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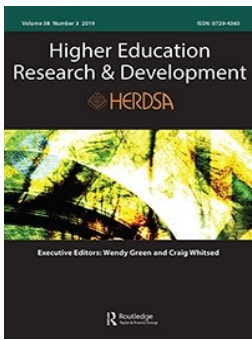
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Going-it alone: the university progression of women nursing students who are the first person in their intimate relationship to go to university

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for an expansion of the idea of the first-in-family student to include the student whose spouse or partner has not been to university. Between 2015 and 2016, a qualitative longitudinal study, guided by Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, was undertaken. Twenty-nine undergraduate women nursing students who began university in a heterosexual intimate relationship participated. All 29 were interviewed in their fourth semester of their degree (or part-time equivalent), and 23 of these 29 completed a second interview in their last semester. Thematic analysis of the resultant 52 interviews revealed the participants who were the first person in their intimate relationship to go to university faced a series of difficulties associated with this relationship. The partners of these women were less willing to share in the university journey and offered little emotional support. Participants experienced personal growth and widened worldviews during their degree, and developed a more liberal stance on gender roles within the relationship. The women's changing perspectives and their partners' ongoing lack of emotional, and also practical support, tested the dynamics of the intimate relationship. The situations of tension and conflict that ensued challenged the women's progression and with this, the stability and functioning of the relationship itself. Higher education initiatives are proposed to support this vulnerable student group. This includes partner outreach activities, enhanced pastoral support systems, and a flexible and responsive approach from the university to women who experience relationship difficulties during their degree. Further research is required to build a body of evidence around the first-in-relationship student experience.

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Intimate relationship; first-in-relationship; first-in-family; progression; nursing students

Introduction

In Australian higher education (HE), students who are school leavers on commencement (aged 17–18) are now the minority (Department of Education and Training (DET),

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2019). The comparative increase in mature-age student representation – aged 20 or over on degree commencement (Bradley et al., 2008) – means the family relationships important to their success have also shifted. More than ever, partners are likely to be the main source of support. While studies on the mature-age student per se abound, those with a dedicated focus on the intimate relationship and its influence on progression (that is, students' continuation and achievement) are limited (Andrew et al., 2015).

An arguably greater omission is the lack of studies into the university experience that consider the influence of partners of first-in-family students (FIF). FIF students are classified as those who come from a family where neither parent nor any siblings have completed a degree before them (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). This non-traditional student group experiences significant disadvantage at university, partly because of their immediate family's lack of a frame of reference of HE on which they can draw to guide and support the student. FIF students are highly represented across Australian health degrees (James et al., 2010; Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

In Australia, women continue to dominate student numbers in nursing degrees, at around 90%. The majority of these women are mature-age (DET, 2015). The global phenomena of an ageing population and rising nursing workforce shortages have intensified the importance of nurse education strategies that support their university success (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). The effectiveness of such strategies relies on an understanding of the students' lived experience within and outside the university, and the factors that make them vulnerable to attrition. This study takes this wider view of the experiences of women nurse students, focusing on those who are the first person in their intimate relationship to enter HE (FIR).

Background literature

Evidence from research across a range of academic disciplines worldwide suggests a strong relationship between partner support and student success, with studies from Australia (O'Shea, 2014), and Ireland (O'Brien et al., 2009) reporting strong partner support considerably reduces the impact of university pressure. UK studies have found that for women nurse students, male partner support has a greater impact than academic issues on their capacity to continue and achieve in their degree (Kevern & Webb, 2004). Of concern, therefore, are the international findings that women students describe inadequate levels of support from male partners (Kevern & Webb, 2004; O'Shea, 2014), and report less practical and emotional support from male partners than vice versa (O'Brien et al., 2009).

While these studies offer important insight into women's experiences, none describe those of women who are FIR. One study that offers some understanding of these women's experiences is Scott et al. (1996). Albeit dated, this study of 188 mature-age married women students in Australia found male partners without a degree qualification offered less support than graduate partners. In these relationships, women were more likely to cite inadequate partner support and family responsibilities as the main reasons behind their attrition.

Evidence from research across a range of degree disciplines indicate women students are also vulnerable to relationship difficulties at university. Meehan and Negy (2003), for example, found married female students in the USA experienced significantly higher

levels of marital distress compared to married male students, while in the UK, Howard (2002) reported statistically significant numbers of relationship problems and breakdown among mature-age women students during their nursing degree, compared to the general population across the same timeframe.

Australian research suggests that relationship difficulties are associated with the male partner's educational background. For example, an analysis of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics national survey in Australia (HILDA) (Butterworth et al., 2008) highlighted higher levels of relationship breakdown where a woman was more educated than her male partner. This study reported a 10-fold greater risk of divorce/separation compared to the mean, when the woman had tertiary qualifications and the man had no post-compulsory education. This was not the case when the situation was reversed, where a greater-than-average level of relationship stability was found.

Tension and conflict in such relationships appear to be influenced in part by the changing dynamics in the relationship as the woman engages in HE. Mature-age women students frequently report personal growth during their degree studies, which manifests as increased self-confidence, widening perspectives and changing priorities (O'Shea, 2014). These changes can be threatening to some male partners, leading to feelings of insecurity and uncertainty (O'Shea, 2014).

This body of evidence suggests that women who are FIR and therefore first to benefit from tertiary education may be particularly vulnerable to attrition and relationship conflict. Despite this, except for Stone and O'Shea (2019) and O'Shea et al. (2015), the influence of partners' educational background is rarely considered in studies investigating FIF students' university experiences. In failing to capture the influence of partners in the growing cohort of mature-age women students, the FIF literature is limited in its scope and usefulness. Developing effective strategies to support this cohort requires an awareness of the experiences of women who study whilst in an intimate relationship, and who are the first in their relationship to do so.

This study explored two interrelated questions:

- How does being the first person in the intimate relationship to go to university influence the woman student's progression in her undergraduate nursing degree?
- How does the woman's university experience influence the intimate relationship itself?

Theoretical framework

Idea of education as transformative

Transformative learning theory developed by Mezirow (2003) states adults undergo personal growth as a consequence of their participation in adult learning. This results in a re-examination of previous assumptions and 'taken-for-granted frames of reference including fixed interpersonal relationships ... cultural bias, ideologies, schemata, stereotyped attitudes and practices' (p. 59). According to Mezirow, transformative learning is the central task of adult education; that is, adult education must 'help the learner realise these capabilities by developing the skills, insights and dispositions essential for their practice' (2003, p. 62).

Research with women in HE commonly identifies this phenomenon of personal growth, often identified as transformative experiences. O'Shea and Stone (2011) for

example described how first-year mature-age women students in Australia experienced personal transformations manifesting as an increased love of learning, confidence and independence. In the UK, Webber (2017) found mature-age women foundation degree students experienced increased confidence and developed an identity outside being a wife and mother. Experiences of personal growth for the women in this present study may have implications for their progression and the dynamics of their intimate relationship.

Gender role theory and the liberalisation effect of higher education

According to gender theory, society differs in its expectations of female and male behaviour and responsibility. Gender role beliefs predict an individual's behaviour and perception of their place within relationships and society as a whole (Acker, 2006). Individuals with traditional gender role beliefs view a woman's domain primarily within the domestic sphere with her responsibility centred on housework and childcare, and a man's place in the workplace with responsibility as financial provider (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Data from the 2018 national HILDA survey (Wilkins & Lass, 2018) reported married or de facto couples and men in general in Australia hold more traditional ideas of gender roles than single adults and women in general, with married men being the most traditional. Pooled data within this report from 2002 to 2016 show women in married or de facto heterosexual relationships work approximately twice as many hours in housework and childcare than their male partners, irrespective of paid employment hours.

Immersion in a transformative HE environment can influence a shift in gender role beliefs, encouraging an increasingly liberal stance (Baxter, 2014). For FIR women students, this may lead to a situation of incongruence with her male partner's gender role beliefs.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of women students. The methodology was guided by Gadamer's Hermeneutic Philosophy (Gadamer, 1986). This philosophy sits within the constructivist research paradigm and takes an interpretivist view of life-experiences and attempts to discover meaning of these experiences through the interplay of the participants' and researchers' perspectives with prior theory. The approach is especially suited to dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, enables mutual construction of meaning, and so allows for a deeper and fuller understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In-depth interviews revealed how these women students made sense of their experience at university. The study was also longitudinal, considering the student experience from commencement (beginning the degree) to its final stages.

Participants

A purposive sample of 29 women nurse students was recruited. All were domestic students, all born in Australia, with the exception of Ruth, who was African, but had

lived in Australia for 10 years. All were enrolled in an undergraduate nursing degree (Bachelor of Science) at a Western Australian university and all were in an intimate relationship and living with their partner on commencement. Recruitment took place using student emails and posters in clinical areas. The lead researcher also promoted the research as a guest in core nursing lectures.

Recruitment took place once ethical clearance was granted by the University's Ethics Board. The researcher did not work in the nursing school, limiting concerns of power relationships and coercion. An important ethical consideration in this study was potential emotional harm arising from discussions of relationship conflict. Details of university counselling services were shared in each interview. Pseudonyms were used and further identifying information altered or removed.

Data collection

A two-phase approach explored the complex and changing nature of women's experience across the nursing degree journey. The first interview was held in the fourth semester of the nursing degree and the second in the sixth (the final semester). Participants chose their interview location, most choosing the university campus, to save travel time. A room was chosen that was situated away from the students' Nursing School buildings. Twenty-nine women completed the first interview, and 23 of these completed the second interview. Concurring with Gadamerian expectations of researcher and participant sharing and consensus, the same researcher completed all interviews. The interview explored the participant's journey. Open questions, together with prompts and probes were used to engender full and meaningful discussions. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection and analysis took place concurrently. Interviews were continued until data saturation was achieved. All participants member-checked their transcribed interviews prior to data analysis.

Data analysis

NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software supported the management of the 52 interviews. Central to the data analysis process in Gadamer's hermeneutic research is the application of the hermeneutic circle, in which consensus of meaning is attempted through the interplay among the participant's perspective, the researcher's perspective and accepted theory.

The transcripts were studied using a circular process, reading the whole text and then moving to a detailed examination of words and sentences and back again. Initial codes were then applied to phrases and sentences. As successive interviews were transcribed, new codes were created and data added to existing codes. Comparison of codes led to the development of subthemes, which were organised within overarching themes. Transcripts were continually re-read to ensure subthemes and themes remained authentic representations of participants' experiences. This process of viewing the findings from the perspective of participants, theory and researcher led to an authentic and coherent understanding of the women's experiences at university.

Findings

Demographics

The participants' ages on degree commencement ranged from 19 to 48 years old, with a mean of 34.5 years. Twenty-eight participants were classified as mature-age (aged over 20). Most participants were first-in-family (FIF), with 27 coming from a family where neither parent had been to university before them; 23 of these 27 also had no siblings with university experience. All participants began university either married (59%) or living with (41%) their male partner. The average length of these relationships at degree commencement was over nine years. Twenty-two women (76%) had children living at home aged under 18. Twenty-three women were the first partner in their intimate relationship to go to university (FIR); of these, 16 were also FIF (no parent or sibling had university experience). Towards the end of the degree, eight women had separated from their partners, with seven of these women being FIR students.

Themes and subthemes

The findings are organised in two overarching themes. The first theme, 'sharing the journey', reports the extent to which partners shared the women's visions of their future career in nursing, as well as sharing the family responsibilities and accepting the degree's time demands. The second theme, 'widened worldviews and changing relationship dynamics', reports on the woman's personal growth and changing perspectives, and this influence on the intimate relationship. Where direct quotes are used, the demographics of each participant are provided using the following format (Pseudonym, age, FIR, FIF, CH [number of children aged under 18]).

Sharing the journey

Sharing the vision

This theme relates to how much partners 'bought in' to the women's nursing degree journey. This includes their ability and willingness to invest emotionally and practically. Significantly, partners who had personal experience of university were reported to be supportive of the women's choice to study, and more likely to provide emotional support than partners who had not been to university. For example, the six partners who were past graduates were described as having a 'love' and 'respect' for learning, and as emotionally invested in the women's degree journey. For these women, having a partner who shared the university experience was highly valued:

He was kind of there on the journey, which helped a lot. (Leah, 20, FIF, CH 0)

He is a graduate from a family of graduates, the most supportive person out of everybody. [He] thinks education is the key to everything in life. (Maggie, 44, FIF, CH 2)

In contrast, partners who had not been to university were almost unanimously described as unwilling to invest in the university experience. These participants described their partners' view of the degree as 'separate' from family. Participants described how these

partners did not take the degree seriously, referring to it as a ‘hobby’ or ‘fad’ the women would tire of:

He reckons I’m going to get bored. He said ‘you’ll get bored and you’ll want to go and do something else’ ... I don’t think he ever took me seriously. (Judy 43, FIR, CH 2)

FIR participants’ partners were also described as unable to envisage the potential benefits of the degree. Despite participants’ attempts to involve them, these partners remained disinterested:

He just couldn’t see the big picture ... I guess he didn’t seem to appreciate the contribution that I would make into the family. (Lauren, 32, FIR, FIF, CH 2)

Some participants associated their partners’ lack of ‘valuing’ of the degree with their lack of university education:

He didn’t understand what it meant, probably because he’s only had the short courses. He still thinks it’s something I’ve done for me but it’s something I’m building up. He just couldn’t see that far. (Charlotte, 30, FIR, FIF, CH 1)

Exceptions emerged in a few of these relationships over the course of the degree, with participants describing their partners’ growing awareness of the tangible financial benefits of nursing:

He’s got that perspective where he’s thinking ‘Oh ok I will get behind this ‘cause it is going to better our future’. Whereas before I think he wasn’t so certain, you know ... but now he realises ... that I’ll be working and the money that comes with nursing. (Georgia, 23, FIR, FIF, CH 1)

Nine partners worked in fly-in-fly-out mining jobs during the women’s degree. Many had expressed unhappiness in this work arrangement and were seeking ways to change their job situation. For these partners, the promise of a better household income let them consider other employment options.

Sharing time

As a vocational degree with a strong clinical practice component, the nursing curriculum is particularly demanding of the student’s time. In this study, graduate partners tended to accept these time demands, even when they impinged on family time:

I’d say, ‘I’ve got to go into the spare room to study’, he’d said ‘yes’. (Maggie, 44, FIF, CH 2)

In contrast, partners of FIR participants were reported to be reluctant to accommodate the time demands of the degree. Participants described how these partners did not understand the need for additional study outside the classroom, and resented the time spent on this. Participants often described how their partner equated this study time as leisure time:

He’s never done a degree. He doesn’t understand, he thinks I go to university and have cups of coffee. (Candice, 40, FIR, FIF, CH 3)

These partners were described as becoming increasingly resentful as the degree demands intensified, some partners expressing their displeasure by withdrawing, using sarcasm or starting arguments:

He hindered me studying by the fact that if I needed time out to study he would chuck strops and be slamming doors or would come out and go 'oh you're still up' and I would be like 'go to sleep'. I thought 'I'm going to hear about this all tomorrow'. (Lauren, 32, FIR, FIF, CH 2)

Lauren was not alone in finding the resulting tension in the relationship led to an environment that was not conducive to study, with other participants also explaining how they had felt pressured to limit the time they devoted to their degree. Some reported their grades had been adversely affected by this compromise:

So basically, I had to base my course around my family ... I think if I did have more time more freedom to choose whatever would definitely have increased my grades. (Georgia, 23, FIR, FIF, CH 1)

Sharing the burden

Unlike sharing visions and time, sharing the burden of domestic work did not seem to differ according to the participant's FIR student status. In almost every relationship, the division of domestic work was highly traditionally gendered, with the women responsible for the childcare and housework, and men as the 'breadwinner' with few household responsibilities:

He is a real boy and very much a man's man ... he has this understanding that women should be in the kitchen. (Anne, 38, FIF, CH 3)

This situation seemed independent of the women's age and additional paid work duties. Early in the degree, the women recalled how they rarely considered asking their partner for domestic help. Over time, however, the growing demands of university study led some to request support. This was especially the case among women with young children and those in paid employment. Most partners were steadfast in their refusal, continuing to see the degree as the woman's choice and a burden she must carry alone:

No he never compromised, to him all he really had as a responsibility was his work. (Lauren, 32, FIR, FIF, CH 2)

The tense environment requests for help sometimes prompted some women to stop asking:

Sometimes I tend not to say anything because I'd rather not, um, have the hassle, it's just not worth it. (Rebecca, 43, FIR CH 4)

This additional source of relationship tension, together with partners' reluctance to offer practical and emotional support ultimately limited the women's capacity to concentrate on their degree.

Widened worldviews and changing relationship dynamics

Widened perspectives

The nursing degree immerses students into a diverse array of unfamiliar cultures and complex social situations, in which they must engage meaningfully and effectively. Many participants described how these experiences had widened their worldview. These women described being more confident and having a higher sense of self-worth. For some, this personal growth was profound:

I'm a completely different person now than I used to be. (Kylie, 20, FIR, FIF, CH 0)

Few participants had been interested in learning per se at the start of the degree, describing it as a necessary step to nursing practice. This changed during the degree, as they began to develop an intrinsic love of learning:

I love studying, I have enjoyed it, it's hard work, and it's not that I go 'oh I just want to get this year out of the way'. Because now I've nearly come to the end, I really want to learn it, I really want to soak in this last bit. (Frankie, 32, FIR, FIF, CH 3)

Participants who were mothers also began to see the importance of education for their own children, with many describing a hope that they would act as influential role models.

Converging and diverging paths

Most participants described how their changing life perspectives had an important influence on their intimate relationship during the degree, with some growing closer to their partners, and others growing apart. Women with graduate partners found they increasingly shared common ground on social and world issues. Many described how this strengthened the relationship:

One thing I know is that before, things that I discussed with my husband is I couldn't see his point, where he was coming from, but now I kind of understand ... when it comes to academic issues and big issues about life, yeah, we kind of seem to see things from the same point of view. (Ruth, 38, FIF, CH 1)

In contrast, FIR student participants often described how they had begun to see their partners' outlook as narrow and poorly informed, with the terms 'blinkered' and 'seeing in black and white' commonly used. Some participants described how their degree journey was directly responsible for this divergence of views:

It's made me realise how different we are. Jesus we really are different people, we are so different. (Judy, 43, FIR, CH 2)

These women commonly observed that, while they had changed, their partner had not. This dynamic is summed up in the following quote. Here the participant explained how her engagement in a cultural studies unit had challenged and ultimately altered her views on indigenous Australian issues:

If he had also studied it would have been different, it would have changed him. As soon as you start doing uni you see like a different future for yourself, career wise, you do change your perception. You do your cultural studies and it opens your eyes up to the world differently. But it just made me realise, like the Aboriginals made me go ... I'd always had my husband's influence saying that they're terrible, they do it to themselves. You do cultural studies and you realise why. (Frankie, 32, FIR, FIF, CH 3)

For most FIR participants, these new perspectives had a deleterious impact on the intimate relationship. Their new insights into social issues and current affairs became a further source of tension:

It can sometimes cause friction when he's still got a set mindset and mine's changed. (Rebecca, 43, FIR, CH 4)

The women's personal transformative experiences left them less tolerant of partners' unwillingness to offer support or accommodate the time demands of their degree. These women were increasingly drawn to challenge the status quo informed by traditional ideas of gender. Their changing perspective of their partners' contribution to household tasks began to cause tension:

Well I guess we sort of busted heads a lot over it, because it was like 'I've worked the same number of hours, just in three different jobs'. We had both been working the same. We both lived here, we're both parents. (Lauren, 32, FIR, FIF, CH 2)

Towards the end of the degree, the cumulative impact of the women's changing world-view, their changing relationship dynamics and their partners' continued resistance to share in and support the degree journey took its toll on many FIR participants' relationships. Of the 23 women who were FIR students, 10 described their relationship as in serious difficulty by the final semester:

We are only just holding out. The only thing that is keeping us going is that we can see a light at the end of the tunnel. I think that if it was four years [degree duration], even just that extra year it would end up a bit tricky. (Kylie, 20, FIR, FIF, CH 0)

Choosing a different path

While the 10 FIR participants who had reported their relationship in difficulty remained with their partner throughout their degree, seven further FIR participants did not. Overall, of the eight participants who experienced relationship breakdown, seven were FIR students. These participants talked extensively about the influence of the degree on their separation, most describing how their studies had initiated or accelerated this outcome:

It sort of caused a large rift between us ... cause I do think uni does ... like have a negative effect on your relationships. (Lauren, 32, FIR, FIF, CH 2)

Some participants described a growing insecurity among partners associated with their educational achievements:

I don't think he would have liked me having a degree and him not. A few times he said to me you will be working with doctors and smarter people than me. So, I think in the back of his mind, he thought I was going to be more qualified around more qualified people than him. Would I then prefer to be with one of them and leave him? (Frankie, 32, FIR, FIF, CH 3)

Five of these women described examples of partners' obstructive behaviours, including withdrawing childcare support and refusing to take leave from work when the women had exams or clinical practice. Some explained that this behaviour had prompted a conscious decision to end their relationships. As the following comments suggests, these women chose to prioritise their study over their relationship:

Something needs to give and it's not going to be my degree ... it just wasn't going to work so I gave him the flick. (Charlotte, 30, FIR, FIF, CH 1)

The breakdown of the intimate relationship had a mixed but profound effect on the women's ongoing progression. Following separation, participants often expressed feelings of relief. These women had rarely received any help with domestic work and had

coped with resentful and sometimes obstructive attitudes from partners. In this context, separation enabled them to refocus on their studies:

I feel so much better ... like I'm a survivor. (Chantelle, 38, FIR, FIF, CH 3)

Separation also, however, resulted in emotional trauma:

I have had a couple of breakdowns, just bawled my eyes out. To sum up it's been a long dark tunnel. I'm only just starting to see the light. (Judy, 43, FIR, CH 2)

Financial arrangements also remained unsettled following separation, especially for women with dependent children. Some had to take on more paid work to manage financially. Most described how they achieved lower grades during these periods of emotional trauma and financial stress.

Discussion

This study not only demonstrated that being FIR had a profound influence on the women's university experience, but that this experience had an impact on the relationships itself; the association was iterative. These findings highlight the importance of the transformative nature of HE, and the mixed but intense implications this has for women FIR students' university progression and their relationship with their partner. Moreover, this research indicates how difficult it is for this cohort of students to separate their academic and personal lives.

The importance of the partner's educational frame of reference

A significant body of evidence indicates that being FIF shapes students' experiences and prospects in HE. This study highlights how being FIR can also have a profound influence on women students' ability to progress at university.

Research into the significance of family members' educational background on the student experience is not new; the relationship between parental education and student success is clearly identified in the FIF literature (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Here, the association between a parent's lack of HE experience with the quality support they offer their child at university is well known (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Importantly, the present study adds a new dimension to the understanding of 'family', and its influence on student progress. It demonstrates that, for FIR women, the partner's educational background is a further crucial influence. Reflecting the FIF literature (Thomas & Quinn, 2007), the study's finding revealed that, like parents of FIF students, partners with no university experience lacked a frame of reference from which to draw support and guidance, most notably in understanding the time demands of a degree and the importance of independent study in adult education. Also mirroring the FIF research was the finding that partners without university experience valued the idea and potential benefits of HE less than those with this experience and were also less emotionally invested. Explored in detail in a separate publication (Andrew et al., 2020), participants who were both FIR and FIF found themselves in a position where neither their partners nor parents were able to offer the kind of emotional support associated with helping women students to cope with the stress of university life (Webber, 2017).

Partners' lack of understanding of university culture, expectations and values left them less able to share in the women's vision or appreciate its time demands; this in turn limited their capacity to offer emotional support. While many FIR participants described their efforts to share their experiences with their spouses, most partners remained uninvolved. Although a few partners began to offer support later in the degree, this seems to have been motivated by a growing awareness of its extrinsic financial rewards, rather than an increased intrinsic valuing of education.

Webber's (2017) findings from her research with mature-age women taking a foundation degree at a UK university shares some interesting parallels with the present study. Although Webber did not directly consider the FIF or FIR status of students and their partners, she did find that partners' emotional and practical support was influenced by whether or not they had a shared career or financial goal and the extent to which they valued education. These findings strengthen the idea that the partner's own university experience is closely related to their capacity and willingness to be part of the university journey.

For the FIR participants in the present study, the lack of partner emotional support was combined with a continued lack of domestic help, the latter a common situation in Australian marriages and de facto relationships (Wilkins & Lass, 2018). This left these women in an unenviable position as university students struggling alone with a degree that was highly demanding of their time.

The participants' journey

The transformative nature of the nursing degree (Mezirow, 2003) was evident in this study, with the women's personal growth having a profound influence on their progression as well as the dynamics of their intimate relationship.

Reflecting previous research (Thomas & Quinn, 2007), FIF participants had not overly valued the idea of HE at degree commencement. Over the course of the degree however, they began to enjoy and appreciate the process of learning and the potential benefits of HE for themselves and their families. This motivation was intrinsic as it arose from an inherent satisfaction of academic study. In HE, intrinsic motivation is regarded as a highly desirable student attribute, associated with autonomy and self-drive (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, extrinsic motivation is less desirable, as it is associated with external reward, pressure or expectations to achieve instead of personal desire to do so (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Arguably in this present study, this developing intrinsic motivation was particularly important to the progression of participants whose partners were not supportive, and who encountered relationship difficulties. Interestingly, although a few partners began to see the value of HE towards the end of the degree, this was restricted to a growing realisation of its tangible rewards – therefore extrinsic in nature. Following the logic of Ryan and Deci (2000), a lack intrinsic motivation is to be expected in partners who have not participated in the transformative learning experience of HE, nor vicariously 'shared' in the women's university journey.

The transformative nature of education also supported the liberalisation of participants' gender role perspectives (Baxter, 2014). As worldviews broadened, participants increasingly tested the traditionally gendered division of labour in their relationship. These women no longer accepted they should subordinate their personal goals to

appease their partner and began to question the structures that reinforced traditional gender roles and threatened their progression. Unlike the participants, partners were not directly exposed to the transformative learning experiences of HE and its influence. Consequently, partners' traditional ideas did not change, and they continued to counter any shift in the gendered division of domestic roles within their relationship.

As the participants continued in their degree, those who were FIR students found their worldviews increasingly diverged from their partners. Women who challenge established gender roles with their partners can experience relationship conflict (Howard, 2002; Kevern & Webb, 2004; O'Shea, 2014), a situation evident in this study. Partners were described as particularly threatened by the prospect of participants becoming increasingly knowledgeable and mixing in more highly educated circles, by their increased self-belief, and by their prioritisation of their personal nursing ambition.

O'Neil (2015) described how relationship conflict can arise when men with rigid and traditional ideas of gender feel threatened by their female partners' emancipated views and can result in displays of anger and attempts to control and resist change. Such behaviour was seen among partners in this study as participants increasingly challenged the status quo in their relationship. These behaviours not only threatened the women's academic progress but also damaged their intimate relationship. For some women, the situation became untenable and the nursing degree was chosen over this relationship.

Limitations

An understanding of how the participants' relationship with their partner influenced their academic progression and the relationship itself formed an essential part of the study. This understanding was achieved through the participants' perspective only. While this approach limited an understanding of the relationship from both partners' perspective, it remained true to the aim of the study, which was to seek and give voice to women students' perspectives in HE. Although same-sex relationships were outside the scope of the study, this does not detract from the importance of future study to understand the HE experiences of this student group.

Although situated in WA and the nursing discipline, these findings have relevance to other vocational disciplines with clinical practice requirements and that are increasingly attracting mature-age women. Although it is likely that these relationship effects will be found in such disciplines, further studies are required to confirm this.

Recommendations

Currently, strategies exist in HE that introduce parents and siblings of FIF students to the culture and expectations of university. Inclusive orientation sessions such as family open days are designed to increase parental and sibling understanding of Australian university life and the demands of HE (see Shanahan et al., 2011). Based on the present study's findings, these initiatives should be extended and adapted to partners, particularly where students are FIR women. Activities that highlight the longer-term tangible benefits of a degree may further enhance partner investment in FIR students' learning journey, and facilitate enhanced practical and emotional support. Such an approach

must, however, be taken in collaboration with the woman student, so that it does not undermine the woman's rights to autonomy and self-determination at university.

It is evident that FIR women students may be susceptible to intimate relationship tension and conflict during their time at university, with potentially profound impacts on their personal life and their academic progress. The personal and educational dimensions of their lives are intimately linked. In executing their duty of care, academic staff need to be cognisant of the impact of relationship difficulties for women students, and offer a flexible and sympathetic approach academic and pastoral support during these times.

Whilst relationship breakdown is sometimes unavoidable, the social, emotional and financial ramifications can be immense for the student and her family (Coleman & Glenn, 2010). In light of the study's findings, university professional counselling services could benefit students by offering couples counselling.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated that for some women, being in an intimate relationship may create challenges to university study and the intimate relationship. As mature-age women increasingly enter HE, these findings have important implications for student retention and wellbeing and their wider families.

The increasing number of mature-age FIF women choosing to study nursing, and the time demands of this vocational degree means nursing can be a particularly challenging option for women who are also FIR. The foreshadowing of a global nursing workforce shortage makes these findings particularly worrying for nurse education.

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