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Lives Behind the Faces: Perceived Influence of Families on Female Adult Learners

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored how the perceived influence of members of both the family of origin and current family impacted adult female's educational experiences. Findings suggest that family of origin significantly impacted attendance as traditionally aged students while supportive current family members enhanced persistence.

Introduction

When an adult female undergraduate student begins work towards a bachelor's degree, there is typically a story, or reason, why she did not pursue or complete higher education studies as a traditionally-aged student. These stories are influenced by family values and expectations, individual perspectives, the historical time period in which she was raised, and cultural expectations (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Leeder, 2004). Expectations based on roles and responsibilities for males and females are modeled, or normalized, by family, community members, and institutions in day-to-day living situations. These expectations are historically and contextually situated and changes to these norms tend to occur slowly. Because women's lives are so intricately woven into the fabric of their families, big decisions, such as those related to college attendance, are likely influenced by family members.

Despite broad societal changes in family structures, the increasing number of women who work outside the home and the increasing need for a more highly educated work force, there is a question as to whether adult women feel supported by their families in their initial decision to attend college and their ability to persist towards bachelor's degree attainment.

Theoretical Frameworks: Social Constructionism and the Life Course Theory

Individuals are socialized by society and their family from the moment they enter the world. This socialization, or acculturation, is often so embedded that there is no recognition of the knowledge or norms that are being transmitted. This phenomenon is explained by social constructionism which explains that knowledge acquisition is a product of the environment and that the self and others have an interactive effect (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg, & Echevarria-Doan, 2008). Social constructionists hold that meaning making and knowledge are created at the individual level, but influenced by society, so each individual's perception of reality will be different (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The family is integral to society and the socialization process (Oliveri & Reiss, 1981).

While social constructionism explains the importance of social environment, which includes the family from a contextual perspective, it does not account for the influence the family is likely to have on decision-making that occurs over a period of time or the prominence of the family. For this reason, a second theoretical construct, the life course perspective was incorporated to provide a more complete explanation of family influence. The idea of linked lives, part of the life course perspective theory, provides a framework which recognizes that lives are interdependent, especially in regard to the family, they are impacted by socio-historical

influences, and they are expressed through networks of shared relationships (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003).

Specifically, this theory is relevant to the current study because the perceived influence of the family on the adult female undergraduate student is likely to be influenced by macro issues related to gender, culture, and the time period in which she was raised and by micro issues such as each individual's unique perspective based on personal characteristics and how and where they are situated within their family (Aulette, 2002). This theory also provides a rationale to examine the decision-making process retrospectively due to looking at the life trajectory as a continuum.

Review of the Relevant Literature

Female undergraduate students are obtaining bachelor's degrees at higher levels than males. Summary results from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) show that between 1996-1997 and 2006-2007 the number of bachelor degrees awarded to men increased by 25% while bachelor degrees awarded to women increased by 34%. Further, college enrollment is expected to increase through Fall 2017 with a projected increase of 19% in enrollments of people over the age of 25 (NCES, 2008). Several common themes have emerged to explain this phenomenon including career advancement or change, personal fulfillment, and family. Career advancement is the number one reason most adult learners return (Bauman et al., 2004; Kasworm, 2003). For female populations from a lower socioeconomic level, higher educational attainment may be viewed as an opportunity for social mobility because it can be tied to career advancement (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001). This is important for women whose goal is economic self-sufficiency.

Research shows that adult female students are different in significant ways from traditionally-aged students as well as male adult learners. First, the major differences between traditionally-aged students and adult learners is that adult learners, which includes both women and men, often have work, financial, and parenting responsibilities (Kasworm, 2003; Lumina, 2007; NCES, 2008). These additional life roles tend to impact women and men differently. Female students are much more likely to interrupt their studies than either traditionally-aged or adult male students due to family responsibilities (Jacobs & King, 2002; Kasworm, 2003).

Research done by Jacobs and King (2002) found that 82% of adult female undergraduate students were returning, rather than entering as first-time students. These findings closely mirror those of Plageman and Sabina (2010) which found that 84% of their sample identified themselves as returning students. This supports what a number of researchers have found, namely that female educational and career trajectories do not tend to follow linear paths but rather paths that are interrupted and change along the way (McGoldrick, 1999). The reasons for interruptions to study are as varied as the adult learner population. Hadfield (2003) points out that "nontraditional students often interrupt their studies for a variety of reasons such as to, have a baby, change jobs, close on a house, care for an ailing or dying parent, get divorced, get married, have bypass surgery, start a business, or simply catch their breath" (p. 19).

Family support and perceived family support are important because of the primary position so many woman hold in their families for taking care of the home and children. Support from family members, as a variable impacting persistence for adult female undergraduate students, is a construct, which has been researched in a number of studies. In an attempt to quantify support, it has been divided into two spheres, emotional and instrumental. Emotional support is defined as acceptance, encouragement, and praise, which encompasses being available

on a relational level meaning being willing to listen, talk, care, support, and empathize while instrumental support is hands-on help with such things as finances, childcare, and household responsibilities (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Adult learners have been found to benefit from both emotional and instrumental support (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Pearson & Bieschke, 2001; Plageman & Sabina, 2010).

Research Methodology

A basic interpretive approach, using purposeful and snowball sampling, was chosen to help clarify how both the decision to attend and ability to persist are processes that occur over time and how the perspectives and worldviews of the study participants were impacted by their families. The research was conducted over the summer of 2010 with undergraduate students from a mid-size public university in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through a campus supported female adult learners on-line support group, word of mouth, and several were participants in an academic support service program. Individuals were contacted and screened by the researcher. If they were eligible and agreed to participate, a one-on-one interview was scheduled. Each interview began with completion of the informed consent, demographic questions were asked and then open-ended semi-structured interview questions were asked. There were 13 participants and each interview lasted between one to two hours. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Demographic data were summarized. Qualitative data were coded for content analysis and then categorized. Initially, all of the data was color-coded using 13 characteristics which were categorized by using the text within each transcript. Following that, the transcripts were reviewed a second time and analyzed for meaningful words and phrases. It was in this way that the themes of family of origin, the dream of attending college, current family matters and the institution as a factor emerged from the data. Patton (2002) explains that content analysis means reducing the data so that core meanings and consistencies are identified. This research project used triangulation between the transcripts, field notes, reflective journal notes and member checking with participants to assist with transparency and validity of the findings (Creswell, 2007).

Participant Demographics

Thirteen women over age 25, with a current family, defined as having a significant other and/or at least one child, and either pursuing or graduated with their bachelor's degree in the past year participated. The average age of the participants was 42 and they had an average grade point average (GPA) of 3.27. There was one freshman, three sophomores, three juniors, four seniors, and two who had graduated in December 2010. Eight respondents reported they were full-time students and five were part-time. Study participants were asked to broadly categorize family of origin level of income as high, middle, or low. Seven participants reported the level of income in their family of origin was low, four reported middle, and two reported high. The participants were asked the same question about their current family and eight respondents reported a low level and five reported they were at a middle income level.

Ten respondents had a significant other and all of the participants had children. Ten had children who lived at home. Five participants had children living at home who were younger than 13 years old. In addition to being parents and students, ten of these women worked part-time. One was employed full-time and three did not work. Also, 12 of the 13 participants were first-generation college students. Taken together, these women were almost exclusively first-generation college students, tended to live at a lower income level than their family of origin, to be upper classmen, to have a fairly strong GPA, work part-time, and have children who are older than 13.

Findings and Discussion

Family of Origin Issues

All of the participants reported feeling academically supported as young children. School was recognized as important in all the participant's households. Several of them spoke of being taught to read outside of the school setting. Several others spoke about family expectations of performing to the best of their ability academically. Report card day was recalled as an important event in each participant's family history. Most of the participant's reported that during their elementary school years they felt confident in their ability to be academically successful.

Despite the early emphasis on the importance of education, the majority of participants did not experience that support by the time they reached high school age. Four of the main themes that emerged were: (1) parents no longer placed priority on the student's academic progress, (2) parents believed that because they were women, higher education was not as important, (3) families had shifts to their family structure causing changes in home life, and (4) families experienced issues associated with drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness. Taken together these variables seemed to have the most profound influence on the reason these female participants were attending college as adult learners rather than as traditionally-aged students. It was not that the families did not value education; rather, there were other issues occurring within the family that took precedence over the educational pursuits of these participants.

In most of these families, there was a genuine lack of understanding about higher education. Of the 13 participants, 12 were first-generation college students. This was especially problematic when higher education was seen as luxury and working was viewed as the priority. These participants reported that due to low levels of parental education, they did not have support or guidance in regards to pursuing higher education.

The Dream of College

The desire to attend college was a dream for most of the participants from a young age. The path traveled to enrollment was unique to each participant; however, there were several patterns which emerged that together help to explain the journey towards achieving higher education. First, many of the participants spoke about people outside of their family of origin who provided some belief and support for their academic endeavors as they were growing up. Next, the participants expressed thoughts about wanting to achieve more and/or to have the ability to provide a better life for their current families through attaining a college education. Several participants reported that through maturation and increased life experience, they regained some of the confidence they had lost in their ability to be academically successful. Despite the fact that during the time period these women were raised cultural expectations focused more on staying home to raise children or working, each of these women had a strong personal desire to achieve a bachelor's degree.

Current Family Matters

This study found that the current family significantly influences the adult undergraduate woman's educational experience. The reason for this appears to be the importance each of these women placed on being the primary caretaker of their families. This seems to imply that despite broad societal changes that include more women gaining more education and increasing in numbers in the work force, they still struggle with the central moral dilemma of the dichotomy between serving themselves versus serving the needs of others (Gilligan, 1982). Other aspects specifically related to the current family are: the importance these women placed on being a good role model for their family and community; the importance of feeling supported by family members, particularly from their spouse/partners; how integral the current family is to the time of reentry; and finally the on-going challenge of balancing all of their life responsibilities.

The Institution as a Factor

This was an indirect factor which emerged from the data. At the time this study was conducted, no degrees could be completed without attending daytime, weekday classes. This structure worked for these women and their families. Course requirements which included on-campus activities during out of class hours were a hardship for these women causing stress and anxiety. They also reported they did not take the time to participate in many groups or activities. Although these aspects do not directly influence persistence, they certainly affect the educational experiences of the women due to their inability to participate in these activities and missing out on the networking opportunities they provide.

Conclusion and Implications

The family of origin tended to be more supportive of academic endeavors as an adult, particularly mothers, than they were when these women were in high school. For the most part this support was emotional rather than instrumental. While the majority of these women felt supported by the members of their family of origin, they could not count on their help on a day-to-day basis.

For the current family, when a mother is also a student there are often accommodations that need to be made as everyone adjusts to the new responsibilities which become part of the family system. Although the women spoke of trying to minimize the impact on their family, they acknowledged that there were times when school-related responsibilities impacted the current family.

There are several important points for individuals who work in higher educational settings to be aware of in regard to serving the needs of this student population. The key areas that have emerged are issues associated with admissions processes, new student orientation, advising, and the need for increased faculty awareness with regard to incorporating adult learners into their classrooms. Each of these areas would benefit from an audit of best practices to determine if student needs are being met in an effective manner.

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