

1992

Mature Women Students: Effects of the Gender Division of Labor on Education

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October 30, 1992
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MATURE WOMEN STUDENTS:
EFFECTS OF THE GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR
ON EDUCATION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University

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December, 1992

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I'd like to thank the twenty-one women who selflessly agreed to share so honestly and generously the descriptions of their experiences and details of their lives. Without their voices this project could not have been accomplished. I thank Dr. Scully for her extensive patience and unyielding perseverance which shaped this project from a vague concept into a concrete piece of research. From methodological suggestions to painstaking editing and unyielding support, her contributions to this research were enormous. Thanks also to Dr. Lyng and Dr. Marolla, who took time to read sections of the research in progress and make suggestions even though their time was limited by other responsibilities. Thanks to Dr. Clark who also took time from her busy schedule to sit on the committee of an unknown student from another department. Finally, I want to thank the other graduate students at VCU and my family and friends, whose interest and encouragement helped me continue when I got discouraged and who reminded me of my abilities and the importance of reaching my goal. Thank you for listening to endless details about the project and supporting me. Thanks to all of you and your combined efforts to make this project possible.

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Abstract

Mature Women Students: Effects of the Gender Division of Labor on Women's Education.

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This thesis seeks to better understand the trend toward mature women college students as impacted by the gender division of labor. It is based on qualitative research involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten African-American and eleven white mature women students age 30 and over enrolled at Virginia Commonwealth University.

The interview questions focus on two main decision points in the lives of mature women students. The first is defined as the point at which they chose a course of action, other than attending college, after high school, or when they left college. The second is defined as the point at which these women decided to (re)enter college.

The gender division of labor is explored as it exists in capital patriarchal society and emphasis is placed on the processes by which it is created and maintained at both macro and micro levels. The focus of the research is on the connection between the structure of the gender division of labor and the processes through which it affects individual lives in everyday, personal ways.

The focus on the two decision points leads the analysis of the trend toward mature women students in a direction not taken by other researchers and helps to uncover aspects of the trend which had been neglected. The findings suggest that the designation of domestic and childcare tasks to women in the gender division of labor greatly effects the trend toward mature women students at both decision points. The gender division of labor becomes a lived reality in individual women's lives and influences their decisions concerning work, family and education. The findings suggest further that the explanations for the trend toward mature women students are much more complex than current literature reflects. For the women who participated in this research, the gender division of labor creates power differentials between women and men which affect women's decisions concerning college which have not been explicitly addressed in other research.

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

As older students have become recognized and identified as a unique group on college campuses, investigators from various viewpoints have undertaken studies aimed at understanding this phenomenon. Psychologists, educators, administrators, sociologists and others have focused on various aspects of this trend which are of interest to their specific areas. Although many have viewed this group as a homogeneous set of "reentry," "nontraditional" or "mature" students, recent studies have focused on the majority group, women. In an article published in 1983, Kirk and Dorfman reported that 65% of adult college students over age 35 were women (Kirk and Dorfman, 1983:15). In 1988, Linda Lewis estimated that 55% of adult college students (over age 25) were women, and that women had become the largest group of reentry students (Lewis, 1988:1).

Areas of emphasis among researchers have included motivations to return, stress of returning, familial support, obstacles faced, unique learning styles, and others. The major goal has been identifying and encouraging areas of help and support for the students from educational institutions and from family members and friends (Berkove, 1979; Hooper, 1979; Kirk and Dorfman, 1983; Lewis, 1988; Sutor, 1987,1988).

Statement of the Problem

The problem for this research is that from a sociological standpoint, the trend toward mature women entering and re-entering college poses questions which have

not been explicitly addressed by much of the existing literature. The goal is to analyze this trend from a sociological perspective, to generate a theory grounded in data through which we can better understand how this trend is socially produced. This is attempted through elaborating on a theoretical framework applied to mature women students through which the research focus became, "what is the impact of the gender division of labor on mature women students?" The research is designed to identify social factors which affect the lives of mature women students and the processes of social construction which influence their choices as related to various aspects of the gender division of labor.

Literature Review

While there is a large amount of literature on mature women students, it is primarily from the disciplines of education, college administration, and psychology rather than sociology. In choosing from this variety for this paper, I tried to include articles from different viewpoints while limiting them to certain sociological areas of focus. I disregarded research on teaching methods for older students, learning styles, physiological and psychological approaches, etc... that were too technical in nature and specific to one discipline.

The areas of focus around which I chose the articles include relationships between college and family life, problems faced by mature women students, and general changes in their lives. In addition, I chose some books and articles, the foci of which were more general than these specific areas, and which offered demographic statistics and descriptive overviews (Astin, 1976; Hall, 1981; Glass & Rose, 1987; Mendelsohn, 1980; Scott, 1980; Smallwood, 1980).

Motivations for Returning to School

Much of the literature on mature women students focuses on the point at which women return to school and the period after they make the decision. Consequently, most of the studies have analyzed reasons women enter college later in life.

Older women college students are not a homogenous group. Reasons for enrolling in college at a later stage in life are numerous. Often women have offered

reasons which reflect their own perceptions of their lives as well as reasons which appear to be those they view as acceptable based on societal norms and values. Some researchers have offered their own explanations for women's return to school.

Many reasons women give for returning to college are expressed as personal, individual reasons, such as the desire for self-development, and career goals (Kirk and Dorfman, 1983:17; Mendelsohn, 1980:3; Smallwood, 1980:66; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983:45). Scott suggests that as Letchworth (1970) explains, many of these women have reached an identity/integrity crisis, and returning to school offers self-actualization and a new concept of "personhood." She also suggests that mature women may need a status change due to pressures from family and friends (Scott, 1980:9).

Glass and Rose (1987) propose reasons for mature women to enroll in college: "It may be a re-evaluation of the self brought on by divorce, the maturity of her family, the boredom of her life, or any number of other reasons." They suggest additional reasons including a need to discover one's own identity, financial reasons, better employment or a career change, the maturing of family, running out of time, and the need for a feeling of self-worth (Glass and Rose, 1987:111-112).

Astin found that for single, separated, divorced, and widowed women, job preparation was the most important reason for returning to school. Of the women in her study, this was less important to married women. Additionally, women who were employed outside the home reported job dissatisfaction as a major catalyst, whereas older and married women who did not work outside the home identified

boredom at home as the main reason for returning to college. Astin also found that among the women in her sample, those who had been married and women of color were five times as likely to cite family and marital problems as reasons for returning to college (Astin, 1976:82).

Smallwood suggests that the major factor producing the trend toward older women enrolling in college is the increased life-span of women. She also places significance on women staying single longer, having fewer children, the reduction in time spent on housework, changing institutional policies, and better financial aid (Smallwood, 1980:65). Scott suggests that technological advances have lessened household chores, thus allowing women more time for college (Scott, 1980:8).

Maslin's (1981) study of mature women students included African-American women and resulted in some findings which contradict the typical image of mature women students as white, middle-class housewives (Maslin, 1981:185). Her random sample of 250 female students over age 25 at Temple University included 42% African-American students, 25% over age 40, only 50% currently married, and over 50% from households which earned below \$15,000 yearly (Maslin, 1981:185).

Maslin identifies eight distinct motivational patterns expressed by women for returning to school. These patterns require explanation which goes beyond their relevance here, but a few of the patterns are related to certain characteristics of women's experiences addressed in this research. First, Maslin found that the women who reported vocational interests as their main reason for enrolling in college were not African-American, divorced, or low-income women, but were more likely white,

over 40, and "highly feminist" (Maslin, 1981:187). The motivational patterns most reported by "high-income, middle-aged white women with little responsibility for motherhood" were vocational, desire for competency recognition, and counteractive efforts against unpleasant situations (Maslin, 1981:187). In Maslin's study, the desire for personal growth was not associated with this latter group, but with women already fairly happy and not compelled to meet achievement needs. These women were mostly older African-American women, young single white women, and highly feminist women (Maslin, 1981:188). Maslin suggests,

A general conclusion can be that we muddy the waters when we view self-fulfillment, personal growth, a new career, developing one's abilities, all as aspects of the same phenomenon-that of the unhappy middle-aged, middle-class housewife trying to resolve her identity crisis (Maslin, 1981:188).

Although many motivations appear to be individualistic and personal to the women expressing them, as well as to some researchers, from a sociological standpoint they are understood to be reasons socially produced through structural and cultural relations.

Barriers/Problems Faced

Much of the literature has discussed obstacles mature women face when entering or reentering college. They typically encounter difficulties in several areas of their lives.

Family Problems and Multiple Roles

Because much of the research reviewed assumes most mature women students are or have been married, the researchers discuss the problems women face in relation to their families. For many researchers, this is the major emphasis (Berkove, 1979; Hooper, 1979; Huston-Hoburg and Strange, 1986; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983; Sutor 1987, 1988; Young, 1977).

One major variable related to family relations is the amount and type of support women receive from their spouses. Support is assessed along various dimensions including attitudinal, emotional, financial and behavioral. Although researchers use various means to measure levels of support, results are similar.

Instrumental, functional, or behavioral support primarily refer to help with household and childcare tasks. Among most of the women sampled, this form of support was perceived as the most important to their performance in school. Many women, however, did not feel they received enough instrumental support. Many researchers found that even after women return to school, they continue to be primarily responsible for household labor (Berkove, 1979; Kirk and Dorfman, 1983;Wheaton, 1983; Huston-Hoburg and Strange, 1986).

Berkove's (1979) study analyzed different levels of support and was based on 361 mailed questionnaires. She focused on wives' perceptions of their husbands' support in terms of attitudinal, emotional, financial, and behavioral support. The questionnaire employed Likert scale responses (Berkove, 1979:452). The sample consisted of married women who had been away from school for at least five years

before returning, were at least 26 years old, and had at least one child,. Similar to other researchers, Berkove found her respondents typically to be "white, financially secure, suburban homemakers" (Berkove, 1979:452). Over two-thirds of the respondents in her study had been at home full-time prior to returning to school, resulting in the women's view that the return to school was, "a significant departure from the traditional homemaker role which had been a major focus of their lives in recent years" (Berkove, 1979:452).

Berkove found that husbands with traditional attitudes about sex roles were emotionally and financially supportive, "...under the explicit or implicit assumption that school reentry would not involve major changes in the established family routine, i.e., that the (traditional) division of household labor would be maintained." One of the women interviewed stated, "My family was willing to help if I asked, but I didn't feel I had the right to ask." (Berkove, 1979:455).

Berkove concludes that,

despite the increased stress of taking on extra responsibilities, many women find it "easier" to add to their already existing chores rather than to try to change the family's status quo. This is further reinforced by a sense of guilt or obligation for having "imposed" less comfort on their families by choosing to go to school (Berkove, 1979:456).

She further indicates that while most returning women students encounter the most difficulties and conflict their first semester back in school, the longer women are there, the greater self-esteem they experience (Berkove, 1979:147).

Hooper (1979) also studied family support of mature women students. She

conducted in-home interviews with 24 volunteer families to assess adult personality scores and family coping styles. She required that the families be "intact" (mother and father living at home) with at least one child at home, where the mothers were at least 35 years old and returning adult students. The sample was composed of students randomly-selected from the schools of business, education, and family resources and consumer sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Hooper employed various scales to gather and measure her data including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, a 10-item Guilt Scale which assessed feelings of guilt related to family and student role conflict, and an Outcome Anxiety Scale. The last scale was intended to interpret the extent to which husbands worried about their marriages after their wives returned to school. Finally, Hooper used a Family Supportiveness - Role Taking scale which assessed how the family would resolve hypothetical family problems. She also asked other open-ended questions (Hooper, 1979:451). Her data analysis techniques included analyses of variance and factorial variance analyses. Based on composite responses to the Family Supportiveness - Role Taking scale, Hooper divided the families into three distinctive groups labeled a) role division by sex agreement, b) role division by sex disagreement, and c) egalitarian. The first group was identified as dividing tasks among family members along traditional lines according to age and sex, with family members' agreement that such divisions were appropriate and useful. The second group also divided tasks along tradition lines but members disagreed on the appropriateness of the divisions, resulting in arguments and confusion. The last group divided tasks on a rotating

basis regardless of sex roles (Hooper, 1979:149).

Like Berkove, Hooper found a relationship between the number of semesters in school and self-esteem, such that the longer the women had been in school, the higher their self-esteem. Also, the shorter the time women had been away from school, the higher their self-esteem. Additionally, the longer a woman had been in school, the greater her husband's outcome anxiety. The higher the husband's outcome anxiety, the less supportive he reported himself as being (Hooper, 1979:149).

Again, family support is crucial to the success of most mature women in college. Hooper described feelings expressed by women in her sample whom she identified as the "agreement group" based on their families' agreement with a traditional sex-typed division of labor:

All of these women said they would drop out of school for family-related reasons that were far less crisis-oriented than those given by women in the other two groups. For example, one woman said she would drop out 'if the family seemed upset,' another would drop out 'if my children decide they want to come home for lunch' (Hooper, 1979:151).

Suitor's (1987 and 1988) extensive study of mature women students stipulated that the women be at least 25 years old, have been married for at least three years, have at least one child under the age of 18 living at home, and have been away from school at least five years. She included equal numbers of full- and part-time students (Suitor, 1988:484). Of Suitor's sample, 2/3 had been employed outside the home since being married, and 1/4 were employed outside the home at the time of the

interviews. For 77% of the women in her sample, community college had been their first college experience (Suitor, 1988:485). Suitor interviewed 44 wives and 33 of their husbands, asking wives how they perceived their husbands' attitudes. She asked both husbands and wives about the husband's instrumental contribution to housework, childcare, library trips, etc. For the husbands, Suitor used the Felton Sex-Role Traditionalism Scale to assess their gender role attitudes (Suitor, 1988:486).

One area of focus in Suitor's 1988 study was the relationship between husbands' educational attainment and support for their wives' return to school. She found a positive relationship between husband's educational attainment and their attitudes toward their wives' enrollment. Suitor (1988) also discovered a difference in instrumental support among spouses with different levels of education. Of the spouses she interviewed, although their attitudes toward their wives' return to school was negative, those with less education gave more instrumental support than those with more education. Suitor attributed this to the "relative resource hypothesis" which suggests that the greater the wife's resources in relation to their husband, the greater his contribution to the household labor and child care (Suitor, 1988:492).

Many women who have participated in research on mature women students have indicated that they received support from their families as long as their return to school did not interfere with their family roles of mother and wife. Huston-Hoburg and Strange studied spouse support among male and female returning adult students. They sent a six-page questionnaire to 300 married students randomly

selected from a list of all married students enrolled in health or business programs of a 2-year technical college in northwestern Ohio. The response rate was 64%, resulting in 194 usable questionnaires (Huston-Hoburg and Strange, 1986:388).

Huston-Hoburg's and Strange's questionnaire employed Likert-type responses indicating agreement with perceptions of spouse support in three areas, attitudinal, emotional, and functional. They also used a 14-item assessment of a Likert-type scale that measured the extent to which roles were perceived as gender specific versus shared. They used a 12-item list of household tasks to determine which tasks were carried out jointly and which were done by either the student or the spouse. Finally, emotional support was measured by asking respondents to indicate the level of support received from each significant other in their lives, as well as to identify the person from whom they received the most support (Huston-Hoburg and Strange, 1986:388).

Huston-Hoburg and Strange (1986) found that for both men and women returning to school, there was initial support from their families, but the women eventually encountered resistance. Again, for many women, support was contingent upon giving top priority to family roles (Huston-Hoburg and Strange, 1986:388). Additionally, Huston-Hoburg and Strange found that men reported a higher degree of emotional support from their spouses than did women, whereas women reported a greater degree of emotional support from friends and classmates than did men. In terms of functional support, a larger proportion of women than men reported that they assumed greater responsibility than did their spouses for household and child

care tasks, with the exceptions of driving children, minor household repairs, lawn care and snow removal, trash disposal and care repairs (Huston-Hoburg and Strange, 1986:391).

Huston-Hoburg and Strange conclude that wives generally seem to be more supportive of their husbands' return to school than husbands' of their wives' return, and consequently, the return to school is more difficult for women than for men. Additionally,

for adult women a return to school may be a more liberating act than it is for men in the sense that newly adopted attitudes concerning women's roles may either precipitate a change in life goals, followed by a return to school, or may result from participation in formal education (Huston-Hoburg and Strange, 1986:393).

Wheaton and Robinson (1983) developed a comprehensive model for university administration and counseling services for responding to the needs of reentry women. Their sample was composed primarily of part-time students, but did not include a discussion of sampling or methodology. Women in Wheaton's sample typically had two years of previous college experience and had been away for an average of fifteen years (Wheaton and Robinson, 1983:45). The majority of the women were mothers. Again consistent with current research on reentry women, Wheaton and Robinson found that mature women students faced many problems concerning conflicts between student and family roles. Similar to other researchers, they found that the less equal the division of household labor the women experienced, the more guilt they felt for participating in college-related activities

(Wheaton and Robinson, 1983:46). They also found that women in the mid-motherhood stage experienced fewer demands from their children than did women with younger children (Wheaton and Robinson, 1983:45).

Young (1977) studied 144 welfare mothers attending an urban community college. Questionnaires which focused on the women's perceptions of their college experiences combined a check-off format with an option for free responses (Young, 1977:39). Young separated her sample into two groups, older (25 and over) and younger. She found that whereas the majority of the younger students had never been married, most of the older students were separated or divorced. She also found that the older mothers, despite reporting greater family conflicts, academically performed significantly better than the younger mothers (Young, 1977:39). Young suggested that

[Older students'] superior performance suggests a difference in motivation, maturity, and sense of purpose. Since younger mothers tended to be single and lived with relatives, they may have had less independence and responsibility and thus pursued their education with less urgency (Young, 1977:44).

All of those in the sample expressed feelings that improved self-image, confidence, and determination were benefits of going to college (Young, 1977:42). Although for this particular group, economic concerns are assumed to be motivations for going to college, the women expressed other benefits:

...when asked why a poor person should attend college, 44 percent of the women gave answers relating to personal development, while only 34 percent gave answers concerning economic development (Young, 1977:42).

Astin (1976) also discussed some of the problems women face when returning to school. She suggests that lack of self-confidence and poor self-image sometimes hinder these students (Astin, 1976:51; Scott,1980:10). Also, many women confront psychological problems resulting from the guilt they feel for neglecting family roles and for relying on family members for help in housework and childcare (Astin, 1976:51).

Similarly, according to Scott (1980), "The most common characteristic of middle-class housewife mothers is the pervasive lack of confidence in their ability" (Scott, 1980:10). She adds that they usually have poor self-images. Scott found that guilt resulting from spending money on their educations and depriving their families of material advantages, as well as competition with their husbands, poses problems for many women (Scott, 1980:11). Scott suggests that, "In order to achieve, the women need to develop and strengthen their capacities to assert themselves and to make decisions" (Scott, 1980:12).

Clearly, the greatest problems mature women students face, at least those with families, are related to family life. Their responsibilities to family require them constantly to confront conflicts with their time and attention. This situation will be addressed as it relates to the overall gender division of labor in the theory section.

Psychological Problems Faced

Vera Lewis (1983) studied forty minority women students between the ages

of 30 and 50 who had been away from college for at least five years. As a psychologist, Lewis was interested in analyzing the link between adult development and mid-life years among women. She chose to focus on mature women students, because most returning women come back to college in their middle years. Lewis further commented that she had found no literature on minority women returning to college.

Of the women in Lewis's study, 21 were married, 17 separated or divorced and 2 single (Lewis, 1983:66). Nine of the forty had no children (Lewis, 1983:67). The majority reported a total household income of \$25,000 or more. Thirty-one were employed outside the home full-time, six part-time, and three were full-time homemakers (Lewis, 1983:68).

Lewis used a questionnaire and interviews to collect data. Her questions were related to three typical experiences of mid-life crisis or transition:

1. reappraising the past or assessment of one's life and deciding where to go next
2. continuation of individuation process of focusing on the inner self
3. modifying one's life structure or concern with self-utilization (Lewis, 1983:2).

Lewis found that the majority of women she surveyed had experienced a psychological shift around age 30, and that most perceived the middle years as offering new and greater opportunities. She identified four significant concerns in these women's lives:

1. introspective concern
2. concern about appearance
3. evaluation of marital situation
4. feelings of uniqueness

The first three were the same concerns expressed by white women returning to school discussed in other research (Lewis, 1983:93).

Lewis also found that two dominant themes were part of the mid-life stage for the minority women in her sample - internal conflict and present economic uncertainty. She commented that as Levinson's 1978 study had found, women tend to be more preoccupied with the future than men (Lewis, 1983:100).

Contrary to some of the findings about white women, none of the women in Lewis's study expressed feelings of stress or anxiety as aspects of their transitional period. Rather, most experienced an increased realization of their abilities. For most of the women in this study, the main objective of going to college was job preparation. This contradicts Maslin's (1981) finding that the primary group for whom job preparation was a major goal was white women (Maslin, 1981:187).

Lewis concludes that:

The findings from this investigation as contrasted to other research (Kahnweiler, 1979; Wiersma, 1978) suggests there may be more similarities than differences between the concerns of minority and white returning women at mid-life (Lewis, 1983:109).

Suchinsky's (1982) study of older female college students also focuses on human development, and on the psychological problems faced by mature women students (Suchinsky, 1982:30). Although it is unclear what type of methodology he used, except two case studies, Suchinsky describes various categories of reentry women as the following: empty nesters, displaced homemakers, those seeking education as an end in itself, and women seeking to improve skills because of

economic hardship (this last group he identifies as blue-collar wives, where education is not valued) (Suchinsky, 1982:30).

Suchinsky suggests that many older women (he didn't specify an age) experience decreased ability to use their memory and carry out other cognitive functions which puts them at a disadvantage in relation to younger students. Suchinsky indicates that this often results in older students' feelings of inferiority. Additionally, psychological development and drive to learn have been interrupted in many women's lives as they fulfilled family duties. This renewed move toward personal autonomy is charged with anxiety and pain and these women require great care from the faculty members and administrators (Suchinsky, 1982:32).

Suchinsky describes the psychological problems faced by mature women students due to their failing mental abilities and emotional problems. Not only was he the only researcher to find these problems, but he fails to provide data to support his conclusions and he does not use comparison groups. On a positive note, Suchinsky also suggests that for many older women, returning to college is a kind of "hatching" experience where women begin to discover their unique individuality and to develop their personal autonomy (Suchinsky, 1982:30, 41).

Astin's (1976) frequently referenced work on mature women students is based on several studies carried out by other researchers. In her edited book, Some Action of Her Own, she gives "...an analytic account of the developing programs of continuing education for women..." (Astin, 1976:vii). She does not discuss the

methodological approaches of this research in detail, but most of the data are based on interviews and questionnaires. Of the women described in Astin's discussions, 53% were employed and 2/3 were employed full-time (Astin, 1976:71). Additionally, 2/3 of the women were married, 8% were in their second marriage, and 17% had never been married (Astin, 1976:59). Thirty-two percent had no children (Astin, 1976:60).

Astin, like Suchinsky, emphasizes the significance of the developmental process for older women, yet views this process more positively. Astin suggests that "...women in adult education are searching not only for integrity but also for identity; they are asking themselves who they are beyond being wives and mothers" (Astin, 1976:46). Astin comments that where men become more affiliative as they mature, women show a need for independence, they grow more assertive, and remove themselves from nurturing roles. Astin suggests that for women:

...a period of high need for achievement before beginning a family is followed by a decline in achievement need. But once the children are grown, there is a return to the previous high level... Like all adult learners, they are conscious of their reasons for learning, and they understand the benefits of education (Astin, 1976:46).

Part-time vs. Full-time Status

Because of the extra strain of going to school for women who have family responsibilities, many women reenter school on a part-time basis. Many also work outside the home and may not be able to attend school full-time.

Hall's (1982) study was part of the Project on the Status and Education of

Women. He suggests that women's decisions to attend college part-time are usually a matter of necessity, due to a variety of factors including full-time employment and financial constraints, as well as family responsibilities. Hall found that many institutions' faculty and administrators question the "seriousness" of part-time students and often present obstacles which prevent them from attending college. These obstacles are discussed in a later section.

In Suitor's (1987) study of part-time and full-time older female students, she found that the experiences of the two groups differed, primarily due to family differences in relationships. She indicates that other researchers have found that the more hours wives are employed, the less interaction there is between the husband and wife, and the more marital disagreement and unhappiness. She suggests that these factors will similarly affect the relationship when wives return to school, and predicted she would find more marital conflict in full-time students' marriages than part-time students'.

Suitor found that full-time students were more likely to choose to fulfill their student responsibilities rather than family responsibilities when status conflict arose, while part-time students continued to give priority to family roles. As predicted, this led to lower levels of marriage quality. Full-time students experienced changes in their perceptions of equality in the division of household tasks which led to conflicts with husbands over the wives' expectations of the husbands' contributions (Suitor, 1987:327).

Suitor (1987) suggests:

...the greediness of the American family constrains women's commitment in the occupational sphere because their family roles are expected to take precedence whenever there are conflicting demands placed on them by their nonfamilial roles (Suitor, 1987:312).

She notes that this experience is not typical for men.

Satisfaction and Role Strain

Kirk and Dorfman's 1983 study of mature women students focuses on various sources of conflict and support in students' lives. They received 141 questionnaires from undergraduate women aged 35 and over at the University of Iowa. The questions focused on women's perceived levels of satisfaction and strain in their student roles and in support from family and friends. Areas of focus included educational and family background, motivational factors in returning to college, psychological supports, behavioral supports, and institutional supports (Kirk and Dorfman, 1983:19).

Of the women in their study, 63% were employed outside the home while going to college. Three-fourths of the women in their sample were married, and 20% were divorced. Though they did not require that participants have children, 96% of the women were mothers (Kirk and Dorfman, 1983:18).

Kirk and Dorfman found that the most frequently mentioned strains were "not enough time" and "performing multiple roles." Some of the respondents also mentioned financial problems. The satisfactions most frequently mentioned were related to personal growth and development (Kirk and Dorfman, 1983:21).

Consistent with others' findings, Kirk and Dorfman found that the longer women had been away from school, the greater role strain they experienced. They also found that role strain may be greater for women with young children in the home (Kirk and Dorfman, 1983:23).

The greatest sources of support for the women in the sample were from children first, and from friends second. Contrary to other findings, husband support was not strongly related to women's satisfaction in the student role. The greatest cause of dissatisfaction for these women was relying on family members for help in housework and child care (Kirk and Dorfman, 1983:24). An area strongly related to satisfaction in the student role for these women was the helpful attitudes of professors (Kirk and Dorfman, 1983:26).

One of the positive aspects Astin (1976) found was that children also benefitted from their mother's (re)entry in college through gaining increased interest in education, being more independent, having more responsibility, and feeling greater respect for their mothers (Astin, 1976:100). Perhaps Astin expressed best the benefits to women of a college education:

Since the primary purpose of recurrent education is to reduce inequality and offer a second chance, it is clear that women's stake in recurrent education is closely allied to their concerns for equality of opportunity and legal rights legally, educationally, and vocationally. Moreover, recurrent education provides opportunities for career development and means of updating skills that have become obsolete because of long-term interruptions for family life (Astin, 1976:48).

Mendelsohn's discussion is based on 200 taped interviews¹ with returning women students and their families. Fourteen case histories provide the data for one chapter, but beyond this information, she does not discuss her research strategies. Mendelsohn found many positive aspects to women's return to college. She reports that many of the women in her study felt that their marriages had improved in a number of ways. They and their husbands had more to talk about, were better off because she was happier, they communicated better, and they were pleased about the possibility of another breadwinner (Mendelsohn, 1980:36-39).

Many women in her study also felt that they were better mothers after having entered college. They felt better about themselves, were good role models, and were too busy to smother their kids with attention (Mendelsohn, 1980:31-33). Although family may be the source of the greatest problems for mature women in college, it may also be the greatest source of support. In any case, the significant relationship between family life and women's experiences continues to be a major issue related to mature women entering college.

It is clear that many of these studies have produced contradictory conclusions about the experiences of mature women college students. This might suggest that there are no clear patterns or consistencies explaining women's return to college. It also may suggest that there are deeper, social factors involved which have not been discovered or considered thus far, a possibility this research seeks to explore.

¹ The actual number of participants was not indicated.

Obstacles in the University

Many researchers discuss the difficulty of reentering school for older women due to the inflexibility of institutional bureaucracy. At the earliest stage of the process, recruitment into college is not geared to older women. Recruitment efforts often don't include locations where women with school-aged and pre-school aged children, single mothers, women working outside the home, minority women, and others are present (Hall, 1981:2; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983:44; Astin, 1976:51).

Another obstacle is the admissions process, often the major problem these women must confront. Many of the standard requirements for admission are unavailable to women who have been away from formal education for some time, such as recommendations from teachers and professors, high school or college transcripts, or scores from S.A.T. tests which are difficult for these women due to their rusty academic skills (Hall, 1981:3; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983:45; Astin, 1976:51). Many institutions refuse to accept transfer credits from community colleges which are often the first-step for older women returning to college. Some require that a certain number of credit hours be earned as a full-time student (Hall, 1981:6). Suitor (1987) found that many institutions require full-time enrollment, which is often impossible for this group of women (Suitor, 1984:328).

Many women cannot enroll in college without financial aid. For many, governmental aid is their only option. Unfortunately, it is not readily available to them. One reason is that the husband's income is taken into account when assessing the need for aid, regardless of whether or not he is actually contributing. Also,

financial aid is not always available to part-time students (Wheaton and Robinson, 1983:44). Certainly for working class women and many divorced and single women, this barrier is of utmost concern (Astin, 1976:81).

In addition to the structural barriers are discouraging and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors of some administrators and faculty members. Hall indicates that admissions counselors can be discriminatory in their treatment of older students and question their commitment to a college education. Financial aid advisors may also question the seriousness of students' desire to enroll (Hall, 1981:4). Glass and Rose comment that those within the institutions view this group as lacking commitment (Glass and Rose, 1987:113). Some faculty members and administrators have trouble relating to older women students for personal reasons stemming from the fact that they are the same age (Suchinsky, 1982:31).

Again, these obstacles must be analyzed in terms of their social implications. They may be related to more general social values and norms.

Discussion of the Literature

The following discussion considers the major problems with many of the studies reviewed here from the standpoint of this research and its approach.

Assumption of Marriage

Almost all of the research on older women students reviewed here focuses on married women, or women who have been married at some point in their lives.

Even separated and divorced women for the most part are ignored, and the omission of women who have never been married, though presumably the number is small, creates a partial view of the phenomenon and offers no insight on the experience of college reentry for these women.

Young's research on welfare mothers considered women who had never been married. She found that they were primarily in the under 25 age group, and that they did not do as well academically as older students who were primarily separated and divorced. According to Young's study, single women may also have fewer personal problems. For example, Young suggests that the single mothers usually lived with relatives and had less responsibility and were less serious about school since they were not solely responsible for their livelihoods (Young, 1977:40). Given that this research was specifically on welfare mothers, it does not help to illustrate experiences of single middle- and upper-middle-class women returning to school. Although the number of students in this group is likely very small, their absence in the research is a shortcoming.

Structural Aspects

From a critical sociological perspective, most of the research reviewed for this paper has neglected the structural aspects of the experiences of older women returning to college. Most of the literature focuses on individual factors such as psychological problems, emotional stress, guilt, etc.

While the majority of researchers acknowledge the significance of conflicts

between student and family roles, the lack of emotional and instrumental support from families, and the emotional problems resulting from guilt and lack of self-respect and confidence which are constant problems for these women, the researchers have not discussed the origins of these conflicts. They are accepted as given and approached as starting points for developing institutional programs to help women in these circumstances.

Although most of the studies reviewed found lack of confidence and low self-esteem as typical in these women's lives, these characteristics were considered individual and personal problems, not a result of the way social relations have been constructed around gendered definitions and values. The guilt, anxiety, and lack of confidence experienced by women returning to college later in life may come from societal norms and values, and from the gendered construction of social relations. For example, such cultural aspects may include social relations concerning family and household activities and labor and extradomestic work, or other structural factors which have not yet been examined.

Other studies found higher self-esteem, feeling better about one's self, increased self-worth, and autonomy as important benefits that accrue to women due to college experience. Are these characteristics so important to women, and so obviously absent in their lives prior to college? Is there something about the organization and processes of the social relations creating this situation such that women are denied basic feelings of self-worth and autonomy which men take for granted, even to the point that women feel guilty for wanting these feelings? These

questions must be addressed. Acker suggests, "...the structural roots of women's ambivalence about their self-image are located in a societal arrangement that makes many women economically dependent on men" (Acker, 1988:489). The current research does not address this possibility.

Many researchers indicate that women's families support them as long as they do not neglect their primary role as mother and wife. This cultural expectation is accepted in these studies, not analyzed in terms of its social construction, how it has been maintained, the underlying cultural assumptions, and possible conflicts between groups involved.

Many studies conclude with suggestions to institutions for improving the experiences and increasing the numbers of reentry women. These suggestions, if accepted and carried out, will benefit reentry women and possibly encourage more women to return to college. These studies make college and university administrations aware of their discriminatory policies and lack of consideration of the needs of a significant group of students. While this may produce change at the institutional level, the changes required at many other levels go unaddressed. It is important that older women be allowed to earn college degrees as easily as anyone else, but what these studies have not addressed are the effects on this trend of structural and social relations which continue to be defined by men, disadvantaging women in terms of economic and political resource power.

Lack of Comparison Groups

While many of the studies claim that mature women students have low self-esteem, lack self-confidence, and have other psychological problems, they did not use comparison groups on which to base these findings. In some cases, these characteristics were reported by the women themselves, or their husbands, as motivations to return to school or as traits that were eliminated as benefits from college. Astin (1976) and Scott (1980) report findings such as these, but both of their discussions were based on research done by others, and those methodological approaches were not reviewed. Again, Suchinsky was another researcher who clearly failed to base his findings on comparison groups.

Neglecting Race and Class

Many studies of older women do not address the issue of race (Scott, 1980; Mendelsohn, 1980; Hooper, 1979; Kirk and Dorfman, 1983; Suito, 1987, 1988; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983; Huston-Hoburg and Strange, 1986; Smallwood, 1980). For many researchers who did include women of color in their samples, whites were the majority group. Berkove (1979) describes her sample as primarily white, and Astin (1976) reports that 94% of the women in her study were white. Astin adds that this may have been due to the low response rate among women of color (Astin, 1976:58). Of the 144 participants in Young's study, 103 were African-American and 41 were white. She found no differences due to race, however (Young, 1977:39). Lewis (1983) suggests that the minority women in her study were

more similar to than different from white women in other studies, but Maslin (1981) found clear differences between the African-American and white women in her study.

Perhaps the most obvious limitation of the literature on mature women college students is its failure to address the importance of race. Aside from justifying using predominantly white samples with explanations of atypical institutions or low response rates from "non-whites" (Astin, 1976:57), most researchers completely ignore race.

In their (1987) article, "Race and Class Bias in Research on Women: A Methodological Note," Cannon et. al. argue that while the current research on women which has employed qualitative research methods has been successful in uncovering hidden truths about women's lives, this research has focused mainly on white middle-class women (Cannon et. al., 1987:4). They suggest that since qualitative research relies on small samples to generate theory, relatively homogenous samples are much more useful. "When small groups of subjects are extremely diverse, the task of identifying common patterns becomes almost impossible" (Cannon et. al., 1987:4). This consideration has led many researchers to continue to study samples of middle-class white women while ignoring the significance of race and class. Similarly, Allen (1981) writes that the roles, statuses and attitudes of African-American females tend to be neglected by social researchers (Allen, 1981:26). He adds, "Very few researchers have seen fit to approach black women as a unique subgroup of the population with distinctive socioeconomic statuses and roles in the society" (Allen, 1981:28).

Cannon et. al. argue that researchers need to make efforts to change this pattern and to include women of color and women from working and lower classes in their samples. They undertook an in-depth study of professional, managerial and administrative women of diverse class and race backgrounds as a case study to demonstrate the importance of examining these dimensions of women's lives.

When the experiences of African-American women have been taken into account by researchers, the perspectives employed have resulted in conflicting and distorted, often biased and controlling images of African American women. Allen (1981) identifies three ideological perspectives which have been used to examine African-American women's experiences. First, the "cultural deviance perspective" interprets African-American families as deviations from the normative white, conjugal, middle-class nuclear family and employs indices of pathology (Allen, 1981:26).¹ Secondly, the "equivalence perspective" deemphasizes differences while emphasizing similarities between African-American and white families. This perspective tends to recognize as legitimate only those features of African-American family life which parallel those of whites. Finally, the "cultural variance perspective" recognizes differences between African-American and white families and accepts African-American family differences as legitimate cultural forms. Allen adds that, "...researchers historically have studied females in relation to family contexts, rather than as legitimate research subjects in their own right" (Allen, 1981:27).

1 See also, Maxine Baca Zinn, "Family, Race, and Poverty in the Eighties" Pp. 856-874 in *Signs*, 1989, vol. 14, no. 4 and Patricia Hill Collins, "A Comparison of Two Works on Black Family Life" Pp. 875-884 in same edition.

Allen and Fleming suggest that the most prominent of these perspectives used in social science literature on African-American female socioeconomic status is the cultural deviance perspective, which has directly produced "black matriarchy theories" (Allen, 1981:27; Fleming, 1983:43). These theories have created images of African-American women as strong, competent, and self-reliant, sharing more equally in economic and decision-making responsibilities in relation to white wives, and images of female-headed households (Allen, 1981:27; Fleming, 1983:43). African-American women are often judged to be better educated than African-American males, to demonstrate superior scholastic performance, to be more represented in high status occupations, and to be generally more successful than African-American males (Fleming, 1983:43). According to empirical evidence, these interpretations are inaccurate (Allen, 1981:27; Fleming, 1983:43).

Collins (1990) argues that the image of the African-American matriarch is a controlling image of African-American women which perpetuates their image as "Other," as reflected in cultural deviance theories. African-American female-headed households have come to be viewed as a cause of African-American poverty rather than an outcome (Collins, 1990:73).

The modern Black matriarch thesis contends that African-American women fail to fulfill their traditional 'womanly' duties... Portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children (Collins, 1990:74).

Fleming (1983) suggests, "Perhaps the real truth is not that black women are stronger or more dominant than black men, but rather that they are less passive and dependent-less 'feminine,' in terms of white stereotypes, than white women"

(Fleming, 1983:43).

Implications for This Paper

While it may be assumed that white middle-class women constitute the majority of mature women college students, this should not preclude studying the experiences of women of color who are part of this group and may have different experiences. According to Patricia Hill Collins,

Women do share common experiences, but the experiences are not generally the same type as those affecting racial and ethnic groups... Thus while expressions of race and gender are both socially constructed, they are not constructed in the same way (Collins, 1990:28).

Collins comments that some "...white women who possess great competence in researching a range of issues omit women of color from their work claiming that they are unqualified to understand the 'Black women's experience'" (Collins, 1990:10). She further suggests that this attitude reflects "a basic unwillingness by many white feminists to alter the paradigms that guide their work" (Collins, 1990:10).

It remains unclear why the research on mature women students has neglected to assess the importance of race. Audrey Maslin (1981) has suggested that the research on mature women college students has been based on casual observations or on small subgroups in particular places which has led to assumptions which are biased, partial and overgeneralized.

The result was that the continuing education (CE) woman was often characterized - even stereotyped - as a white, middle- or upper-class housewife, an empty nest mother who either a) is bored, depressed, isolated [sic], going through middle-age identity crisis, or b) is yearning to find self-fulfillment through a new career, or both a) and b) (Maslin, 1981:185).

Whatever the reason, it is not because women of color are not returning to college. Although African-American women represent only 25% of women students at Virginia Commonwealth University, the proportion of mature students in each racial category is the same. Of white female students, one-fifth are over age 30. Similarly, of African-American women students, one-fifth are over age 30. This research includes a sample of African-American women, because, as suggested by Cannon et. al.:

Future research on women--especially research that relies on small samples of volunteer subjects--should make class and race an explicit part of the research design and allow them to permeate the whole research process. This will certainly add to the complexity of studies, but it is time for gender research to become more complex. We can no longer afford to forget to incorporate race and class or to use the complexity as an excuse to avoid the issues. When they are integrated fully into research, the building blocks of feminist social and psychological theory will begin to incorporate the diversity of women's experiences. When that happens, working class women and women of color no longer will be viewed as adjuncts, afterthoughts, or interesting deviations from an existing theoretical model (Cannon, 1987:38).

African-American Women

Because of the lack of sufficient literature on African-American mature women college students, I have included a brief discussion of some of the literature on African-American women's general educational, occupational and family experiences. This is included in an effort to identify some relevant areas of significance which distinguish the experiences of African-American women from those of white women.

College enrollment is down for African-Americans despite higher high school completion rates. In some cases, two-year colleges have become the only viable

education route especially for many single African-American women with children because of the decrease in financial aid (Wilkerson, 1986:86; Hall, 1984:271). Almost one-half of college-bound African-American students' families earned below \$12,000 (1985 figures) compared to only 10% of whites. Two-year colleges are less expensive and more accessible. "A four-year education is increasingly a luxury for a black woman, requiring some outside support from a spouse or family, or some form of financial aid or fellowship" (Wilkerson, 1986:86).

A smaller proportion of African-American females pursue higher education than white females or white males (Burlew, 1977:90). Overall, "Black women comprise only 5% of the total student enrollment in institutions of higher education across the country; a significant number are clustered in 2-year institutions where the cost of education is much lower" (Wilkerson, 1986:88). African-American females face tremendous financial burdens that dampen educational and occupational planning (Burlew, 1977:91). On a positive note, in absolute numbers, more African-American women are earning degrees at all levels than ever before (Wilkerson, 1986:89).

Constance Carroll (1982) argues

Black women in higher education are isolated, underutilized, and often demoralized. They note the efforts made to provide equal opportunities for Black men and white women in higher education, while they somehow are left behind in the wake of both the Black and feminist movements (Carroll, 1982:115).

While there is some evidence that African-American women students are in the majority at predominantly African-American institutions and that they are more

successful there than at white institutions, enrollment at African-American schools has decreased and they are in financial and managerial trouble (Wilkerson, 1986:87). The situation in white institutions is discouraging for African-American students. Perhaps of greatest concern to African-American female students is the small number of African-American female role models in these institutions (Carroll, 1982:119; Wilkerson, 1986:90). Across the country, less than 2% of college faculty are African-American, and the majority of them are men (Wilkerson, 1986:91). According to Carroll (1982), at the University of Pittsburgh, where the situation is representative of the rest of the country, white men account for 50% of the associate and full professor ranks, African-American men 31%, white women 19%, and African-American women 3%. While among whites, men are 2-1/2 times more likely than women to be in the upper ranks, among African-Americans, men are 10 times more likely than women to be there (Carroll, 1982:117).

According to many researchers, the occupations chosen by African-American women are typically traditional, "feminine" careers (Burlew, 1977:83; Fleming, 1983:43; Hall, 1984:273). Hall (1984) argues that African-American women lack adequate access to role models and mentors that is necessary to cultivate their interest in pursuing a non-traditional career (Hall, 1984:273). Further, based on her research, Hall found that African-American women consistently reported lower occupational aspirations, were more often in traditional majors, and had lower self-confidence than men. However, they had higher G.P.A.'s (Hall, 1984:281). Burlew (1977) suggests that many African-American females are likely to expect they will not

achieve high level careers because of the overwhelming barriers facing members of their sex and race. These low expectations dampen their aspirations (Burlew, 1977:91).

Historically, African-American women have worked outside the home in greater proportions than white women. Collins (1990) has traced the history of African-American women's work and described its distinctions from white women's work.¹ She points out that during slavery, African-American women performed the same work as men (Collins, 1990:49). Later, after emancipation, African-American women continued to work.

For African-American women the issue was less one of economic equality with husbands and more the adequacy of overall family income. Denying Black men a family wage meant that women continued working and that motherhood as a privatized, female "occupation" never predominated in the African-American communities (Collins, 1990:53).

Collins comments that domestic work historically has been an occupation typically performed by African-American women. Many have been sexually harassed by their white male employers. Those who were able, withdrew from field labor and domestic service to concentrate on duties in their own homes. These women were severely criticized by whites and seen as "aspiring to a model of womanhood that was inappropriate to them" (Collins, 1990:54). Collins argues that, "Black women wanted to withdraw from the labor force, not to duplicate middle-class white women's cult of domesticity but, rather, to strengthen the political and

1 This is a much simplified account of Collins' extensive discussion of this topic which is far too involved for the purposes of this paper.

economic position of their families" (Collins, 1990:54).

The difference between proportions of African-American and white women in the workforce is not as great as has historically been the case, but women's reasons for employment outside the home may vary by race. Figures from June 1987 indicated that 57.1% of African-American women and 55.6% of white women were in the paid labor force (Rix, 1988). Collins suggests that "Historically, the classic pattern of employment for African-American men and women has been higher-paying yet less secure work for African-American men as contrasted with lower-paying, more plentiful work for Black women" (Collins, 1990:59). According to Collins, among middle-class African-Americans, greater numbers of women than men work in professional and managerial positions, but in lower-paying and lower-status positions than men. For working-class African-Americans, men are typically employed in factory work and women are heavily concentrated in clerical work (Collins, 1990:61).

African-American women tend to come out of an atmosphere where employment of wives is accepted and expected, and they are more likely to be employed outside the home. Burlew found that, "...more white women felt marriage would make it difficult to have any career at all" (Burlew, 1977:92). She continues:

Moreover, more Black than white women prefer to continue working even while they raise young children. More white than Black women, on the other hand, prefer to work only before their children were born and after their children are grown. All these lead us to speculate that Black women are less likely than white women to think that career or educational pursuits interfere with fulfilling other roles as wives and mothers (Burlew, 1977:98).

Differences Between African-American and White Women

Cannon et. al.'s study of African-American and white managerial and professional women also resulted in findings about some differences between the experiences of African-American and white women in different social classes. They looked at the factors they identified as most crucial to women's transitions from high school to college, which were information, and emotional and financial support (Cannon et. al., 1987:26). They found that among both African-Americans and whites, middle-class families were more helpful in obtaining information about college entrance, admissions, and approaching and selecting a college (Cannon et. al., 1987:27). Among both African-Americans and whites, working-class families were unable to help students identify the steps necessary to go to college (Cannon et. al., 1987:28).

Cannon et. al. found that 58% of the working-class families and 88% of the middle-class families were able to pay for students' college tuition and fees, but that poor families were not able to do this (Cannon et. al., 1987:29). In general, middle-class families were most able to reassure daughters of their abilities, but white families were identified as doing this more than African-American (Cannon et. al., 1987:30). Overall, African-American parents gave more emotional support for their daughters' educational pursuits than did white parents (Cannon et. al., 1987:31). Cannon et. al. emphasize that education has been encouraged in African-American communities and "hailed as a way of improving the lot of the race." African-American women were encouraged more by their families to think of a career than

were white women, and white working-class women were the group least encouraged to think about a career. They were more encouraged to marry (Cannon et. al., 1987:32). These findings are similar to Fleming's suggestion that, in studies comparing African-American women and white women, most researchers find that African-American women show stronger work orientation, longer history of participation in the work force, and stronger commitment to professional goals (Fleming, 1983:43).

There are many areas in which differences can be anticipated between African-American and white women in this study. Although any predictions at this point would only be speculative, certain issues should be recognized and considered throughout the research.

In terms of education, it is clear that African-American women have suffered more discrimination than white women. They continue to face greater obstacles in obtaining an education and are seriously underrepresented in all levels of education. As Wilkerson has suggested, "Not only are black women generally not in the policymaking or leadership positions in educational institutions, but their history is not reflected in the curriculum, for the most part" (Wilkerson, 1986:91).

It is important to remember that traditionally, African-American women have worked outside the home more than white women. Where enrolling in college may cause strains in the lives of white women, similar to strains associated with working outside the home, this may not be the case for African-American women. In fact, Lewis (1983) found that none of the African-American women in her study expressed

feelings of stress or anxiety as aspects of their experiences returning to school (Lewis, 1983:160). African-American women may be more likely than white women to be the head of a household, or to be unmarried.

African-American women may view their responsibilities to their families differently than do white women. Lewis (1983) has suggested that, "Although women, in general, are accustomed to subordinating their needs and interests to the needs of their families, this appears to be deeper ingrained for minority than white women" (Lewis, 1983:107). Collins (1991) has similarly commented on this and suggested that white and African-American women's responses to their families have differed. While white women may have come to view subordinating their own needs to those of their families as a choice and/or sacrifice, African-American women have considered it a necessity and a form of resistance to oppression through strengthening their families (Collins, 1991:53). These differences could affect African-American women's return to college in different ways than for white women.

Again, these are only speculative variations. It will be important to look for such differences and to consider the important aspects of the lives of women which may not be the same for all.

Theoretical Framework

Specific Areas of Focus

In order to better understand and explain the trend toward "mature women in college," I identified two major historical decision points in women's lives which seemed to reflect the crucial points creating their status as "reentry" students. The first decision point is defined as the point at which a specific course of action, other than college immediately following their graduation from high school, was chosen. Because this typically is considered the point at which most students enter college, it is important to understand what led these women to make other choices. For those women who did enter college at this point, the first crucial decision point is when they left college.

The second significant historical decision point is defined as the point at which the most recent decision to enter or return to college was made. Because college has been deferred, it is important to analyze those activities which were chosen instead of college, and how they may have changed so that college became an option. Questions focused on discovering the circumstances around which these two major decisions were made and toward understanding how and by whom they were made.

Gender Division of Labor

The theoretical model I chose to guide the research questions is Janet Saltzman Chafetz's model of the gender division of labor. She, like others, argues that gender inequality is fundamentally rooted in the gender division of labor

(Chafetz, 1990:11; Hartmann, 1979:206). This framework focuses on important aspects of women's lives in patriarchal capitalist society which relate to women's work and education. Chafetz explains that where historically women have been responsible for the work of child rearing, food preparation and other domestic tasks, men have done the extradomestic work in the realms identified as economic, political, educational, and other culture-producing spheres of activity. Traditionally, many married women deferred establishing careers or pursuing educations in order to support their husbands' pursuit of these extradomestic goals (Acker, 1988:476; Smith, 1987:213). Hartmann (1981) explains, "Their control of women's labor power is the level that allows men to benefit from women's provision of personal and household services, including relief from child rearing and many unpleasant tasks both within and beyond households..." (Hartmann, 1981:372). Although the experience of women returning to college is not limited to married women, they have constituted the majority. Single women's reasons for delaying college are different, yet can be viewed as related to the gender division of labor. This is most apparent at the macro level, where the male-dominated hierarchy of the political economy has maintained men's superior position to women in all aspects of society. These aspects include the fact that occupations typically filled by women earn less money than those filled by men, and the processes by which gender ideologies discourage women from higher education.

In describing the processes by which gender inequality is maintained, Chafetz has developed a set of propositions about the relationships between women and men

at each level of social life. She argues that "the gender division of labor recreates itself, first, through micro processes within the family, and second, through mezo and macro processes outside the household" (Chafetz, 1990:45).

Chafetz suggests that historically men have accounted for a majority of the paid labor force and continue to earn more than women. This results in men generally having greater power resources at the micro level, which leads to their wives' compliance with their demands. The husband typically contributes little to household labor, even when both marriage partners work outside the home. Their greater resource power has often allowed males to choose which household tasks to undertake. They may also have the power to decide the wife's choices for her, for example, whether or not she will work outside the home, or enroll in college. Because women are still responsible for a majority of the household labor, they are limited in the career choices they can make, to those which will allow them to continue to fulfill those domestic and familial responsibilities. These jobs are usually those which pay the least, the typically female careers (Giele, 1982:119). Given these circumstances, a woman's dependence on her husband typically continues whether or not she works outside the home. If she does not, she is completely financially dependent on him, and if she does, she will most likely have a job in which she earns less than her husband (Chafetz, 1990:51).

At the macro level, historically males have controlled elite positions which, over time, has created a male-dominated political and economic organization of social relations. Because males first occupied these arenas, they created and

designed their operation from a male standpoint. Although a few women do now occupy these ranks, they generally follow the same procedures and organization which men follow. What has come to be regarded as "normal" in these positions was created by men and from their viewpoints. Men no longer have to blatantly evoke their interests as males, because their interests are already incorporated into the operations at elite positions.

Males in elite positions have often afforded greater resource power to males and have created an unequal distribution of opportunities and rewards which favors men. As Acker suggests, "Gendering occurs in the sex segregation of jobs within work organizations that typically locates women in some jobs and men in others" (Acker, 1988:482). Males in elite positions have tended to value maleness and jobs associated with maleness, and conversely to devalue work that women typically do simply because women do it (Chafetz, 1990:60; Acker, 1988:482). Chafetz describes this as part of the production of gender ideologies, which she defines thus:

belief systems that explain how and why males and females differ; specify on that basis different (and inevitably unequal) rights, responsibilities, rewards to each other; and justify negative reactions to nonconformists (Chafetz, 1990: 35).

This helps to legitimate the unequal distribution of opportunities and rewards based on gender.

Predominantly male organizations have used various tactics to exclude women from higher-paying and prestigious occupations. As Hartmann suggests, "Male-dominated trade unions and professional associations, for example, have excluded women from skilled employment and reduced their opportunities to support

themselves" (Hartmann, 1981:372). Males in elite positions have defined certain attitudes and behaviors as acceptable in certain positions based on this gender differentiated distribution. These definitions become part of the cultural ideology and are expressed to both women and men. Chafetz refers to these attitudes and behaviors as gender norms, which "refer to behavior that is expected of people on the basis of the status to which they are assigned, given their sexual biology" (Chafetz, 1990:35). The more women come into contact with these attitudes and behaviors, the more they accept them. As a result, women make more choices which they understand to be acceptable, which are the traditionally female roles.

Chafetz suggests that the micro-level resource power of males intersects with the definitional phenomena of widely shared ideologies and norms in the concept of "micro-definitional power." Rooted in resource power, micro-definitional power is:

the power to define the reality or situation to which people who are interacting orient themselves; what is and is not worthy of notice and especially discussion; what is and is not "proper" behavior in the concrete interaction situation. In short, it is the ability to shape what transpires during an episode of interpersonal interaction. Because it is heavily rooted in resource power, which in turn accrues disproportionately to men in gender-stratified societies, micro-definitional power also tends to belong primarily to men in male-female interactions (Chafetz, 1990:37).

Structural Aspects and Everyday Experience

Chafetz's discussion of the gender division of labor offers a description of some macro-level patterns related to women's labor in patriarchal society. Other theorists have described related structural issues with an emphasis on capitalist patriarchal relations, which further describe the gender division of labor in this type

of society.

In his introduction to Lily Braun's Selected Writings on Feminism and Socialism (1987), Alfred Meyer discusses Braun's views on capitalism's intensification of women's oppression. Her account describes some of the beginnings of capitalistic relations. Braun argues that the rise of capitalism coincided with a cultural change which made productive labor the major criterion of human worth. At the same time, women were forced out of the more meaningful and satisfying lines of work. Many of the productive functions women had carried out were taken over by factories, "so that household management, once a responsible and challenging line of work, had turned into boring drudgery" (Braun, 1987:xii). While middle-class wives were transformed into "decorative play thing[s]," lower-class women were mobilized into wage work in industry.

They did the most menial tasks under degrading and health -destroying conditions for wages far below those paid to men. Or else, on the margins of the capitalist system they faced comparable or even worse exploitation as actresses, or prostitutes, while in the countryside they toiled in their own hovels which functioned as the sweatshops of cottage industry (Braun, 1987:xii).

Smith's (1987) discussion of the importance of working relations incorporates an approach emphasized by Marx and Engels:

Marx and Engels held that how people think about and express themselves to one another arises out of their actual everyday working relations... Their analysis shows how the ideas produced by a ruling class may dominate and penetrate the social consciousness of the society in general, and thus may effectively control the social process of consciousness in ways that deny expression to the actual experience people have in the working relations of their everyday world... The social forms of thought, according to Marx and Engels, arise in people's immediate working relations (Smith, 1987:55).

Smith argues that integral to women's experiences in this society is the progress of capital, which has created "a wholly new terrain of social relations external to the local terrain and the particularities of personally mediated economic and social relations" (Smith, 1987:5).

Capitalism has created a form of social relations which is characterized by anonymity, impersonality and universalism in the extralocal domain which became the exclusive terrain of men. Women became confined to a reduced local sphere of action organized by particularistic relationships. "Formerly common to both women and men, the domestic became a discrete and lesser sphere confining and confined to women and on which the domain arrogated by men has continually encroached" (Smith, 1987:5).

This theoretical position which focuses on human beings' experiences in everyday life is discussed by many theorists. As Smith (1987) argues, "Inquiry does not begin within the conceptual organization or relevances of the sociological discourse, but in actual experiences as embedded in the particular historical forms of social relations that determine that experience" (Smith, 1987:49). Smith refers to these social relations as structures that "rule" (manage, administrate, organize, and otherwise control). "These constitute the bases of common perspectives" (Smith, 1987: 56). She continues, "Women's experiences and concerns in their everyday lives were not independent of determinations in relations beyond them" (Smith, 1987:215).

Eisenstein (1979) explains further, "Marx used his theory of social relations - understanding 'things' in their concrete connections - to understand the relations of

power in society" (Eisenstein, 1979:42). She continues, "The universal elucidates the specifics and the specifics give reality to the universal" (Eisenstein, 1979:45). Similarly, Acker (1988) suggests that personal relations do not have significance only at the psychological level of family interaction, but that, "...these relations constitute elements in the underlying social structure, linking individual experience to external, distant economic and political processes" (Acker, 1988:484). She further supports Smith's proposal for building a sociology *for* women which "suggests starting from women's concrete experiences, recognizing differences in economic and cultural contexts, and then locating the processes through which these experiences come into existence in the social relations of the society as a whole" (Acker, 1988:476).

Eisenstein explains further that:

A moment cannot be understood outside the relations of power which shape it and the ideology which defines, protects, and maintains it. In describing these moments, understanding the ideology of a society becomes crucial because the social relations of capitalist patriarchy are maintained through liberalism, male supremacy, and racism (Eisenstein, 1979:46).

Smith concludes:

...seeing this way has the capacity to write a sociology that shifts outside the relations of ruling to a stance from which the relations and powers of the world we live become visible from the sites of people's actual experience (Smith, 1987:213).

In this study the gender division of labor is the theoretical framework used to inform interview questions. The intent is to discover how women's participation in patriarchal capitalist forms of the gender division of labor has effected their everyday lives, specifically their decisions concerning college. Aspects of the gender division of labor as generated through patriarchal capitalist relations were assessed through

questions related to how women participated in domestic and extra-domestic labor. Perceptions of overall values and normative aspects of labor as defined through these relations and which influenced their decisions through socialization agents such as teachers, counselors, and family members at each decision point were also examined. The emphasis on actual lived experiences was incorporated in this study through its analysis into the personal lives of the women who made up the sample by way of face-to-face interviews. Discovering those experiences through the women's accounts was considered necessary to the study.

Division of Household Labor

As Chafetz argues, the division of household labor is crucial to the overall gender division of labor. Much of the literature reflects this as well in its emphasis on instrumental and behavioral family and spouse support of women returning to school. Considering that women continue to be primarily responsible for domestic and child care labor even when they work outside the home or go to college, this is a major conflict in the lives of many women and reflects the overall gendered structure of social relations. Fundamental to the division of household labor are gender ideology and relative resource power, which are described further by other theorists.

Coleman and Blumberg have argued that within this model, women's ability to exercise power in a marital dyad depends upon certain discount factors at the macro and micro level. At the macro level, the discount factors affecting the wife's

power include the male-dominated hierarchy of the political economy, gender ideologies, and age cohort (Coleman, 1988:140; Blumberg and Coleman, 1989:230). At the micro level, Coleman and Blumberg identify the following discount factors: each partner's commitment to the relationship, attractiveness, gender ideology, and the husband's perception of need for the wife's income (or for the purposes of this paper, her education) (Coleman and Blumberg, 1988:140).

Geerken and Gove (1983) similarly have addressed the importance of power in the marital dyad. They suggest that at the macro level, power is based on income and occupational prestige, in the form of material rewards and sanctions, of the marriage partners which are influenced by their educations. Additionally, values and societal norms within the culture affect the operations of the family. At the micro level, family composition and life-cycle stage (i.e., the absence or presence of children) are the most important determinants of inner structural demands and the wife's work involvement in the family and outside (Geerken and Gove, 1983:28-29). Some of the studies of mature women students reviewed here reflected this importance as they consider the ages of children and how this affected a woman's decision to return to school. Hooper (1979) found that the age of a woman's children plays a part in determining when she goes to college (Hooper, 1979:150). Hartmann (1981) found that the husband's contribution to housework stays the same regardless of family size or age of the youngest child, so that, again, the wife adjusts to the family life cycle with regards to housework (Hartmann, 1981:385). Also important is the sexual division of labor as perceived by family members in their

assignment of household tasks (Geerken and Gove, 1983:29).

The theoretical framework used to guide the research includes these various areas of focus. The gender division of labor includes processes at micro, mezo and macro levels as described by Chafetz, an awareness of the structural aspects and historical production of patriarchal capitalism, and mechanisms at work within the household division of labor.

Connecting the Theory to the Research

Using the gender division of labor as a theoretical framework, the two major historical decision points were considered relevant in two basic ways. One aspect is that each decision point involved relative resource power and definitional power. As Chafetz has suggested, resource power is generated through economic resources based on the macro level reward system. Definitional power is also generated through economic resources, as well as through the cultural ideologies defining gender, work, etc... and filtered through socialization agents in education, family, peer groups, the media, etc.

Also, each role women chose was analyzed in terms of how it fit into the gender division of labor, where the very roles chosen instead of and that took precedence over college education may have been those identified as typically-female roles, e.g. secretarial jobs, teaching positions, full-time mother/wife responsibilities, all of which might have been supplemental income or support type roles. The

decision to go to college may have been a way to overcome those roles, threatened them, and either took precedence over or competed with them.

Relative resource power at this decision point could involve the power women have had in relation to their parents', boyfriends/fiancées', and peer groups, to enforce their decisions if in opposition, or to participate in making decisions. For example, given that men continue to earn more than women in comparable positions, it could make sense that the woman's husband should go to college first, since his college education will be more financially rewarding. Relations with parents could involve their expectations, as well as their financial situations, in terms of what women chose to do after high school.

The second decision point, that involving the decision to enroll in or reenter college, was thought to be affected by the gender division of labor in a number of ways. Again, structural and ideological aspects of defining situations are involved. This decision might have involved changes in the previous situation or primary role, or changes in the need for that role.

Resource power relations at this decision point may involve the wife's capacity to pay for her college education after years of working in the paid labor force. This is the point at which Blumberg and Coleman's "discount factors" may become important in analyzing power relations between husbands and wives (e.g., each partner's commitment to the relationship, gender ideology, and the husband's perception of need for the wife's income (or education)) (Coleman and Blumberg, 1988:140). Their suggestion that a sudden increase of the wife's power is sometimes

regarded as a threat by the husband may also be important at this decision point. Another possible structural change at this decision point might involve a reduction in finances required for the household due to children leaving home, one of the marriage partners receiving a raise, etc... which may allow for extra money for the wife's education. Household responsibilities may have subsided due to children growing older which allows extra time for the mother's education. Both of these examples reflect a diminished need for a specific primary role and opportunity for another. Separation, divorce, or the husband's death may lead to the wife's need for a career and education because she is no longer in a support/supplemental role but a primary provider role, a change in her position in the gender division of labor. Upward mobility in her career out of the lower-level typically female positions may depend on increased education.

These structural changes might also involve redefinition and reevaluation of the woman's primary role. What had been defined as the most important of her roles has changed, based on structural and attitudinal changes. Definitional power may be involved as women define their roles in new ways, choose new commitments, in relation to their husbands' definitions of their roles, their families' definitions, and dominant social definitions. That many women face conflicts with their families when they go to college suggests contradictions in defining situations and needs. What has been viewed by women as a change in role may not be viewed in the same way by others around them (husbands, parents, children, friends). The interview questions were directed so as to discover how the decision to enter or reenter college

was defined by women and others in terms of such structural or attitudinal changes. The questions were geared to address how the women's roles were viewed by them and their families in relation to the gender stereotypes and female-defined positions in the gender division of labor.

The Methodology

Because the experiences of mature women students are various, the task of defining the population for this study was difficult. It is clear that race is a significant variable in this phenomenon. A consideration suggested by Cannon et. al. (1987) is that women's responses to invitations to participate in research may vary according to race. In their study, white women were more than twice as likely as African-American women to respond to letters or media solicitations while personal contact was typically required to recruit African-American participants. Cannon et. al. suggest, "Dominant group women have less reason to suspect that they or members of their group will be exploited in research on women. Members of minority communities have greater reason to do so" (Cannon et. al., 1987:24). They further found that African-American middle-class women had less free time to devote to participation in research, and were more likely to have to cancel appointments or complete an interview in more than one sitting (Cannon et. al., 1987:25). Most importantly, the African-American women who participate in this study were approached as a distinct group, not a deviation from the norm, with significant experiences to share about their lives. This was intended to add not only to the knowledge about mature women students, but also to that about African-American women.

Because Sutor found that women who had attended both community and

¹ Although African-American women constitute only one group of women of color, the constraints on this study do not allow for more groups to be included at this point.

four-year colleges felt that the four-year college or university experience was most important in terms of change in their lives, community college students were excluded from this research. In establishing an age requirement for "mature," the other research offers the span of 25 to 35 years. The minimum requirement for this sample was based on the average between the two, 30. The variables which were held constant were the age category, marital status limited to those who have been married at some point, and the student status of undergraduate and degree-seeking. I included only undergraduates based on the assumption that these students are more likely to be experiencing the initial changes in their lives involved with enrolling in college than graduate students who either have been there longer, or who obtained a bachelor's degree immediately after high school and are now returning for an advanced degree. I did not make a distinction between full- and part-time status. It was not clear from the research whether these two experiences were different, and the types of processes analyzed in this study were not expected to be strongly related to this distinction. The variable which was varied was race, white and African-American.

The sample was a combined convenience and snowball sample, drawn from students I have met in classes, and other mature women students they know. I also visited several classes where I described my research project and asked for volunteers to be interviewed. A research protocol and consent form were approved by the Committee on Conduct of Human Research prior to data collection (see Appendix C). Due to time limitations, the number of informants was relatively small, twenty-

one, ten African-American and eleven white, mature women students.

The Research Question

The research question for this study is how the gender division of labor has helped to create the phenomenon of mature women college students. It was proposed that a connection exists between the broader structural patterns of the gender division of labor as it exists in capitalist patriarchal society and the seemingly personal experiences of women who pursue college later in life. An appropriate method of inquiry was chosen to seek answers to the research question. Following the emphasis on concrete experience advocated by Acker, Eisenstein, and Smith in which inquiry begins with individual accounts of experiences in everyday life, interviews were conducted with women.¹ As defined by Taylor and Bogdan (1984), qualitative interviewing is

directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words. the in-depth interview is modeled after a conversation between equals, rather than a formal question-and-answer exchange (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:77).

In seeking to identify how the gender division of labor had helped to create a trend toward mature women students, it was important to hear how these women describe their experiences. The gender division of labor relies on the individual interpretations and internalizations of the values and norms which maintain it.

¹ For further discussion of feminist research involving interviews see Janet Finch's (1984) "It's great to have someone to talk to: the ethics and politics of interviewing women" in C. Ben and H. Roberts (eds.) *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*, Dorothy Smith's (1987) *The Everyday World as Problematic*, and Caroline Ramazanoglu's (1989) "Improving on Sociology: The Problems of Taking a Feminist Standpoint" in *Sociology* 23,3.

It was important to find out how individual women defined themselves and their experiences in relation to the gender division of labor, the gender ideologies, and the dominant social norms by asking them to describe their experiences. These accounts were used to explore the social relations organizing their experiences and the extent to which aspects of the gender division of labor had affected their decisions and actions.

The interviews were conducted in library study rooms, in my office on campus, and in some of the participants' places of work. I personally conducted the interviews, which took approximately one hour each, and were completed in one sitting.

The Method

Glaser's and Strauss's (1967) The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research is considered a major resource for designing qualitative research. Emphasizing the use of comparative analysis as a crucial requirement for generating theory, Glaser and Strauss suggest, "Grounded theory [theory grounded in data] can be presented either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:28). The emphasis in the latter case, and the type most suitable for this project, is on theory as process.

Glaser and Strauss suggest that there are two types of theory which can be generated in this way. The first, substantive theory, is developed typically for

substantive, empirical areas of sociological inquiry, such as patient care, race relations, etc. The second, formal theory, is developed for a formal or conceptual area - stigma, deviant behavior, socialization, authority and power, etc (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:32).

The design involves a progressive building up from facts, through substantive to grounded formal theory. To generate substantive theory, we need many facts for the necessary comparative analysis; ethnographic studies, as well as direct gathering of data, are immensely useful for this purpose (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:35).

Glaser and Strauss believe that formal theory can be generated directly from data, but that it is most desirable to start the formal theory from a substantive theory. It seemed appropriate for the purposes of this paper to work toward developing a substantive theory of women's status as mature students based directly on data gathered from the interviews.

Glaser and Strauss's (1967) approach to developing theory through theoretical sampling involves the simultaneous efforts of data collection and data analysis. Taylor and Bagdon also emphasize, "data analysis is an ongoing process in qualitative research" (Taylor and Bagdon, 1984:128). The idea is to, throughout the interview process, keep track of emerging themes, continue to read through notes, and to develop concepts and propositions to begin to make sense out of the data. The data should be analyzed soon after they have been gathered.

Data Analysis Techniques

The preliminary steps of data analysis incorporated Taylor and Bagdon's

Page 61 was missing from the book when digitized.

categories, and its other properties (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:106).

Glaser and Strauss suggest that there are two kinds of categories and properties, those constructed by the analyst, and those abstracted from the language of the research situation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:107).

After the interview process, I read the data several times before coding. I categorized them in a number of different ways, around variables related to the analysis, e.g. age, race, and marital status. They were also categorized around certain responses to questions which identified the women in different ways -those who were discouraged vs. those who were encouraged to go to college, those who chose college vs. those who chose marriage after high school, etc. Categories were changed and compared and notations were made as to the most meaningful categorizations in terms of explaining the phenomenon.

Although all of the material in the interview schedule (see Appendix B) was covered in each interview, each question may not have been asked individually or in the exact order it appears on the schedule. Comparing responses to exact questions was limited somewhat by this, but general responses were compared and analyzed. Certain areas were identified as significant based on the women's emphasis on those aspects of their lives. Much of the significant and meaningful data were offered by women themselves and not in direct response to any specific question from the interview schedule.

Interaction Effects Between the Interviewer and Participants

I recorded my perceptions of the atmosphere at each interview, the general rapport between each woman and myself. The interviews with younger women, closer to my own age, seemed to be more comfortable overall, but none of the others was uncomfortable enough to indicate possible affects on the data. Although the general sentiment among the participants was that they were busy and had little time to spare, most seemed comfortable with sharing their experiences at length and responding to all my questions.

Contrary to observations by Cannon, et. al. (1987) that African-American women are sometimes less interested in participating in research, I did not experience this problem. It was a little more difficult to find African-American women to participate, but I think it was due more to the smaller number (not proportion) of African-American compared to white women on this campus than to their hesitancy to participate. In fact, some of the most willing participation and most detailed descriptions were from African-American women.

Description of the Sample

Twenty-one women participated in this research, ten African-American and eleven white. Their ages ranged from 31-56, the average age being 40. Ten women were married, eight divorced, two separated, and one widowed. Seventeen had at least one child. Eight women reported total family incomes exceeding \$34,000, four reported incomes equal to \$34,000, and nine reported incomes below that amount.

Seven of the eight whose incomes were greater than \$34,000 were married, and all whose incomes were below \$34,000 were separated or divorced. Ten of the eleven white women reported that their incomes exceeded \$34,000 when they were married, compared to five of the ten African-American women. Eight women were not currently employed outside the home, six were employed part-time and seven were employed full-time.

As there were only 21 participants and the sample was not random, the findings cannot be generalized to the larger population. The purpose of reporting these data is to tell the stories of these 21 women.

Findings

Through the initial analysis I realized that comparing the women's accounts based on certain demographic variables (race, age, marital status) was not helpful in terms of discovering patterns in their decisions concerning college. It became clear that the data was more interesting when analyzed around the two decision points.

Decision Point 1 - Encouraged/Discouraged

Comparing their descriptions of experiences at the first decision point (after high school graduation), it became clear that the women were divided between major categories, or groups - those who were encouraged to go to college, and those for whom college was not an option, either because it was never suggested or because it was blatantly discouraged by school teachers, counselors, or parents. In other

words, for some women, college was defined as an appropriate course of action or part of their role expectations, and for others it was not.

Of those who were encouraged to go to college after high school, many went. Some of those who went to college said that they didn't remember explicitly receiving advice about college, but they already knew they wanted to go. These women had already defined college as a viable option, a valuable and appropriate course of action, and they evidently received the material assistance they needed to go.

Most who responded that they had received advice about college and encouragement to go to college were African-American. One woman, who graduated from an all-black school in 1961 said that her teachers and counselors insisted that, *"Blacks need to go to college'... My parents encouraged me to go, too."*

Another African-American woman responded, *"I went to a open high school. College was expected of everyone, it wasn't questioned."* Another commented, *"The administrators helped me get financial aid information and apply to school."*

One African-American woman described the advice her teachers and counselors gave her:

"Don't give up. You have the ability to do whatever you want." Never, "I'm gonna help you find a way to get to college." For minorities, advice was abstract, not concrete. It was a predominantly white school, and I think they got more help.

Although none of the other African-American participants said this explicitly, many shared similarly "abstract" types of advice that teachers and counselors had given them.

Teachers taught us the value of an education.

Try to obtain a lot of knowledge...develop good study habits, set goals, work hard.

My guidance counselor was very supportive. She gave positive messages - to have and hold onto the dream of going to school. She told us "Don't forget your community when you achieve your goal. Know who you are, what you stand for."

For the African-American women who were interviewed, as a group, college seemed to be defined as an appropriate course of action. Education was defined as valuable and necessary. It's impossible to determine whether the first woman's observation (that the advice was more "abstract" for blacks than for whites) was consistent among other schools based on this data. Only a few white women responded that they were encouraged to go to college, and it's not clear whether the advice they received was any less abstract than what the African-American students received. It would be interesting to research, however.

The majority of women who participated in the interviews were in the second group, those for whom college was not considered an option. For some of the women (in this case, all of whom were white), marriage was the focus of the advice they received, both from school and from family. Marriage was defined as valuable and necessary, an appropriate course of action. One reflection of this is in the requirement that girls take home economic classes in high school. This was the case for most of the women, and as one woman commented, *"The idea was that you'd be a housewife and mother."*

Another woman described how she realized the cultural expectation that women should marry and care for families. She was in high school:

I never thought about having to support myself. I didn't plan a career or education. I always thought I'd be a mother and wife at home. I had no real plans, no goals except marriage eventually.

When asked what advice teachers and counselors had given her, another woman replied, "*Get married, be a good girl, help your husband, keep a good house.*" Similarly, another woman commented,

My counselor didn't encourage me toward college, only toward marriage and family... I didn't really think about my future plans, but I wanted to get married and have kids.

These women's accounts are clear examples of how they came to define their major need or goal after high school as related to domestic responsibilities of wife and mother. The school curricula led them in that direction, school officials and parents gave them explicit or implicit encouragement. Even those who didn't identify specific sources of influence realized the cultural expectations affecting their decisions.

Others expressed perceptions of their parents' realization of the cultural views of marriage vs. college, their definition of marriage as the appropriate course of action. These women were white.

My parents thought it was a risk to finance an education for a daughter. They thought college was an expensive place to find a husband.

My parents didn't think college was important. They thought I'd quit and get married.

None of the African-American women mentioned their parents' attitudes about marriage.

Other women were encouraged to work after their graduation from high school rather than to go to college. These women were typically from working-class

families, where the immediate need for an income helps to define work as the appropriate course of action as opposed to a college education which requires, and does not supply, monetary resources.

Neither of my parents had a high school degree. They didn't see a college education as necessary. Work was more important.

My parents figured if I was working, it was fine. They really valued the work ethic.

The jobs most women held after high school were those defined as typically female within the gender division of labor, such as secretarial, clerical, retail, etc. These were the jobs their high school educations had prepared them for, both mentally and physically, based on the cultural definition of these jobs as appropriate for women.

For other women, college was never mentioned in high school at all.

I don't remember teachers or counselors telling me much... My parents weren't really heavy on advice either; they supported me to do what I wanted to do.

When I graduated, no one talked to me about college, how to prepare for it, get to it. I had no plans. My family assumed I'd go to college, but they thought high school would prepare me for it.

I remember after I graduated from high school my mother asked me if I was going to college. I had no idea how to get started.

Some of the women had considered college after high school, but they were discouraged from going. These women tended to be white.

My guidance counselor told me I couldn't ever go to college. I wanted to go into graphic design, but he and my mother told me I couldn't, and that there was no money in art.

I got a scholarship to a teaching college, but my parents wouldn't let me go. They didn't value formal education.

I wanted to go into physical therapy, but my guidance counselor told me women

didn't do that. He pushed me towards secretarial work and teaching.

Clearly, financial barriers prevented others from going to college after high school.

I was the oldest child in my family. I thought about how hard it would be for my parents to send me to college. I got married, but kept college in mind.

The guidance counselors could have done a better job of guiding me towards financial aid... We didn't have much money.

It appears that going to college required certain resources which many of these women did not possess. These can be identified as specific types of support. First of all, they needed to know that college was a possibility, that it was an appropriate choice; they needed "definitional support." Many were never given the opportunity to consider college. Teachers and guidance counselors didn't offer this information, didn't define college as necessary, attainable, or valuable. School curricula guided girls in other directions, those identified as feminine - domestic, secretarial, teaching, nursing.

If they did consider college an option, women still needed financial support. Many did not receive it; some were overtly discouraged. This can be interpreted as evidence of the greater resource power of parents and counselors and, in turn, their greater power to define the situation and choices for women. They defined college as unimportant, unattainable, or otherwise inappropriate. Again, in addition to encouragement, they needed the material means to do it, including finances and knowledge of application and financial aid procedures. These material means are related to power resources, which few of these female high school student possessed.

Only a few women in this sample received all that was necessary to go to college after high school. Those who did not lacked the resource and definitional power to overcome their deficits.

Of the group of women who did go to college at the first decision point, some went into training programs for nursing, secretarial positions, allied health occupations, etc... which they completed. Others attended colleges or universities, but they stopped before completing.

The majority quit college to get married, and this group included both African-American and white women.

I went to college two and a half years. Then I fell in love and got married. I quit college. It was partly my decision, but my husband thought, "either marriage or college, not both." My parents agreed.

I stayed in college one year... I'd gotten married and at the time, I wanted to concentrate on my marriage. Plus, he was in college and we couldn't both afford to go. We could have made sacrifices to do it, but we didn't.

I went to college and stayed two years. I fell in love and got married, then I was busy having children. The interest [in college] wasn't there. It didn't come up.

I started going to community college but I got married and dropped it. I felt marriage was the most important thing, not worrying about school.

Although these women had initially defined college as valuable and appropriate, they were forced to redefine its value in relation to marriage. College was typically defined as incompatible with marriage, which required either all of the women's time, or her additional income from full-time employment. Given the cultural assumption that marriage is more important to women than to men and the belief that women

are primarily responsible for maintaining the marital relationship, women generally made the appropriate choice to marry and postpone or forget college. They did not have the support of extra time for college since many had to work full-time in and outside the home.

Financial concerns kept others from finishing.

I went on welfare for awhile for health insurance when my baby was born. I hated it - they treated me like dirt. I vowed I'd never do it. I couldn't stand a welfare check. I wanted to get a job, so I quit college.

After two years, my student loan didn't come through. I moved home to save some money. Then I got married and didn't go back. I had to work.

Clearly, defining college as valuable is only part of the problem. The complex interdependence of these different types of support - definitional, financial and structural - worked to keep many women from going to college after high school.

Still others described various reasons for quitting college.

I went to college for about a semester, but I didn't like it. I felt it was a very prejudiced environment.

I went to college for a year. I wasn't ready. I thought I knew more than I did.

I stayed in college until my junior year when my parents were killed in a car wreck. The grief from my parents' death kept me from seeing the sense in finishing college because they weren't here.

Like going to college, staying in college required certain types of support. Women needed to believe that college was important or necessary; they had to define college as valuable and appropriate. They required financial and structural support of money and time. Marriage was defined by these women as the most important choice at the time, and their responsibilities related to marriage were so

great that they did not structurally allow for other commitments such as college.

Decision Point 2

I found that women's descriptions of how and when they decided to come (back) to college didn't necessarily provide the information needed to suggest how their situations had changed between the two decision points. Some responses were as brief as, "The time was right" or "I was ready." I realized that adding the question, "Why do you think you didn't go before now?" helped to uncover some of the obstacles they had to overcome.

At the second decision point, it seemed that the earlier distinction between the "encouraged" and "discouraged" was no longer significant. Obviously for all these women, college came to be defined as an appropriate course of action. Over time they became aware of the opportunity to go to college and were able to gather together the necessary resources. The task in analyzing the data at the second decision point was to discover what had changed in these women's lives since the first decision point to make college a viable option.

For many women, college had always been a goal. These women tended to be those who had been encouraged to go to college at the first decision point, or those who had wanted to go but were discouraged. Some had attended college periodically, while others had waited for the right time to begin. In either case, they waited for a significant change in their structural situation to make going to college possible. For others, college was not even considered until some change in their lives

caused them to consider it important to go to college. These tended to be those who were not encouraged or who were discouraged and gave up hope of going, at the first decision point.

Marriage and family responsibilities were identified by many women as reasons they postponed college. For some women (in this case, all white), the very absence of marriage helped them to redefine college as a valuable option. For one woman who was initially encouraged to go to college, and did for awhile, the absence of discouragement in her marriage allowed her to come back:

I didn't think about college before, because it was easier to get along in the family. It was something my husband didn't think was important. It was easier not to fight, just go along... After I'd separated, I decided I'd wanted to go to college for years, and now I didn't have to listen to anybody tell me it was a stupid idea.

Others who experienced discouragement at high school graduation also waited for the absence of their husbands' discouragement.

I tried to go to college periodically, but my husband was very threatened by my finishing. He always found a reason to move... When I came back it was a hard decision. I was divorced, living on welfare and child support, and I lost my job. I figured, if I'm gonna be poor anyway, I might as well go on [with college].

When the kids were little I told my husband I wanted to go to college. He told me, "You'd be so bored." I wasn't strong enough to do it without his emotional or financial support... When I came to college, my husband, parents and grandparents had all died within two years. The time was right.

For these women, lack of resource power in their marriages prevented them from pursuing college against their husbands' wishes. Change in their structure of relationships placed them in new situations and made available new choices. Following the end of marriage, these women were in a position of sole provider, no

longer supplemental income earner or full-time homemaker.

For some women who had not planned to come to college, a divorce forced them to redefine college in terms of their new situation and location in the structure of social relations. They were suddenly the sole providers for their families and themselves, and had to redefine their choices in relation to their capacities to provide for their families. Many came to define college as a necessary means to better employment. This group was not distinguishable by race.

I was busy having children. My interest [in college] wasn't there. It didn't come up. My husband wanted to come back first... After the divorce, I needed financial independence.

Financially, I had to work. I wanted to quit and go to school but my husband got hurt at work and had to go to college to retrain. I had to help pay... All the positions above mine required a college education... I was separated and knew I had to be independent.

Many women expressed a need to stay home with their children when they were younger. Other researchers also have found that having young children affects women's lives and educational or employment choices. This again reflects the broader structural patterns of the gender division of labor which designate to women the majority of childcare responsibilities. The white women in this sample were less likely to work outside the home or go to college when they had young children than were African-American women. Nevertheless, women from both races commented that coming to college was easier as the children grew older.

I felt I needed to be working on my marriage. When the kids were young I didn't want to leave them. I didn't have the money or time for college... Now, I know I'll be single for a long time. I need a better job, better pay.

I should have gone when the kids were little, but the thought never occurred to

me. I thought my kids would need me forever... After I got divorced, I started to work out of necessity as a secretary. I realized I needed a degree. I kept getting more responsibility but not more money. The kids were older so college became an option.

I was working for the department of corrections in data entry - no benefits, hourly. Every week I applied for a new job... I decided to quit and go to college full time... My supervisor encouraged me. "Why stay in a dead-end job?" I'd always dreamed of getting a bachelor's degree. As the kids got older it was easier.

I stayed home with my kids for thirteen years. My husband would have let me work or go to college, but I didn't want daycare or baby-sitters for my kids... When they were older, I went to work in a department store to save money for their college. I didn't like retail. I realized I couldn't get anywhere, it was a dead-end job. I decided I couldn't do much without a degree.

Married women tended to indicate that having young children was a consideration in their decisions related to career and education more than divorced women. Married women were typically more structurally able to devote extra time to children. Many of the divorced women in college had young children. The structure of relationships which placed them as "sole provider" did not afford time to "stay home" with their children.

Many women began to define college as valuable in terms of their employment opportunities. They described how they had made this realization in various ways. This was experienced both by women who had and had not been encouraged to go to college after high school. Further, these women all had older children and may have begun to think of their jobs more in terms of a career since they had been relieved of most the time-consuming domestic and childcare activities.

I went to a life-planning seminar... The tests pointed to a helping profession. I wasn't happy with what I was doing. I needed a change.

I need a bachelor's degree to go into administration... In nursing, power is in

administration, it's the only place to make changes.

College wasn't as important before. I liked my job and thought I'd have it forever... I got turned down for a job and decided it was because of my race. I decided I wouldn't be turned down again if I had a degree.

Obviously all these women came to define college as appropriate at various points prior to their enrollment. However, after having reviewed their accounts of their experiences, a mere change in definitional support does not explain their return to college. Many women had defined college as valuable long before they were able to go.

Further, although financial support would seem the logical reason for women to consider going to college, many of these women (re)entered college when their financial situations had worsened. All of the unmarried women began college after their marriages had ended and they had become sole wage earners. Although some indicated that they couldn't afford college out of high school or earlier in their marriages, the striking fact is that many went to college after losing their husband's income, when their financial situation was at its worst. This can be viewed as a reflection of the interdependence between structural and definitional support. Women who have recently graduated from high school are in a structural position to rely on others for guidance and support and may be limited to their definitions of situations. A divorced, separated or widowed woman, on the other hand, is in a structural position of independence and possesses the definitional power to decide which options are appropriate herself. What may have been defined as financially

impossible in one structural position had become financially possible in another, even the financial situation had worsened.

As one woman commented in retrospect, "*...he was in college and we couldn't afford to both go. We could have made sacrifices to do it, but we didn't.*" Choosing courses of action involves weighing the estimated costs and benefits, comparing sacrifices with rewards. Based on their structural and financial situations and on messages from various socialization agents, many women did not define college as rewarding as marriage or paid labor at the first decision point, but the changes in their structure of relationships at the second point redefined the sacrifices and rewards.

Some of the women who were divorced or separated were on welfare. They had chosen to make sacrifices to go to college which they had not considered making before. The answer to the question of whether college was financially feasible changed dramatically with structural changes, but not necessarily improved financial situations.

It is clear that the gender division of labor has had some impact on the process which creates the trend toward mature women college students. The most apparent effect seems to be from the cultural emphasis in a capitalist patriarchal society on women's domestic and childcare responsibilities which clearly influenced these women's decisions at the first decision point. Through school curricula, counselors, teachers and parents, many women came to define marriage and motherhood as a priority. Others who went to college dropped out to marry when

faced with a choice. Also influenced by the gender division of labor were those who pursued college at the first decision point. They typically chose traditionally female routes, e.g. nursing, secretarial, etc.

The literature on the gender division of labor has suggested that women have been primarily responsible for domestic and childrearing tasks. As Chafetz has described, various mechanisms in the culture work to help men and women define certain types of labor by gender. It is a subtle process through which the broader structural patterns of capitalistic patriarchal forms of social organization become internalized by individuals and incorporated into lines of action. We've seen that many women in this study have chosen to accept family responsibilities over college, believing it an appropriate choice based on others' encouragement, advice, expectations, etc.

Marriage was defined in certain ways, took on special meaning for the women who viewed it as the best choice, the primary responsibility, as the gender division of labor literature has described. As Eisenstein has argued, the social relations of society define the particular activity a woman engages in at a given moment (Eisenstein, 1979:47). The ways in which these women talk about their experiences in marriage reflect these broader structural patterns:

After my husband died, I realized I'd been Mrs. Dr. ---- forever - I'd audited courses, played bridge, all of it.

There are definite roles in my marriage. I do the traditional female roles - but I don't resent or mind.

I always did all of the housework. My husband didn't want to help. He thought I should want to do it all for him.

I'm not as nurturing as I used to be. They don't need that type of nurturing anymore... I always had to put studying aside for my son, sometimes my husband. It didn't bother me, I had an excuse - my family. I didn't want to neglect them completely.

I wish I'd had a mind to finish before I got married, but because of my family and their needs I chose one course at a time. Now I'm tired.

My life was at a stand-still. I was there for my husband, a housewife, middle-class. I didn't work, lived nicely. I enjoyed it until the end... I realized values were placed on what he did for me, not what I did for him.

My husband cooks, cleans, lets me study... If he hadn't it would have been close to impossible to go to college.

These women's accounts seem to illustrate a very clear image of how marriage should be, and what their responsibilities entail. Their commitment to their marriages is (and for some, was) strong, and they are keenly aware of the time their duties require.

Also included in women's domestic responsibilities are childcare tasks. As Chafetz and Hartmann have discussed, the social norm delegating to women the care of children has had an impact on women's subordinate status in society. Some women's versions of their experiences reflect this pattern.

One ideological aspect of childcare which some of the women's accounts reflect is the cultural belief that mothers are the best providers of their children's care.

I went back to work when my baby was six months old. I left her with a babysitter, went to work, and when I came home I heard the baby crying. I quit my job again and didn't go back to work until my kids were in the first and third grades.

I didn't want daycare or babysitters for my kids... I'm glad I stayed home with my kids. When I look at kids today, all those problems, on their own, I know I did

the right thing.

I wanted to stay home with [my kids], but I had to work. My family helped out watching them. Daycare would have been different.

When the boys were young, I stayed at home... I was glad to be able to stay with them.

When the kids were young I didn't want to leave them.

It is apparent how, given these popular beliefs about women's responsibilities to take care of husband, home, and children, women who are married and have young children will typically not have the structural or definitional support to go to college.

Other women who participated in the interviews described their views of domestic work which challenged the traditional expectations.

[My husband] encouraged me to go back. He said, "I'll assume your role"... He's helped do things around the house, quizzed me for tests, picked me up at midnight from the library.

I always worked various shifts as a nurse. My kids are used to not having me around... My husband's very helpful. We don't complain if nothing gets done... I don't even worry about the house.

The kids help out with the house, we each have our own chores... We let the dishes sit if we have projects coming up... Looking from outside into my world people might think, "single mother, no money, quit her job, on financial aid, section 8 housing." In reality, since I've been back in school, we've never used food stamps, never been late on the rent, always food in the refrigerator, electricity never turned off, children doing exceptionally well in school... We're doing great, working together. I've tried not to let other people influence my reality - I've chosen to accept this reality.

These African-American women have exercised their definitional power to define their family and household responsibilities on their own terms, not on those external, culturally-biased expectations of capitalist patriarchal society.

It is clear from listening to these women's voices that the gender division of labor's emphasis on women's domestic roles is not merely a theoretical construct, but is the internalized and lived reality of many women's experiences.

Summary and Conclusion

The research was designed around two areas of focus, the two historical decision points. The interview questions were designed to allow the participants to describe how they had made decisions at these two points which had placed them in their current position of "mature women students," and the gender division of labor theoretical framework was used to inform those questions.

It appears that at the first decision point, the gender division of labor typically influenced women's decisions to choose marriage and family responsibilities over going to college. These decisions were shaped by school curricula, counselors, teachers, parents, and general cultural expectations. Although every woman did not define marriage/family as the reason they postponed college, their descriptions all seemed to be related to their responsibilities in this capacity. Whether the reasons seemed primarily definitional (college not encouraged, discouraged; marriage encouraged), financial (couldn't afford to go, didn't make sacrifices), or structural (not enough time, not the right circumstances), all appeared to be ultimately related to the expectations involved in their familial roles.

At the second decision point, it appears that the primary explanation for women enrolling in college as mature students was a structural change leading to a role alteration. All of the women had experienced a change in the structure of their relationships which caused them to reevaluate their choices in terms of their new positions, roles, and corresponding expectations. Definitional support changes with a change in structure, but does not seem to explain women's coming to college in itself.

The primary structural changes which seem to have affected these women's lives and placed them in a position to consider college are (1) end of marriage, (2) older children, and (3) new vision of job. The end of marriage, whether through divorce, separation, or husband's death, is a structural change which placed a woman in a position of independence, and of primary provider for herself and her family. Either from the absence of discouragement against college, or through a new vision of their responsibilities and opportunities, women whose marriages had ended began to redefine college as an appropriate choice and role expectation of their new structural positions.

Most of the mothers in the sample commented that the older their children were, the easier it was for them to go to college. When their children were younger and demanded more of their time and attention, many women were not in a structural position that allowed time for college. Their children's maturity caused a change in that structural position and afforded them more time to devote to college.

For those who indicated that promotions and higher pay in their jobs required a college education, a structural change (typically maturity of children or divorce) placed them in a position to consider their job opportunities more in terms of long-term, rewarding careers and less in terms of supplemental family income.

Again, these three general reasons can be tied to women's positions in the gender division of labor which places primary marriage, childcare and household responsibilities on women. Further, this leads to women's limited opportunities in the paid labor force, lesser earning power, and subsequent dependence on a

husband's income and definitional power.

In addition to these observations about the connections between the gender division of labor and women's lived experiences in family, work, and education decision-making as related to three major structural changes, an important finding was the unexpected situation of women returning to school after a **loss** in financial support. Perhaps more than any other described, this situation poses a real challenge to common assumptions. The crucial comparison here, and one that other studies have missed, is between the period when women did not consider college an option, and when they did. What had changed to make college a feasible and desirable course of action? The answer was not always as easy to predict as "more time" or, especially, "more money".

The explanation is not merely that women didn't have enough money for college before the second decision point; many had more money then, and it could have been defined as "enough money," but it was not. "Enough money" for college or an "acceptable sacrifice" was defined in these cases either primarily by the husband, or in the context of a marital dyad and nuclear family. The woman's pursuit of a college education was defined relative to the needs of the family and her obligations to fulfill those needs as the caretaker, domestic worker, or supplemental wage-earner.

Alone and independent, some women did **redefine** "enough money" for college and accept sacrifices they did not make when dependent upon their husbands' resources and definitions of situations and choices. If Chafetz is correct about

resource and definitional power between husbands and wives, and this study seems to indicate in many ways she is, one possibility could be that independent of a more powerful man, a woman gains power, simply because she is no longer in a comparative position. The relative resource hypothesis no longer applies. Even though she may lose resources, an independent woman becomes the sole wage-earner, relative to no one, and free to make decisions and define situations from her perspective alone. She is able to decide to "make a sacrifice" if she views it as necessary. And she can redefine just what sacrifice means.

Also, when the husband is absent, the family composition changes and is no longer the "typical" or "normal" form with a husband and a wife. The woman is no longer subject to the evaluations and expectations of a wife and mother based on that ideal type. She is no longer solely viewed as in a supplemental or domestic role, but as a provider, wage-earner, decision-maker, definer. There is yet to be any consensus on how exactly an "atypical" family should operate, and fewer guidelines for a single mother's behavior. She is in a new structural position and situation, with new terms of power and new goals. She begins to view her education both in terms of long-term financial security and in terms of a lifetime endeavor she can choose; one that is important and meaningful to her, not just something viewed as providing her with a hobby or providing supplemental income for her family.

This finding also helps illustrate the significant connection between resource power and definitional power. Just as she who has less resource power possesses less definitional power, she who possesses all the resources has all the power to define

situations - even if those resources represent almost nothing. In micro as well as macro level relations, definitional power is based on the possession of resources. Patriarchal societies are based on a male perspective and defined from a male point of view because historically men have possessed greater resource power. Similarly, as women gain greater (or total) resources, they gain definitional power.

Granted, these explanations tell only part of the story, in that they reflect women's personal experiences in making choices about college. Another part of the explanation lies in the macro-level structural changes which may have helped make college an option for these women. For instance, changes in the economy have caused some jobs to require college degrees which previously may have required only high school degrees. Also, changes in demographics have indicated a decrease in the number of 18-year-olds available for college and caused universities to look to other populations (e.g. older women) as college candidates. Finally, the achievements of women's movements have opened more doors for women in the public realm and changed the view of their responsibilities in the private realm. These are only some possibilities among many macro-level changes which also may have affected women's return to college.

It appears that there are a substantial number of African-American mature women students, at least at this university, and that their experiences returning to college are not that different from those of white women. Basically, two differences were found between African-American and white women in this sample. First, most of the African-American women had been encouraged to go to college and had

attended college after high school. One speculative explanation for this may be that the white women were older. Although their average age was 48 compared to 39 for the African-American women, there were two white women over age 50 which skewed that distribution. The range for white women was 31-56, and for African-American women, 31-49. There was not a significant difference due to age.

One possible explanation for the greater encouragement experienced by African-American women lies in the historical emphasis within the African-American community on education as a route to equality (Cannon et. al., 1987:10). Another could be that African-American women historically have been socialized and encouraged to be more independent than have white women. They have tended to work outside the home and to rear children independently, and may subsequently define their role expectations to include career preparation more than white women.

Secondly, more African-American women had worked outside the home and attended college when their children were young than had white women. This difference does not appear to be due to class difference. When they were married, all eleven white women's total family incomes exceeded \$34,000. Seven of the ten African-American women's total family incomes exceeded \$34,000 as well. This, again, may be related to African-American women's greater participation in the work force which had led them to redefine their roles in motherhood to include work outside the home as well as in it.

The gender division of labor has clearly impacted the trend toward mature women students, and without its capacity to keep women away from college (in the

home or in low-status occupations), mature women students would not exist. Women do come back to college, which is why I also chose to focus on the second decision point. These women's accounts suggest that at the second decision point, changes in women's structure of relationships help them to redefine college. These changes were again related to women's domestic responsibilities, and to their positions in "female" occupations in the gender division of labor.

The stereotypical middle-class woman whose primary endeavor in life has been homemaking and who comes to college to "find herself" was not reflected by these 21 women's accounts, neither for African-American nor for white women. Rather, these women described experiences which placed them both in and outside the home and family and in various positions within the gender division of labor. They described how these structural positions included certain role expectations which influenced their decisions and choices concerning their families and careers. Rather than confirming a simple identification of the mature woman student, these women's accounts reflect an ongoing process of women defining, redefining, assessing and estimating, through which they come to make choices based on expectations they realize at certain structural locations. Their choices appear to be related to the gender division of labor's designation of women to domestic labor, but not in any clear-cut, matter-of-fact way. To the contrary, their decisions are based on a complex interaction between definition, financial and structural support at various social historical locations (including gender, race, age and class) in a capitalist patriarchal society which influence women's lives through various agents of socialization.

It is clear that were the gender division of labor as Chafetz, Hartmann, and Eisenstein describe it not in effect, these women's experiences would have been completely different. If women were paid for household labor, if men were responsible for domestic and childcare labor, if women earned as much as men, mature women students would not likely exist in such large numbers.

Eisenstein has suggested,

If men and women believed that childrearing was a social responsibility, rather than a woman's responsibility, if we did not believe that childhood affection was dependent on privacy rather than intimacy, the "relations" of childrearing would be significantly different. If being pregnant did not involve a woman in patriarchal medical care, if it did not mean the loss of pay and the incurrence of financial obligations,... the act of childbirth would take on a wholly different meaning (Eisenstein, 1979:52).

Explaining the trend toward mature women students in colleges and universities requires seeing beyond the individual. It demands exploring the complex processes through which capitalist patriarchal society influences women's lives, their definitions of responsibilities and choices, through focusing on its manifestations in the home, family, school, economy, etc.

While the existence of "mature women students" may be viewed negatively, as a reflection of women's subordinate status through the gender division of labor, it can also be applauded as a positive effect of women's gains in equality in recent decades. Women coming (back) to college are realizing new goals and finding new positions in the structure of social relations which will help them gain more equality. Perhaps if women can begin to define their "roles" in different ways (as demonstrated by Eisenstein and a few of the participants in this project) which do not prevent them

from gaining power in the extra-domestic sphere, and with the help of other women activists, the trend of returning women will increase at the second decision point, and decrease at the first.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is clear that this trend is a phenomenon too complex to analyze thoroughly in one study. Even from this particular perspective, there is a vast amount of pertinent information to consider. Future studies which employ this framework and emphasis on the two decision points would benefit from multiple interviews with each woman exploring even further the experiences throughout their lives which related to their (re)entry in college. The researcher would also benefit from the opportunity to use insights gained from other interviews throughout the process. Also, it could prove useful to conduct group discussions, preferably sessions which offer college credit, in which women could come together and collaborate their personal experiences which reflect the shared social patterns which are of importance to this type of study. These sessions might also offer a sense of group identity and power to individuals who otherwise often feel alone. An additional suggestion would be to conduct interviews with mature women students and with their friends and acquaintances who have not gone back to college to look for comparisons between the ways they describe their choices and decisions.

The findings from this research suggest that knowledge can be gained from hearing accounts from the social actors actually experiencing the social relations that

are being explored. This approach not only retains the significance of the known as knowers and respects their versions of their experiences, it also offers participants an opportunity to reflect on their lives and choices which they might otherwise have taken for granted. This approach helps to understand social life as process and demonstrates some of the connections between the structural and personal. This study has helped to elaborate on such processes by describing some ways the gender division of labor impacts on a specific and concrete phenomenon - women's delay of education. Future research which embraces such theoretical and methodological ideals will likely uncover more about the effects of such processes on individual lives.

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Appendix A

Areas of Focus as Guided by the Gender Division of Labor

Pre-high school graduation

courses taken, which were enjoyed, which teachers influenced them
grades, major declared
plans/preparation for after graduation
family encouragement, expectations
marital plans

Course of action chosen after high school - Decision point #1

how decision was made, situation defined, important issues
who helped make decision
encouragement/discouragement

Employment/education background

jobs held after high school
when they worked in relation to other commitments (school, family)
satisfaction/dissatisfaction with employment experiences
other times they attended classes in college

Own family situation

marital status
children, ages, number - significance to decisions about work/education
views of primary role

Decision to enroll in college most recently - Decision point #2

surrounding circumstances - structural/attitudinal changes
support/encouragement or problems from parents, friends, family members,
etc.
plans for college

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

Demographic information

1. Marital status - If separated/divorced - Did your separation/divorce take place prior to or since your return to college?
2. What does/did your husband do?
3. Is your total family income less than, equal to, or greater than \$30,000?
4. Do you have any children? How many and what ages?
5. Are you employed now? Full- or part-time? What do you do?
6. How old are you?

Pre-high school graduation

1. What types of classes did you take in high school?
Which did you enjoy, which did you not enjoy? Were there teachers who were especially influential to you?
2. What was your major?
3. How were your grades?
4. What did you plan to do after high school?
5. What did your family encourage/expect you to do after high school?
6. Were you planning to get married/were you engaged?
7. What did your fiance encourage/expect you to do after high school?

Immediately after high school-the first decision point

1. What did you do after high school graduation?
2. Describe the circumstances around which you made this decision. What were the most important issues at the time?
3. Who helped you make this decision?
4. How had you prepared/planned for this course of action?
5. How were others encouraging/discouraging this decision?

If you went to college immediately after high school,

1. **Describe the circumstances around your decision to quit.**
2. **What were the most important issues at the time?**
3. **Who helped you make this decision?**
4. **How did others close to you react to this decision?**
5. **Did you plan to go back? When?**

Employment/college

1. What types of employment have you held in the past? How satisfying were these positions to you personally and financially? Were there times when your work outside the home was interrupted by other responsibilities (e.g., family, education)?
2. When were other times you attended college?
3. What issues led you to choose when to work outside the home and when not to?
4. How has your husband/family reacted to your working outside the home?

Returning to College-The Second Decision Point

1. Describe how you made the decision to return to college this time. What were some of the most important issues? How did your parents/family/husband react?
2. Who helped you make this decision?
3. What do you hope to gain from your college experience?
4. In what ways have your relationships with your family and your family role changed?
5. Would you ever consider dropping out of school? Under what circumstances?
6. What things could have made coming to college easier or better?

Appendix C
Consent Form
STUDY OF MATURE WOMEN STUDENTS

Introduction

I am Sarah Jane Brubaker, a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University. For my master's thesis, I am doing a study of mature women students at VCU. I would like to ask you to participate in this study by agreeing to be interviewed. If you agree to participate, I will ask you questions related to your educational and work experiences, your family experiences, and questions concerning your personal feelings in dealing with your everyday experiences as a student, woman, wife, mother, daughter, etc.

Benefits

The benefits you would receive as a result of participating in this research would be to have the opportunity to discuss your experiences as a student and other important aspects of your life which have influenced or been influenced by these experiences. You would also help me to fulfill my degree requirements.

Risks

There are no risks to you in participating in this research.

Cost of Participation

The cost to you as a participant would be a one-time two-three hour interview scheduled at the time and place of your convenience.

Confidentiality of Records

I will treat your identity with professional standards of confidentiality. In the event that the information contained in this interview is published, your identity will not be revealed. The interviews will not involve tape recording.

Withdrawal

If at any point during the interview you wish to withdraw from the study you are free to do so. Additionally, you are free to refuse to answer any questions or to ask me questions.

____ (initial)

___ (initial)

You will receive a copy of this consent form ___ (initial)

Should you have any questions concerning research and subjects' rights, please contact the IRB at [redacted]

"I have read and agree to the terms of this consent form."

Date Signature

Investigator- Sarah Jane Brubaker, [redacted]

Vita

