

SOME FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DECISION OF MATURE WOMEN TO ENROLL FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

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Abstract

The study investigates the characteristics of mature women who enroll for continuing education. Their goals and motives and the obstacles they perceive are surveyed, as are their self-attitudes and the attitudes of others who potentially influence their decision to enroll for continuing education.

The questionnaire results reveal that mature women who enroll in university courses are seeking self-fulfillment and the realization of personal needs in other than affiliative spheres. A subsequent positive shift in their self-perceptions is apparent, and the initial attitudes of "significant others" may likewise undergo transition: spouses of first year mature women prove supportive of the decision, but a different attitude is characteristic of the spouses of women who had re-enrolled for subsequent years.

The mature group is also compared to a younger group in order to determine whether the decision to enroll for higher education is influenced by situational components, and some affirmative evidence is reported.

Résumé

Cette étude veut découvrir les caractéristiques des femmes d'âge moyen qui s'inscrivent à des cours d'éducation permanente. On énumère leurs buts, leur motivation et les obstacles qu'elles doivent surmonter. On discute également leurs attitudes envers elles-mêmes et les attitudes des autres personnes qui peuvent influencer leur décision de se remettre aux études.

Les résultats du questionnaire révèlent que les femmes d'âge moyen inscrites à des cours universitaires recherchent la réalisation de soi et la réalisation de besoins personnels non-reliés au domaine de l'affiliation. On relève un changement positif dans leur perception d'elles-mêmes. Les attitudes initiales de personnes-clés dans la vie de ces femmes subissent également des changements. Les époux des femmes inscrites en première année d'études appuient la décision de leur épouse. Cependant, une différente attitude caractérise les époux des femmes qui se sont ré-inscrites après avoir terminé une première année de scolarité.

Ce groupe de femmes fut comparé à un groupe de femmes plus jeunes pour voir si la cause de leur décision de se remettre aux études peut changer d'après la situation de chacune. Cette étude indique que la situation de vie d'une femme peut exercer une influence sur sa décision de poursuivre ses études.

Stereotypical Attitudes Toward the Continuing Education of Mature Women:

The trend toward increasing enrollment of mature students in higher education has produced what has been viewed as a special problem group by educators and counsellors. While the

stereotypical image of their "uneducatability" due to lack of ability or non-use of skills has been refuted (Senders, 1961; McGowan and Liu, 1970; McClelland, 1973; Perkins, 1973), other pervasive and negative attitudes toward mature students persist and many of these are sex-specific.

Negative stereotypes of the mature woman's goals and attitudes toward education are general, and have evolved from a view in which her goals were seen strictly in economic terms (Bardwick and Douvan, 1971). This assumption presumes that the middle-age woman is motivated to enroll for higher education through the need to support her family, perhaps as a consequence of deprivation of financial support through divorce or death of her spouse (Kalback and McVey, 1971); or, if she is married to augment her husband's income. Thus she is depicted as directed toward the nurturing of her family through rapid employment because her financial contribution is thought to be an extension of her home and child-care duties rather than aimed at self-fulfillment (Hartley, 1960; Nye and Hoffman, 1963; Bardwick and Douvan, 1971).

Data inconsistent with this stereotype are provided by a U.S. study conducted by Manis and Mochizuki (1972) who report that the typical woman applying for continuing education has a family income in excess of \$16,000 per annum. Motives are thus not economically determined; however, the opposite extreme to the "woman-without-choice" viewpoint is the suspicion that she holds a "dilettante" attitude toward education. This viewpoint implies that her education is not directed toward eventual employment, but simply allows a means of filling time (Scanzoni, 1972).

The Achievement Needs of Mature Women:

Another possible explanation of the motives of mature women returning to education has been provided by Bardwick (1971) who suggests that mature women may be fulfilling a dormant motive to achieve. Having withdrawn from the labor force 10-15 years earlier to fulfill "traditional" roles, many women at middle-age find their major role radically decreased when the youngest child enters school (Friedan, 1963; Bardwick, 1971; Scanzoni, 1972). McNeil (1974) notes that the traditional role was once sufficient to fill a woman's adult years when her expected life span was 35-40 and approximately coincided with the termination of her child-rearing years; however, the middle-aged woman of today has approximately one-half of her life before her when her chosen career becomes less than a full-time occupation. The middle-aged woman, having successfully fulfilled family-oriented roles, becomes less anxious about her femininity; however her self-percept may require independent achievement in non-affiliative

spheres (Bardwick, 1971). Thus it is conceivable that mature women who enroll for continuing education are demonstrating a re-emergence of a motive for achievement or self-fulfillment that lay dormant through the years when affiliative motives proved primary (Senders, 1961; Dawson, 1965; Baruch, 1966; Letchworth, 1970). This sequential pattern of employment, retirement from the labor force for child-bearing and rearing and an eventual return to employment represents a growing trend (Komarovsky, 1973), even though this pattern relegates women to second-class positions in the work sphere.

However, not all women return to school or directly into employment when their children reach school age. Similar to her choice of a career (Hawley, 1971; 1972), a woman's decision to return to university is highly dependent on the attitudes of significant others, i.e., husband, friends, and relatives, and may be related to the mores of her community (Bardwick, 1971).

The current study attempts to further investigate the importance of the attitudes of "significant others" to the mature woman's decision to pursue continuing education. Our major emphasis, however, is research of the personal needs and goals of the enrolees. Ancillary information regarding factors involved in the decision may be revealed by a question regarding the major obstacles perceived by the participants. Also, an attempt to predict continuing success will be made through a comparison of two sub-groups of the mature sample, the first group entering or re-entering university after an extended period as a homemaker, and a second sub-group composed of women who had successfully completed the previous year and were entering their second academic year. Situational components of success will be investigated by survey of young (under 21) freshman women with continuity in the school system. This group will be compared to the "mature" group in order to investigate the situational components of success and to provide further information regarding Porter's (1974) contention that the attitudes and goals of young women are becoming increasingly traditional.

METHOD

Participants:

Sixty-eight (68) women participated in the study. Three groups were specified, as follows:

Group 1 was composed of a random sample of 22 mature women students who were either entering or returning to university following a lengthy period. Participants were recruited from

a list provided by the Office of the Dean of Women.¹ Mean age was 34.0 years.

Group 2 was comprised of a random sample of 22 women members of the Continuing University Education (CUE) group. Their membership consisted of mature students who attended university in the previous year. Mean age was 35.6 years.

Group 3 was comprised of 24 women students drawn from an Introductory Psychology class. Mean age was 18.5 years, with a range of 17-21 years.

Questionnaire:

A twenty-four item questionnaire was designed to sample self-attitudes and the perception of the attitudes of significant others toward the participant's continuing education, as well as to provide information on marital, family, and economic situations. Self-attitudes and the perception of the attitudes of others were measured via a five-point scale ranging from "very positive" (1) to "very negative" (5). Elaborations of responses were solicited under each scale. Areas of interest, motives, goals and obstacles to enrollment were surveyed via open-ended questions, and data regarding prior education, current enrollment and friendship groups were also collected.

The questionnaire was refined and first administered in a pilot session employing a predominantly female undergraduate Psychology of Women class rather equally represented as to "young" versus "mature" participants. Ambiguities in the questionnaire were eliminated, and a class discussion of the results led to the elaboration of two questions.

Procedure:

A random sample of 47 mature first year participants (Group 1) received questionnaires by mail. Twenty-two were completed, for a return rate of 46.8%. Group 2 was contacted in person, and each of the twenty-two women completed the questionnaire. Group 3, the younger group, completed the questionnaire in one experimental session for credit in an Introductory Psychology course.

RESULTS

A comparison of age, marital status, number of children and previous education detected no significant differences between the mature groups.

Because these characteristics proved very similar the data analysis is generally combined over the two mature groups, with the exception that differences that proved significant are noted.

Results relating to the major influences under study (i.e., motives, goals, obstacles, the influence of others) are preceded by descriptive data to provide Canadian statistics.

Description of the Personal Characteristics of Samples of "Mature" and "Young" Students:

Personal Statistics: Sixty-two per cent of the mature women were married, 27% were divorced, widowed or separated, 11% had not been married. The typical mature woman was 34.8 years of age and the mother of 2-3 children at home ranging in age from 3 months to 24 years, with a mean of 11 years. Few mature students had children under school age. Only one of the "under 21" group was married, and none were rearing children.

Previous Education: Of the mature sample, 36% had earlier completed a portion of their undergraduate work or achieved their degree, but none had taken post-graduate training. High school graduates comprised the second largest group (32%), while 9% had attended junior college and 23% checked "other" (indicating attendance at technical schools or other educational institutions). Over 10% of the mature sample were enrolled as special students having not completed high school matriculation. The entire group of young women had matriculated for university entrance.

Finances: Forty-two per cent of the mature students reported receiving financial support from their husbands, 31% were self-supporting and 27% had taken student loans. All first-year mature women who applied for and were granted loans were either previously married or had remained single. However, lack of marital financial support did not relate to inferior economic circumstance: an equal number of first-year mature women without husbands were self-supporting. Further, of the sub-group who had attended university the previous year, 37% reported financing from government loans, compared to 16% of the first-year women who were supported by loans. While only single, first-year women applied for and were granted loans, subsequent re-enrollment resulted in a much larger percentage of mature women seeking financial assistance, and 30% of the married women were included in this group. Forty-eight per cent of the younger students reported they

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Table
Specialization and Vocational Preference of Young and Mature Female Students.

Occupations of Predominant Female Membership:

	<i>Young</i>		<i>Mature</i>	
Education	4%	}	36%	}
Nursing	9%		7%	
Psychology, Sociology	30%		18%	
Rehabilitation Medicine	—		12%	
Household Economics	12%		—	
Music, Painting, Art and Design	4%		5%	
Laboratory Research	—		5%	
Volunteer Work	—		2%	
	59%		85%	

Neither Sex Predominant in Membership:

Physical Education, Recreation	21%	}		—
Geography	4%		25%	—

Occupations of Predominant Male Membership:

Biology	4%	}		%
Pre-Med	4%		—	
B. Commerce	4%		12%	}
Law	—		2%	
Politics	—	2%		
<i>Undecided</i>	4%	11%		
	100%		100%	

were receiving financial support from their parents or spouse (in one case), 31% were self-supporting, and other sources (primarily student loans) accounted for the remaining 21%. Mature and young groups are thus in similar economic positions and neither group appears to be at an economic disadvantage, although family incomes were not compared.

Academic Specialization: Most women were enrolled in Education or Arts: 86% of the mature women and 71% of the younger women were enrolled in these fields. Regardless of age,

specialization and vocational preference were generally in occupations having a predominant female membership (see Table). Mature women almost exclusively chose traditionally female occupations whereas the enrollment of younger women in these fields is somewhat less. But young women do not alternatively choose "male" occupations; instead they enroll in fields not relegated to either sex. Thus an interesting trend over age is suggested, although a note of caution in interpretation of the data is necessary because the occupational division by sex is rather

arbitrary; the sample is small, and the "young" group is drawn from a specific population (Introductory Psychology classes).

Time Commitment: When the time commitment to education is considered a difference between the two mature groups is seen. Twenty-eight per cent of the first year women attended on a part-time basis but less than 5% of the second year group were part-time students, indicating that continuation and an increased commitment to full-time study are highly related. The young group, who had continuously been in the school system, were all full-time students.

Motives and Goals:

An open-ended question surveyed the major factors in the decision to attend university. The desire for educational advancement was listed by each participant; however, an elaboration differentiated the motives of the mature and younger groups. Additional motives listed by the younger students were the influence of parents and friends and an interest in university life. The mature students did not list these factors, but reported a need for self-fulfillment or identity: 85% of the mature group listed this motive, with no significant differences between the two sub-groups. Contrary to Baruch's (1966) findings, stated need for fulfillment and prior education proved unrelated, $X^2(1) = 0.08$; $p > .05$.

The younger students never mentioned a goal of self-fulfillment, and monetary gain was named by only 9% of this group. Economic gain proved to be of more significance for the second year mature students: 22.7% of the second year group named financial gain as a purpose or object. However, only one of the first year mature women named a monetary goal, and thus a minority (6%) of mature women indicated financial gain as their ambition while remuneration (in combination with other goals) proved important to an additional 6%. Life crisis, reported by 7% of the mature women, did not relate to economic goals but to self-fulfillment.

Whereas the ambitions of the younger women included marriage (45.8%), many (89%) of the older women had been or were married and indicated a desire for extended aspirations. Thirty-eight per cent of the younger women chose both a career and marriage, one-half of the group named a career only, 8% preferred marriage not combined with a career, and one young woman chose further education rather than marriage or a career. In contrast, the entire

group of mature students held aspirations that were outside the home, either in employment (57%), further education (31%), or volunteer activities (4%). The remaining 8% checked "other", and none named a return to domestic duties.

Major Obstacles:

When asked to name the major obstacles faced on entrance or return to classes, all three groups reported insufficient funds. Of the younger group, 66.7% reported no other problems and the remaining one-third mentioned distance, and opposition from significant others. In comparison, the mature women were required to cope with the lack of child care facilities as well as time bargaining for study and family needs. A more elusive problem is their self-reported lack of confidence, never mentioned by the younger group. Self-attitudes prior to enrollment also provided strong differences between the mature and young group: of the younger group, 16.6% were somewhat self-dissatisfied prior to enrollment compared to 40% of the mature women who described themselves as extremely self-dissatisfied prior to entering university. After enrollment, 16% of the mature sample retained some degree of negative self-attitude, but in fact 93% of the mature students experienced a positive shift in their self-concept.

The Influence of "Significant Others":

The expected positive influence of "significant others" on the decision to return is in part confirmed. Mature groups report the attitudes of others to be important to their decision ($\bar{X} = 2.2$, $s = 1.44$, on a five-point scale in which "1" represents "very important" and "5" represents "not at all important"). While no differences were seen between the two mature groups, the attitudes of others proved more important to the younger group ($\bar{X} = 1.7$; $s = 0.47$) than to the mature group and this is a significant difference, ($t(58) = 2.16$, $p < .05$). For the younger group, "significant others" may refer to peer and friendship groups — their friends' attitudes may be influential in their decision ($\bar{X} = 1.7$; range 1-3). Further, 79% of the young group reported that their friends were enrolled compared to 20% of the mature group. The attitudes of friends proved important to the mature group's decision as well (\bar{X} first year = 2.1; \bar{X} second year = 2.5), but the prime influence is contributed by her family. Her children are supportive (\bar{X} first

year = 1.8; \bar{X} second year = 1.5), as is her husband. Although he proves to be most supportive of any "significant other" in her first year (\bar{X} = 1.5, s = 1.26), second year women report less enthusiasm on the part of their spouse (\bar{X} = 2.4, s = 1.59); in fact, significantly so, (t (27) = 1.64; p < .05). The result may in part be due to her changing ideas about her role: 36% of the first year mature women and 59% of the second year group stated a re-evaluation of their attitudes toward their roles.

However, although there may be some increasing pressures in that second year, students perceive less enthusiasm in their husbands toward their continuing education, the somewhat negative attitudes initially held by others outside the nuclear family may decline. Although both mature and young first year women students perceive others to hold somewhat critical attitudes toward their education (\bar{X} mature = 3.3; \bar{X} young = 3.4), this influence may alter toward the positive, as reported by second year mature students (\bar{X} = 2.9). Unfortunately, a sample of young second year students was not surveyed to determine whether this change is irrespective of age.

DISCUSSION

The Mature Woman's Achievement Needs:

In accord with Bardwick's (1971) expectation, the results indicate that mature women who enroll for continuing education are seeking realization of personal needs and self-fulfillment in areas outside the affiliative spheres traditionally thought sufficient concerns for women. Thus Canadian women demonstrate a resurgence of the need to achieve when "femininity" is confirmed through marriage and homemaking and affiliative motives decline in importance. While life-crisis spurs a small number of women to enroll, the majority require no such dramatic event. This trend may instead be related to a general emergence in society of a malcontentment with "traditional" female roles, and, as women's affiliative obligations decline in their middle years, the perception of socially-accepted emerging roles for women may serve to intensify the resurgence of a dormant motive to achieve. These factors may explain the increasing numbers of women who return to university for re-training.

Re-training is their goal, not the simple filling-of-time suggested in earlier writing. The majority of the mature women surveyed intend to later enter the labor force, and in some cases

it was suggested that monetary rewards will enhance the satisfaction of personal needs. It is only surprising that but 12% of this sample name remuneration as a goal, because payment for work has a high social value.

The ambitions stated by the mature women necessarily differ from the futures desired by their younger counterparts. Ambitions alter over age, and this is particularly true for women. While mature women students typically have achieved marriage and are now directed to employment, younger students typically foresee their future in both careers and affiliative roles. And the reasons to enter or return to university reflect these goals: mature women seek self-actualization, but younger women are highly dependent on the attitudes of their peer group and may enter university to conform to the norms of their parents and friends. Thus mature women hold more personal goals than the other-directed goals of the young.

The Attitudes of "Significant Others":

The attitudes expressed by her acquaintances are important to the mature woman who returns to university, but it is the attitudes held by her immediate family that prove particularly influential to her decision. Children provide consistent support and husbands of first year women prove to be highly supportive of the decision. However second year women perceive their husbands to hold a somewhat negative attitude toward their spouses' education, perhaps as a consequence of the woman's increasingly liberalized perception of her roles and the likely loss in traditional services due to time bargaining. A related factor may be increased commitment to full-time study and the likelihood that financial losses (through loans) are necessary to continuance. The inference is that those who return are highly committed, and are not dissuaded by financial considerations. While both these factors (greater time and financial commitments) may be predictive of continuing success, they may also relate to husbands' increasing dissatisfaction with their wives' continuing education.

Some Situational Factors and the Implications for Counsellors:

Predictably, mature students face a different set of obstacles than do their younger counterparts. Younger students apparently have fewer problems as compared to the mature group who mentioned the lack of child-care facilities, time stresses and time bargaining for home duties

and study, and the pervasive lack of self-assurance, mentioned also by Manis and Mochizuki (1972). The obstacles facing mature women place them in a disadvantaged position relative to their younger counterparts, and may also result in selectivity by social class, i.e., only women who can afford child-care can attend university when their children are young. Programs to alleviate these problems would allow greater enrollment of mature women and specific recommendations are these: (1) an early attempt should be made to incorporate part-time credit programs in professional degree courses to allow married women to register for one or two courses per year and thus not be entirely excluded from achievement-oriented pursuits while raising children; (2) public information programs directed toward education of the attitudes of "significant others" should be undertaken by universities, so that stress may be reduced; (3) an increase in availability of child-care facilities should be sought; and (4) counselling programs specifically directed toward aiding mature women in overcoming role conflicts that hinder a change in life style should be made available by universities.

In addressing this latter problem counsellors may wish to meet mature students in groups where problems can be shared, thus allowing individuals to come to the realization that theirs is not an atypical situation. The role of the counsellor in organizing such meetings may be directed at increasing the mature student's self-assurance; individual help may be provided to the mature student through recommendation of non-conflict schedules for home duties and study, thus alleviating the stresses brought about by conflicts in time bargaining.

Equally important is the counselling given to young women. Although women's roles (if not opportunities) are rapidly changing (as epitomized by the fact that more than 35% of married Canadian women are currently in the labor force² and trends indicate that this figure will reach 50% in the next decade), the socialization of girls continues to stress the "traditional" roles as the only suitable roles for women. The young woman learns that marriage is an end in itself (not a beginning) and thus, in young adulthood, she is unprepared to cope with her future. But in fact her adult life may take one of a variety of directions; however two are becoming increasingly likely: (1) she will be-

come one of the increasing numbers of working married women, but because she lacks professional training she will be relegated to a poorly-paid position of low responsibility and status, or (2) she will in her middle years attempt to begin or resume a career with skills out-dated by 15 years. She may then accept an unskilled position, or seek re-training. It is here that information as to the future success provided by the retraining of mature women is required — in essence this would provide an evaluation of the subsequent fulfillment of their personal needs.

Trends in the Goals and Attitudes of Young Women:

Girls who do not respond affirmatively to "traditional" roles are considered "deviant" (i.e., masculine) in our society, and, at ages when conformity (and popularity, as gleaned from other's responses) proves so important, young girls will overtly choose stereotypical futures. Thus a survey of the choices of potential employment may be more indicative of goals than are direct questions regarding domestic duties (Porter, 1974). The current results address this specific question and reveal that the majority of mature women prefer traditionally-female areas, but lesser numbers of their younger counterparts are enrolled in these fields. Survey of the areas of interest and employment goals of young and mature students therefore does not lend support to Porter's (1974) contention that young women are becoming increasingly traditional. But while the trend is not toward stereotypical futures, neither are occupation-by-sex boundaries firmly rejected. As an alternative to "female" occupations, young women do not choose "masculine" areas but instead are turning to occupations not dominated by either sex.

Declining interest in traditional roles is also indicated by the younger women's emphasis on a career: 88% of our sample aspires to this goal, and fully 50% of the younger group see only a career in their futures. There is no reason to suspect that our young sample is not representative of the female college population, and hence this result may be relevant to that perennial but interesting sociological question: Whither the future of marriage?

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