A Case Study of Female Adult Learners in Community Colleges: Understanding Multiple Role Navigation

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Abstract*:* This qualitative case study focused upon better understanding and analyzing how female mothers and adult learners in community colleges perceived and navigated multiple roles.

Relevant Literature and Theoretical Framework

Female adult learners continue to be the fastest growing subpopulation in community colleges, making up 60% of the population. (AACC, nd; US Census Bureau, 2011). Research shows that female adult learners face challenges juggling domestic, professional, and academic roles (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Home, 1998; Fairchild, 2003). Previous female adult learner research shows the existence of challenges related to juggling multiple roles and subsequent social support ramifications (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998; Leavett, 1989), but few studies seek to explore how women negotiate resources to resolve these conflicts.

This study is framed by role theory, first established by Goode (1960) and later refined by the many studies that have used role theory (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998; Terrell, 1990). Role theory establishes that roles, whether perceived or real, do not exist independent of each other, but instead, impact each other in such a way that the person navigating them is impacted, as well. The existing research that utilizes role theory further offers themes such as guilt, stress, anxiety, depression, role reevaluation, and effects on personal relationships, among others. Adult learners face three dimensions of role strain: role conflict, role overload, role contagion (Home, 1998). Role conflict occurs when two or more roles vie for the time and attention of the learner. Role overload occurs when one role requires more of the learner than the learner can handle. Role contagion is preoccupation with one role while completing another. Perceived role strain or overload often causes more stress than actual strain or overload, and often, women blame themselves for their inability to focus or attend to responsibilities rather than question social or familial expectations. Female adult learners are constantly evaluating their roles, values, and beliefs and revising them. Kasworm (2005) found that these revisions are either the result of some sort of crisis, or they precipitate one.

According to NCES (2003), there are 732 rural community colleges in the United States. Total female enrollment in 2-year colleges is 3,013,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Of that total, 1,187,000 are over the age of 25. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower surveyed 350 adult female students at a community college and found that those with children felt "excessively burdened by the stressful demands of parenting" (p. 297). In addition to female adult learners who had children of their own, Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower note, "A surprising discovery was the number of women who provided child care for grandchildren or nieces and nephews" (p. 298). "Child care concerns appear to be the greatest source of stress facing adult women students" (p. 298). Sixty-one percent of women who have children after

enrolling in community colleges fail to finish their degree, and many community college students arrive on campus already navigating work and family (Gonzalez, 2011).

The resounding issue at the heart of female adult learner persistence and completion seems to be role conflict. The research in this review shows that women who have more spousal and family support feel less stress (Loeper, 2003) and that more flexibility among stakeholders (spouses, family, friends) also results in less stress for the female adult learner (Brazier, 1988). Research also shows that women with children younger than age 13 exhibit more stress and feel more conflict than do others. Thus, the decision to study role navigation of female adult learners with children under the age of 13.

Research Design

This instrumental case study (Stake, 1994) utilized interpretive design (Merriam, 1998) to understand how female adult learners in community colleges perceive and navigate multiple roles. The guiding research questions were: a) How do female adult learners in community colleges perceive multiple roles? b) How do female adult learners in community colleges navigate multiple roles?

The study included 19 individual interviews and two focus group sessions. The participant criteria included female adult learners (defined by adult responsibilities such as financially independent, parenting, full-time employment, etc.) who had completed at least one full semester of community college within the past two years and who had at least one child under the age of 13. In total, the data represents 25 contact hours gathered through 19 individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews and two focus group meetings.

Each participant was asked to reflect on her own experiences as a student, parent, spouse, employee, and community member. Participants were also asked to reflect on the hypothetical situations of the two vignettes that were offered for reading during the interview. Credibility, dependability and peer debriefing strategies were utilized to ensure rigor and adequate quality of research during all phases. The data was analyzed in two manners – via open thematic coding and via the application of the theoretical framework, role theory, as a guiding structure for analyzing participant data through multiple iterative phases of first and second level tagging, labeling and coding (Baptiste, 2001; Weiss, 1994).

Findings

For this paper, the data will be drawn from two subthemes: *School IS Cool: The Paradigm Shift in Student Support* and *The Unbreakable Venn Diagram: The Unique Integration Among the Roles of Mother and Student.*

School IS Cool! The Paradigm Shift in Student Support

Earlier research in role theory with regard to female adult learners suggests that women who returned to college faced a negative social stigma (Spence & Hahn, 1997). This attitude was rooted in traditional gender roles and the belief that women should focus more on the roles of wife and mother and should limit any activity that impeded their ability to be available for their family and to carry out the duties of traditional gender roles. However, participants in this study revealed a change in others' perception of their college attendance. Participants were asked explicitly how they believed their families viewed their desire to go to college.

Participants felt supported by family members and spouses with their decision to return to college. Although some participants do not receive the instrumental assistance (help with chores and caring for children) they would like from their spouses and families, most commented that

they felt generally supported in their efforts. The paradigm shift has affected social beliefs but has not fully permeated the practice of supporting female adult learner return to college.

Alice asked her husband for his opinion when she decided to return to school, and he told her if that's what she wanted to do, then that was fine with him. He does not have a degree, but her parents, who live several states away, do have a degree, and she says that she turns to them when she has academic questions. Taylor says that her husband (who already has a degree) encouraged her to return to school:

> *Well, he kind of encouraged me because I've worked in special ed for seven years in a school system as an aide and wanted to go back where we were but because of, I guess, we bought a house that was – it was still within our means, don't get me wrong – but without two of us working it was going to be outside of our means. So, and then running kids to everything else, between trying to work and take care of them with him being gone most of the time, there wasn't a choice to go back up there. So whenever we got here and he got more of an income raise I didn't really technically have to go back to work so it was a good time for me to start school.*

Taylor was strategic in her timing to return to school. She chose to delay a return to school because she needed to work; her family needed the extra income, and Taylor implies that going to school while also working full-time would have had negative effects on their family. Thus, she waited until her family was in a more secure situation that did not require a second income.

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She adds of her decision to return to school:

> *It's a, yeah, it was a… well, I mean, the kids really didn't have too much say in it, but it was definitely a husband-supported decision. He said, "Go do it now," you know? Because I was scared and trying to put it off and he said, "No, you need to make your appointments, go do it, go do it, go do it." And so when I finally did it he was like, "Thank you. Good job!" you know?*

The Unbreakable Venn Diagram: The Unique Integration Among the Roles of Mother and Student

A Venn diagram usually focuses upon the area grouped in the middle where the two circles overlap (the aspects that the two roles have in common). Findings for this study indicate that there is something more to see in the Venn diagram. Participant interviews show a strong relationship between the role of mother and the role of student such that to fail as a student would mean failure as a mother.
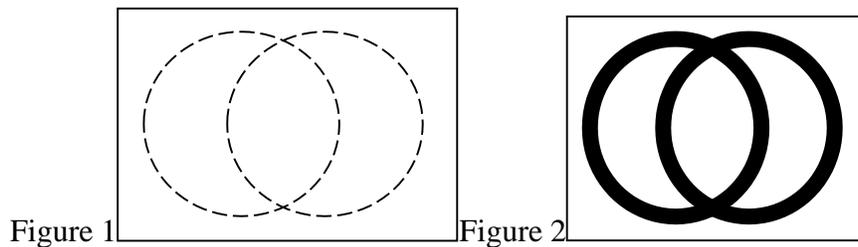
Figure 1 Figure 2

Figure 1 above shows the weak link between roles compared in a traditional Venn diagram. They are made to overlap and show places where the two have similarities. This traditional Venn diagram has dashed lines with small breaks in them to illustrate the ease with which one might break the two components apart. The lines show that the boundaries are permeable and that the roles are integrated. In Figure 2: Mother/Student Role diagram, the lines are wider, darker and have no breaks, illustrating the strength of the bond between the two components or the two roles. The intensity of the lines in Figure 2 shows that the boundaries are not permeable and cannot be easily separated.

Holly shares her perspective:

> *I, at first, when I first started high school I really wanted to go to college. I knew it was, like, the right thing to do and I wanted to do it and then the further on I got in high school, I actually dropped out my senior year. I got my adult high school diploma and I actually ended up finishing six months sooner than I would've if I would've stayed in high school, but I just couldn't – I couldn't, like, take high school kind of . At the time it was just, like, so much going on and I just, like, kind of just didn't do anything for maybe two or three years and then I, like, got pregnant. And I was like, "I need to go back to school because I need to. This isn't just my life anymore," you know? I have to do something.*

For Holly, the decision to return to school was a selfless one and integral to providing a good life for her child. Before she became a mother, school was not a priority for Holly. She dropped out of high school and had no motivation to return. At this point, she could not see the value of an education. When Holly became a mother her perspective shifted. She saw the value of the education and how it would impact others, particularly her son. Taylor also shares her motivation and how it helps her manage her guilt:

> *Yeah, you know, like I said, there's still guilt's in there… feeling like I don't take enough time to spend with them because of school, but the guilt's not there coming back to school. Just because now it's a time in my life when I need to do something not just for me, but because it is something that I'm doing, it's going to benefit the whole family eventually.*

Taylor weighs the outcome of getting a degree against the guilt of not being able to spend enough time with her family. Like Holly, Taylor sees her return to school as a way of helping her family in the long run. The guilt that she feels now is temporary, but the positive repercussions of earning a degree will be long-reaching. Taylor is not just earning a degree for herself; in her perspective, she is doing this for her family.

Mothering is an ever-present role that does not stop between the hours of 8:00 am and 5:00 pm when the typical workday begins. Philosophically and perhaps inherently these women feel that the role of mother should precede and supersede all other roles, including the student role.

Discussion

Earlier literature suggests that the social acceptance of traditional gender roles has kept women from returning to college and persisting in their efforts (Hayes, 2000a); yet more current research reveals a change in those beliefs and trends (Spence & Hahn, 1997; Twenge, 1997). Spence and Hahn (1997) concede, however, that old fashioned sexism was still evident in the college students who participated in their study, and they were concerned that the politics of the late 1990s would incite a return of such sexism. The participants suggest that in 2013, women feel entitled to a college education and feel that it is generally socially acceptable for them to attend college. Although Spence and Hahn (1997) and Twenge (1997) point to a change in cultural and social attitudes toward women, Moen and Sweet (2004) point to existing inequalities in beliefs and practices. Moen and Sweet (2004) show that though social beliefs have changed, practices such as those found in the workplace or in the academic sector have not. This is consistent with findings of instrumental support lagging behind general attitudes.

Literature that focuses on multiple roles doesn't adequately illustrate or define the places where one role ends and another begins. The boundaries of roles are less fixed than some role theory studies suggest (Goode, 1960). In 2002, Colbeck discussed role integration pertaining to faculty and described the roles as blended. Gatmaitan (2006) points to the push/pull effect that the roles of student and mother have on learners. This study supports Gatmaitan's findings and further suggests that the strength of one role relies on the strength of the other. For the participants in this study, being a student is very much cohesive and it is about being a good mother. In the same way that children are often extension of their parents, the student role is an extension of the mother role.

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