge a fee for their services. According to the American Psychological Association they provide many benefits that professionals cannot provide such as friendship, mutual support, experiential knowledge, identity, a sense of belonging and other by-products of a positive group process

(2022). People who are brought together into a self-help group share a situation which may vary: it can be a problem, a habit, a life stressor, or a transition (American Psychological Association, 2022). Each self-help group develops their own ideology or set of beliefs about the situation that brings them together (American Psychological Association, 2022).

Examples of self-help groups from around the world include Alcoholics Anonymous (a global voluntary organization that helps people stay sober), National Alliance on Mental Illness (a network of people in the United States that provides emotional support for relatives and individuals affected by mental illness), Compassionate Friends (a voluntary US organization that offers support to families grieving the death of a child) (American Psychological Association, 2022) and SHGs (community networks in India that have emerged as a development strategy with a primary focus on poverty alleviation and women empowerment) (Saha et al., 2013).

Mutual support groups are similar in nature to self-help groups. They are also not led by professionals, are volunteer in nature, do not charge a fee, and meet on a regular basis. However, the purpose of this meetup is to help one another cope with a shared life problem (American Psychological Association, 2022) across a whole range of health and welfare issues (Worrall et al., 2018). Researchers and practitioners coined the term to emphasize on the mutual, interdependent nature of the group process (American Psychological Association, 2022). Mutual support group participants deeply and actively rely on one another to receive the support they need.

Peer-led or social support groups are another form of support groups where members who share a problem come together to provide help, comfort, and guidance. The distinguishing feature of such support groups is that they are led by a person who either does not share the problem of the members (American Psychological Association, 2022), or has considerable experience compared to other members (Pazos et al., 2010). What is interesting about all types of support groups presented in this section is that their group processes are associated with the generation of some form of learning.

2.4.3. Learning in Groups

Group participation and learning are intrinsically connected. In their book titled "Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation" Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger argue that the conversation about learning has shifted from the acquisition of propositional knowledge, to

learning generated through some form of social participation (1991, p. 14). Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, leading advocate of critical pedagogy, was convinced that there is no such thing as "self-learning". Freire writes that "*No one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world*" (1993, p. 61). Freire describes learning as a dialectical relationship of the individual and the social. In "Conversational Learning" Baker, et al. (2002, p. 4) make the distinction between "*the personal knowledge that grew out of participants' personal experience and the social knowledge that grew out of explicit ideas generated through texts and experiences shared in conversations*". Trognon & Batt (2012) write that "*by collaborating in a common task, group members carry out what they couldn't do alone, and they progress together. This explains that groups became tools for learning*".

Ever since those first studies, learning in groups has been extensively researched in a variety of contexts, for example: the workplace (Illeris & Associates, 2004), psychotherapy groups (Fairfield, 2004), communities of inquiry (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007), and online communities (Ziegler et al., 2014). The more the academic body of knowledge progresses, the clearer the interrelations between knowledge sources, types of learning and group participation become (Ziegler et al., 2014).

Kolb (1984) was one of the first to argue that the medium through which group learning occurs is dialogue: "*the dialectical movement of action and reflection, as learners move outward into the external world and inward into themselves*" as referenced by Baker, et al. (2002). Baker, et al. also mention two types of knowledge sources for group learning: "concrete knowing" (what people know and share when they converse) and "abstract knowing" (what concepts and abstract ideas manifest as people converse). This type of interaction, achieved through conversation, leads to two types of learning outcomes, namely: "inside-out" (drawing from the expression of our internal pool of knowledge) and "outside-in" (having external ideas and events that act upon us and shape our knowing) (Baker, et al., 2002). None of these types of learning would have been possible outside of a group and without conversation as the medium for interaction.

Étienne Wegner references four types of dialogical components that manifest within a group and lead to group learning, namely: "meaning" (discussing life experiences that we deem as meaningful), "practice" (sharing historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives that others may find helpful or relevant), "community" (where group participation is

recognized as a competence), and "identity" (sharing personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities) (2008). These dialogical components can occur in any type of group learning setup: formal, non-formal and informal.

Both formal and non-formal learning are interrelated with group participation. For instance, formal group learning can take place in a classroom amidst classmates. Non-formal group learning can take place during a union's seminar amidst trade practitioners. In addition, as Schugurensky (2000) notes, all three types of informal learning presented in paragraph 2.3.2 (i.e., self-directed, incidental and socialization) can occur within a group setup. Book clubs are examples of self-directed informal group learning setups where people self-organize to read the same book and meet regularly to discuss readings. Incidental informal learning in a group context may occur any time we interact with other people collectively during our daily lives (e.g., as members of the same workplace, or members of the same community) and gradually gather experiences that get to shape our beliefs and assumptions. Last, but not least, through socialization people come together to share knowledge and information, discuss and exchange ideas; this generates informal learning at a group level through socialization.

All the above paint a rich picture of learning in the context of adult support groups. Group processes lead to several types of learning (both of non-formal and informal nature), that manifest through dialogue. In the next section we will shift our focus from the process and outcome of learning to the agent of learning; the adult learner, and more specifically working mothers who are the specific adult learner profile that this thesis focuses on.

2.5. Working Mothers as Adult Learners

As Poduval & Poduval note, "*a working mother [is] a woman with the ability to combine a career with the added responsibility of raising a child*" (2009). Whenever we address working mothers, we will refer to both "*the stay-at-home mothers who work from home, and the women who work away from home while managing to fulfil their maternal duties*" (Poduval & Poduval, 2009). In this thesis, working mothers who participate in a support group are viewed as adult learners. To grasp how this "Professional-Mother-Learner" triad shapes their relationship with (and experience of) learning, empathizing with them holistically is of great significance (Leeman & Altman, 2020).

In the following paragraphs, epistemological evidence concerning the profile of working mothers and the context of their learning process will be gathered, following the learner-centered paradigm outlined by Galyen, et al. (2020). Understanding the unique dimensions of working motherhood is the first step towards grasping their particularities as adult learners (Galyen, et al, 2020). This step will help explore the adult learning process occurring in the context of a support circle in greater depth in the following chapters. Since this thesis researches the case of Greek working mothers who participate in a support circle, some local sociocultural context will also be presented.

2.5.1. The Profile of Working Mothers

In most OECD countries, the average age at which women give birth now stands at 30 or above (OECD, 2019). The trend moves towards postponing the first birth, thus increasing the mean age of women at childbirth (OECD, 2019). In Greece, the average age to have one's first child has risen to 31.4 years (OECD, 2019), a point in time where 57.2% of women are found already in the workforce (OECD, 2019).

OECD's latest maternal employment survey (OECD, 2020) reports that, on average, 71% of mothers residing across OECD countries were employed in 2019, with overall maternal employment rates consistently growing year on year. In Greece, 59.9% of mothers are employed, a percentage which sits on the low end as per OECD standards.

Another interesting fact painting the biographical picture for working motherhood is the direct correlation of employment rates with the age of children. As we read on in the latest maternal employment report, "*in almost all countries, employment rates are lower for mothers whose youngest child is aged between 0 and 2 than they are for mothers whose youngest child is between 3 and 5 and particularly between 6 and 14, although the size of the gap varies across countries*" (OECD, 2020). Based on the OECD database, the average age of a Greek working mother is 31 years old; she has completed at least tertiary education and is full-time employed. The average Greek family is composed by two married adults who work full-time.

The discussion around women remaining active in the workforce while assuming a motherhood role is longstanding and ongoing. While economists appear perplexed over the persistence of the plateau in female labor force participation even as women continue to become all the more equipped to take on the labor market (Goldin, 2006, p. 25) more recent studies shift the focus

on empirical evidence to understand the psychological and personality traits of working mothers and their deliberation to persist in holding both roles (Cortes & Pan, 2020, p. 2).

Some mothers stay in the workforce because of the practical necessity to contribute to their families, while others stay to fulfil their self-actualization needs (Scarr et al., 1989; Poduval & Poduval, 2009). Regardless of prevalence, both are attributed as underlying reasons for a decision which seems to heavily generate high amounts of stress in working mothers, primarily due to "*not having enough time to do everything*" (Rout et al., 1997, p.264), combined with an increased tension between co-existing expectations of being both "*a good mother and a good worker*" (Turner & Norwood, 2013, p. 401).

A working mother's psychographic profile is ambivalent. The psychological stance of working mothers is exposed to a series of emotional tensions, dilemmas, contradictions, and uplifts. Not all of them apply to all working mothers simultaneously, and not all of them affect all of them the same way. Still, all of them have been observed (De Benedictis, 2020).

Tensions to live up to "intense mothering" norms and "ideal worker moms" simultaneously challenge working mothers trying to place boundaries (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Ennis, 2014; Huang, 2019). Additional tensions apply to working mothers who are primary family breadwinners due to gender stereotypes (Meisenbach, 2010). Mothers who are also executives are likely to have a harder time adjusting to the non-negotiable demands of new mothering, especially if they are white, middle-class, and higher educated (Hollway, 2020).

Working mothers are also faced with increasing concerns about the false dichotomy of "work-family balance", feeling pressured to pick sides (Zambrana et al., 1979; Williams, 2001; Buzzanell et al., 2005; Greenberg & Ladge, 2019). On top of this, if they aspire to assume managerial roles, they are faced with a series of paradoxes related to masculine norms that are prevalent in the workplace (Wood & Conrad, 1983; Martin, 2000; Buzzanell et al, 2005), and subsequent dilemmas around constructing more equitable organizations that welcome mothering issues (Jorgenson, 2000; Kirby et al., 2003; Buzzanell et al., 2005).

Working mothers experience feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, shame and guilt, accumulated over time (Smith, 1981l Zambrana et al., 1979; Frone et al., 1997; Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Buzzanell et al, 2005; Hollway, 2010; Brown, 2013; Turner & Norwood, 2013; Greenberg & Ladge, 2019). Meanwhile, unrealistic expectations about returning to work after giving birth trigger additional negative emotions and anguish (Greenberg & Ladge, 2019).

Heightened levels of stress have also been observed in working mothers transitioning from one child to two or more (Greenberg & Ladge, 2019).

Bringing all these insights home to Greece, the respective literature review underlines similar emerging psychographic patterns. A diverse mix of local studies from a variety of perspectives paint an equally complex picture of the Greek working mother with regards to work-family balance (Karassvidou & Glaveli, 2015), psycho-social triggers and challenges (Tsalikoglou, et al., 2003), socio-cultural conflict (Kadoglou & Sarri, 2015) inner emotional conflicts (Symeonidou, 1989), additional challenges faced by Greek Women in Managerial positions (Mihail, 2006; Ventoura & Neokosmidi, 2007; Galanaki et al., 2009), socio-cultural complexities (Moussourou, 1993; Kataki, 1998; Moussourou, 2005), dilemmas (Kaklamanaki, 2007), and stress from combining work with family care responsibilities (Giannikis & Mihail, 2010).

The prominent gender stereotypes deeply rooted in the Greek society – where the mother is viewed as the primary caregiver, while a notable percentage of working women is led towards part-time or no employment – serve to hint that the psychological challenges stemming from the global academic body of knowledge hold true for Greek working mothers too. However, given the limited number of contemporary studies based on qualitative research outcomes, the need for additional studies aimed at further drilling down to the local reality as it gets transformed in the modern Greek world of work appears to be more than timely.

Given the point in time this thesis is being composed, it is highly relevant to make an additional note on a phenomenon which has presented additional challenges onto working mothers globally: the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2019).

The latest "Women in the Workplace Report" by Lean In and McKinsey finds that working women are more likely to have been laid-off or furloughed, stalling their careers and putting their financial security at risk (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Grant Thornton's "Women in Business" study reports that, in the case of UK mothers, they are 23% more likely to leave the workforce compared to fathers (Grant Thornton, 2021). Working mothers (who have always worked a "double shift" now needed to spend additional hours caring for children and doing household labor given the lockdowns which suspended access to childcare and schools (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Senior-level women holding managerial positions report feeling pressured (36%) exhausted (54%) and burned out (39%) (McKinsey & Company,

2020). Greek working women report lower levels of inner well-being and balance due to the lockdown measures (American-Hellenic Chamber of Commerce, 2020). The pandemic has served as a trigger to revisit ineffective workplace patterns long shied-away in social cohesion (Alon et al, 2020).

All the above paint a diverse psycho-social picture for working motherhood: one filled with a variety of challenges, stressors, and trade-offs. Given the magnitude of psychological challenges presented in this section, seeking to secure some type of support is a behavior we except of working mothers. Although we have found no academic study reviewing the type of support a (Greek) working mother would need, prefer, or ask for, we believe that joining a support group is a logical option in their array of available coping strategies.

2.5.2. Working Mothers as Adult Learners and Participation to Adult Learning

To date, the existing body of knowledge around working mothers as adult learners is limited. We know that women are faced with a series of barriers in terms of access and participation to adult learning, which holds especially true for women in Greece (Karalis, 2013), but we are largely unaware of how those barriers manifest in (or shape the preferences and intentions of) working mothers as adult learners. Fragments of the global body of knowledge around working mothers as adult learners will be synthesized below.

The oldest found reference of an adult learning scheme for working mothers comes from Germany where, in the late 90s, a broad state-funded vocational training program for young single mothers was created, in support of their transition from school into the professional world (Paul & Zybell, 2007). This is a first attempt to shed some light into the adult learning profile of working mothers from capturing the perspective of young single working mothers who took part in a non-formal learning experience.

Young single mothers who are new to the workforce is "a niche within a niche" in the realm of working motherhood: the young maternal age and family context particularities (non-married and non-cohabiting) combined with low (or no) experience of the workforce are unique characteristics which do not necessarily reflect the totality of working mothers as adult learners. As Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira (2015, p. 5) point out, "*young people and adults are not mere imitators of models, because they play an active role in constructing their cognitive and emotional world(s)*". They are in the beginning of everything. They do not know what they do not know. Still, it is worth remembering that for young (defined by the authors as those

below 27 years old) single working mothers, learning is not just a means of acquiring new knowledge: it is viewed as the basis for their occupational and social integration; "*a route that leads to independence*" (Paul & Zybell, 2007, p. 80). The expressed motivation is not linked to the curriculum, the instructor, the facilitator, or the learning process. They are driven by a need to strengthen their professional identity and secure a better future (Zaugg, 2014).

This is the first point we can infer for working mothers in their initial stages of work and motherhood as adult learners: they seek learning experiences that help them forge strong links between their personal and professional selves, further securing their place in the workforce. Building on self-realization, self-esteem, and responsibility for oneself is the impact learning has to them (Paul & Zybell, 2007). Non-formal learning helps them construct their cognitive and emotional worlds as they assume their maternal and professional identities, and while continuously challenged by the inner conflicts of working motherhood. Participation to learning also helps young working mothers create social bonds and experience a sense of communal belonging which they characterized as "liberating" (Paul & Zybell, 2007, p. 81). By becoming members of a group of adult learners, they enjoy a type of socialization which helped them feel occupationally capable (Paul & Zybell, 2007, p. 83).

Moving on to more contemporary academic sources, we come across studies around working mothers who are more experienced in the workforce. Two motherhood sub-profiles discretely emerge in academic literature regarding working mothers and adult learning – new to motherhood, and seasoned – although no such distinction is clearly articulated by any of the scholars conducting the studies.

Working mothers who are experienced in their professional fields are eager to keep progressing professionally and are willing to participate in non-formal learning programs offered in the workplace (Cavanagh, 2007). As with new working mothers, the inner patterns of determination to grow, the need to prove oneself within the workforce, to secure self-assurance and confidence, are also relevant and are referenced as key drivers for adult learning participation. However, there is a key difference between young and experienced working mothers.

Unlike new working moms, experienced working mothers seem to have already built a foundation of self-assurance on which to rely on (which they keep strengthening). They are not looking for training to assert themselves as professionals, "*they know they do a good job*"

(Cavanagh, 2007, p. 142). Participation in adult learning does provide with a form of self-confidence, but it is at a different level than the one experienced by new working mothers. It is primarily about creating valuable levels of learning which will help them further progress professionally (Cavanagh, 2007, p. ii).

Access to learning is not just an opportunity for an experienced working mother's professional growth: it is also a sign that the employer "sees" and "values" them. It is a demonstration of respect and how they are "*part of the equation*" (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 149). Access to learning also helps experienced working mothers cope with maternal struggles, like the anxiety that comes with being new at motherhood while professionally experienced (Çiftçi & Arikan, 2012; Dinour & Szaro, 2017. Still, experienced working mothers oftentimes need to negotiate their continued access to learning: it is not always a given and requests may get delayed or turned down (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 10).

When access to learning in the workplace is not an option, experienced working mothers willing to pursue further education oftentimes take the road of distance learning. It allows for arranging study time around other schedules. However, most working mothers enrolled in distance learning formal education programs admit that they are challenged by firm deadlines to be met, group work to be submitted, forum discussions to take part in, and alignment with educators and classmates to occur (Zaugg, 2014, p. 59).

Experienced working mothers have cultivated their agility and responsiveness to changing needs and priorities in both the work and family contexts. They are at a better position "*to make changes they felt comfortable with, and changes that harmonized with work and family demands*" (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 150) and that manifested in an undeniable tenacity to change roles, re-arrange responsibilities and make room for learning. Elevated stress and frustration are prominent emotional responses of experienced working mothers to adult learning participation (Haslam et al., 2015, p.6), but not for the same reason as it was for young working mothers. For this sub-profile, the stress does not stem from fear of failure: it originates by the need to balance multiple intertwining and – at times – conflicting priorities (Zaugg, 2014, p. 66): an ongoing pressure upon working mothers.

An additional emotional element applicable to experienced working mothers is the presence of guilt in learning stemming from setting boundaries between work-family-learning lives, for not spending enough time with their children, and for outsourcing housework (Haslam et al., 2015,

p.4). However, and regardless of the stress, experienced working mothers do have something else in common with the younger working mothers: reportedly they persist, even if they need to readjust the pace of learning (or work) multiple times in their lives (Zaugg, 2014, p. 70).

Learning experience (also known as "*how learning takes place*") is important to experienced working mothers (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 10), a factor which didn't seem to account for much in the case of new working mothers previously discussed. Experienced working mothers care deeply about the learning process, the learning context, and the educator or facilitator. Especially in distance learning contexts where there exist numerous elements in the learning context deemed "*vital in unveiling the processes of adult learning*" (Gravani, 2015, p. 173), the adult learning educator or facilitator plays a critical role in securing and maintaining the commitment and engagement of experienced working mothers (Zaugg, 2014, p. 39). The latter needs to be able to understand this complexity of a working mother's balancing, to serve not only as a tutor, but also as an advisor and a mentor (Zaugg, 2014).

Bringing all this home to the context of the Greek society, the last paragraphs of this section will draw from Alexandra Kaoni's PhD thesis (2013), titled "The impact of lifelong learning on the work and life of women in Greece". To my knowledge, this is the only local research conducted to date, which uses qualitative methodologies to study the impact of lifelong learning on Greek women and contains insights on Greek working mothers.

Formal learning which leads to the acquisition of a University degree or official accreditation is highly valued in Greece. Non-formal and informal learning, not so much. When asked about non-accredited adult learning programs, interviewed working mothers use the word "hobby" to describe their participation, showcasing a deeply rooted socially constructed conception that the only adult learning that "matters" is the one officially recognized by the state (Kaoni, 2013, p. 178).

Distance learning, which is globally considered to facilitate working mothers as adult learners in juggling their multiple roles and responsibilities, is undervalued in Greece. The only local distance learning option which appears to be gaining ground is the Hellenic Open University (HOU), whose degrees are accredited by the Greek state, and accepted as equal to the ones issued by standard Universities (Kaoni, 2013, p. 29). Accreditation aside, Greek experienced working mothers have expressed a strong preference towards such options for an additional

reason: the learning programs were reportedly designed "*for people like them with family and work obligations*" (Kaoni, 2013, p. 170).

To conclude, in Greece, "*the desire for [adult] learning is linked to social mobility and prestige […] thus partially confirming the view that lifelong learning is an act of consumption [where] learners purchase their […] membership to an elite group of educated individuals, through repeated episodes of learning*" (Kaoni, 2013, p. 180). This membership also comes with an emotional toll of cancelling out negative feelings trying to fully comply with the social standards asking for "*full-time commitment in all three fronts (work, family, academia)*" (Kaoni, 2013, p. 186).

2.6. Literature Review Summary

In this first chapter we have presented key terminology and conceptual definitions related to the purpose of this thesis, namely: non-formal and informal learning, learning in adult support groups, and working mothers as adult learners.

By critically reviewing the current body of academic knowledge around the key themes of this theses, it became evident that both non-formal and informal learning can occur in the context of adult support groups. Learning that manifests in a support group context can take many informal learning forms: socialization, self-directed and incidental (Schugurensky, 2000). The main vehicle of learning in an adult support group setup is dialogue (Kolb, 1984) around meaning, shared practices, community participation and sharing personal stories (Wenger, 2008). However, adults are not always aware of (or able to pinpoint to) the exact timing that learning has occurred, especially in informal setups (Schugurensky, 2000). This introduces a degree of research complexity that should be addressed when framing the research questions and subsequent research methodology.

The "Working Moms of Athens" is an adult group that does not fully abide by any of the formal definitions of support groups of the American Psychological Association. This shows that the circle is a hybrid support group that incorporates traits from both mutual support and peer-led groups, where – as did Rogers (2014) – we uncovered non-formal learning elements present in an informal setting, which allow members to integrate any prior learning experiences with the current (informal) ones (Czerkawski, 2016). And since a group is not defined solely from the primary reason it was created, but also from the processes that take place (Lickel, et al., 2000), we take note it also functions as a learning space.

In addition to the types of learning in the context of an adult support group, we also approached working mothers as adult learners. We saw that working mothers are selective learners who engage in learning to establish themselves in the workforce, and to socialize with other like-minded individuals (Cavanagh, 2007). Participation to learning also helps them create social bonds and a sense of communal belonging that helps them feel occupationally capable (Paul & Zybell, 2007). Working mothers experience elevated levels of stress and frustration (Haslam et al., 2015). Given that they are exposed to multiple sociocultural challenges that perplex their daily schedules, working mothers seek to join only those learning experiences that are truly meaningful to them and, when available, they opt for online setups. Especially in Greece, informal learning is nowhere near the radar of working mothers. Greek working mothers support accredited formal learning, and largely consider all other types of learning as "hobbies", except for non-formal learning that happens in the workplace and is acknowledged by the employer (Kaoni, 2013, p. XII).

2.7. Research Framework

Following literature review, a research framework was designed and employed to demystify the process and impact of learning that took places in the context of a support group for working mothers in Greece.

2.7.1. Purpose of Research Framework

The purpose of the research framework was not to limit data gathering and analysis, but to facilitate the process and make sure that all angles that are significant to the theme at hand are captured. The research framework was used as a guide of the research techniques applied. As mentioned by Merrill and West, "*we cannot interpret the detail generated in our research without having some framework to piece together, however provisionally, the fragments of stories to enable them to find a place in the world*" (2009, p. 57).

However, the research approach taken for this thesis was data-driven, meaning that the research outcomes were shaped by the captured information and were not limited to the axis of the framework or relied on interpretations from only one academic field. As shown during literature review, the research approach was holistic and multidisciplinary, drawing from studies and approaches stemming from Sociology, Psychology, and Learning. This way, the research approach has enabled the data "*to speak for themselves*" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 129) in a deliberate effort to give voice to Greek working mothers who are becoming the center of a targeted study in the field of adult learning for the first time.

The dimensions of the research framework stem from the key angles that arose following the critical review of the literature. The said framework (depicted in Figure 2) and the respective elements are explained in the following paragraphs.
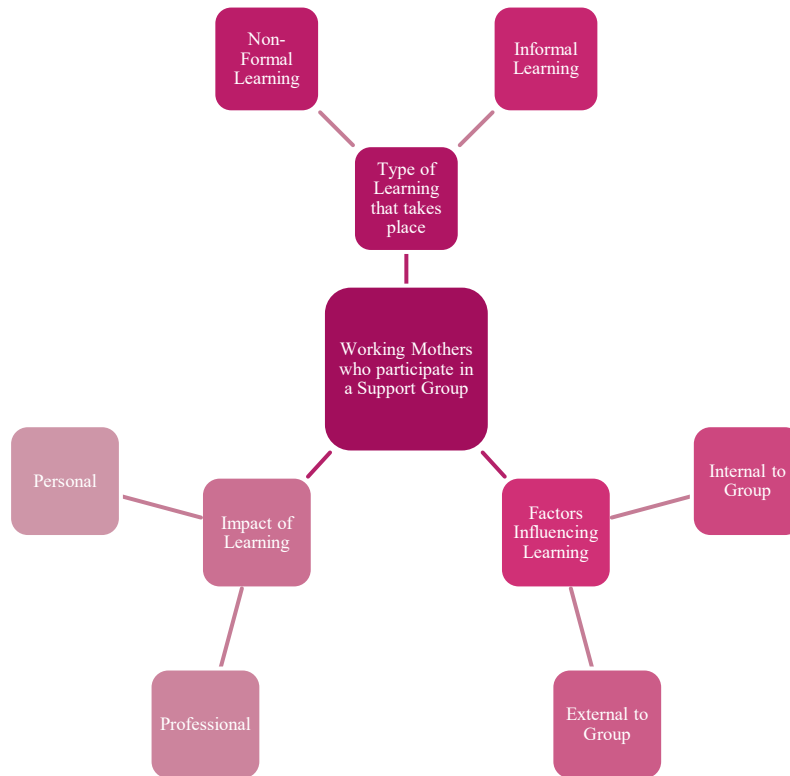
Figure 2 Research Framework

2.7.2. Type of Learning: Informal and/or Non-Formal Learning

As discussed during literature review, learning takes many forms and can occur in a variety of setups. The nature of learning in an atypical context (Rogers, 2014) where both informal and non-formal elements are present (Groombridge, 1983), as well the forms of learning interactions that shape learning (e.g., socialization, self-directed, incidental) are important angles to be taken into consideration for the research framework.

2.7.3. Factors Influencing Learning: Internal & External to Group

A group process is shaped both by the external factors that led to its creation and by what happens within (Lickel, et al., 2000). Therefore, factors that influence learning within the context of the "Working Moms of Athens" should not only be sought within the group process, but also in additional factors outside of the group (intergroup) (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018). As internal factors we identify the interpersonal component of the group session (the group process), i.e., shared practices, and social interactions. Dialogue, meaning, sharing and

participation (Kolb, 1984; Wenger, 2008). As external factors we identify the participating working mothers' intrapersonal processes i.e., attitudes, decisions, self-regulation, and cognitive functions (Kepner, 1980; Tulving, 1993; Haslam et al., 2015), as well as the broader sociocultural norms that shape their behaviors and preferences (Cortes & Pan, 2020, p. 2).

2.7.4. Impact of Learning

Learning is an existential phenomenon, and an active process through which a person may change (Jarvis, 2006). Working mothers who take part in the "Working Moms of Athens" are exposed to learning formats in an atypical setup they joined with no intention to learn, but with an intention to receive support and socialize with like-minded individuals (Cavanagh, 2007). Learning participation for them is correlated with both occupational capabilities, and a sense of communal belonging (Paul & Zybell, 2007). Therefore, both the personal and the professional axis were included in the research framework.

2.8. Research Questions

Based on the critical reading of the literature, in conjunction to the context of the study and the research framework, the following research questions arose for this thesis:

1. What form(s) and dimensions of learning took place amidst working mothers who participated in the Working Moms of Athens support group?
2. Which factors influenced learning for these working mothers?
3. What impact did learning have on the participating working mothers?

The first research question sought to detect the form that learning takes, in the context of an adult support group for working mothers, a space not focused on learning. Is it primarily informal or non-formal in nature? What learning dimensions were observed?

The second question wished to understand the inhibiting and facilitating factors for learning to occur within the context of this support group. Which elements of the group process support learning? Becoming aware of potential learning barriers and catalysts is an important aspect of learning experience design. It will help inform future studies or other practitioners willing to design, introduce or include adult learning elements within the context of support groups.

The third question is aimed at uncovering the impact of learning generated in the context of a support group to its participating entities. To understand what participating working mothers get out of their time invested in the process of the support group, and whether this concept

worth expanding to other similar communities. It will help understand if such support groups deserve to be further studied as learning spaces. Following these research questions, the next chapter presents the research methodology.

Chapter 3
Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to present all aspects of the methodology selected to address the research questions, namely: research design, theoretical positioning, research methodology, research model, research participants selection, data collection tools, data collection process, data analysis process, research validity, reliability and representativeness, and ethical concerns and limitations.

3.1. Introduction

In the last 30 years, we see increased emphasis being placed on the individual: people are less and less expected to abide by the social norms of contemporary societies and shift towards choosing their identity (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, p.33). This has also affected how research is conducted, and which methodological frameworks prevail in social sciences, with the interest shifting from studying the group quantitatively to studying the individual qualitatively.

3.2. Research Approach Design

Choosing a research approach rooted in experimentation (through the quantification of statistically validated propositions) may be fitting for phenomena with specific and quantifiable dimensions which can be directly observed and measured. However, when exploring the presence, form and impact of learning in a support group setup (as is the aim of this thesis) the phenomenon at hand is impossible to observe out of context, stripped of its extraneous socio-cultural or subjectivist dimensions.

The research questions presented in the previous chapter aim to capture the experiences, opinions and perceptions of working mothers who take part in the support group. Such an investigation emphasizes how individuals perceive a phenomenon and seeks deeper interpretation and conceptualization (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9).

Given the above, we find no better way but to design a research approach in the field of qualitative research which takes both this innate subjectivity of adult learning and the particularities of the viewpoint of working mothers into account to effectively respond to the research questions posed.

3.3. Theoretical Positioning – Epistemology

As Dr Carla Willig mentions in her book "Introducing qualitative research in psychology", there exists more than one qualitative methodology, depending on the epistemological positions taken up by qualitative researchers. For instance, in the academia we find both empiricist and social constructionist qualitative researchers (Willig, 2013, p. 8). However, not all qualitative methodologies are compatible with all epistemological positions (Willig, 2013, p. 8).

What all qualitative researchers do have in common is their shared interest in meaning: "*how people make sense of the world, and how they experience events*" (Willig, 2013, p. 8). In the case of the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" this perspective guides our epistemological standpoint, with social constructionism being a fitting paradigm which draws attention to the fact that human experience, including perception, is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions, but rather socially constructed (Willig, 2013, p. 7).

3.4. Research Methodology

The innate characteristics of the experience matter more than the variables that cause the experience (Willig, 2013, p. 8).This is an important aspect considered for the methodological framework designed for this thesis, given how the aim was to study how the members of the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" experience their support group participation in terms of the presence and impact of learning. This research thesis aspires to understand, describe, and explain events and subsequent experiences, not to predict future responses. To study phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Such an approach emphasizes on how individuals make sense of events; therefore, its epistemological position is an empiricist one (Willig, 2013, p. 10), addressing any phenomenon as "*a possible human experience*" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 58). The application of hermeneutic qualitative research techniques of what makes things what they are (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10), materialized through the adoption of a carefully selected research model and fitting research tools.

3.5. Research Model

Of the available research models in qualitative research, this thesis selected the case study approach. Even though case studies are common ways to do qualitative research, they are not considered a methodological choice, but rather "*a choice of what is to be studied*" (Stake, 2005, p. 443). A case study is both the process of inquiry about the case, and the product of that inquiry, and the complexity levels it can acquire varies (Stake, 2005). It is a heuristic that can

be applied in any theoretical paradigm, methodological approach or academic discipline (Van Wynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p. 80).

Case studies optimize a researcher's understanding through "*triangulating the descriptions and interpretations throughout the period of the study*" (Stake, 2005, p. 443). Using case studies for research purposes is considered one of the most challenging endeavors in social sciences (Yin, 2003). Case studies can serve one of three purposes: exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (Yin, 2003, p. 3). The purpose of a case study stems from a series of factors, namely: the types of research questions posed, the extent of control of behavioral events, and the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events (Yin, 2003, pp. 5-9). The case study in this thesis was an exploratory one: the research questions composed were "what" questions, the research did not seek to control behavioral events but to explore them, focusing on contemporary events.

3.6.   Research Participants Selection

For the needs of this research, decisions were also made as to who the participants should be. A purposeful selection took place, as defined by Merrill and West (2009, pp. 107-108) based on two criteria: participation in an adequate number of group meetings, and the ability to speak English at a satisfactory level.

The criterion of participation serves to make sure that research participants have been exposed to multiple occasions of group interaction which would allow them to have an informed opinion of the group process and its impact. This criterion was introduced based on the findings that came out of the literature review where interviewed adults rely on episodic memory to recall occasions (Tulving, 1993) and might not be able to pinpoint the exact timing of learning, especially in informal setups (Schugurensky, 2000). Given that the "Working Moms of Athens" account for more than 70 members who do not all attend all sessions, a criterion was introduced to select only from those among them who have attended at least half of the support group meetups.

The second criterion, that of the use of the English language during the interviews, was imposed by the decision to compose an English-speaking thesis. This decision may not affect the choice of methodology or theoretical paradigm, but it does affect sampling and data collection (Willig, 2013). Had the interviews been conducted in Greek (the native language of the group participants) subsequent translation would reduce generated data after collection and affect the

thematic analysis (Willig, 2013, p. 15). A "difficult decision" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 165) was made to conduct all interviews, data collection and thematic analyses in English to interfere as little as possible with capturing the experience of the members and allow them to use their own words to narrate it, even at a non-native language. However, we should note that this approach does deprive the thematic analysis process from additional intuition stemming from the etymological origin of words or the use of idiomatic phrases (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 58-62).

Six members of the "Working Moms of Athens" group who fit the above profile were privately approached and invited to participate in the research. All six participants are working mothers between the age of 40-50, with varying family statuses (e.g., Married, Divorced), diversity in the family setup (i.e., number and ages of children). Throughout the data analysis the conversation, participant names were replaced with pseudonyms inspired by flowers (namely: Rose, Daisy, Magnolia, Violet, Orchid, and Plumeria) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

As far as the selection process was concerned, I asked the first six people who fit the profile described above, in the same order as they appeared on the roaster of members (where members registered based on the date they joined). All members accepted on the first ask, so this selection has the characteristic of being both convenient and opportunistic based on Patton's typology (Wengraf, 2001, p. 103). Lastly, working with a research corpus of six participants strikes a fine balance in achieving a focused research approach that does not overburden the researcher with an unmanageable quantity of transcripts (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 66-67).

3.7. Data Collection Tools

Although, as Willig suggests, "*there are no right or wrong methods*" in qualitative research (Willig, 2013, p. 22), it is important to select an appropriate and effective set of data collection tools which are fitting to the research questions at hand and respective context.

3.7.1. Data Collection Research Tool

Qualitative research interviewing methods vary, depending on the degree of structure present in the research framework. We can distinguish research interviewing methods as per their degree of structure of the interview process, ranging from completely unstructured to fully structured (Wengraf, 2001, p. 60). Wengraf empirically states that when research aims at model-building (i.e., we are beginning to understand a phenomenon and ground theory around

it) unstructured interview models should be selected, whereas when model-testing is the case (i.e., the phenomenon is well-theorized) structured models are more appropriate (2001, p. 60).

Qualitative research paradigms where participants are asked to narrate their lives with no structure introduced by the methodological approach followed by the researcher (such as ethnographic or biographical interviews), rely on capturing one's narrative based on one's life history (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 52), allowing participants to "*construct and explore a sense of their own cultural and psychological worlds*" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 119). Although well equipped to explore different dimensions of informal and non-formal learning (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 52), capturing data through biographical interviews rely on episodic memory, the cognitive function that enables a person to remember personally experienced events as such, making it possible for a person to be consciously aware of a certain experience in a certain situation at a certain time, long-standing enough to generate an impression (Tulving, 1993). Given the fact that the "Working Moms of Athens" group has been operating for only two years, and not all members attend all sessions every month, we argue that the support group cannot have had enough time to impress upon its members and secure an uncontested spot in their life's history.

Meanwhile, learners may only report that they have learned something informally, only to appeal to the researcher without any actual learning taking place. Additionally, learners may have learned something at a previous point in time (i.e., at a different learning episode during their perceived knowledge acquisition journey), so pinpointing the exact point in time where informal learning has occurred may be indistinguishable (Schugurensky, 2000). These are two important points that will affect how we approach the design of the research methodology for this thesis. Therefore, we believe it would be methodologically unfitting to rely on ethnographic of biographical research paradigms to investigate non-formal and informal learning elements within the "Working Moms of Athens" support group.

A semi-structured interview approach was selected, enriched by thematic and discourse analysis strategies (Wengraf, 2001). This approach allows the researcher to hear the participant talk about a particular aspect of their experience, while data capturing is not limited by the questions who function as triggers that encourage the participants to talk (Willig, 2013, p. 24). This way, participants were asked specific situational questions based on an interview guide that facilitated interaction. Semi-structured interviews introduce flexibility allowing interviewees to describe their experience with as much detail as possible, while the researcher

is not bound by the structure of a rigid interview format and can intervene to cross-check and elaborate on the information shared. This is an effective methodological approach for the aims of this study.

3.7.2. Other Data Collection Tools

The research data of this thesis were captured through semi-structured interviews which took place via videoconferencing (Zoom). The use of a videoconferencing tool served three purposes: practical convenience, technological enablement, and abiding by social distancing measures still applicable in Greece for people affected by covid. The use of a videoconferencing tool allowed for flexible scheduling, granting faster access to interviewees. The research participants were also acquainted with this tool, since the group often uses it to conduct its meetings. Social distancing due to COVID-19 was still an active social phenomenon in Greece throughout the research process. Without the video conferencing tool, two of the interviews would have to be postponed as the interviewees (and immediate family members) were affected.

Moreover, the use of Zoom has allowed for seamless audio and video capturing. Having access to superior quality data also greatly facilitated transcription, since it was combined with a digital plug-in that automatically generated the transcript. Of course, all transcripts were thoroughly reviewed in conjunction with the captured audio and video files, and any word misinterpretations were manually corrected. The use of the automated transcription tool facilitated data collection. Each participant was interviewed separately. The recording period was carried out over a 12-month period, and each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes.

3.8. Data Collection Process

When conducting semi-structured depth interviews (where there exist partially prepared questions that are prepared by the researcher) a priori planning is required (Wengraf, 2001, p. xxv).

Before the beginning of the interviewing phase, an interview protocol was created, linking research goals and respective questions to the actual interviewing questions. The interview protocol is included in the Appendix.

In addition, inspired by the paradigm of Merrill and West (2009, p. 106), prior to each interview, research participants were provided with a checklist of topics to be covered via email, to help them form a better understanding of the thematical ground to be covered, to build

confidence and to avoid confusion. This checklist was aligned with the research questions and the respective interview guide, without making the theme of learning apparent to them, to not predispose them into discussing learning by default. Figure 3 shows the connection of the checklist items to the research questions.

General participant information	•A bit of context about you, your work and your family
What form(s) of learning take place amidst working mothers who take part in an adult support group?	•Your involvement with the "Working Moms of Mathens" •Stories and experiences from your participation in any or all available ways of interaction and participation
Which factors influence learning for these working mothers?	•Fitting participation to the "Working Moms of Athens" into your life and what it means
What impact does learning in the context of an adult support group context have on participating working mothers?	•Details of the impact your learning experience within the "Working Moms of Athens" may have had on yourself or others
Additional related information important to participants	•Other issues you might like to raise

Figure 3 Research Questions & Interview Checklist

During the interview, interviewer interventions followed the semi-structured approach of the interview guide, and additional prompts were made to acknowledge or request to further elaborate on information shared. Such an approach, ensures that the research experience is not likened to an "interrogation" (Casey, 1995, p. 234) where participants may oftentimes result in "accommodating the perspective of the researcher" (Barkoglou & Gravani, 2021, p. 72).

The design of the data collection approach applied the features of interviewing as discussed by Wengraf (2001, p. 3). The semi-structured research interview was designed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions. The research interviews were planned and prepared for, and the interviewing process followed the interview guide. However, the interview was not a rigidly scripted formality: it was a co-production by both interviewer and interviewee, the goal of which was to go into matters "in depth" and allow participants to also bring in additional themes or related information that they deem important through the final question.

When implementing the data collection approach, I abided by Peter Alheit's "rules of conducting interviews" as referenced by Merrill and West (2009, p. 121). More specifically, I mentally and physically prepared for each of the interviews carefully, making sure I was present and that I did not treat the semi-structured interviews as "television interviews". Interviews were scheduled in the morning to secure mental clarity, and I had prepared myself to listen rather than respond. The interviewees were people who really interested me on account of their own person or problem. In the beginning of the discussion, I openly stated the purpose of the interview to make sure that participants knew what was going to happen and why. A 2-hour window of availability was secured so that time is not working against the data collection process, which has proven more than needed since all interviews took about one (1) hour to complete.

In the beginning of the discussion, participants were prompted to start with talking about themselves: who they are, what their family setup is, allowed space to make the transition to the research questions related to the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" by themselves. As a trained Gestalt coach, I am experienced in guiding discussions using open-ended questions that do not trigger participants' defense mechanisms. Additional questions to the interview guide beginning with "why" or "what for" were avoided altogether. Requests for elaboration and other type of open-ended questions were applied beginning with "how", "what", when", "who" etc.

The first research discussion conducted was, by far, the sloppiest one. I even used the word "interview" which I tried to take back afterwards, and I found myself nodding and commending more often than I would have wanted. Statistical analysis of my role as an interviewer provided by the AI-powered transcription tool used has helped me polish my capability in the five subsequent ones because it gave me not only the transcript, but also data showing what percentage of the conversation my words were covering. On the first interview my participation was a whopping 30% which was gradually reduced to 15% in the remaining discussions.

The type of data collected through the implementation of this qualitative study were empirical in the most naturalistic form possible, which means that the conjunction of tools applied has ensured that no part of the data captured was "*coded, summarized, categorized or otherwise reduced at the point of collection*" (Willig, 2013, p. 15). Of course, given the use of video-recording and subsequent automatic transcription tool, transformation of the real-life act to

another form did occur so, strictly speaking, a translation from one medium to another did take place (Willig, 2013, p. 15).

3.9.   Data Analysis

The following points summarize the analytical data collection stages followed, which were loosely inspired by the approaches presented in Merrill and West (2009, pp. 134-135) and Max Van Manen (1990, pp. 66-68) as well as the concept of thematic discourse analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

During each discussion, I was taking quick notes on colored post-it papers (which is a practice I frequent for multiple occasions in my life, more so during my coaching practices). Right after each interview I reflected upon each interview and noted down my initial thoughts as well as my own response to the experience of the interaction.

Each discussion was captured using Zoom's video function, and automatically transcribed using a specialized AI cloud tool. I immediately read the transcript in conjunction to the audio source to manually make corrections and amendments to words the AI tool has misinterpreted.

I read the transcript for the first time a few days afterwards, and highlighted parts of the story I considered relevant to the research questions. I read each of the transcripts multiple times after that, to synthesize the themes related to the research questions and the purposes of this study. This generated the initial coded themes. Themes capture "*something important about the data in relation to the research questions, representing some level of patterned response or meaning derived out of the data set*" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10). The outcome of data analysis and respective coding can be found in the Appendix.

I repeated this process, constantly reviewing themes, moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts, and themes that I was analyzing, as well as the produced meta-analysis of gathered data. Meanwhile, I tried to identify commonalities and conjunctions across stories. I reflected on what the stories and data signal and how they connect to existing literature in the field, contemplating around what could be new, further defining, naming, and synthesizing themes.

3.10. Ethical Concerns

The methodological framework of this research has addressed all ethical considerations with regards to the treatment of research participants outlined by Elmes et al., (1995) and referenced

by Willig (2013, p. 19), namely: "informed consent", "no deception", "right to withdraw", "debriefing" and "confidentiality".

More specifically, all participants were fully informed about the research procedure and gave their written consent to participate in the research before data collection took place (informed consent). The consent form is found in the Appendix. Moreover, deception of participants was avoided altogether: there exist multiple ways and no risk involved in answering the research questions. All participants were informed orally before the beginning of the interviews that they had the right to withdraw from participation at any point and without repercussions (a right also included in the written consent form). Following data collection, participants were informed about the full aims of the research orally, after the end of each of the interviews. Lastly, complete confidentiality regarding any information about participants was maintained during the research process, and participants were only referred to with the use of pseudonyms. The raw data were safeguarded under password-protected files on my personal computer, were not shared with others beyond myself, and were deleted within 30 days following the successful submission of this thesis.

3.11.   Research Validity & Limitations

Ethical considerations aside, this research is also impacted by some limitations which should also be addressed before data collection. The qualitative researcher should be concerned about validity and subsequent limitations in all stages of the research: during its design a study, analysis and overall quality review (Golafshani, 2003).

3.11.1. Research Validity

Willig notes that validity can be a "problematic concept for qualitative researchers" (2013, p. 16). For this, additional care should be placed in data collection to incorporate techniques that ensure that participants are free to challenge and, if necessary, correct researcher's assumptions on the themes investigated (Willig, 2013, p. 16). The choice of a brief interview guide and the use of open-ended questions alone serve to limit the researcher's control over the themes that arise during the interviewing process. To increase validity, the findings of this study were presented to each of the research participants during a brief 15-minute follow up call before writing the respective chapter of the thesis. This additional participant validation step serves to ensure that findings make sense to participants (participant validation). Moreover, the qualitative data collection process took place in real-life settings (research participants joined

the Zoom call from their usual space and did not visit a laboratory or any other specified space), another aspect that increases ecological validity (Willig, 2013, p. 16).

3.11.2. Limitations

Barbara Willig discusses a lot how, in qualitative research, "*the researcher influences and shapes the research process, both as a person (personal reflexivity) and as a theorist (epistemological reflexivity)*" (Willig, 2013, p. 18). In this last part of the discussion on the research findings, it is important to reflect on the extent to which my role as both support group facilitator and interviewing researcher affects the study's validity, reliability, and representativeness, leading research participants to either provided answers that could appeal to the researcher or allocate interview time on praising the support group facilitator for their role, instead of focusing on answering the research questions. Reflexivity promotes researcher mindfulness around their own role in the research, which discourages impositions of meaning and further strengthening validity (Willig, 2013, p. 10).

As Schugurensky notes (2000) (and was also referenced during the literature review), the first limitation cannot be fully avoided as is irrespective of the interviewer: research participants prone to provide answers to appeal to the researcher is a typical behavior in learning-related research. Participant validation after the theme-capturing phase also helps address this limitation. The second limitation (the one related to the misallocation of research time into referring to themes unrelated to the research questions) is partially addressed using a semi-structured interview process coupled by my personal reflection from the research process which can be found in the Appendix. Still, both assumed potential limitations do call for validation which could take place in the context of a follow-up study reproducing all the interview steps in the same way and led by a different female researcher other than myself.

A final limitation of this study is related to research group representation and outcome transferability (Willig, 2013, p. 150). The current study was conducted based on research whose participants reside in the same city (namely: Athens, Greece). This is not an uncommon phenomenon in qualitative research practices, for several reasons related to both sampling methodology (e.g., opportunistic or snowball sampling (Merrill & West, 2009, pp. 107-108)), and the research phenomenon itself. Moreover, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) acknowledges a gap in the provision of equal educational opportunities to adults in rural communities, leading to lower participation rates compared to their urban counterparts across Europe (Charmpis, 2020). This also holds true for Greece, where Eurydice

reports discrepancies in access to adult education for inhabitants of semi-urban and rural areas (Eurydice, 2021). Meanwhile, large scale studies on Adult Learning in Greece seem rely greatly (75% or more) on participants from the capital area (Kokkos, et al., 2021).

For the case of the "Working Moms of Athens", this limitation is innate to the research context and cannot be avoided, since Athenian residency is a prerequisite for group member acceptance. However, it should be noted that relying on the experience of interviewees from the metropolitan area alone limits the breadth and scope of this research, a point which should be considered by any potential follow-up studies eager to build upon the findings of this one. Reporting the contextual features of the study in full (as was done in this thesis) is the way to address this limitation and "*allow readers to explore the extent to which the study may, or may not, have applicability beyond the specific context within which the data were generated*" (Willig, 2013, pp. 150-151). Following the above, considering the research framework, research questions and research model (case study) of this thesis, not working to achieve representativeness is acceptable (Willig, 2013, p. 17).

Last, but not least, the fact that I am a working mother myself also plays a positive role in empowering the research technique. The fact that I am aware of the structure of my experience as a working mother provides me with clues for orienting myself to the phenomenon, and thus to all other stages of empirical research (Van Manen, 1990, p. 57).

3.12.   Methodology Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present the methodological considerations and the data analysis process. Following the design of the research framework, the research approach (qualitative), theoretical positioning (social constructivism), research methodology (empiricist), and research model (case study) were presented. Six research participants were selected, and data collection relied on a semi-structured interview with the use of a popular videoconferencing platform. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Last, but not least, additional care was shown to address ethical concerns and limitations, while strengthening research validity. The findings of this research are presented in the next chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 4
Research Findings & Discussion

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the forms of non-formal and informal learning taking place amidst working mothers who participated in adult support groups, the factors influencing learning, and the impact this learning had on them, by conducting primary qualitative research. The purpose of this chapter is to present the research findings and engage in subsequent discussion, following the implementation of the qualitative research framework presented in the previous chapter, and the thematic discourse analysis of the captured data.

4.1.   Forms of Learning for Working Mothers in Adult Support Groups

Group participation and learning are intrinsically connected; therefore, it came as no surprise that the acquisition of learning was a prominent theme in the interviews. All interviewed members of the "Working Moms of Athens" report that taking part in the support group generates learning. Research participants report that learning is integrated into the work and daily routines of the members and is an inductive process of reflection and action linked to the learning of others (Marsick & Volpe, 1999).

Participating members inform one another, share information, wisdom, and enlightenment (Schugurensky, 2000). They acknowledge both the many forms that learning can play, and at the same time the distinct types and timings it may manifest. This was particularly significant given how none of the interview questions (see Interview Protocol on the Appendix) mentioned learning, and all research participants brought it up during the interview by themselves.

Since the presence of learning is self-reported (combined with the apparent lack of an authority setting the learning agenda and checking in on the learning outcome) all generated learning consists of an individual process each member is "personally responsible" for. As initially hypothesized, learning occurs informally, and amidst a social context (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 123), where participating working mothers "*move outward into the external world and inward into themselves*" (Baker et al., 2002). Interviewees report both an inside-out (drawing from the expression of our internal pool of knowledge) and an outside-in (having external ideas and events that act upon us and shape our knowing) learning process (Baker et al., 2002). Figure

4 below summarizes the research findings around the forms and dimensions of learning that take place amidst an adult support group.

| What type(s) of learning take place amidst working mothers who take part in an adult support group? | Incidental learning (Informal) | Socialization (Informal) | Self-study (Informal) | Group Learning (Non-Formal) | Learning Material (Non-Formal) |
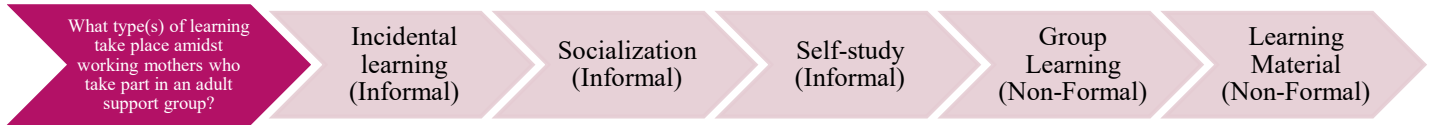
Figure 4 Forms of Learning Present in an Adult Support Group

4.1.1. Informal Learning

This research has uncovered three forms of informal learning present in an adult support group: incidental learning, socialization, and self-study.

4.1.1.1. Incidental Learning

For the working mothers who participated in the adult support group, learning was unplanned and not intentional. Still, working mothers were aware that it occurs. Participation in an adult support group led to the creation of tacit knowledge for working mothers: knowledge that they hold as parents and as professionals and actions they perform, although oftentimes hard to explain, were passed down in an informal learning space. "*I found alternative ways of facing some challenges, which I would never think of before*", said Daisy.

This further supports Schugurensky's definition of informal learning, and subsequent claim that informal learning does not only happen randomly, ad-hoc, and beyond organized contexts such as the classroom and the workplace. Instead, it manifests within and transcends beyond them (Schugurensky, 2000) and can occur even in atypical contexts set up for other reasons (such as the provision of support). "*I always find new things to hear, which are interesting, and I learn from them*," said Magnolia. This also fits Illeris' definition of "everyday learning" where participating working mothers experience and acknowledge learning, although they have no intention of learning (Illeris, 2006, p. 215). "*It's part of my daily life given that we have this group, and we can share through that information and also be the channel where we can ask for help or provide help if another mum wants that*", said Plumeria.

4.1.1.2. Learning through Socialization

Some interviewees explicitly linked their participation to the support group participation with the exchange of knowledge through which they reported learning occurs, i.e., informal learning

through socialization (Schugurensky, 2000). Other research participants shared stories which described occasions of new knowledge generation as well as an increase in their understanding even when they were not engaged in any conscious learning activity, i.e., incidental learning (Schugurensky, 2000). "*I can share thoughts and opinions and also learn,*" said Violet.

One participant also mentioned that the content shared on the instant messaging channel may also become a source of incidental learning: "*Our circle leader shares useful information on WhatsApp. From the laws and our rights and things I wouldn't read, even the news, and try to learn my rights as a working mom, the maternity leave rights, everything. This exchange of knowledge is very important*", said Rose.

The research has made it clear that working mothers could not easily tell apart incidental learning from socialization: both concepts seem to have been intertwined. Illeris argues that this finding was to be expected. The human brain is much too flexible to function abiding by the systems scholars make to convey meaning and help systematize research (Illeris, 2006, p. 87).

Frameworks serve to inspire and support scholars, however, are not there to limit our empirical understanding of the world. As Illeris notes, "*one must simply be careful not to understand them as fixed systems applying at all times and in all situations*" (Illeris, 2006, p. 87). Given how this is a data-driven study, it can be argued that, in the context of a support group for working mothers, there exists a fine line between incidental learning and learning through socialization, which is, to a large degree, indistinguishable.

In the context of this support group for working mothers, learning also occurred through storytelling and the exchange of narrative (Schugurensky, 2000). Social connection and group discourse, either all together or divided in smaller teams (and breakout rooms), group discourse promoted social connection as well as learning. "*In our circle, what is more valuable is the experience from life: what we share between us. The important thing, I think, is life experience; that's how we learn,*" said Magnolia. In the context of the support group, the narrative understanding composed by working mothers' life history, the stories they have about themselves, and which are constantly developed, are interpreted anew (Illeris, 2018, p. 62). As Orchid mentioned, "*It was a very eye-opening moment when I realized that all working moms face almost the same conditions at work*".

Narrative is the vehicle to understanding personal experience (Gavey, 1989), creating personal histories of becoming (Wenger, 2008), and signaling their cultural standpoint (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 40). "*The experiences that others share or the way that they experience and face issues, is something that is a learning experience for me,*" said Daisy. Rose agreed: "*You see different people having different reactions, and you can exchange all these experiences and information and form an idea of your own*".

Out of all the different ways of informal learning reportedly occurring within the context of the circle, the exchange of experience (i.e., conversational learning) was viewed as the most impactful, a finding consistent with Paulo Freire's pedagogy that adult support group members "*teach each other, mediated by the world*" (Freire, 1993, p. 61). Plumeria shared one such story around this: "*The way Elizabeth elaborated on her relationship with her husband, and how they manage to have a balanced relationship, being nice to each other […] was very insightful also for me as well, how they manage to balance their own personal needs and lives with their common life and their relationship as a couple. […] This helped me understand how other couples work.*"

Learning relates to a person acting at the micro level (socio-culturally shaped external environment) where engagement in the world leads to durable change of his internal condition (Singh, 2015, pp. 20-21). And within the context of a support circle, it is the dialogical components that amplified internal forces of knowledge acquisition and thought progression.

The significance of everyday life stories was underlined by all participants. Stories around parenthood, stories from the workplace, both came forth and created a sharing space that appreciated openness and valued personal experience. This is consistent with Illeris' idea that "*the great narratives are rejected, the world is constantly changing, everything must be understood locally and in its own time*" (Illeris, 2006, p. 118). Or, as Orchid puts it: "*It's not just theories and things that you read or study […] it's something that gets out from people that have experiences on the topics. This is why I terribly value this circle and this learning that comes out from this process, because although it's not the formal learning that you get from your job, it's far more eye opening,*" said Orchid.

4.1.1.3. Learning through Self-Study

Two out of the six interviewees mentioned that the discussions prompted them to look deeper into the themes discussed, by seeking out additional sources of knowledge such as reading

articles and books, and taking up personal study projects i.e., self-study (Schugurensky, 2000). "*I used those materials to make a course on diversity and inclusion. I mean, a course that we are going to sell to our clients, and train them on diversity and inclusion matters,*" said Daisy.

Some working mothers reported that they embarked in self-study activities after engaging with the support circle. Topics such as the types and presence of bias, negotiation and equitable parenting inspired working mothers to learn more. Some further acted upon the findings of their self-acquired knowledge. "*I had some notes. I kept notes on that theme. I always keep notes, but this was really something that I was very much interested in, and I searched to find out more on these topics*", said Daisy. The way the working mothers perceived it, self-study is also a type of learning manifested both through socialization and by following the informative material they received monthly.

Last, but not least, one participating working mother (Magnolia) claimed that sharing the monthly "Collective Insights" brief after each meetup constituted learning for the society. Plumeria characterized the collective insights as "community service". "*We are offering insights and impacting other moms outside our circle, who can use these insights and either contact us or use them for their own benefit when they are doing a negotiation with their employer, or they are dealing with their child, etc. So, this is helping them find support and find tips that they can use for their own lives*," said Magnolia.

Still, such a statement cannot be validated by this study (at least not without capturing the viewpoint stemming from non-members who get to see the content). However, the intention of the "Working Moms of Athens" to create conditions that generate learning beyond their support group is noted.

4.1.2. Non-Formal Learning

This research has uncovered two forms of non-formal learning present in an adult support group: group learning and learning through the study of designated learning material.

4.1.2.1. Group Learning

In the context of an adult support circle, informal learning manifested through group interaction. Group learning, manifesting through sharing (giving and receiving) of experience and information during the meetups is the main characteristic of the group processes present in the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018, p. 9). "*Each of us contributes*

to this circle with her experience and point of view, and this is treasure. We share our lives, our secrets, our difficulties about job, about life, about the children. So, we have a nice discussion once a month, we share things as a team and that's very important," said Magnolia. "*Other members have feedback for me because they've been there, they've done that,*" said Rose.

Three out of Étienne Wegner's four types of dialogical components that manifest within a group and lead to group learning (2008) were brought up by interviewees, namely: "meaning" (discussing life experiences around working motherhood), "practice" (sharing tips, resources and perspectives around working motherhood that others may find helpful or relevant), and "identity" (sharing personal histories of becoming a working mother).

4.1.2.2. Learning Material

In the context of an adult support circle, informal learning also manifested in the form of planned informational material shared monthly with the group. "*We have things to study, which is very important because we always learn. So, we are given things to think about and papers to read, so that's interesting,*" said Magnolia.

Working mothers recognized how reading this material (in their own time and space and with no commitment) generated learning. This also matches the concept of self-study but given how the content is planned and composed by an external source, it was coded under non-formal learning.

What was especially appreciated by the working mothers was the quality of the material and the fact that it came from credible sources. The use of academic sources and quantitative studies was commended. Learning material that serves the needs of non-formal learners serves as an enabler to their empowerment (Papaioannou, 2016, p. 163).

Moreover, educational material provided in non-formal learning setups has been associated with self-regulation, namely goal setting and planning, self-evaluation, seeking assistance, seeking information and generating motivation (Nikolaki & Koutsouba, 2012). Although the support circle was not a non-formal learning space, given how this is an atypical setup some of these angles did show up.

Still, the dimensions of non-formal learning that were identified through this research were limited. The adult support circle, although enriched by non-formal learning elements, primarily remains an informal learning space. The difficulty to manage this distinction throughout this thesis is aligned with Colley (as referenced by Illeris) who argues that the distinction between informal and non-formal learning is "untenable professionally […] and cannot be maintained in practice" (Illeris, 2006, p. 216).

4.2. Factors Influencing Learning for Working Mothers in Adult Support Groups

As discussed during literature review, learning in the context of a group can be influenced both by internal and external factors. Factors that influenced learning within the context of the "Working Moms of Athens" adult support group were not only uncovered as being the byproducts of the group process, but also in the array of intergroup relations (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018).

Group commonality, purpose, the group process experience, as well as the affiliation with a global network of support groups (namely LeanIn) were all reported as factors that shape the learning that is generated within the context of the group.

Lack of any of the intragroup factors is considered a barrier to learning. The existence of the intergroup affiliation is viewed as an enabler but lack of it is not considered a barrier. Figure 5 below summarizes the research findings around the types of internal and external factors that influence learning amidst an adult support group.
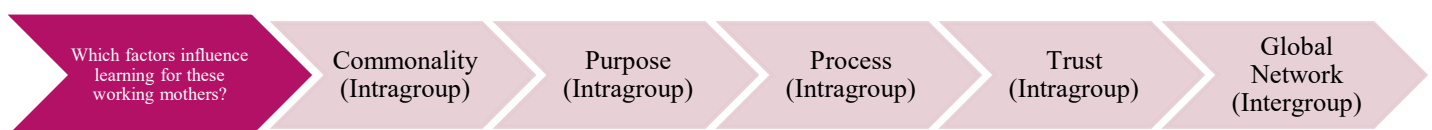
Figure 5 Factors that Influence Learning for Working Mothers in Adult Support Groups

4.2.1. Internal Factors

This research has uncovered four types of internal group factors that influence learning in an adult support group: commonality, purpose, process, and trust.

4.2.1.1. Commonality

Research participants identified the "Working Moms of Athens" as a social group (Lickel, et al., 2000) with members sharing the common sociocultural characteristic of being mothers who

are part of the workforce. Plumeria took this a step further and characterized the composition of the circle like a group of "like-minded people", a prominent theme found in other discussions, signaling not only social categorization but also "in-group mental activity and cooperation" (Bion, 1961, p. 143). "*I joined common-minded people, like-minded people I can share experiences and knowledge with*," said Plumeria. Working mothers who took part in an adult support circle frequently reported on the importance of affinity and commonality as enablers of coherence that facilitate not only the exchange of knowledge but also its acknowledgement by the members.

Regardless of the notable interdependence, interviewees who were mothers of older children (like Magnolia) reported a heterogeneity in group composition and mentioned two types of sub-groups: namely new mothers and more experienced ones. The two profiles were characterized as having different personal and professional needs, driven by the stage they are found in their life's history. This is consistent with the initial literature review where two profiles of working mothers are presented, with different challenges and aspirations both in terms of learning and in terms of what they expect to get out of an adult support circle.

However, this heterogeneity was not acknowledged by all members. Rose, being a mother of two young children, had the impression that the members of the circle shared not only the same sociocultural traits, but also the same demographic and professional characteristics. "*We're kind of the same level of professionals. Most of us have us, same years of experience, relevant industries and relevant issues with the kids*," said Rose. Still, the circle consists of more than 70 members of many ages (from 30 to 55), with various professional states (employed and entrepreneurs), differing family standings (married, divorced, single) and ranging maternal experience (new to experienced mothers). This signals a high degree of perceived group commonality (Tsimpoukli, 2012, p. 16).

Plumeria attributed this commonality to a shared interest among members to demystify the identity of a working mother through the group process, most notably the incessant balancing of work and personal life attributes. This goes to show that members perceive the "Working Moms of Athens" as a common identity social group: a network of connections and role relationships where working mothers maintained their independent self-construal and are organized around a collective self which views working motherhood as a relational social identity (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018, p. 3) fueled by the group processes operating in the circle.

The "Working Moms of Athens" is a group motivated by a purpose of fulfilling member needs (Mc Grath et al, 2000), most notably their need to share experience and knowledge with others, to give and receive feedback, and to provide others with help. "*I know that this group of people is there for a reason, and has a scope,*" said Violet.

As expected, given how this study came from the context of a support group, the word "help" was one of the most used words throughout the discussions. This signals how essential the provision of help is for members who take part in the "Working Moms of Athens" (Douglas, 1995, p. 14). "*I joined because I wanted to bring a bit of intelligence in the group, meaning that my kid is so much older now, she's a teenager, so I'm a bit accelerated with regards to some other moms. In that sense, I could help others with things I've already experienced,*" said Plumeria.

Willingness for affiliation and group membership to the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" reduces self and identity uncertainty: working mothers took part in the circle with the purpose to reduce feelings of uncertainty about themselves and the world they live in, through a process of social categorization of self and others (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018, p. 4). The purpose of taking part in an adult support group was to help. A biproduct of that purpose was learning. Working mothers who engaged in support groups learned from the experience of others, as a means that allows them to become more experienced themselves (Van Manen, 1990, p. 62).

4.2.1.3. Process

There is more to the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" than bringing together a group of people who shared similar characteristics and wished to help each other. Interviewees used three different terms to describe this: "an active group", "a live community" and a "team" which showed that they perceive the circle as a dynamic group of people (Lewin, 1948, p. 63) brought together by strong feelings of interdependence such as "trust", the generation of "fun" and the perception of "shared values".

Group socialization, manifesting through sharing (giving and receiving) of experience and information during the meetups was the main characteristic of the group processes present in the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018, p. 9). The monthly meetups were referred to as the flagship experience of participants, providing members with the space

needed for the group process to unfold (Lewin, 1936, p. vii). Participation in the monthly meetups mobilized forces which produced internal effects perceived as important by circle members.

The fact that the monthly meetups occur online via Zoom (as opposed to a face-to-face encounter) was not brought up to the conversation by any participant. The broad use of digital collaboration and videoconferencing tools introduced into our daily lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic and respective lockdown regulations is arguably a contributing parameter for mainstreaming this type of group interaction (Haas et al., 2020, p.3) and back up any positive psychosocial experiences participants who are taking part in group activities via Zoom report (Shapira, et al., 2021).

Given the considerable number of members, two integral parts of the meetup process were facilitation and dividing meetup attendees into smaller discussion groups using Zoom's "breakout rooms" functionality. Facilitating outlined activities enabled members to share personal stories and get to know one another, tapping into each other's ideas, experiences, and support.

Furthermore, the use of breakout rooms as a practice creates spaces of "brief-and-debrief" before participants join the main session where the action is happening (Haas et al., 2020). Still, in the "Working Moms of Athens", breakout rooms were viewed as a continuation of the main session rather than a pause from it, with members acknowledging that this practice promoted deeper group interaction and cohesion. "*I very much enjoy the breakout rooms. We have even smaller groups that we can discuss in more detail and come even closer,*" said Plumeria.

Another notable component of the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" group process was the existence of multiple channels of group interaction: a closed group on LinkedIn (where the material for and from the meetups was uploaded and content was moderated) and an instant messaging group on WhatsApp used for casual member interaction (where content was crowdsourced and not moderated). The parallel use of other channels of interaction keeps members engaged with the group in between meetups and were seen as spaces which contained desirable content (especially the unmoderated WhatsApp group).

Circle logistics such as the duration of the meetups (which is predetermined and respected), how the monthly discussion topics were selected (which occurs through a poll function and the initial ideas are expressed by members in several points in time) and cultivating an atmosphere

of acceptance to all opinions and ideas, have been brought up as group process components that promoted cohesion in adult groups. "*We have two hours every month dedicated to this, and that shows respect to our program and to our lives*," said Magnolia.

Finally, one of the most frequently brought up components of the "Working Moms of Athens" group processes is the "One Action" monthly ritual. At the end of each meetup, members were invited to commit to a personal action which would help them better themselves. This action ranged from something small (an incremental change in a daily habit) to something more complex, so long as it lied in the sphere of members' personal development and overall betterment. Each member shared their "One Action" with the group, and the progress is followed up in the next meetup.

The impact of this ritual was twofold: it established member roles within the group associating their progress with role transitions (from newcomer who is yet to work on a "One Action" to full member who is reporting progress on their "One Action"), and constituted a social action, more specifically a public self-commitment which according to scholars was harder to alter midcourse (Clark, 2006, pp. 130-131).

This last part was the perceived value and significance of the "One Action" for participating working mothers: committing to something which contributed to their overall betterment, in a way that was viewed as both efficient and effective. As Plumeria puts it: "*Having [a] one action for a week [...] makes you want to actually make it work. This is something that you carry with you and [...] you have the opportunity to work on something for yourself*".

"One Action" reportedly linked experience and idea sharing with personal betterment, describing the process of continuous self-improvement (Alemi, et al., 2000, p. 78) which brought systems thinking into the personal context and signals the presence of learning in the form of a cyclical outcome of the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" group process.

4.2.1.4. Trust

Cultivation of trust between group members enhances and improves learning. People learn more easily in an environment characterized by and trust (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 1). As Illeris notes (2018, p. 106), high levels of trust are needed so that group participants can "think aloud", realize what they deeply know, what they do not know, and where they are struggling to find relations and extensions to their current level understanding. This consolidation fostered

by trust leads to deep learning (Illeris, 2018, p. 106). As Kepner puts it, providing a climate of trust supports some risk-taking, and toward making some connections with individuals' inner experience, among individuals, and with the group-as-a-whole (Kepner, 1980, p. 8).

Research participants mentioned trust on multiple occasions during the interviews. In the context of this support group, the word "trust" signaled an element of the group process and is clearly distinguished from the intrapersonal process of generating "trust in one's abilities" (which is referred to as "confidence" and is referenced as an outcome of learning) (Kepner, 1980, p. 5). For example, here is how Plumeria talked about trust in the context of the group "*I grew my circle of trust, I would say, because the "Working Moms of Athens" are now people I trust*". Rose described the circle as "*An environment that really helps me get my thoughts across to a group of people who will truly understand where I come from and what I've been through. I trust their feedback because they've been there.*"

4.2.2. External Factors

External factors referred to participating mothers' interpersonal processes (their attitudes, decisions) as well as broader sociocultural norms and constructs that shape their preferences (e.g., intergroup affiliation).

4.2.2.1. Interpersonal Processes

A limited number of insights was generated through the research about participating working mothers' attitudes which were not considered enough to form a solid thematic category. Here are the distinct angles.

Orchid mentioned that her attitude to share with other working mothers stemmed from her maturity as an experienced mother (Orchid's Quote: "*I am now in my 50s, I feel much more mature to be able to communicate to other working moms that have toddlers or babies*").

Magnolia referenced confidence as a key emotional function that supported sharing and therefore promoted learning (Magnolia's Quote: "*When you feel that you need to share things, you feel confident, if you don't feel confident, you just don't share*").

Daisy referred to a feeling of relaxation amidst the members of the group that allowed them to openly share knowledge with the group, which signals self-regulation (Daisy's Quote: "*Most*

of us feel very relaxed when we have our discussions, we feel like there's nothing strange in doing this thing"). All these attitudes promote socialization which generates learning.

4.2.2.2. Intergroup Affiliation

Intergroup affiliation of the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" with the broader global Lean In network is a sociocultural norm that influenced the expectations of members as regards the group process. Interviewed members reported that, the fact that the "Working Moms of Athens Circle" is part of a global network and that does not just limit its activities to Greece, comes with a solid group process, and introduces a strong affiliation which generates value for its members.

Members felt being part of an extended global movement supporting them to pursue further involvement in feminist activities such as starting their own support groups or join additional LeanIn Circles in Greece (complimentary to their membership in the "Working Moms of Athens").

Magnolia narrated a story where being part of a Lean In circle helped her stand out as a participant in a mentoring initiative for women organized by a large Greek non-profit foundation. "*I was invited to collaborate with Lambrakis Foundation, and when I sent my curriculum and they saw that I'm a member of a LeanIn circle, that was very important for them*," said Magnolia.

Such an affiliation, although complementary to the group process, seemed to be related more to the expectation of members in terms of the group process quality standards and member engagement with the process, so it impacted learning only indirectly. "*When I realized it was endorsed by LeanIn I was looking at it in a more positive way in the sense that I knew that there would be structure*," said Violet. This means that its existence was a positive influence on the learning occurring within the group, and its lack would not be a barrier.

One final aspect of intergroup affiliation that also arose in some interviews signaled the concept of mission as a factor that leads to learning. The "Working Moms of Athens" viewed themselves as a group on a mission to influence society at large and help bring about social change through the creation and sharing of new knowledge, a concept indirectly related to learning. Each month, after every meetup, the group composed and publicly dispatched "meeting minutes" (titled "Collective Insights") summarizing what was discussed. Those

Collective Insights were then publicly communicated. This way, the circle promulgated a message that was consistent (occurred every month) and not transparently self-interested (since its content relates to characteristics, needs and conditions experienced by working mothers in the workplace and beyond). Although the actual impact of this action is currently unexplored, this process is consistent with the premise of minority influence theory which drives social change (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018, p. 11).

4.3. Impact of Learning

The working mothers who participate in an adult support group receive notable amounts of peer-support (Cavanagh, 2007). Moreover, a great deal of knowledge was shared in the context of a learning space which generated or improved people's understanding. These were two findings explored in the previous paragraphs so they will not be further elaborated here.

In alignment with Étienne Wegner's "Social Learning Theory" (2008), the dialogical components related to learning so prominently described in all interviews lead to the creation of meaning for participating working mothers. Generating learning in this context leaded to a strengthening of self which is aligned with Jarvis' argument (2006) that learning can bring about change both at a personal and professional level. Figure 6 below summarizes the research findings around the impact learning in the context of an adult support group has on participating working mothers.

What impact does learning in the context of an adult support group context have on participating working mothers? → Confidence (Personal) → Perception Change (Personal) → Motivation (Personal & Professional)

Figure 6 Impact of Learning in an Adult Support Group for Working Mothers

4.3.1. Personal Impact

This research has uncovered three ways through which learning in the context of an adult support group impacts participating working mothers, namely: confidence generation, perception change, and motivation.

4.3.1.1. Confidence

In the company of like-minded individuals who acknowledge and share the same challenges, narrate stories and generate new knowledge, working mothers experience feelings of comfort.

These feelings boosted their confidence and at the same time alleviated some of the experienced working motherhood stress. "*I hear all the girls that have similar situations and I feel more confident. This helped me soothe feelings of panic or distress*," said Rose.

Some interviewees like Magnolia directly refer to gaining confidence as an outcome of their participation in the support group. Other participants like Violet described the feeling confidence without naming it: "*It really gave me a boost I cannot really describe. It's not tangible, but I kind of felt good that there are these people in my life looking after me, helping me*".

Members who were already undergoing change in their lives acknowledged circle participation as a reference point which supported them as they managed change, while others who did not mention the presence of changing conditions in their lives related group participation with the development of confidence. "*The group really helped me this past year. And I really needed it because also being in a new environment for my work, it was very stressful*," said Rose.

The "Working Moms of Athens Circle" served as a collective learning space, and at the same time as a safe environment of camaraderie. Members experienced a strengthening in their capabilities as working mothers, expressed through a manifestation of fearlessness and omnipotence stemming from their interaction with other members and the social learning that occurs. "*I got like a bit of a switch in mentality that you have nothing to fear*", said Rose. This was also empirical evidence for the presence of empowerment derived through the perceived strengthening of one's self-image (Papaioannou, 2016, pp. 176-180).

4.3.1.2. Perception Change

Socialization that manifests in the context of the support group meetups has a transformative effect on participants' perceptions (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018, p. 9) on selected topics of interest, most notably on the interrelation between work and life. "*The group changed my perspective around the work-life relationship or work-life balance,*" said Rose.

All types of inter- and intra-group interrelations shaped members' experience and affected their viewpoint and positioning in their life journeys as women, as mothers, and as professionals. "*The [meetup] process doesn't change a lot, but you know it's the feeling that changes from one circle to the other, because we are not the same each time that we join the circle,*" said Magnolia. "*I used to see other working moms being much more relaxed than me, having almost*

no stress. I thought it was just me. Now I feel relieved to realize that I am not alone over there,"
said Orchid.

The presence of an altered perception around female groups also arose as a sub-theme in the change of perception context. In the narrations it was almost never about a genderless group: interviewees referred to the members of the "Working Moms of Athens" with female characterizations such as "the girls", "other women", or "other moms". The feminist element was the common denominator that members value and would not want to have it any other way. "*It's between women and it's not that we are opposite men, women are thinking in a different way from men. It's another point of view in society. So, being among women is giving value to this way of thinking, which is important,*" said Magnolia.

4.3.1.3. Motivation

The knowledge and the feelings of confidence that the "Working Moms of Athens" experience as part of their group participation were indicative of the type of relationship that was formed between knowledge and emotions (Illeris, 2006, p. 108).

Working mothers developed a type of internal motivation that translated into actions towards the betterment of their lives in all fronts. From small actions of self-development that were included into the monthly "One Action" routine of the group, towards taking stands such as advocating their role as working mothers during interviews or setting up and facilitating other adult supported groups themselves. "*This group has really touched me and helped me want to organize my own circle in the future,*" said Daisy.

Here is Plumeria describing how participation in the support group motivates her to grow as a person and further contribute to society: "*Such a circle is making me a better person, because I want to create a bigger impact and to amplify the good thing and the impact that we are having right now as working moms and it made me think of more ways that I can help through community building or support to other women or mothers. It also made me a more thinking person because all this feedback and all these insights that I'm gaining made me think more and made me realize that we can all have an impact. Also made me ask myself how I can grow this impact even more, and how I can make this world better.*"

4.3.2. Professional Impact

Motivational qualifications such as dynamism, drive, and taking initiative are aspects of personal development oftentimes associated with learning (Illeris, 2006, pp. 132-133). Although this type of impact could spark action both in the personal and professional setups, the examples referenced by the interviewed working mothers were all in the context of work. "*When I was asked if I have kids in my latest interview I said 'Yes, and I am very proud of them. They have helped me evolve as a person and a professional.' I wouldn't have shared this in an interview before joining the circle*," said Rose. Violet narrates a story of professional boundary-setting: "*They asked me and a few other colleagues to help with, organizing, directing the customers to go to the auditorium, which was fine until I realized were all girls under 25 and kind of good-looking, and I was enraged. I went to my manager, and I said, I'm not going this, this feels like you just pick the cute young girls of the company to just, look pretty.*"

The interviews contained multiple examples of working mothers renegotiating their position in the workplace, expanding their understanding about the industry they were working in, sharing knowledge with others outside of the group, or addressing unequal division of family labor with the spouse. Rose shares a story on this: "*I was at some point, very stressed about my work. I was thinking that I was doing a million things and my boss didn't really know how much I did. And I felt very frustrated because I said, 'okay, I'm very busy to try to show off how what am I doing'. But then a lot of the girls supported me saying, 'you have to go out there and write something or try to have a conversation to just tell my boss, like, this is my list of things I cannot take no more, or this is what I do, and you don't know about'. I had the conversation with my boss because then the appraisals came and I was very specific and I got the message through and I'm going for a bonus, which is... yeah!*"

To a significant extent this was anticipated and is attributed to the fact that all interviewed participants matched the profile of experienced working mothers as discussed during the literature review, who valued learning experiences and group interactions that supported their professional growth.

4.4. Research Findings Summary

This chapter has presented and discussed the findings of a qualitative research process on data that derived from the context of the "Working Moms of Athens" circle. A semi-structured interview approach was called for, followed by thematic and discourse analysis practices. The

forms of learning that took place amidst working mothers who took part in an adult support group, that factors that influenced learning and the impact of that learning were investigated.

Learning in the context of the working moms of Athens support circle where both informal and non-formal elements of learning are present, was primarily informal in nature. Learning was unintentional, which means that it occurred even though members did not join the circle to learn. Learning was conscious, which means that the working mothers realized that they have learnt. Learning was generated through socialization and the sharing of knowledge, experience and wisdom.

Another form of learning present in the context of the support circle originated from incidental experiences such as the ad-hoc sharing of informational articles between the members through the instant messaging channels. In addition, following the knowledge and information sharing, working mothers embarked in self-study projects which was another form of informal learning. Two learning components oftentimes found in non-formal learning setups, namely group learning and learning through the deliberate study of material, complement the learning process.

Although not designed for learning, some factors present in the context of the adult support circle of the "Working Moms of Athens" influenced learning. Learning was facilitated by commonality, the in-group common traits that members felt they had in common. Moreover, the fact that this group served the purpose of generating support for working mothers and cultivated trust within its members promoted socialization which enabled learning. The structure introduced into the group process in the form of routines and ceremonies positively influenced learning. The fact that the "Working Moms of Athens" was affiliated with the global network of Lean In served as a quality standard for the group process and as an indirect enabler to learning.

In the company of like-minded individuals who acknowledged and shared the same challenges, narrate stories and generated new knowledge, working mothers experienced a boost in confidence and a strengthening of their self-image which contributed to their empowerment. Socialization that manifests in the context of the support group meetups had a transformative effect on participants' perspectives around work-life balance and the value of female groups. Working mothers developed a type of internal motivation that translated into actions towards the betterment of their lives. Figure 7 contains a summary of the research findings.

What forms and dimensions of learning take place amidst working mothers who take part in an adult support group?	• Incidental Learning (Informal) • Socialization (Informal) • Self-Study (Informal) • Group learning (Non-Formal) • Learning Material (Non-Formal)
Which factors influence learning for these working mothers?	• Commonatily (Intragroup) • Purpose (Intragroup) • Process (Intragroup) • Trust (Intragroup) • Global Network Affiliation (Intergroup)
What impact does learning in the context of an adult support group context have on participating working mothers?	• Confidence (Personal) • Perception Change (Personal) • Motivation (Personal & Professional)

Figure 7 Research Findings Summary

Chapter 5
Conclusion & Way Forward

5.1.   Concluding Remarks & Recommendations

Adult support groups are complex social spaces. Participating individuals enter a group process that impacted their perception in more ways than initially anticipated. Take the case of the "Working Moms of Athens". Working mothers from Athens, Greece, joined a globally affiliated group with the intention to offer their support to like-minded working mothers, only to embark in a learning experience that went beyond the provision of support. Members affected each other in ways that were not linear or predetermined. Introducing learning into the mix elevated the group experience to a whole different level.

Instead of thinking of support groups as closed systems where specific things "are meant" to happen (e.g., provision of support, generating empathy and more), why not think of them as learning spaces? This thesis has explored how an adult support group can be transformed into an informal learning space. The multidimensional social interaction between members, the trust and connection that rise through commonality and other factors that were explored in detail in the previous sections have made this quite evident.

Thinking that impactful learning only manifests in closed systems and controlled environments, in the context of formality or the presence of accreditation, deprived adult learners of opportunities to grow. This thesis argued that setting up an adult support circle in similar ways to setting up a learning space not only generates new knowledge, but also positively impacts the participants in feeling more confident and motivated to lead their lives.

When bringing people together to form a support circle, the adult learner as well as the learning process should be regarded holistically and dynamically: the context could prove to be irrelevant – it is the process that matters. Adults, working mothers among them, should be granted opportunities to flourish by designing deliberate learning environments that facilitate their growth through learning. As Knud Illeris has put it, experience, feeling, reason, and social practice should come together to serve as conduits of balance in personal development (2006, p. 87).

We should worry less about trying to control the learning environment: typologies were made to facilitate our understanding, not to limit our perception of the process. If there is one thing that came out of this thesis, is this: it pays huge dividends to generate and facilitate opportunities for everyday learning in working mothers who take part in an adult support group. By not treating an adult support group as a mere socializing space, by introducing learning tools, learning processes, and learning channels, even in this atypical setup, we can offer richer everyday experiences that have a real impact on people's life.

5.2.   Future Research Areas

This was the first study that focused on working mothers as adult learners. Hopefully, it will not be the last. In this section we will point out a few areas in the field of lifelong learning and adult education where further research is required.

The academic community is, at this point, unaware of the idiosyncratic characteristics of working mothers as adult learners, not just in Greece, but globally. We do not have a body of knowledge substantial enough to help us design learning experiences that address the needs and adult learner profile of working mothers. To cut a long story short, when it comes to why, what and how working mothers relate to adult learning, we are in the dark. This fact, combined with the notable lack of both quantitative and qualitative studies on Greek working mothers as adult learners, should serve as the basis to create an academic community that conducts additional research to further explore the learner experience and help design better-targeted learning programs and respective learning environments.

The potential impact of having the facilitator of the group serve as the interviewer in the research process should not be underestimated. Follow-up research should take place with a different interviewer (who is, in any case, female but has no role in the support group) to capture additional angles that will enrich the findings.

Lastly, given how this adult support group has been operating for only two years, there exists no adequate research space to explore additional potential research dimensions such the presence of transformative learning, and the impact of the learning on the female identity of the members. Conducting additional studies after the needed research space has been established should remain on the research radar.

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Appendix

Indicative Support Group Material
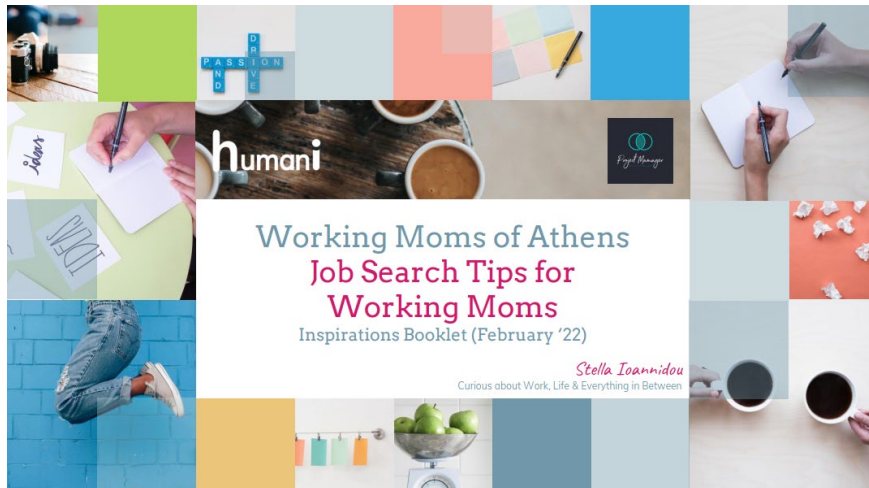
Figure 8 Working Moms of Athens "Inspirations Booklet" Cover (February 2022)

Figure 9 Working Moms of Athens Intention (Collectively Decided)

Figure 10 Working Moms of Athens Meetup Logistics (Collectively Decided)

Figure 11 Working Moms of Athens Monthly Theme (Collectively Decided)

Figure 12 Working Moms of Athens "Inspirations Booklet" extract
(Learning Material curated and referenced by the facilitator)

Figure 13 Working Moms of Athens "Inspirations Booklet" extract (Recommended Books by the Facilitator)
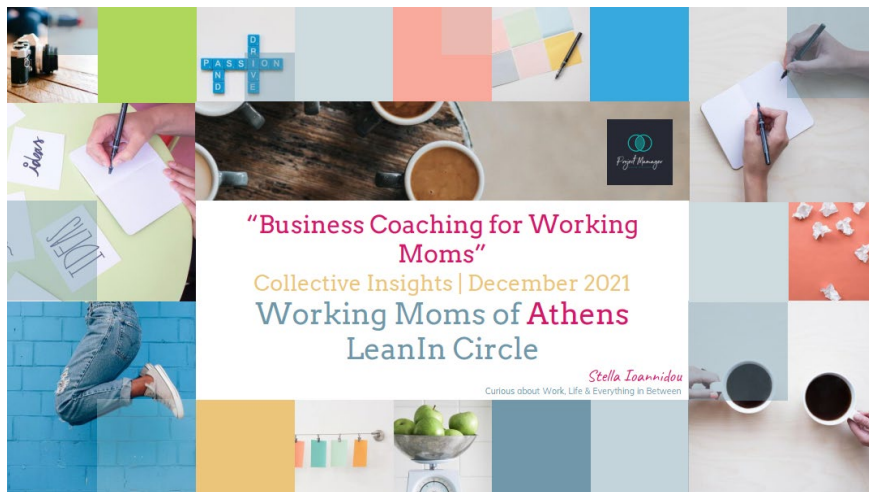
Figure 14 Working Moms of Athens "Collective Insights" Cover (December 2021)

Figure 15 Working Moms of Athens "Collective Insights" extract 1/3 (December 2021)

Figure 16 Working Moms of Athens "Collective Insights" extract 2/3 (December 2021)

Figure 17 Working Moms of Athens "Collective Insights" extract 3/3 (December 2021)

Reflexivity Statement (Positionality)

As a researcher, I have not just been on a journey of discovering and exploring the key themes that emerged from this qualitative research. I have also embarked on a journey of self-reflection as I have embarked on my exploration and essay writing. For the needs of my Master of Arts Thesis in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning, I have conducted qualitative research to explore the adult learning that took place amidst working mothers who participated in an adult support group, based on their captured experiences and perceptions.

I have studied in a variety of fields, as a personal quest to uncover what I truly love, and what comes naturally to me. For example, this research in lifelong learning is for a Master of Arts degree. I have three more master's degrees proceeding this (in Engineering, Computer Science and Business Administration). This quest to understand my favorite themes is something I was unable to fulfill during my early school years: I was good in a wide variety of subjects, top of my class for many years, with a variety of examples that showcase linguistic, logical, interpersonal, musical and visual intelligence. This is the main reason that drew me to experiment with conducting research in the field of lifelong learning in the first place.

I am a white, upper-middle class, cisgender, straight, non-disabled female. I am legally married to my partner, a white, upper-middle class, cisgender, straight, non-disabled male, and we equitably co-parent a 4-year-old boy. Both our parents are actively supportive of our family in a variety of ways. Moreover, we live in the biggest city of our country and have relatively easy access to anything and everything this country has to offer in terms of social and technological infrastructure, peaceful daily life conditions, an active community of peers, a strong support system, and uninterrupted access to resources. This is an advantageous situation that allows me to take many things (not by default available to other working mothers) for granted and gives me the space I need to work towards my personal, professional and academic aspirations.

I think of myself as an achiever. I strive to experience simultaneous growth at a personal, professional and academic level. Studying has always been a part of life: it always coincided with work and family obligations. I view academic competence as a demonstration of my appetite for continuing growth and a signal of my determination. I feel that I grow more when I am challenged, and for a big part of my life so far, I have been unable to see how growth can occur outside of challenges. The idea that growth can also occur outside of challenging

situations is something that I have only recently begun to experience. For this, I view other people's life journeys through the lens of continuous growth through persistence and deliberation.

The birth of our little boy came unexpectedly. Not because my husband and I didn't want to have children, quite the contrary. The need to surgically remove a notable dermoid cyst from one of my ovaries had resulted in a hormonal imbalance that gave me slim chances of giving birth. Doctors recommended that we drop all efforts to naturally conceive. Our son was born a few months after we received this prognosis, without any treatment. For this, my husband and I chose to name our son Jason: an ancient Greek name (Ἰάσων (Iásōn)), which means "healer", from the ancient Greek verb ἰάομαι (iáomai). For me, having a family is a miracle and a blessing that I do not take for granted.

Just like how raising and nurturing children is not straightforward, motherhood remains a self-discovery and development process. Becoming a mother has been one of my biggest challenges as a human being, but it has also proven to be one of the most rewarding experiences in life. If I could redo all the things I did (or did wrong) as a parent, perhaps I would have approached parenthood differently. Instead of looking back on what went wrong, I look forward to future experiences that await our family.

My experience as a working mother has pointed out to me the many challenges working mothers face and the need to support them in their journeys. As a mother and wife, I now feel happy and fulfilled to be working full-time in a global company that offers flexible work hours so that I can be close to my family and at the same fully satisfy my professional and academic aspirations. However, this accommodating professional setup was not always the case. Achieving my current professional state is the outcome of a series of complex choices and tough decisions through which I prioritized my own mental and physical health, while addressing the increased needs of my family. Having experienced working environments that were not equally accommodating to working mothers, I go by the perception that working mothers are professional challenged individuals that need as much support as they can get to achieve their goals and aspirations.

To me, learning is a lifelong journey; it began with my first explorations as an infant and continues long beyond my formal schooling. I have been continuously supported by my parents in my learning journey and the provision of this support to my own child is a core value I abide

by. While the enormous responsibility I hold for my child during these formative years may sometimes seem daunting, I feel that we as parents are (or should be) supported in our efforts by an extended network of teachers, family members, and incredible communities of peers. I believe that we can find inspiration wherever and whenever we need it. It's up to us to be deliberate in seeking that inspiration.

As someone who has juggled the many demands of being a working mother, I have been on an ongoing personal journey of self-reflection and learning. I have explored many challenges that working mothers face and realized the need to support them in their quest for lifelong learning. Before setting up the "Working Moms of Athens" circle I immersed myself in various groups where mothers shared their wisdom and experience on rearing children. I learned a lot through their stories and shared narrative, and I felt a sense of belonging when I interacted with other working mothers: I felt that I could communicate at a deeper level, and that we understood each other faster and better. Through my own experience with support groups for mothers, and my own journey as a lifelong learner, I have formed the opinion that working mothers are people who seek out opportunities for personal development, regardless of their current circumstances in life. At the same time, I remain convinced that we learn best through social interaction, mediated by the world.

Conducting qualitative research in the context of a support group I am facilitating brings about its own set of unique challenges. I cannot be impartial about the circle or the group process: my achiever stance will tempt me to orient the findings of this research towards a validation of my contribution to the community of working mothers. Research participants will also try (or may feel compelled to) use this additional connection channel for the expression of gratitude or may be inclined to think of it as such. For this, I acknowledge the great need to be mindful when designing and executing the research process. Multiple validation checkpoints need to be introduced. Any type of captured information that does not respond to the research questions needs to be completely disregarded and excluded from thematic and discourse analysis.

Through this essay, I have reflected upon my perspectives on discourses around working motherhood and what I learned about participatory learning as an adult learner myself, to explore the various angles and perspectives that impact my research design, process and findings. Reflexivity is a key element of qualitative research, and not always a pleasant process. However, acknowledging my positionality (and role) is a necessary step that improves validity before embarking in this qualitative research.

Research Participant Consent Form

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Styliani (Stella) Ioannidou, a Master of Arts student at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Open University of Cyprus (OUCY), Programme: Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning. You must be 18 years (or older) to participate in the research. Your participation is voluntary. You may spend as much time as you need to read this Consent Form. You can also decide to discuss it with your family or friends. A copy of this form will be provided to you.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

You are asked to participate in this research whose purpose is to explore your experience as a Member of the Working Moms of Athens Circle. The provision of answers to questions posed during the discussion constitute consent to participate in the present study.

POTENTIAL RISKS

There exist no foreseeable risks arising from your participation in this research. If you feel uncomfortable answering specific questions, please do not hesitate to ask for them to be omitted.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND THE SOCIETY

Deeper understanding of the experience of the Working Moms of Athens Circle, to help design better experiences of participation in groups, and help design needs tailored to Greek working mothers.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information obtained about this study that could personally identify you as a participant will be kept confidential and disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Any information that personally identifies you will be kept separate from the rest of the data that concerns you. The data will be kept at the responsibility of the researcher. In case of a recording, your prior consent will be requested. You can refuse to being recorded. The researcher will transcribe the recordings and may provide you with a copy of the transcript at your request. You have the right to control and edit the transcript. Sentences that you have asked the researcher to omit will not be used and will be deleted from all relevant files. In case where the results of the research get published or presented at conferences, information that could reveal your identity will not be included.

PARTICIPATION & WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether you wish to participate in this research or not. If you voluntarily choose to participate in this research, you may leave at any time without any consequences. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer and stay in the research process. The researcher may ask you to withdraw from the research if circumstances require so.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and terminate your participation to this research without any repercussion.

IDENTITY OF THE RESEARCHER

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher. Here are the contact details of the researcher.
Name: Ioannidou Styliani
email: styliani.ioannidou@st.ouc.ac.cy
I have read the above and consent to participate in this study.

Name		Signature	
Date			

Interview Protocol

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL WORKING MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES & PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING IN AN ADULT SUPPORT GROUP: THE CASE OF THE WORKING MOMS OF ATHENS			
Research Dimension	**Research Goal**	**Research Question**	**Interview Question**
Context	Capture general participant information	Context about participants and their family	Can you share a bit about yourself? What is the family setup? How did you come to find this support group?
Type of learning that takes place	Detect the form(s) that learning takes, in the context of an adult support group for working mothers, a space not focused on learning.	What form(s) and dimensions of learning took place amidst working mothers who participated in the Working Moms of Athens support group?	What happened after you joined this support group? What topics do you discuss in the group? Can you share any stories around something you have shared in the group? Can you share any stories around something someone else has shared in the group that you distinctly remember?
Factors influencing learning	Understand the inhibiting and facilitating factors for learning to occur within the context of this support group.	Which factors influenced learning for these working mothers?	Can you give an example of a story that shows what influences learning in the context of the support group? How does the use of breakout rooms serve learning in the context of the group? Did the fact that this circle is endorsed by LeanIn make a difference? Did it matter to you that the group meetings were primarily digital and not physical?

Impact of learning	Understand what participating working mothers get out of their time invested in the support group.	What impact did learning have on the participating working mothers?	How does support manifest within the group? What do you experience as an outcome that comes out of your participation to the circle? How do you experience support provided in the context of the group?
Other issues research participants might like to raise	Capture additional related information, important to participants for research validity purposes	Anything else the participant wants to add	Anything you would like to add around your experience with the group? Anything else you would like to add?

Data Analysis Coding

Research Question 1
Forms of Learning for Working Mothers in Adult Support Groups

Code 1.1			Code 1.2	
Informal Learning			Non-Formal Learning	

C.1.1.1	C.1.1.2	C.1.1.3	C.1.2.1	C.1.2.2
Incidental Learning	Learning through Socialization	Learning through Self-Study	Group Learning	Learning Material
C.1.1.1.1 Find, found, part of daily life	C.1.1.2.1 Share thoughts, opinions, shares information, exchange of knowledge, sharing between members, experience others share, stories	C.1.1.3.1 Kept notes, searched to find out more, made a new course	C.1.2.1.1 Team, figure things out together	C.1.2.2.1 Study, papers, things to read
"I always find new things to hear, which are interesting, and I learn from them" "I found alternative ways of facing some challenges" "It's part of my daily life given that we have this group, and we can share through that information and also be the channel where we can ask for help or provide help if another mum wants that"	"I can share thoughts and opinions and also learn" "Our circle leader shares useful information on WhatsApp. This exchange of knowledge is very important" "In our circle, what is more valuable is the experience from life; what we share between us." "The experiences that others share or the way that they experience and face issues, is something that is a learning experience for me"	"I kept notes on that theme, I always keep notes, but this was really something that I was very much interested in, and I searched to find out more on these topics" "I used those materials to make a course on diversity and inclusion. I mean, a course on diversity and inclusion matters"	"We share things as a team and that's very important" "We share our lives, our secrets, our difficulties about job, about life, about the children we figure things out together"	"We have things to study, which are very important because we always learn, we don't know anything. So, we are given things to think about and papers to read, so that's interesting"

Figure 18 Data Analysis and Coding for Research Question 1: Forms of Learning

Research Question 2
Factors Influencing Learning for Working Mothers in Adult Support Groups

Code 2.1				Code 2.2	
Internal Factors				External Factors	

C.2.1.1	C.2.1.2	C.2.1.3	C.2.1.4	C.2.2.1	C.2.2.2
Commonality	Purpose	Process	Trust	Interpersonal Processes	Intergroup Affiliation
C.2.1.1.1 Common, like-minded, kind of the same, all of us	C.2.1.2.1 Has a reason, scope, bring intelligence to the group	C.2.1.3.1 Breakout rooms, two hours, dedicated, one action	C.2.1.4.1 Circle of trust, people I trust, trust the feedback	C.2.2.1.1 Maturity as a mother, confident enough to share, feel relaxed	C.2.2.2.1 LeanIn, network, global, endorsed by
"I joined common-minded people, like-minded people I can share experiences and knowledge with" "We're kind of the same level of professionals. Most of us have us, same years of experience, relevant industries and relevant issues with the kids" "All of us have something in common which is that sense of being squeezed all the time"	"I know that this group of people is there for a reason, and has a scope" "I joined because I wanted to bring a bit of intelligence in the group, meaning that my kid is so much older now, she's a teenager, so I'm a bit accelerated with regards to some other mums."	"I very much enjoy the breakout rooms. We have even smaller groups that we can discuss in more detail and come even closer" "We have two hours every month dedicated to this, and that shows respect to our program and to our time" "Having [a] one action for a week makes you want to actually make it work"	"I grew my circle of trust" "the "Working Moms of Athens" are now people I trust" "I trust their feedback because they've been there"	"I am now in my 50s, I feel much more mature to be able to communicate to other working mums that have toddlers or babies" "When you feel that you need to share things, you feel confident, if you don't feel confident, you just don't share" "Most of us feel very relaxed when we have our discussions, we feel like there's nothing strange in doing this thing"	"I was invited to collaborate with Lambrakis Foundation, and when I sent my curriculum and they saw that I'm a member of a LeanIn circle, that was very important for them." "When I realized it was endorsed by LeanIn I was looking at it in a more positive way in the sense that I knew that there would be structure"

Figure 19 Data Analysis and Coding for Research Question 2: Factors Influencing Learning

Research Question 3

Impact of Learning for Working Mothers in Adult Support Groups

Code 3.1 Personal Impact	**Code 3.2** Professional Impact

C.3.1.1 Confidence	C.3.1.2 Perception Change	C.3.1.3 Personal Motivation	C.3.2.1 Professional Motivation

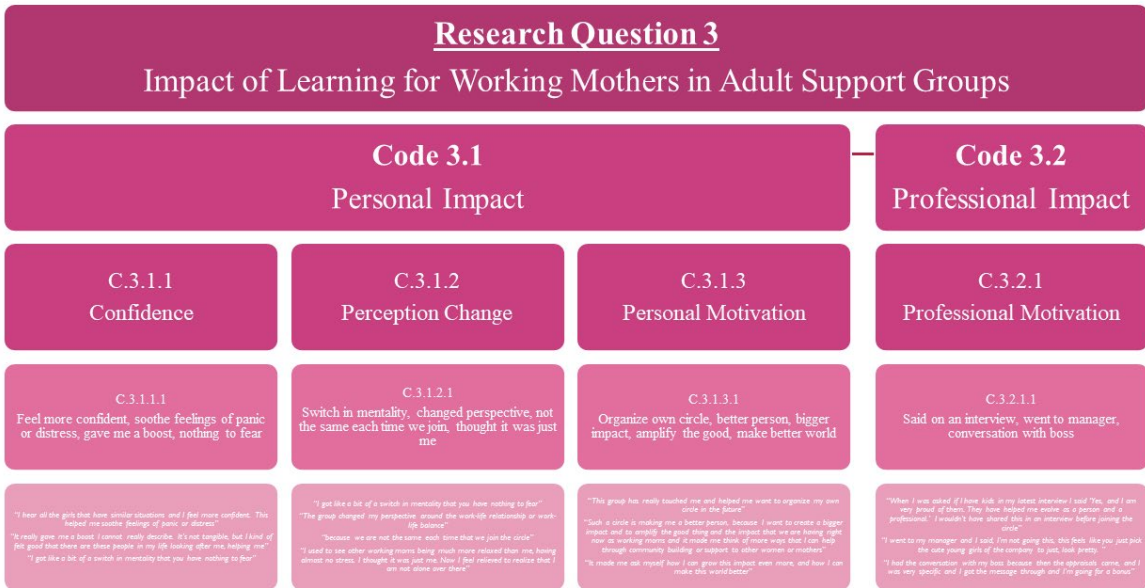| C.3.1.1.1 Feel more confident, soothe feelings of panic or distress, gave me a boost, nothing to fear	C.3.1.2.1 Switch in mentality, changed perspective, not the same each time we join, thought it was just me	C.3.1.3.1 Organize own circle, better person, bigger impact, amplify the good, make better world	C.3.2.1.1 Said on an interview, went to manager, conversation with boss
"I hear all the girls that have similar situations and I feel more confident. This helped me soothe feelings of panic or distress" "It really gave me a boost. I cannot really describe. It's not tangible, but I kind of felt good that there are these people in my life looking after me, helping me" "I got like a bit of a switch in mentality that you have nothing to fear"	"I got like a bit of a switch in mentality that you have nothing to fear" "The group changed my perspective around the work-life relationship or work-life balance" "because we are not the same each time that we join the circle" "I used to see other working moms being much more relaxed than me, having almost no stress. I thought it was just me. Now I feel relieved to realize that I am not alone over there"	"This group has really touched me and helped me want to organize my own circle in the future" "Such a circle is making me a better person, because I want to create a bigger impact and to amplify the good thing and the impact that we are having right now as working moms and it made me think of more ways that I can help through community building or support to other women or mothers" "It made me ask myself how I can grow this impact even more, and how I can make this world better"	"When I was asked if I have kids in my latest interview I said 'Yes, and I am very proud of them. They have helped me evolve as a person and a professional'. I wouldn't have shared this in an interview before joining the circle" "I went to my manager and I said, I'm not going this, this feels like you just pick the cute young girls of the company to just, look pretty" "I had the conversation with my boss because then the appraisals came, and I was very specific and I got the message through and I'm going for a bonus"

Figure 20 Data Analysis and Coding for Research Question 3: Impact of Learning

Sample Interview Transcript

00:08

Researcher

Thank you so much for helping me out with my master thesis and on the last week of summer, I really appreciate that and welcome aboard the research. As I also already mentioned you, this will be recorded, but you're free to abstain and stop participating at any time this conversation feels uncomfortable.

02:02

Research Participant - Violet

Okay.

02:05

Researcher

Great. Let's discuss about you and the working moms of Athens. Tell me a bit about you and the family, then how you came to be with this group and your experience so far, and we'll take it from there.

03:56

Research Participant - Violet

Yeah, actually, I'm trying to remember. I remember seeing a couple of posters online about this Lean In circle which I didn't know at the time, and I was triggered by the topics and how they were approaching this working parent thing, and how they stay with the pragmatic point of view. I really liked it because it's quite practical and, matter of fact, not very "oh but children are so cute" or "you should do this, and you should not do that". It was like, everybody's going through a hard time. Everybody's challenged in different areas of their lives. Let's see what we can share and what we can learn. It was kind of a dream by that. I remember I reached out to you to, ask what this is and what you do. Also, I was thinking maybe I could share my experiences on top of learning from other people's experiences. I guess that's how I got in.

05:14

Researcher

Okay, but first what's your family setup?

05:23

Research Participant - Violet

Yes. We are two parents, a man and woman, and we have two children who are both boys, age 11 and four, and we have two dogs. I'm not sure if they fall into the family category [laughs]

05:40

Researcher

[laughs] Would you think they do?

05:41

Research Participant - Violet

Indeed, they do take a lot of effort!

05:45

Researcher

Right.

05:46

Research Participant - Violet

Yeah. So yeah, two kids quite challenging. We both work a lot. We were until recently both in the business world, I was an employee, and my husband owns his own company. And now I'm an entrepreneur as well. So, I own my own company too. By saying that, I just want to make the point that we both have very demanding, working realities and long hours throughout the day, we have to travel a lot. So, it was especially challenging. It is especially challenging with the children.

06:33

Researcher

OK. So, you found the circle, you came into the circle and then?

06:36

Research Participant - Violet

Well, I came into the circle and in the beginning, I couldn't join because you guys were having meetings every month on Fridays. And because I'm playing basketball, I have one of my practices on that same day and hour. I was just following the communications and WhatsApp and the materials that you were sending, and I was reading them all and everything. When my season ended, and I was more flexible, I started joining the calls as well. To be very honest with you, I mean, I was very surprised by the level of support that I felt throughout the circle. I mean, I got into a virtual team of people, women that I didn't know. I had no connection with anybody in the circle. I didn't know anyone. I really liked the openness of the conversations and the opinions and how everybody was sharing their own experiences

to help others. But those experiences were practical help. Like I was literally literally building my own business at the time when I joined and I still am, but it was at the very beginning and everybody was super supportive, like to introduce me to people, to link me with their own employers, you name it. They were very supportive practically, but also like, during this meeting. I mean some psychological support as well. Like, you can make it, you can succeed. What do you need to succeed? Build those things. In every level, I think it's very useful and hopefully I can also, by sharing my own experiences and my own thoughts, maybe I can also help some members of the group to do more things or achieve what they want to achieve.

08:51

Researcher

You mentioned a lot, the word support. How did you see it manifest within the circle?

08:59

Research Participant - Violet

In many different ways. I mean, as I told you, one was very practical, like connect me to people that would be helpful, potential, partners, customers, whatever. Also, I really appreciate the "I'm here for you" kind of a thing. I'm not just practically make connections or do something or send an email, but also talk about it, whatever you might be struggling with or how you can overcome something that looks like a big obstacle at the moment. There were a few women that were entrepreneurs, became entrepreneurs a few years ago. They were able to kind of share their own experience about that journey. I think the support comes in everywhere and just even sharing thoughts, like "I saw this on the internet, and I was thinking this and that". Suddenly you do realize that you're not alone. There are other people who are thinking like you and like, or don't like things that are happening, and I think that's very important because there are topics that you cannot easily discuss with people around you, not even within your family or within your work or whatever. It's very important to have like a few topics that you can openly discuss with a group of different people

10:26

Researcher

Topics like?

10:28

Research Participant - Violet

Topics like we have been discussing about gender equality, for example, me too. All these things happening, like what parents should be doing or not be doing, the do's and don'ts kind of. Many social issues around women mostly, but still quite wide social issues that it's just too sensitive to start the

discussion with people that you don't know, if they're willing to have this discussion with, you don't just casually chat about gender equality at the party.

11:08

Researcher

You don't?

11:09

Research Participant - Violet

No, you don't, if you want people to like you [laughs]

11:15

Researcher

Yeah. Don't bring this up around cocktail hour. [laughs]

11:18

Research Participant - Violet

Well, I do by the way, but it's not received very warmly sometimes, it's an unpleasant thing. It becomes unpleasant, the more you talk about it, right? Even if you are with someone who really thinks that there should be equality and we should be doing things and we should be changing our society, it still is not a pleasant topic to be discussing like casually. You can do it, of course, with friends that care about this topic and that you can even disagree with them and that's okay. It has to be within a safe circle that respects all opinions. You know what I mean?

11:59

Researcher

And this was something that you found in the circle?

12:03

Research Participant - Violet

Yes. For sure. We don't always agree on everything, but it's very interesting to hear different points of view. As long as you will be respected for what you're saying and able to respect what other people are saying, then it's, it's a very safe space to share your beliefs and your ideas and your thoughts.

12:22

Researcher

Any stories around sharing that you remember something you've shared, something someone else share that you distinctly remember?

Research Participant - Violet

Yeah. Actually, at some point, were talking about how we have felt discrimination in the workplace or being women. I remember that the sad thing was that everybody had a story to share, like everyone, nobody said that has never happened to me. To be very honest with you, I mean, up until the point, I thought I was not being discriminated against. I mean, if you asked me a few years ago, I would say no. I mean, I know it's there, but I haven't felt it. Right? When they started thinking about it, there was so many incidents that I thought that they were, it just happened. If you add them together, you see a pattern. Like for example, I was working for a big multinational company and there would be a customer event. They asked me and a few other colleagues to help with, organizing, directing the customers to go to the auditorium, which was fine until I realized were all girls under 25 and kind of good-looking, and I was enraged. I was enraged back then. I went to my manager, and I said, I'm not going this, this feels like you are just pick the cute young girls of the company to just, look pretty. I'm not here for that because, I have a job role job school. I'm getting paid to do what I believe I do well. And that's it. Stuff like that back then, I didn't realize it. I mean, I was angry, but I wouldn't say that this is, sexist thing. Right? I just thought there was a bad decision made by someone, but then when you start thinking about stuff like that and how, for example, I also shared in that discussion how, during an interview, the HR lady not only asked me whether I'm married and if I have children, which okay. I had one at the time and she said, and are you planning for one? I'm like, okay, we're getting to know each other. Do you want to be friends? So, you know, things like that. When everybody shares incidents that has happened to them, you realize that it's not because it's you, it's because you're a woman and it's very different because sometimes you kind of think maybe the way I handled something, maybe it's the way I positioned myself. I don't know, whatever. So, it's very important to share stuff.

Researcher

Thank you for that story. Anything else you would like to elaborate based on, what do you think is the impact that this learning experience is having if it's having any impact on you?

Research Participant - Violet

Okay. For me, I think it's threefold really. I think one is the safe space I told you, like, I know that they have like-minded people in the circle, and I can share thoughts and opinions and also learn. I know that this group of people is there for a reason and that helps has a scope. So, one is the safe space. The other

one is, as I said, learning from other people's experiences and also getting advice, like practical advice, how to handle something, like how did you pick your kids schools based on what, or what's happening in your family when something happened? You know, stuff like that. The third one, the sharing, I mean, I do think that there are a few things that I have thought through a lot. I would like to share my point of view in case somebody could be helped.

16:50

Researcher

For sure. Let's dig a little deeper into learning part you mentioned. Can you be more like, give me an example or a story with regards to what influences this learning?

17:08

Research Participant - Violet

Learning from other people, you mean?

17:11

Researcher

Any way you experience learning in the circle.

17:16

Research Participant - Violet

Okay, so again, different things. For example, we receive materials before every meeting and you'll have a lot of kind of academic content in there, like research results, statistics. I love it. I love it. I'm all about numbers, and I really think it helps you kind of place things in the right order or in the right size. I think that learning for me is quite objective. You have to get the facts right. To understand what's happening, how it's happening, what's the impact, the speed, the size, whatever it is. And then there's the other one. Like, how do you feel about things and how do you act and behave and decide for everyday things? And, the first part, the learning, the data part is easier. You have to find the sources, you have to follow like the right, I don't know, organizations and people and whatever. You can learn maybe about what's happening up there, although it's not very easy by the way, to get to the right data and understand what it says, but still, it's easier. The, more kind of, personal thing, personal learning, where you can take all that and try to interpret that and turn it into decisions and actions and mindset really. And, and this is where the sharing stories from the group helps a lot. Because every time we get a topic and then we discuss about by the bias or a work-life balance or whatever, and you realize that there are many different things that are happening out there, and you may not be aware, and there are many different ways of experiencing, each topic for different people. You kind of understand what's happening outside of your personal bubble. It also helps you shape your mind in the sense. What I'm

trying to say is that you start making decisions using not just your experience, but also other people's experiences. It's really valuable because your own experience it's good enough, obviously. If you are a thinking person, the person who it's trying to learn and understand and evolve, it's definitely good enough, but it's even better when you get other people coming in, telling you things, telling you how they're thinking about things, how they make their own decisions, or why they made their own decisions. Suddenly you can have a mind shift, or even if you don't, you kind of take a different point of view and confirm your way of thinking probably, or confirm your decision, but still, you're in a much better place. It's not just your instincts and what you think is best, but you combine information from different people. As I said, most topics are not things that you discuss out there. It's not easy to get other people's views. It's like the period. I was reading today an article about how period, affects your body and how you must go for your number two because of the period, but almost no woman knows that it's natural. You know, it's naturally connected. There was really like lack of information among women on that topic. Right? And it's like that. I mean, you wouldn't go casual and talk about your periods at work. Even if the person next to you would be willing to share, it's not easy to start that discussion. It's too specific. I think it's very important to be sharing what you're going through and how you see it with other people. It's the same with the topics we have in the circle.

21:48

Researcher

Great. So, any learning moment within the circle that you mentioned one briefly, when you said that the discrimination story, anything more in particular when you've seen learning happened for other people that it's a good story worth capturing you would think?

22:21

Research Participant - Violet

I remember one discussion. We were split into different work groups, and we had the discussion about how schools they are not designed for working parents. And were again sharing stories. I shared mine where I was called spoiled because I expected the school to be there while I'm working. And I was shocked. I was shocked by the choice of word. Anyway. I realized when I heard stories from other people there and they had all similar challenges and they also had like personal challenges as well, because if you don't have the infrastructure to support you, if you're a working parent, a working mom and the father works as well, or if you're a single mom and you have to work until five or six in the afternoon and no school is open until that time, right? So, what do you do? A lot of women choose to not have a demanding career and work part-time or work for the public sector or do whatever they need to do to be home at 1, 2, 3 to be with their kids. Other families choose to pay for a nanny, but that's not an option. Other families choose to have the grandparents look after the kid, which again, it's quite common here in Greece, but it shouldn't be the default option and it's not possible for everyone. I

remember that shame that I realized how big of a problem I was. It wasn't just me and a few other people, which I kind of knew based on logic. Once you discuss you see the frustration and how people were going through the same problem with the same energy, like you realize that it's indeed a very big thing and not just exaggerating or just focusing on the wrong thing.

24:38

Researcher

For sure. Did the fact that you went into breakout rooms help you more to realize this?

24:51

Research Participant - Violet

Yeah, I think yes, because it was like a few of us every time and it's easier to share stories when it's like three or four people, because if it's 20, I don't have the time or the focus to listen to 20 stories, right? When it's three, four people, maybe five it's easier and also, it's much more interactive. You can interrupt without feeling like you're being rude. And I think it works great. I think every time we have had a discussion like that in a smaller circle, it really helped to be more authentic, and not think about the "too many people. I shouldn't speak". It's just a few of us so it's easier. You are more natural.

25:41

Researcher

Okay. Did it make a difference for you the fact that there was a circle endorsed by Lean In or you would have joined such a search query?

25:55

Research Participant - Violet

Yes, it did. Actually. It did. Again, although I was not looking actively for something like that, it was more than checking for content than looking for a circle around this topic, when I realized it was endorsed by Lean In, I started looking at it in a more positive way in the sense that I knew that there would be structure. It's kind of, as far as I knew at the time, it wouldn't be just one individual deciding however he, or she may be great, and I think I liked that.

26:52

Researcher

Great. Anything else you would like to add to this discussion, your experience, your overall viewpoint, or any other comments or remarks you have?

27:14

Research Participant - Violet

The only thing I will say, maybe I've touched upon it previously, but it's an excellent thing to be connected to people that you wouldn't be normally connected, and you have that under an umbrella or the common understanding and the common, I don't want to say problem, but it's almost phase one situation that everybody's in. Because I have had this in my life through basketball, by the way. In the basketball teams, I was always member of the team that comprised of people that I wouldn't normally hang out with or work with so many different types of people. And I really loved that diversity, how you can hear all the different things. And, and I really liked the fact that I was able to connect to all those women being so supportive, it really gave me a boost. I cannot really describe, it's not really tangible, but kind of felt good that there was a new bunch of people in my life looking after me, helping me and asking for help.

28:34

Researcher

And it didn't matter that this circle was mainly a digital one and not a physical circle, like the basketball team?

28:47

Research Participant - Violet

Okay. Good point. Not really. It didn't really matter. I mean, I think that connection and communication was there, but I think that some face-to-face interaction really helps. If, for example, we are able to meet once in a while, even for like coffee or drinks or something, not necessarily as the group meeting with the topic. I think it would be a bit better. Well, hopefully we don't cancel the next face-to-face meeting due to covid. I was sad that it was cancelled.

30:04

Researcher

Thank you so much for your time and for your participation, it really meant a lot to the research. As I shared, I will be making a transcript of this for the purpose of thesis. I will destroy the physical and digital copies of this as soon as my thesis is over as you saw in the consent form. Anything else you would like to add?

31:47

Research Participant - Violet

No, thank you for inviting me to the research.