Life Situations and Institutional Supports of Women University Students with Family and Job Responsibilities

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Abstract: *This empirical study focuses on Canadian women studying adult education, social work, and nursing, while managing paid work and family roles. Qualitative data illustrate survey findings on the contribution of life situations and institutional supports to role strain and stress experienced by these non-traditional university students.*

The increasing presence of adults in universities challenges educators and policy-makers to reflect on institutional responsiveness to non-traditional student groups. This issue is pressing because the adult university student population is becoming more diversified, as new clienteles attempt to increase their marketable skills (Apps, 1988). Women with family responsibilities are one such group, whose needs differ markedly from traditional populations universities were designed to serve. Not only do these women retain primary responsibility for family work (Napholz, 1995), but many must also continue their employment in an era when public spending on higher education is decreasing. As a result, these students may be caring for young families or elderly relatives, while continuing to be sole providers or co-contributors to their families' well-being (Lewis, 1998). It is not surprising that women drop out of university more often than men for non-academic reasons (Merdinger, 1991) or that multiple role women are more vulnerable to role strain (Marlow, 1993).

Personal and institutional support can reduce role strain (Mikolaj & Boggs, 1991) and make the difference between continuing participation and dropping out (Lewis, 1988). However, it is not clear to what extent university adaptations designed to ease the work-study interface are helpful to women seeking to accommodate family needs (Miles, 1989). As there is little research indicating which life situations and institutional supports make a difference, it is difficult to adapt services to these students' needs. This paper presents findings from a survey of adult women with family and job responsibilities, who are studying adult education, social work and nursing in Canadian universities. Excerpts from interview and focus group data are used to illustrate and enrich the findings, on the contribution of specific life situations and institutional supports to role strain and stress.

The study's theoretical framework revolves around four key concepts. **Role strain**, a felt difficulty in meeting role demands (Goode, 1960), is made up of role conflict (from simultaneous, incompatible demands), overload (insufficient time) and contagion (preoccupation with one role while performing another). Role strain can lead to **stress** if demands are perceived as taxing a person's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). Researchers have identified some **life situations** which may influence these women's vulnerability to stress and strain. These include occupying a job with long, unpredictable or inflexible hours in an organisation which is intolerant of interference from other roles (Lambert, 1993). Increased vulnerability can be related to demanding family situations, such as single parenting, having younger children (Mikolaj & Boggs, 1991, Voydanoff, 1993), or lower income (Sands & Richardson, 1984). Number of children, full or part-time status as student and/or employee can also influence vulnerability (Koeske & Koeske, 1989, Schmidt & Scott, 1986).

Affective and tangible support can reduce the impact of stressful life situations (Krahn, 1993). The researchers examined **tangible supports** in universities and the workplace, which the literature and the authors' previous qualitative work suggested might be beneficial. These include university supports which increase student control of time, pace and place of learning or increase access to needed resources (Long, 1983, Kelly & Voydanoff, 1985). Distance education offers more flexibility and control than evening or part-time accommodations, which can be difficult for women with families (Miles, 1993). Student services can be helpful in facilitating time management, peer support and

financial and dependent care assistance, if they are accessible outside of traditional times (Coats, 1989, Copland, 1988). Workplace supports such as schedule flexibility, leave provisions and financial support can also be helpful, even though they were developed primarily to enhance productivity of a increasingly diverse workforce (Lambert, 1993, Voydanoff, 1993).

Methods

This research combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Interviews with 30 students were analyzed to identify key variables to examine in a subsequent survey of multiple role women in Canadian universities. A purposive sampling approach was used to select 17 adult education, social work and nursing programmes, reflecting linguistic and regional diversity, as well as differing degrees of adaptation for an adult clientele. An estimated 87% of eligible women in the sampled programmes participated. All respondents were at least 23 years old, employed a minimum of 9 hours weekly and caring for children or other dependent relatives. Respondents were enrolled in a final undergraduate year, a Master's degree or a post-RN programme. The instrument was a self-administered questionnaire, comprised of some existing and adapted scales as well as some new scales developed from the qualitative data. A panel of experts and two pre-tests ensured good content validity for the new measures, all of which demonstrated satisfactory reliability. Readers are referred to Home (1998) for further information on the measures.

The researchers wanted to ensure they understood the practical implications of the overall survey findings, while making the latter accessible to a wide audience of potential users. An adapted focus group method was used to present preliminary findings in four regional feedback sessions. Over 100 representatives of diverse interest groups (unions, workers, students, employers, policy-makers) heard a summary of key descriptive findings before participating in one of nine focus groups. Data analysis focused on implications for educational institutions and the workplace, including strategies for coping with obstacles to change (Home, 1996). Summaries were distributed to participants for local action, while aggregated data were combined with survey results to produce two bilingual publications which featured a data summary along with practical strategies (Home, Hinds, Malenfant & Boisjoli,

1995).

Further analysis was carried out, to identify which independent variables were related to role strain or stress. Two types of independent variables were examined. Life situations included variables pertaining to the respondent (age, ethnic origin), her family (caregiver status, parenting responsibilities, income), her work and student roles (full or part-time status, type of programme). Tangible institutional supports included those used in the university (such as distance education, part-time study, study skills workshops) or the workplace (study leave, cost reimbursement, workplace equipment). A two step procedure was used to **analyse the quantitative data**. First, analysis of variance allowed the researchers to select those life situations or institutional supports associated with the dependent variables. Next, multiple regression analysis was carried out to determine how much each of these variables contributed to stress or role strain. Using a hierarchical, stepwise method, the researchers first entered the life situation variables, followed by the institutional supports. The final model showed how all entered variables together explained stress and role strain respectively.

Findings: Characteristics of the Sample

Eighty-five percent of the 453 respondents were part-time students. Three fifths worked in full-time jobs and studied at the Master's level. The majority (80%) had a family income over $40,000 (Can.) and lived with a partner and children but 16% were single parents. Two-thirds had one or two children under the age 13 and 27% were caring for an adult or a child with disabilities. Nearly a quarter of the respondents were studying adult education, a third were in social work and 43% were in nursing. The adult education students were different from the other groups in some respects. Fewer were single parents but all were studying at the graduate level. These women had higher family incomes, perhaps because they tended to be in managerial and professional positions or self-employed. The nature of their work meant they reported more irregular work hours, although they saw their job demands as being less intense than the nursing students, who were obliged to do on-call and shift work. Compared to social workers, adult education students felt less preoccupied with student concerns while performing their work or family roles.

Findings: Impact of Life Situations and Institutional Supports

Multiple regression analysis was done separately for stress and role strain. Low income was the most important life situation predictor, in that women with lower incomes had significantly higher stress and role strain. Once income was controlled, no other life situation variable made a unique contribution to stress. Students were at higher risk for role strain, however, if they were involved in course work (rather than practicum or thesis), had children under age 13 or had caregiving responsibilities.

With respect to the institutional variables, some differences were found between predictors of stress and role strain. Regardless of income, students who were in distance education or had paid study leave experienced less stress. Surprisingly, two other supports appeared to increase students' level of stress. Women who participated in study skills workshops or had assignment date flexibility in emergency situations reported higher stress. All these variables together accounted for 13% of the variance in stress. In the case of role strain, only two institutional support variables made a unique contribution, once life situations were controlled. Students able to use workplace equipment or data for their assignments reported less role strain, while those benefiting from flexible assignment dates experienced higher strain. These variables, along with the four significant life situation variables, accounted for about 10% of variance in role strain.

Discussion and Conclusions

While multiple role women are coping with many difficulties, low income seems to be most problematic. Full-time students and single parents are at no great risk of role strain or stress once income is controlled, suggesting that it is the lack of financial resources which makes these life situations most difficult. Not only do low income women live "in terror of having a broken appliance," but they also have to expend enormous amounts of energy "scraping money together", as one women put it. Without enough income, these women have to cut corners by decreasing such expenses as child care and day camps, or by increasing time spent in their paid jobs. Both of these choices reduce time available for studies, which then "seem to stretch on forever". If we wish to prevent these women dropping out (Merdinger, 1991), adult educators need to advocate for increased access to adequate financial

assistance for students who must continue to support their families (Lewis, 1988), even if they are "spread too thin" (Home, 1993).

Lack of choice around financial and family obligations was a theme which permeated the interview data. Not only must they work "to pay the rent and feed the family", but they must also be ready to drop other responsibilities when family crises occur. It is not surprising, therefore, that mothers of younger children and caregivers are at higher risk of role strain. These women need to be available to provide regular care (after school, and during holidays), as well as for frequent school and medical appointments. In addition, however, women are still expected to be the primary carers (Baines, Evans & Neysmith, 1991) if care arrangements break down or someone gets sick. Choosing between caring for a sick child and writing an exam would make anyone feel "pulled apart" by role conflict. The university and the workplace still expect that family responsibilities will be looked after without impinging on studies and with very little need for institutional adaptation. This study suggests that this expectation should be questioned.

The data on university and workplace supports challenge adult educators to re-examine the usefulness existing supports for diverse subgroups of adult students. For example, distance education can reduce stress but is often available only to students who are geographically isolated, instead of being an option for any student whose life situation makes class attendance difficult. Paid study leave reduces stress, probably by reducing the number of hours students must spend in their jobs, but very few workplaces offer it. Finally, this study suggests that some adaptations designed to help adult students may not work for women juggling family and job responsibilities. For example, extending assignment deadlines gives temporary relief, but students still feel stressed, as they must find time in their overloaded lives to complete the accumulating work. Further research is needed to identify which policies or practices may help different adult student groups. It is hoped that the issues raised in this study will raise awareness of the specific needs of one such group, with a view to enhancing access to appropriate educational provisions and services.

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