

## Role Management, Educational Satisfaction, and Role Dynamics in Post-Secondary, Re-entry Women<sup>1</sup>

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A sample of 42 post-secondary, educational re-entry women completed an extensive questionnaire focusing on background status, role dynamics, satisfaction with and positive effects of their re-entry experience. Results showed that no differences were found between students in a vocationally oriented, job-training program and more traditional, academically oriented re-entry students. Patterns of relationships between the variables in the study revealed that background-status characteristics were not related to positive effects of re-entry while role-dynamic variables were. Implications for educators are discussed.

As the number of women entering the work force has increased dramatically in recent years, so has the number of adult women entering or re-entering college increased. According to Greene [7], 43 percent of the nation's twelve million students are now 25 years of age or older and between 1970 and 1982, college enrollment among women aged 25 to 29 years of age increased 249 percent while enrollment of women aged 30 to 34 years of age increased 314 percent.

As suggested by Brandenburg [4], Smallwood [13], Robinson [12] and Rawlins [10], many women are entering or re-entering academic life to prepare for a job or enter the work force, to seek more financial independence or meaningful employment, to become employable again after being out of the work-force for a period of time, and/or to improve their occupational status and become better qualified for new career opportunities. As the above and other researchers and theorists including Badenhop and Johanson [2], Folland et al. [6], and Astin [1] have pointed out, however, some women have more personal goals and motives behind post-secondary re-entry. These may include desiring increased personal and self-fulfillment, wanting self-improvement, finding outlets for creativity beyond the family, and/or needing increased stimulation and a change in daily routines, or even finding a refuge from marital and family problems. Reehling [11] has suggested that the reasons or motivations behind post-secondary re-entry among women could generally be grouped into either a socio-psychological or an economic-vocational classification.

Hooper and March [9] and Badenhop and Johanson [2] have also pointed out that while needs are being met for many of these women students, it is clear that many problems, conflicts, and potential areas of stress exist for

them as re-entry into academic life adds new responsibilities to their roles as spouses and mothers. Berkove [3] and Folland et al. [6] found that women's lack of time and role strain were the biggest problems faced in post-secondary academic re-entry. They noted that many women feared that re-entry might cause their marriages to suffer and many also experienced guilt and felt selfish for spending money and time that was needed to meet family needs.

### *Role-Management Techniques for Handling Role Stress and Maximizing Performance*

Christianson and Wilson [5], in a study of 1000 Appalachian college re-entry women, reported that their areas of greatest concern were three-fold: performing successfully in school, managing efficiently at home, and coping effectively with a changing self-image. Functionally, the post-secondary re-entry woman student is usually adding a new and demanding role to her life while attempting to maintain her performance in her other life-roles of wife and/or mother. As Hooper and March [9] have suggested, many divorced re-entry women students are attempting to fulfill three major roles: parent, student, and worker. As they also pointed out, these combinations of roles and their associated demands frequently result in high levels of "role conflict" and associated stress. Role conflict is likely to be experienced by anyone who is operating in a multiple-role situation where the demands of one major role might conflict with those of others. The literature on post-secondary re-entry among women students emphasizes two potentially related but conceptually independent role-management techniques or strategies for attempting to minimize or control the degree

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of role conflicts associated with re-entry. As Van Meter and Agronow [14] have pointed out, one strategy is to set priorities and limits on roles by originally defining them in a manner which makes them more manageable. In this study, the authors refer to this type of strategy as "role-input." A second strategy, identified by Hooper [8] and Berkove [3] as "role-support," relates to achieving help in the performance of roles from spouses, children, and/or relatives and friends. As these authors have noted, many women experience verbal forms of support which are never actually translated into instrumental activities, thus making post-secondary educational re-entry more difficult.

### METHOD

The goal of the present study was to address three major questions relating to post-secondary educational re-entry women. First, do women re-entry students who are primarily job-oriented experience different levels of satisfaction or positive effects of program involvement when compared with women re-entry students who are less job-oriented and more traditionally academically oriented? Second, do married and divorced women re-entry students differ on these same dimensions? Third, what patterns of role management techniques are utilized by the above groups and how functional are they in achieving successful role performance and experiencing success in re-entry?

Respondents in this study were 42 women who were re-entering academic life after varying lengths of time out of high school or college (all had been out of school for at least two years, however). While all were attending the same small, private junior-college, eleven were enrolled in a 12 week Job Training Partnership Act program of concentrated classwork designed to assist them in developing basic skills required for entering the work-force. Thirty-one of the female respondents had re-entered for a more traditionally-oriented academic college curriculum. In addition, seventeen of the 42 women were divorced and twenty-five were married.

All respondents were volunteers who agreed to participate in the study by completing an extensive questionnaire which focused on background characteristics and role-related experiences and outcomes. Participation rates were 100 percent for the Job Training Partnership Act group (JTPA) and 62.5 percent for the traditionally oriented students. The self-report questionnaire included items which measured the following background or "entrance status" characteristics: age, marital status, husband's age and education (if relevant), number of children, age of female and male children, hours-per-week employed outside the home, number of sources of income, income level, education prior to returning to school, and number of years out of school before returning to a post-secondary educational program. The questionnaire also focused on a number of specifically stated role-related dimensions which included: whether needs were being met in post-secondary programs, level of satisfaction with post-secondary program, number of

unmet needs experienced. In addition, embedded within the questionnaire and not differentiated from the many other items were four items which dealt with "role support," twelve which focused on "role conflict," nine focusing on "role input," and three focusing on students' perception of their overall "role performance."

Group differences between the 31 traditionally-oriented junior-college re-entry women and the 11 JTPA program women students were analyzed via *t*-tests to see if these two groups reported different types of background-status and/or role-related experiences, supports, and pressures. In addition, a similar statistical comparison was used between the 25 married and 17 divorced re-entry women students to assess similar potential differences. Finally, Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated for both sub-samples to assess relationships among the variables in the study.

### RESULTS

The average age of the re-entry women was 31.45 and that of their husbands was 38.68 (for those who were married). The total sample averaged 1.85 children whose average ages were 11.16 in the case of females and 10.59 in the case of males. Total family income averaged \$12,000 per year and the women reported an average of 10 hours of paid employment a week on their parts. Average educational level attained before re-entry was completion of the junior year in high school and a GED for the total group of women, who averaged 9.78 years since they had been in school the last time. For those who were married, their husbands averaged between "a high school degree or GED" and "some college." On the whole, respondents' reported level of satisfaction with their post-secondary educational experience was between "neutral" and "fairly satisfied" and responses made it clear that the most frequently encountered frustration was difficulty in finding sufficient time to study. The total sample characterized itself as achieving a "moderate amount" of role support; experiencing a "moderate degree" of role-conflict; achieving a "moderate degree" of individual input into how their multiple roles were defined; and experiencing slightly more than a "moderate degree" of satisfaction with their performances in various roles.

An analysis of potential differences between the JTPA program re-entry students ( $n = 11$ ) and the more traditionally academically-oriented re-entry women ( $n = 31$ ) on mean scores on all the variables included in the study compared via *t*-tests revealed only two significant differences: husbands' educational level was significantly higher among the latter group ( $t = 2.26$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p < .05$ ) as was level of income ( $t = 9.75$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No other significant differences were found to exist between the two groups on any of the other background-status characteristics or the role-related variables.

When the sample was broken down into married ( $n = 25$ ) and divorced ( $n = 17$ ) re-entry students and average scores on all variables were compared via *t*-tests, married women were found to be working significantly more hours per week ( $t = 2.64$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p < .02$ ), to have fewer

**TABLE 1**  
 Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Variables Relevant to  
 Both Married (Listed Above, Each Column) and Divorced (Listed Below, Each Column).

	Age	Number of Children	Age of Female Children	Age of Male Children	Number of Sources of Income	Income Level	Years Out of School	Satisfaction with College	Positive Effects of College	Role Support	Role Conflict	Role Input	Role Performance	Number of Needs	Number of Met Needs	Number of Unmet Needs
Age	-	.61**	.29	.76**	.13	.12	.64**	.01	-.02	.33	-.09	.12	-.04	-.16	-.05	-.03
		.52*	.52*	.35	.04	.06	.45	.09	.22	.14	.22	.48*	.11*	.31	.33	-.01
No. of Children		-	.40*	.50*	.06	.14	.46*	.13	-.14	.32	.07	-.13	-.15	-.12	-.10	.18
			.32	.37	-.01	.06	.37	.11	-.08	.22	-.06	.08	-.07	.06	-.03	.11
Age of Female Children			-	.31	-.37	-.28	-.07	-.07	.04	.23	-.06	-.15	-.34	-.08	-.04	-.05
				.19	-.12	-.13	.25	-.26	.06	.16	.07	.34	-.08	.15	.26	.21
Age of Male Children				-	.08	.13	.61**	.00	-.07	.15	-.23	.06	-.01	.06	.07	.13
					.47*	.06	.64**	-.05	-.23	.53*	-.14	-.01	-.29	.57*	.46	.50*
Number of Sources of Income					-	.23	.41*	-.18	.06	.16	.19	.38	.26	.04	.14	-.13
						.32	.56*	.39	-.38	-.05	-.14	-.42	-.34	.21	.19	.23
Income Level						-	.49*	-.30	.13	.37	-.06	.09	.39*	-.42*	-.36	-.16
							.46	-.21	.06	.21	-.05	.13	.42	.38	-.25	.15
Years Out of School							-	.10	-.05	.23	.05	.24	.14	.06	.04	.17
								.09	-.17	.29	.01	-.08	-.44	.63**	.64**	.35
Satisfaction with College								-	-.03	.11	-.27	.11	.11	.27	.07	-.62**
									-.34	-.41	-.34	.16	-.10	-.23	-.02	-.14
Positive Effects of College									-	.41*	-.03	.39*	.34	.00	.26	-.42*
										.40	-.27	.41	.26	-.29	-.24	-.54*
Role Support										-	-.20	.42*	.41*	-.12	.00	-.07
											.38	.11	.00	.33	.37	.08
Role Conflict											-	.07	-.48*	.29	.26	.13
												.13	-.46	.10	.06	-.01
Role Input												-	.38*	.05	.18	.04
													.44	.05	.02	-.07
Role Performance													-	-.26	-.17	-.24
														-.34	-.43	-.06
Number of Needs														-	.86**	.33
															.91**	.54*
Number of Met Needs															-	.04
																.35
Number of Unmet Needs																-

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

different sources of income ( $t = 2.67, df = 20, p < .02$ ), but to have significantly higher family income levels ( $t = 4.02, df = 20, p < .001$ ). No other significant differences were found to exist between the two groups on any of the other background-status characteristics or the role-related variables.

Pearson product-moment correlations were used to evaluate relationships between the background-status characteristics and role-related variables for the two subsamples. None of the correlations for the JTPA program subgroup were found to be significantly different from zero (possibly because of the small  $n$ ). Correlations be-

tween the variables in the study which were relevant to both the married and divorced re-entry students are presented in Table 1.

The correlational analysis of married and divorced re-entry women students presented in Table 1 reveals some interesting relationships between the variables included in this study which were relevant to both subsamples in addition to some significant differences in the patterns of relationships among the two groups of students. None of the background-status variables common to both groups were significantly related to need levels, satisfaction with or reported positive effects of college, or any

role variables among the married re-entry students (husband's education correlated significantly with satisfaction with college among the married women [ $r = .43, p < .05$ ], but not with any other variable). Age of male children, however, was positively and significantly related to role support, number of needs, and number of unmet needs among the divorced women students. In contrast, neither number of children nor the age of female children were significantly related to any variable among either the married or divorced re-entry students. As far as relationships between background-status and role-dimension variables were concerned, age was positively and significantly related to levels of role input among divorced women and number of years out of school was positively and significantly related to reported number of needs and met needs among the divorced respondents (though not among married). The only other significant relationships between background-status and role dynamics or outcomes were positive correlations between number of years out of school and number of needs and met needs among the divorced women re-entry students.

For the most part, background-status characteristics were not found to be significant factors in reported role behaviors, needs, or satisfaction with or positive effects of post-secondary education among the respondents. Table 1 also reveals that specific role variables were more frequently significantly related to other role dynamics variables than to background-status variables, especially among the married re-entry students. Level of role input and role support were positively and significantly related to level of role performance among married respondents but not among divorced. Interestingly, although role conflict levels had been described as moderately high among the total sample, this variable was related to only one other variable included in the study: role performance in the married students (where the relationship was negative). Role conflict was also very close to being significantly and negatively related to role performance in the divorced respondents.

Of special interest to the researchers were the findings relating to satisfaction with and reported positive effects of post-secondary education, since both are the vital ingredients of a good academic re-entry process. Table 1 reveals that significant positive correlations were found between reported positive effects of post-secondary education and levels of role input and role support among the married students. The corresponding relationships among the divorced students were close to significant. The only variable significantly related to satisfaction with post-secondary education was number of unmet needs among married students (where the relationship was negative). The corresponding correlation among the divorced students was not close to significant, however.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study on background-status, role dynamics, and satisfaction with and positive effects of post-secondary education among women re-entry college students have some interesting implications for educators.

First, almost no differences were found to exist between the women enrolled in a specific Job Training Partnership Act program (which was very vocationally oriented) and those who had re-entered as more traditional, academically oriented students. No differences were found in levels of satisfaction with or reported positive effects of post-secondary education between the two groups, despite their obvious motivational differences. Similarly, no significant differences were found to exist in related role dynamics variables between the two groups of students. Although both groups were slightly below "fairly satisfied" on their ratings of satisfaction with their post-secondary programs, both were more positive on reported positive effects of such programs.

The three variables found to be significantly related to positive effects of post-secondary education belonged to the group of role-related behaviors or role dynamics: role input, role support, and role conflict. Background-status variables were not found to be related to either reported positive effects of post-secondary education or to reported role behaviors, with one exception. The only exception to the lack of relationships between background status variables and role behavior variables was the finding that age of male children was related to role support among divorced re-entry women students (the age of female children was not related to any role behavior variable). Despite this, however, the relationship between role support and positive effects of post-secondary education among divorced respondents was zero. This suggests that although role support increases with age among male children of re-entry divorced women, the efforts made were not related to reported positive effects of post-secondary education. In contrast, role support from children and husbands among the married re-entry women was positively and significantly related to levels of positive effects of post-secondary education.

Findings concerning role conflict were also interesting. Although negatively related to reported role performance in both married and divorced re-entry students, role conflict was not significantly related to any background-status variable, to satisfaction with or reported positive effects of post-secondary education, or to any other role behavior variable. In contrast, role input and role support were significantly related to reported positive effects of post-secondary education among married re-entry women and role input almost achieved significance among divorced.

In general, the above findings imply that role variables are more important to positive outcomes among post-secondary re-entry women students than are background-status variables. Since role variables are more easily changed than background-status variables, educators interested in supportive programming for re-entry women would, on the basis of this study, best serve their needs by providing skill-building programs aimed at improving the management techniques of increased role-input and role support for married students and increased role-input and decreased overall unmet needs among divorced women. If these dimensions of role behavior were focused on, the results of this study, together with previous research, suggest that role conflicts

experienced by re-entry women could be reduced with the likely effect of increasing not only perceived role performance, but also increasing the overall positive effects of post-secondary re-entry among women students.

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