

EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE REENTRY MALES DURING TIMES OF PERCEIVED PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

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Abstract

The research question that served as the basic guide for inquiry in this study was: How do undergraduate reentry males navigate through academic coursework, especially during times of perceived psychological stress? Using a semi-structured interview technique, eight Caucasian undergraduate male students, ages 43 – 52, were interviewed. Findings revealed three major themes: a) the psychological stress encountered did not emanate so much from the academic experience as it did from personal struggles, relationship and/or family obligations, and/or work demands; b) when discussing strategies utilized to facilitate engagement in academic coursework, the men reported use of goal setting/planning and seeking social assistance to regulate the academic environment to some extent and compartmentalization as a way of being able to focus on the learning task at hand; and c) for some men there was a perceived difference in self over time with regard to academic coursework. While it has been suggested (Home, 1997; Senter & Senter, 1998) that returning female students may experience more stress than do returning males, findings from this study have shown that some reentry men, report similar needs and concerns related to life demands while engaged in academic coursework.

Introduction

While much of the literature on returning adult students has focused on the experiences of reentry women (Home, 1995; Pirnot, 1987; Droegkamp & Taylor, 1995; Flannery & Hayes, 1995; Home, 1998), little has been done to explore the issues and concerns of returning males (Dill & Henley, 1998; Widoff, 1999). Although it has been suggested (Home, 1997; Senter & Senter, 1998) that nontraditional female students experience more stress than do returning males, the needs and concerns expressed by reentry males often resonate with those found in the literature on returning women students (Widoff, 1999). However, men and women may vary in the sorts of events or predicaments defined as stressful as well as how they cope with stress-producing situations (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987; Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988). So, while themes and concerns associated with the return to college may be similar for men and women, they may be experienced in dissimilar ways as, for example, when learners are trying to navigate through academic coursework during a period of perceived psychological stress.

For many nontraditional students, it can be a struggle to manage the various demands of everyday life. As collegiate student demands and various other life demands compete, adult students may experience what they perceive to be psychological stress. While there is a reported lack of data related to perceived stress and the nontraditional adult learner, there is an even greater lack of data regarding nontraditional male students (Dill & Henley, 1998; Widoff, 1999). Although some studies include men in their sample, very few have dealt specifically with the experiences of nontraditional, male students (Widoff, 1999). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of reentry, collegiate men who report the occurrence of psychological stress at some time during their academic coursework, with an emphasis on how it is that participants navigated through their academic studies, especially during times of reported stress.

Theoretical Influences

The theoretical support for this study comes from the works of McClusky (1963) and Dill and Henley (1998). McClusky (1963) formulated the theory of power-load-margin as a way to better understand the lives of adults in relation to the demands required of them. He considered load to be the result of internal and external demands or pressures experienced during the course of everyday living (e.g., the responsibilities of everyday life and the individual's self-concept, expectations, and goals). Power comes from a variety of resources, both internal and external to the person (e.g., the family support system, financial and social capabilities, and the bank of acquired skills and experiences that contribute to one's resiliency and personality development). The ratio of load to power equals margin, which is defined as the surplus power available to respond to life's demands. While participation in organized, formal adult education may provide a mechanism to increase one's power and thus create more margin with which to meet life's demands, it may also increase the load being carried by an individual. An increase in load with no concomitant increase in power may deplete margin to the point where it is insufficient to meet the demands of life, including those imposed by an organized, formal adult education experience.

Dill and Henley (1998) compared traditional and nontraditional students with regard to perceived stress and stressors. The researchers hypothesized that some stressors would be reported by both groups (e.g., stress related to performance on exams and overall academic performance), while other stressors reported by participants would be unique to a particular group (e.g., family obligations and financial problems for nontraditional students). Findings indicated that nontraditional students reported less school-related stress than did traditional participants in the study. The investigators concluded that this might indicate adult students have buffered themselves against stressful events associated with the student role by success with other life roles or it may indicate the instrument utilized failed to capture events most often perceived as stressful by nontraditional students. More germane to the current study was their finding that nontraditional students reported being back in school after a time away and attending classes as more desirable than did their traditional counterparts. This finding, according to them, may represent an increase in the nontraditional student's eagerness to learn and, if so, "may indicate that the years out of school have put a new perspective on the classroom" (Dill & Henley, 1998, p. 30).

Significance of the Study

It is anticipated that the study will serve to stimulate questions and discussion regarding the world of men and their experience with academic coursework in the face of perceived psychological stress. Hopefully, it will encourage future research journeys into that world.

In years past, data collected from male participants involved in adult education were used to construct theories that were extrapolated to women participants. As feminist ideology began to inform research into, and the practice of, adult education, gender differences became an area for exploration. However, the term gender issues now seems to be synonymous with issues related to women. If adult education is truly going to address gender issues, in the broader sense, data related to men need to be included in our research, theory, and practice efforts. Just as the experiences of men cannot be generalized to women, neither can the experiences of women be generalized to men. It is

anticipated that this study may help to broaden the conception of what constitutes gender issues as they relate to adult education.

As Brookfield (1992) wrote, adult education is not exclusively a joyful experience but includes both joyous and stressful elements. It can be a time of struggle and great difficulty for learners. It is possible that data from this study could be used to create instruments that allow for more accurate interpretation of the connection, if any, between perceived stress and engagement in adult education for the nontraditional collegiate male.

Through attention to the voice of the participants in this study, adult educators may be able to identify coping strategies utilized by adult male learners as they engage in academic coursework during times of perceived psychological stress. Support systems that men employ to facilitate their educational journey may be identified. Equipped with this information, educational institutions and adult educators may be able to better define their roles in assisting nontraditional, male students during times of psychological stress.

Method and Procedure

The study was designed to be descriptive in nature and to focus on understanding the undergraduate experiences of the eight men involved in the study. Traditional qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (i.e., the semi-structured interview) provided the most appropriate avenue for accomplishing this task. Coding categories described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) were used to initially organize data for exploration and analysis. QSR NUD*IST Version 4 qualitative data analysis software was utilized for further exploration.

Findings

As I listened to the men in this study describe their experiences, the data seemed to naturally subdivide into three overarching categories. The men described the stress they were experiencing as they engaged in coursework, their perspectives on academic coursework, and strategies they utilized to facilitate engagement in academic coursework.

The Occurrence of Stress While Engaged in Coursework

For a majority of participants in this study, the stress encountered did not emanate so much from engagement in academic coursework as it did from issues external to the academic experience. Data analysis revealed stress of a personal nature (i.e., personal struggles), stress related to relationship and/or family obligations, and stress related to work demands.

Stress of a personal nature revealed itself as participants talked about ways in which personal struggles made it difficult to maintain a focus on the demands of collegiate studies.

Other participants spoke to times when family needs or obligations competed for their time and energy. While other men found that the demands of school and the demands of work sometimes do not easily coexist. Sidney and Ed best described the sentiments expressed by participants in this study related to the stress they were experiencing.

About the time I started seriously working on the degree I changed careers. I had just bought a new home and moved to Knoxville. We had just lived here two months and my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. So, it was tough. I had so much going on. (Ed)

You know, it's not really in the classroom. If I had any stress to do with going back to college, it would be having to do with being a full time worker and then trying to keep up with college. If I can't study and I do bad on the test then I build up that stress. (Sidney)

Regardless of whether the stress emanated from personal struggles, relationship/family obligations, or work, it was evident that return to college had added to what McClusky (1963) termed the load the men already carried. While the psychological stress did not deter them from pursuit of formal education, it created a context in which it was sometimes difficult to navigate the way.

Perspectives on Academic Coursework

Seven of the eight men interviewed for this study had attended college in their young adult years. Whereas in their earlier years there was a perceived a lack of readiness to engage in collegiate studies now, at midlife, some spoke of being ready and, in some instances, even excited about participation in higher education. They now considered themselves more interested and focused than they had been when enrolled in college during their late teens or early twenties.

Actually I started college in '69. I took a lot of time off. It was a bad time to be in college, at least for me. I think I never really applied myself fully and conscientiously...I didn't have the passion then like I do now. Now, it's like, not only did I want to learn but the material was incredibly interesting. (Sagan)

This finding supports Dill and Henley's (1998) supposition that perhaps returning to school after a time off "may indicate that the years out of school have put a new perspective on the classroom experience" (p. 30).

In addition to a perceived change in self over time with regard to how academic studies were approached, the majority of the men spoke to a change in how they perceived the learning that occurred while engaged in academic coursework. Now they reportedly viewed learning as understanding – not just memorization of facts provided by a textbook or the course instructor. The idea of learning as understanding has been conceptualized by some theorists as engagement in learning that operates at a deeper level than what is experienced when one is learning at a more surface level approach such as memorization (Marton and Saljo, 1997; Richardson and King, 1998). Those who spoke to learning as understanding differentiated between situations where memorization was appropriate and times when a change in perception of a concept was warranted (i.e., use of a deeper level approach to learning).

There are different types of learning. Some learning is just memorizing facts or formulas.

Other learning requires reading, learning new concepts and trying to make breakthroughs in your perception of the concept...Memorizing is different than learning.

Memorizing doesn't mean you understand what it means or how to put two different things together to make something different. Learning is understanding not just memorizing...The reward of going through all this is understanding. (Seke).

Regardless of the approach to learning utilized by a particular participant, it was clear that over time the majority of participants who described earlier attempts at college coursework perceived they had changed with regard to collegiate studies. They now considered themselves more interested and focused with a view that learning was more than just memorizing facts: it was understanding.

Strategies Utilized to Facilitate Engagement in Academic Coursework

To think in terms of McClusky's (1963) theory of power-load-margin, initiation of academic coursework presented new demands with which participants had to contend. Through activation of various strategies, the men were afforded the opportunity to increase the power needed to cope with the new demands while not adding to the stress experience. Although no single strategy emerged as prevalent, many of the activities described seemed to naturally collapse into what has been termed by some researchers (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986) as self-regulatory in nature. The most frequently used strategies were goal-setting and planning and seeking social assistance. Although not identified as a self-regulatory strategy by Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1986), compartmentalization also surfaced as a tactic employed by several of the men in this study.

Two of the ways in which participants conveyed a sense of goal-setting and planning were: controlling the number and/or kinds of classes in which they enrolled and preparing for a future course perceived to be potentially problematic. Goal-setting and planning seemed to have a two-fold purpose: 1) to maximize the opportunity for success in the coursework, and 2) to minimize the potential for additional psychological stress.

Because of my physical condition, I can only take one or two classes at a time. When I had trouble with the Spanish class, I just took it and that's all. That's all I had to worry about. I knew if I didn't do that I was lost. (Mack).

When the men determined that a future course might prove problematic because of a perceived gap in knowledge or skill, they sought out, and participated in activities or classes that would help them be better prepared.

I took a trip to New York immediately after spring semester so I could prepare myself to go on in art...visiting galleries and museums to get my mind set and try to find some influences that would help me find what I wanted to paint (Art).

The use of assistance from others was a frequently reported strategy utilized by participants in this study. For a majority of participants, the professor/instructor was seen as the locus for information that students need to know.

I'm almost ashamed to admit it but once I know a teacher's or professor's teaching pattern, how they're teaching, what they're looking for, how they set up their exams, if I know how to get by in the course that's the way I go. (Vincent)

Other sources (i.e., campus resources, other students, family member) were mentioned very infrequently. Regardless of the source for assistance, the majority of participants spoke to the need to find people who could help them when they did not know what to do.

Although not identified as a self-regulating strategy by Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1986), compartmentalization was a tactic employed by several men in this study. For those who mentioned compartmentalization as a tactic to facilitate engagement in academic coursework, it seemed to help them prioritize and focus attention on academics in the face of the stress they were experiencing. Ed spoke of being able to compartmentalize as he dealt with the stress of a wife ill with cancer, the demands of his job, and the requirements of academic coursework.

You know you have to compartmentalize. When I was at work, I was at work. When I was at school, I was at school. When I was at the hospital, I was at the hospital. You just had to do that. Just keep everything in that box that belongs in that box because if it gets out of that box into the other boxes then you got a real mess. (Ed).

The strategies employed by participants in this study seemed to provide both the external and internal resources (i.e., power) necessary for the margin essential to meeting the increase in load created by return to the academic arena.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To answer the question of how undergraduate, reentry male students navigate academic coursework, especially during times of perceived psychological stress; one must look to the strategies they employ. The strategies utilized by men in this study allowed them to exert some control over engagement in academic coursework while not adding to the psychological stress being experienced. The men reported feeling successful in their studies and although not a major finding, three of eight men in this study indicated that engagement in academic studies was actually a stress reliever – particularly being present in class. So, it would seem that although men in this particular study were experiencing psychological stress while engaged in academic coursework, it does not appear to have had a deleterious effect on their academic studies.

The findings reported and discussed herein can be said to be a springboard for further study and improved practice. Theories need to be developed that speak to the mediating effects of engagement in academic coursework on psychological stress as well how stress enhances or inhibits the reentry adult male's involvement in collegiate studies. What is it about engagement in academic coursework that helps relieve stress for some individuals? Do men experience the mediating effects of engagement in collegiate studies on stress differently from women? Investigative tools that more accurately reflect potential stressors encountered by returning adult males need to be developed.

Participants in this study described the use of strategies that facilitate engagement in academic coursework, especially during times of perceived psychological stress. Are certain strategies (e.g., compartmentalization; self-regulatory strategies) gender specific? Adult education practitioners are in a unique position to assist researchers gather data about the strategies adult male students activate and what precipitates activation of a particular strategy. In doing so, practitioners can help ensure research that accurately portrays the adult male's collegiate experience.

Several participants in this study indicated that while they were attempting to understand (i.e., conceptualize) what was being taught in the academic classroom, sometimes a more surface level approach (i.e., consumption of what is being taught) was also acceptable. In what learning contexts do adult learners move back and forth between these two approaches? Do men tend to use one type of approach more than another?

As adult educators strive to create learner-centered educational opportunities, engagement in academic coursework, especially during times of perceived psychological stress needs to be explored.

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