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# Spousal Support and Sabotage: The Experiences of Female College Learners

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## **Spousal Support and Sabotage: The Experiences of Female College Learners**

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Human beings are social creatures and we rely on support from other people in times of struggle, challenge, and accomplishment. The aspect of family support is crucial in the negotiating higher education demands. This roundtable presents the preliminary findings of a study which examined the support and sabotage experiences of adult female students enrolled in a research extensive university in the Southeastern U.S. city. Two research questions that guide this study are: to what extent did the women experience social support during their studies and to what extent did they experience sabotage?

There is clear and persistent data demonstrating the profound impact spousal behavior can have on adult women students at all educational levels (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Parasuraman, Greenhaus & Granrose; Rose-Mockry, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). It was noted in a review of the research literature that spousal sabotage is one of the leading causes of dropout for adult women and spousal support is one of the more significant factors in their persistence (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Thorstad, Anderson, Hall, Willingham, & Carruthers; Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Corte, 2007).

The ongoing research used a multi-methods design: a survey with 45 items (using a six-point likert-style scale), four open ended questions requiring written responses, and interviews with key informants. The sample consist of over 1,000 women who are over the age of twenty-five and who self-identified as being in a marriage or marriage-like relationship with a person they regarded as their spouse, partner, or significant other. The survey items pertained to both overt and subtle sabotage and direct and in-direct support and explored issues such as: housework and childcare responsibilities, financial assistance, time management, space allocation, psychological and physical bullying. The open-ended questions asked participants to identify instances of support, non-support, stress (both physical and psychological) and sabotage.

In our conversations with graduate students prior to designing the instrument, we learned the many ways in which the family influences their education. The purpose of our study was to gain an empirical understanding of the ways in which spouses influence education. In order to accomplish this, two major research questions were posed: 1) to what extent do students experience spousal support during their education; and 2) to what extent can variance in spousal support be explained by contextual factors in the home and institution. Additionally, three minor research questions are being explored in an effort to capture the data of students who do not have spouses and/or to identify other potential family influences. The three questions were: 1) to what extend do children positively or negatively influence study; 2) to what extend do parents positively or negatively influence study; and 3) to whom do single people turn for support during their schooling.

The population for the study is graduate students currently enrolled in a major research university in the Spring of 2011. The data for the study is being collected using an on-line survey tool (Survey Monkey). Invitation to participate was sent via email from the Graduate School website. The invitation letter was signed by the Dean of the

Graduate School, the Director of the Institute for Women's Studies, and a Professor of Adult Education (three of the co-researchers on this study).

The survey was multifaceted and included a vestibule page, in which students identified their spousal circumstance, e.g. legally married to a male, engaged in a domestic partnership, living in a same-sex union. The survey allows for the collection of primarily quantitative data, but also incorporated open-ended questions for qualitative analysis.

The four explored on the survey were, *Emotional Support*, *Logistical Support*, *Subtle Sabotage*, and *Overt Sabotage*. Each dimension contained items that described the experience. Each dimension contained between five to eight choices. Examples of two items that could be selected relating to *Emotional Support* were (spouse): *shows a genuine interest in the things I am learning at school*, or *is sympathetic about problems that encounter in school*. Occurrences of *Logistical Support* included (spouse): *varies his/her schedule to support my schooling* and *does housework when I'm under pressure at school*. Examples of *Subtle Sabotage* that participants could choose included (spouse): *feels neglected because of the time I spend on my schoolwork* and *tries to make me feel that going to school is selfish*. And in the final and fourth dimension, *Overt Sabotage*, items that could be selected included (spouse), *has threatened to leave me if I don't quit school* or *tries to undermine my confidence for succeeding in school*.

There were four open ended questions and/or soliciting statements at the end of the survey. The first was, *please explain how your spouse has been a positive or negative influence in your education*. The second question asked about the institutional environment: *does your academic department have social activities that include your spouse or domestic partner*. The third and fourth questions related to other family members: *how have your children been a positive or negative influence* and *how have your parents or other family members influenced your schooling*.

The preliminary findings indicate that female students experience significant degrees of spousal sabotage, with the incidents being more commonly restrained or subtle than obvious or overt. In addition, it was the cumulative actions that occurred over time that affected the women's persistence more than one major precipitating event. In addition, there is no indication that length of the relationship affects spousal support or sabotage. However, there is an indication that role stressors may also be a factor that influences sabotage and support, with two-career couples facing unique problems that are then impacted by family issues such as child care and elder care. However, in this study the work-family nexus is not the focus, and while these categories of other variables will be explored, only issues relating to spousal support and sabotage will be reported. The primary support received by the women from their spouses was financial and psychological.