Unforeseen Consequences of Mothers’ Return to School on Children’s Education Aspirations and Outcomes

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ABSTRACT: Parents' educational attainment is generally completed before offspring are born. Thus, there is little opportunity to study the ways in which children's observation of their parents' pursuit of education may augment the effects of structural factors on intergenerational transmission processes. In this article, the authors use qualitative and quantitative data collected from thirty-five women across a decade following their return to school to examine the effects of children's observations of their mothers' educational achievements on the children's educational aspirations and achievements in adulthood. The return to school was consequential only when mothers completed their degrees; when they did not, their enrollment appears to have had little or no effect on children's educational achievements. Mothers' completion of college was found to be the most important for children's educational outcomes when fathers were less educated and opposed to mothers' enrollment and when the return to school was fueled by personal and psychological, rather than career, motivations. Keywords: returning students; nontraditional students; educational aspirations; intergenerational transmission of values

The intergenerational transmission of educational attainment has been one of the strongest and most consistent findings in sociology for more than four decades. Explanations for this pattern have focused primarily on the ways in which both fathers’ and mothers’ educational attainment provides their children with the cultural capital and economic opportunities that foster both higher educational
aspirations and outcomes (Dekker 2001; De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp 2000; Kalmijn 1994). Because parents’ educational attainment is generally completed before offspring are born, there has been little opportunity to study the ways in which children’s direct observation of their parents’ pursuit of education may serve to augment the effects of structural and cultural factors on intergenerational transmission processes. In the present article, we use qualitative and quantitative data collected from thirty-five married mothers across a decade following their return to school to examine the effects of their educational achievements on their children’s educational aspirations and achievements.

MOTHERS’ RETURN TO SCHOOL: OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIALIZATION

Studies have shown that the effect of parents’ social and personal capital on their children in the earliest years continues to play a major role in children’s later educational attainment (Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson 2005). Explanations for this pattern focus on both the benefits accrued by parents’ social positions and their attempts to transmit their values through direct activities with their offspring (De Graaf et al. 2000; Entwisle et al. 2005). These studies demonstrate that parents’ social and interpersonal resources play a major role in the intergenerational transmission of educational values and attainment. It is possible that children’s direct observation of the positive educational experiences of highly salient role models, such as parents or siblings, may augment the effect of such structural and cultural advantages.

Classic theories of socialization (cf. Gecas 1976, 1981; Gecas and Burke 1995; Singer 1981) can be used to suggest that a mother’s active pursuit of her education may provide a particularly salient context for socialization regarding educational aspirations. Parents generally serve as agents of socialization, but for many roles, parents must socialize primarily through a system of positive and negative sanctions, rather than direct modeling, because the parents no longer occupy the statuses associated with those roles. Socialization regarding education is perhaps the best example of this—parents are seldom enacting the role of student at the point in their lives when they are raising their children. However, studies on the intergenerational transmission of many other values and behaviors, including gender roles, exercise, gambling, drinking, and smoking, suggest that direct modeling may be even more important than parents’ expression of their values to their children (Cunningham 2001; DiLorenzo et al. 1998; Gupta and Derevensky 1997; Jackson, Henriksen, and Dickinson 1999; Kalesan, Stine, and Alberg 2006; White, Johnson, and Buyske 2000).

Thus, mothers’ return to school provides a unique context in which children can be socialized regarding educational values and behaviors through direct observation as well as through the usual systems of sanctions—in other words, a context that augments the effects of other dimensions of socialization to norms regarding educational aspirations. We therefore expect that most mothers will report that their return to school substantially influenced their children’s educational aspirations.
Factors Moderating the Relationship between Mothers’ Return to School and Children’s Educational Aspirations and Outcomes

Mothers’ Educational Success

Up to this point, we have discussed the effect of mothers’ return to school without taking into consideration the way in which these effects may vary by mothers’ success as a student. However, it is likely that both the strength of the effect and the direction of the effect are likely to be influenced by the mothers’ success in the pursuit of education. For example, children who observe their mothers’ efforts rewarded are more likely to want to model their behavior than are children who see their mothers’ efforts fail. In fact, when children observe that their mothers’ efforts are not rewarded, they may be less likely to develop the level of educational aspirations and outcomes that would be expected based on their family social capital alone. Illustrations of the effect of such “failed role modeling” on children’s educational aspirations and outcomes can be found in studies of families struggling to escape poverty (Newman 1999a, 1999b; Rosier 2000); when children observe that the best efforts of their siblings, cousins, and friends to succeed in school fail, their own motivation is greatly reduced, increasing the risk of their own failure. Although the families in our study are working and middle-class, we believe that similar processes are at work; thus, we anticipate that mothers’ return to school will have positive effects on their children only when the mothers succeed, as measured by the completion of their undergraduate degrees.

Gender Differences in Effect of Mothers’ Return to School

The literature on gender and educational opportunities and outcomes demonstrates that although parents attempt to provide both sons and daughters with social and interpersonal resources directed toward enhancing their children’s educational aspirations and outcomes, sons tend to benefit relative to daughters (Hauser and Wong 1989; Hopcroft 2005; Powell and Steelman 1989, 1990; Teachman 1997). However, we believe that the modeling processes that are at work when mothers return to school will provide even greater benefit to daughters than sons. Classic feminist theories suggest that the higher level of intimacy and intensity characteristic of the mother-daughter relationship leads mothers to serve as particularly important agents of socialization for their daughters (Chodorow 1978; Hey 1997; Suitor and Pillemer 2006). Thus, although observation of mothers’ education activities and successes are likely to affect children of both genders, the effects may be greater for daughters than sons. Support for this hypothesis can be found in the literature on mothers’ employment, which has shown that although mothers’ labor force participation affects both sons’ and daughters’ career aspirations and gender-role attitudes, the effects are more pronounced for daughters (cf., Kalmijn 1994). Thus, we anticipate that mothers’ successful return to school will have more pronounced positive consequences for daughters than sons.

In summary, we anticipate that mothers who return to school will view themselves as role models for their children; however, we expect that the return will have substantially greater and more positive effects on children’s educational aspirations...
and attainment when the mothers are successful in their educational pursuits. Furthermore, we expect that these effects will be stronger for daughters than sons.

**METHODS**

**Procedures**

In the fall of 1981, the first author was provided with the names and contact information for all women over the age of twenty-five entering a large public research university in the Northeastern United States as new students. The first author called each of the approximately 250 women to determine whether she met the criteria for participation: (a) married and living with her husband for at least three years, (b) mother of at least one child under eighteen years of age with whom she resided; and (c) entering a university as a matriculating student for the first time in at least four years. All but one of the respondents had never attended a university prior to their enrollment in 1981. Seventy-seven women met the design criteria, fifty-four of whom (70 percent) agreed to participate and completed interviews at the beginning (T1) and the end (T2) of their first year of enrollment. In 1991, the first author was able to contact and re-interview forty-four of the original fifty-four returning students (T3), constituting more than 80 percent of the original sample. The present article focuses on the thirty-five women who completed the T1, T2, and T3 interviews.

The interviews were conducted in person (with two exceptions at T3) and lasted between ninety minutes and almost four hours. The T1 and T2 interviews were conducted by the first author; the T3 interviews were conducted by a graduate student in her midforties. All of the interviews were taped and transcribed.

**Respondents**

The women who constituted the subsample for this article ranged in age from thirty to fifty-nine years at T1 \((M = 38.7, SD = 5.7)\). All of the women were white and non-Hispanic. At the beginning of the women’s first year of enrollment, 66 percent of the women were not employed, 23 percent were employed part-time, and 11 percent were employed full-time. At the end of that year, 57 percent were not employed, 29 percent were employed part-time, and 14 percent were employed full-time. By T3, the proportion of women who were not employed had dropped to 21 percent; 29 percent were employed part-time and 50 percent were employed full-time.

The women had been married between ten and twenty-six years \((M = 17.5, SD = 4.4)\). Their husbands ranged in age from thirty to fifty-three \((M = 40.8, SD = 6.1)\). Seventeen percent of the husbands had completed only high school, 40 percent had completed some college, and 43 percent had graduated from college.

The women had between one and five children \((M = 2.7, SD = .96)\) at T1; only one woman had any additional children between T1 and T3. The women’s children ranged in age from two to twenty-five at T1 \((M = 13.1, SD = 5.1)\); their youngest children ranged from two to seventeen \((M = 10.3, SD = 4.0)\). Fifty-three percent of the children were sons; 47 percent were daughters.
Twenty-nine of the women in this subsample completed their undergraduate degrees; seventeen went on to complete a graduate degree. Six of the women did not complete their undergraduate degrees. Four of these women did not complete their first year of reenrollment; the other two continued for the first year but did not return the second year, after having what they reported as very stressful experiences their first year.

Classification of Cases

Classification of Outcomes

The outcomes of primary interest in the present analysis are the adult children’s educational attainment and the mothers’ perceptions of the effect of their return to school on the children’s educational aspirations. To measure children’s educational outcomes, the average level of education of the adult children in each family was computed. Educational level of each child was determined by the number of years of school completed at the latest point at which we collected data; the few children who were minors at T3 were not included in the calculations. The data were collapsed into two categories: (1) families in which between 0 percent and 33 percent of the children completed a bachelor’s degree and (2) families in which 67 percent to 100 percent of the children completed college. In four families, exactly half of the adult children had completed college; we classified these families in the second category because in each case the average educational level of children in these families was fifteen years or greater or at least one child had completed graduate school.

Mothers’ perceptions regarding the effect of the return to school on their children were based on the women’s responses at T3. This is because when mothers were asked about their children at T1 and T2, the questions were focused on whether the enrollment had affected the children’s day-to-day lives, rather than more abstract questions regarding the effects on the children’s aspirations and school performance. At T3, the women were asked both about their children’s attitudes toward the enrollment and about the effect of their enrollment on the children’s aspirations: “Do you think returning to school affected your children’s attitudes or behaviors regarding their study habits, college or career plans?” When women responded in the affirmative, they were asked to describe the effects they believed the enrollment had on the children. None of the women reported that the enrollment had a detrimental effect on their children’s educational behaviors or aspirations; thus, the mothers’ responses were coded as “positive effects” or “no effects.” It is important to note that although the question asked about study habits and educational or career plans, the positive effects reported focused on educational and educationally relevant career aspirations, not day-to-day study habits.

Explanatory Characteristics

The characteristic of primary interest in the present article is whether the mother completed her undergraduate degree by T3. Characteristics of secondary
concern are the husbands’ educational attainment and husbands’ attitudes toward the wives’ enrollment. At T1, the women were asked a series of open-ended questions regarding husbands’ attitudes toward the enrollment. At the end of the year (T2), they were asked the same questions regarding their husbands’ attitudes during the year that had just ended. At T3, they were asked to recall their husbands’ attitudes toward the enrollment as they progressed through their studies. The same coding scheme was used across all three waves. Wives’ reports of their husbands’ attitudes were originally coded into more than twenty categories that made small distinctions among responses (e.g., “Husband was angry about the time school required” versus “Husband thought it was a waste of time and money”). For the present article, the categories were then collapsed into “positive,” “neutral,” and “negative/mixed.”

To determine coding agreement on the open-ended items, students who were enrolled in a course on sociological research methods coded a selection of items from the schedules. Overall, the agreement rate between the students’ and the first author’s coding was 81 percent.

RESULTS

Mothers’ Academic Success and Children’s Educational Outcomes

We began the analysis by examining the relationship between the mothers’ academic success and their children’s educational outcomes. Table 1 presents the relationship between mothers’ completion of her undergraduate degree and the average educational level of the adult children in the family. The findings reveal a strong relationship between mothers’ educational success and children’s educational attainment; families in which mothers completed their bachelor’s degree are more than two-thirds more likely to have all or most of their children complete college, compared to families in which mothers left school following reentry.

It is possible to question whether this pattern is actually a consequence of fathers’ educational attainment; perhaps women whose husbands have completed college are more likely to successfully complete their degrees when they return to school. However, this does not appear to be the case. In fact, fathers’ educational attainment was not related to mothers’ successful completion of their studies ($r = .049$).

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<th>Mother Did Not Complete Degree (% and N)</th>
<th>Mother Completed Degree (% and N)</th>
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<td>Few or no children in family completed college</td>
<td>50.0 (3)</td>
<td>17.2 (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Most or all children in family completed college</td>
<td>50.0 (3)</td>
<td>82.8 (24)</td>
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Perhaps the relationship between mothers’ college success and children’s educational outcomes can be better explained by the sorts of socialization processes that we discuss above. Specifically, we would expect that mother’s success would affect her children’s educational aspirations, resulting in their completing their undergraduate educations. The mothers’ descriptions of the ways in which their return to school affected their children provide support for this argument.

As shown in Table 2, mothers who completed their degrees were more than two and a half times more likely as mothers who had not to describe the effect on their children positively. Most mothers who completed their degrees expressed a belief that their return to school had provided positive role modeling regarding the importance of education:

I think the fact that I went back made [attending college] an option in some sense. He wasn’t interested in going at eighteen, but at twenty-three and a half he went back voluntarily and he was willing to bicycle fifteen miles each way to do it, so, if I hadn’t have gone back, he wouldn’t have seen it as an option. (part-time business major who later completed a PhD)

... probably my youngest son... it gave him a little more incentive to do homework, ’cause he never wanted to do his homework. What could he say, when he saw his mother doing her homework? (full-time sociology major who later completed an MA in health services)

It did affect my daughter... I would tell her not to kill herself over [grades]. And she would say how could she not [worry about grades when she] looked at what I was doing. I never thought my own study [habits] had anything to do with hers—I never ever would have put the pressure on a child [that] I put on myself. So it did affect her.(part-time psychology major who completed a BA)

In contrast, two-thirds of the mothers who dropped out of school after returning said that their enrollment had no effect on their children. One of the two exceptions was a mother who left school specifically because she felt that she could not continue her own education and provide her three high-school-age sons with the time and attention they needed as they prepared for college. Although she did not continue, she nevertheless felt that while she was enrolled she had provided a role model of the way in which students should be committed to their schoolwork.
It is interesting to note that although the mothers who did not complete their degrees reported that their enrollment had no effect on their children, the findings shown in Table 1 suggest that, in fact, the mothers’ unsuccessful return decreased their children’s likelihood of completing college. Without collecting information from the children themselves, it is impossible to account for the children’s lower educational attainment. However, theories of role modeling would lead us to speculate that that the mothers’ unsuccessful attempts dampened the children’s interest or confidence regarding higher education—particularly considering that in four of these six families, the husbands had completed undergraduate school. Perhaps these mothers are unaware of any effects of their educational choices on their children; it is also possible that they chose not to discuss any concerns they have regarding their children’s educational outcomes.

When Role Modeling Matters Most: Families in Which Husbands Did Not Complete College

One pattern that emerged early in the analysis was the greater effect of mothers’ educational success in families in which husbands had not completed college. Among mothers who completed their degrees, 77 percent of those with less educated husbands reported that their return to school had influenced their children’s educational aspirations, compared to only 42 percent of those whose husbands had also completed college. These mothers particularly emphasized the effect of their educational success on their children’s long-range educational goals. Interestingly, these mothers often made this point by contrasting the effect on long-term aspirations with day-to-day behaviors:

I don’t know if it affected their study habits, because they didn’t have very good study habits, but they went to college, so it probably did affect them. Nobody ever said to them, you have to go to college, they just saw the normal progression. (full-time sociology major who later completed an MA; her husband had completed one year of college)

I think it gave them a role model, I think that particularly my older boy because he’s gone through schooling and he’s finished with it. I think he always felt that my mother did it. So it gave him kind of an incentive. He knows what I juggled so when things were a little difficult for him, it gave him a different perspective [on college] I guess. But that didn’t always mean exceptional grades. (full-time English major who later completed an MA in applied social science; husband completed two years of college)

Her study habits, no. [But] it was a given that she had to at least attain an associate’s degree. That was not an option, it was a given. By role modeling, she saw how hard I worked, she saw me studying. (part-time social science major who later completed an MA; her husband had completed high school)

The cases that best illustrate the processes by which mothers’ success in school affected their children are those in which fathers had lower educational attainment and held negative or ambivalent attitudes regarding their wives’ return to school. The experiences of these families showed that under a particular set of
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circumstances, mothers’ success could easily trump fathers’ experiences and attitudes.

In twelve families, fathers had not completed college and held negative attitudes toward the wives’ enrollment; in five of these families, few or none of the children in the family completed college themselves, and in seven, most or all of the children completed college. This pattern was surprising, because in almost all of these cases, mothers believed that their return to school had affected their children’s educational aspirations positively. Nevertheless, in almost half of these families, few or no children completed college.

Examination of the qualitative data revealed a consistent difference between these two groups. The factor distinguishing the families in which most children did complete college from those in which they did not was the women’s motivation for returning to school. In three-quarters of the families in which the return to college was fueled by personal or psychological motivations, most or all of the children completed college. In contrast, in three-quarters of families in which the return was motivated by career concerns, few or none of the children completed college.

To be certain that this pattern was specific to families in which husbands were less educated and did not support their wives’ return to school, we examined the relationship between children’s educational outcomes and mothers’ motivations in families where fathers had completed college and supported their wives’ enrollment. We found that in eight of the nine cases in which husbands had completed college and supported their wives’ return to school, all or almost all of the children had completed college, regardless of the mothers’ motivations for returning. Thus, it appears that mothers’ personal or psychological motivation for returning to school is necessary, in addition to her academic success, to ensure that her children will complete college, specifically when husbands have not completed college and do not support their wives’ enrollment.

Rita’s experience provides an illustration of this pattern. Rita entered the university when she was forty and her children were seventeen and thirteen. She had been a full-time homemaker since shortly after marrying more than twenty years earlier. Rita had considered returning to school for twelve years before she enrolled in her first class. She had taken classes part-time while attending a local community college for four years before entering the university—a level of activity that had little effect on her family life. When she began at the university, she moved from taking just a few classes a year to carrying a full-time load. She explained that she wanted to attend college because she wanted more education. She described herself as a lackluster student in high school, earning only a C average; however, she had earned all As in the classes she took at the community college. She said that grades had become a very important source of self-esteem. She was pursuing an undergraduate degree in psychology and planned to continue on to graduate school to earn a master’s degree and become a mental health worker.

Rita’s husband was a forty-five-year-old civil servant who had recently retired on disability. He had completed less than two years of college prior to entering the labor force and had never considered returning to school. More
than three-quarters of the men whose wives participated in the study agreed to be interviewed during their wives’ first year of enrollment in the university; Rita’s husband was among the quarter who refused. According to Rita, her husband had always opposed her enrollment. In fact, she began to make reference to his attitude well before those questions were raised in the interview. When asked about whether her enrollment had created any time conflicts regarding her children, she spontaneously added, “Wait ‘til you get to the husband part [of the interview]. That’s a killer!” When asked directly about her husband’s attitude at T1, she explained:

Very negative! [Interviewer: What sorts of things would he say?] The time away from home. And the study time.

She also said that that he interfered with her studying and that he was the one person who made her feel guilty about having returned to school. By the end of the year, she said that he “wasn’t complaining as much” but that he still said frequently that “it’s such a shame you have to go to school.” Most important, when talking about her husband’s attitude, she described the changes that she had experienced that led her to be less affected by his response. For example, when asked at the end of the first year whether her husband had ever hindered her school performance, she explained:

Not as much as previously. He interrupts my studying, but I’m getting stronger. I’m getting to have more me.

Throughout the rest of the interview she expressed negative feelings about her husband’s attitudes toward her enrollment, as well as about what she described as his absence of ambition, which she said she had expected when they married. A comparison of her responses to the marital quality questions at T1 and T2 indicated that her marriage had become much more conflictual and she had become markedly dissatisfied with her relationship over her first year of enrollment in the university. In fact, all indications were that hers was one of the least happy marriages among the fifty-four women who participated in the first two waves of the study.

Her descriptions of her own feelings about her educational experiences stand in marked contrast to those of her husband. At almost every point in the second interview, when talking about how difficult it was to manage being a wife, a mother, and a student, she ended with a comment about how clearly the tradeoff was worthwhile. Her summary was, “I love it! I’m thrilled!”

Given her determination to continue her education and her husband’s growing opposition, by the third interview, ten years later, it seemed quite possible that her marriage would have terminated, as occurred in about one-quarter of the cases of women who continued to participate in the study. However, her husband had unexpectedly died not long after Rita had completed her studies. In the T3 interview, she continued to speak at length about how negatively her husband had felt about her enrollment and how much he had posed a day-to-day hindrance in her attempts to be highly successful. Given how commonly widows’ descriptions of their marriages tend to become more positive following the death of
their husbands, the bitterness in her descriptions of her husband’s continued negative attitude toward her enrollment and her feelings about his opposition were quite surprising.

In contrast, her descriptions of her children’s responses to her enrollment were glowing. At the first interview, she said that despite the fact that she had reduced the amount of time she spent with her children, they were very positive about her return to school and were proud of her achievements. At the end of the first year of enrollment, Rita reported that she was concerned that the time she devoted to school might have affected her children—particularly her daughter, who was still in middle school. However, she also said that her daughter had expressed many times that she was not bothered by her mother’s enrollment, despite the fact that it was time consuming. In fact, the children had expressed many positive feelings about her enrollment. When asked at the third interview to describe how her children had felt about her enrollment, Rita replied:

They thought it was fantastic . . . I have a son who is twenty-seven now, he’s living out of the house and he went to college . . . they think it was a good example. Especially for my daughter . . . she’s a graduate student and she’s working on her master’s, so I would like to think the example that some influence on her.

Rita’s case is important because it demonstrates that even when raised in a household in which the father has not completed college himself and voiced objections to his wife pursuing her college education, her enthusiasm and determination provided role modeling necessary for her children to make the decision to complete their college educations and, ultimately, in the case of both children, complete graduate work.

Valerie’s experiences closely mirror Rita’s, also documenting that when mother’s return to school is fueled by intellectual interest, rather than specific job requirements, her role modeling can override husbands’ lack of education. Valerie entered the university when she was thirty-nine and her children were ten and thirteen. Like Rita, Valerie had returned to school out of interest in learning, rather than to meet a particular occupational requirement. Her husband, who left school after completing his sophomore year in high school and ran a small family store, had little understanding of Valerie’s motivation for returning to school. In fact, Valerie indicated that her husband would have been more supportive if she had been pursuing a specific career goal:

He couldn’t understand why I wanted to . . . I try to explain [but] he feels, you know, what is the practical use of going back to school? And I say maybe there is no practical use in it. [I can’t say] “Oh, well, we need the money and I have to go out and I have to work and I’m not really trained for anything, so I’ll go back to school.” That isn’t my reason, you know. So maybe in that way it’s not practical . . . if I say it’s, you know, for my own benefit and my own satisfaction, he says he understands, but I don’t think he does. He doesn’t like it interfering.

Valerie explained that although her husband supported her return to school financially, he provided little emotional support and no instrumental support. She
also felt he had been a hindrance in that she had no support for moving faster toward her degree and that he had made her feel guilty about the time her studies took away from the family. When asked if there was anything she wished she could change in her marriage, she responded:

I wish he could be a little more understanding about my school . . . more supportive.

By the third interview, Valerie had completed her bachelor’s degree in psychology. She took great pride in this accomplishment and hoped to go on to complete a master’s degree in education and begin a career in teaching. However, her husband had chosen to begin a new business and felt that he needed her assistance. Thus, she continued to work alongside him in their new venture rather than pursue the career she had hoped for.

She also continued to express that she wished that her husband had been more supportive of her return to school. In fact, although he had never openly opposed her enrollment, he had never been “too happy about it” and that he had resented it. Unlike most of the husbands in the study, Valerie’s husband made no greater contribution to child care after Valerie returned to school than before. Not surprisingly, Valerie expressed more concerns about juggling motherhood and school than did women whose husbands assumed more responsibilities for the children. Nevertheless, she reported that her children seldom expressed negative attitudes toward her return to school, and she showed a good deal more interest in her school experiences. At one point during her first year of enrollment in the university, she expressed frustration while studying for a difficult upcoming exam, to which her older daughter said, “Oh Mom, well, you’ve gone this far, you have to go on!”

By the third interview, Valerie described her children as enthusiastic supporters:

They thought it was great, they were behind me! [Interviewer: Do you think returning to school affected your children’s attitudes or behaviors regarding their study habits, college plans, or career plans?] Yes! [Interviewer: In what ways?] Well, in the beginning, my older daughter was saying, “Oh, I don’t know if I really want to go to college.” Even though she is a smart girl . . . I would never push her, but you know, I let her, you know, talk about it. She decided to go on, and she completed [her degree] . . . I think [my return to school] had an influence with her decision to finally go. I graduated [from college] when she graduated high school.

Ultimately, both of her daughters continued on to graduate school, surpassing both of their parents’ educational achievements.

In contrast, the return to school had no positive effects on Susan’s children. Susan had begun college immediately after high school but had quickly lost interest and dropped out after a few semesters. She returned to school when she was thirty-seven and her children were eight and thirteen. She had been married for fourteen years to a firefighter who had completed two years of college. Susan completed three semesters after entering the university but then dropped out again, to return again after an absence of three years. From the time Susan entered the university in 1981 as a business major, she was focused on completing her
degree to improve her job opportunities. In fact, when she returned after the three-year absence, it was specifically because her supervisor strongly advised her to do so because it would provide her the opportunity for mobility within the company. She was clear that without this, she would not have returned to complete her degree. In fact, throughout all three interviews, it was clear that her primary motivation for return to school was career advancement. Some other women who were driven to reenter school for practical reasons came to value the less tangible benefits of school as highly as they did career opportunities; however, this did not appear to be the case for Susan. When asked at T3 how returning to school had changed her life, the focus remained on the tangible aspects:

Well, I think that I’ve done very well in my career, and I think that’s in direct relation to getting my degree. I think probably, for myself . . . I didn’t feel as comfortable with my [coworkers]. Even though I knew I did my job very well, I didn’t feel comfortable with [them] . . . I think I’m much more comfortable about my credentials and my career. I mean, nobody now has to know that I got my degree in 1989, I have a degree from [a top university]; that’s all they ask.

Despite her very instrumental goals from the outset, Susan received less support for her educational pursuits than did most of the women in the study—at least until the necessity of completing her degree was imposed on her by her supervisor at work. Although her return had been led by career concerns, her husband nevertheless felt threatened by her return to school and was completely opposed across the first few years:

I think that he was not supportive, [because] he wanted me to be here and maybe he felt threatened, he doesn’t have a college degree. Which doesn’t make any difference to me, but I think he felt threatened by my going to school.

Such a reaction is not surprising when considered in the context of classic work on husbands’ fears regarding changes in power in their relationships when their wives’ social capital increases (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Pyke 1994).

Both Susan’s reports and her husband’s own explanation of his feelings indicated that he believed strongly that her home life should take priority over school or any other outside activities, including even such family-related involvement as volunteering in her children’s Parent-Teacher Association groups and on the local school board. When she returned at her boss’s insistence, his attitude became markedly less negative, because the reenrollment had an even more clear and immediate career benefit. However, although he became more willing to help around the house to facilitate her studies, he never expressed any of the pride and enthusiasm shown by many of the other women’s husbands—even husbands who had completed far less education.

Susan’s children were highly critical of their mothers’ return to school across the first three semesters following her return, expressing views consistent with those of their father. In fact, Susan was the only mother who reported that her enrollment had a decided negative effect on her children. Several of the women said that their academic success had spurred their children to stretch themselves
in some way; however, for her youngest daughter, Susan’s success appeared to create undue stress and competition. When asked about whether the return to school had affected her family life, Susan explained:

I think they were deprived of my presence a lot. They had to pick up a lot of slack around here, do certain things because I wasn’t here. I think my youngest daughter had the hardest time because . . . one of her teachers told me that she was having problems with school. And her problems were that she would try to compete with me or trying to, not compete . . . I think they said she was trying to live up to, you know, the pace that I was keeping.

Susan’s difficulty juggling her multiple roles and the need for her family to “pick up the slack” were typical of most families. However, in Susan’s case, such difficulties were seen as necessary means to achieve the end of a better job and a higher standard of living, rather than viewed as part of an experience in which hard work is an integral component of achieving personal goals. Perhaps the stress that Susan’s daughter experienced emanated from a sense that such extraordinary efforts were necessary to achieve financial success. Even ten years after Susan’s initial reentry, when asked whether her return to school affected her children’s educational aspirations, she responded that there had been no effects other than her daughter’s stress to “keep pace” with her. Thus, despite Susan’s academic successes, her daughters benefited little in terms of their own views of education; apparently, the message they internalized was that school is something that must be pursued when it is necessary but that it has little intrinsic value. In this context, it is not surprising that neither of her daughters continued their educations beyond high school.

In sum, both Rita’s and Valerie’s experiences demonstrate the way in which mothers who returned to school despite their husbands’ lack of support provided positive role models for their children when the mothers valued learning for its own sake. In contrast, as Susan’s case illustrates, when learning becomes important only when it is linked to clearly defined instrumental outcomes, the role modeling that takes place leads to very different educational outcomes.

One reason that these patterns are particularly interesting is that in families in which fathers had not completed college, it would have been reasonable to expect that mothers’ financially motivated goals for returning to school might have had even stronger positive effects on their children’s educational aspirations and outcomes. Perhaps mothers’ financial motivations would have affected children’s aspirations if the poorly educated fathers had difficulty supporting their families and children; under these circumstances, observing the financial improvements brought about by their mothers’ return to school might have increased the children’s interest in college. However, the poorly educated fathers in the present study were able to support their families comfortably, if not luxuriously. In fact, in contrast to the usual strong relationship found between husbands’ educational attainment and family income (cf., U.S. Bureau of the Census 2007), the correlation in the present sample was only .08. The reason for this is that even the least educated husbands in the present study were able to provide for their families at a level that allowed the mothers to pursue higher education rather than full-time employment.
Gender, Role Modeling, and the Effect of Mothers’ Return to School

As we discussed earlier, we anticipated that the benefits of mothers’ return to school on their children’s educational aspirations and outcomes would be substantially more pronounced for daughters than sons. However, we found essentially no evidence to support this expectation. Examination of both children’s educational outcomes and the mothers’ discussions of the effects of their return to school on particular children revealed no systematically greater effects for children of either gender.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we take a new approach to understanding intergenerational transmission of educational values and outcomes by examining the unforeseen consequences of mothers’ return to college, using longitudinal data on thirty-five women who returned to school in the 1980s while raising school-age children. Most research on nontraditional women students has focused on the effects of returning to school on women’s own educational attainment and occupational mobility (Felmlee 1988; Jacobs and Stoner-Eby 1998; Spanard 1990; Teachman and Paasch 1989). However, there is evidence that this focus of activity (Feld 1981) also provides an important context for socialization, often effecting changes in women’s values and behaviors (Suitor 1987b, 1988) and in the structure of their social networks (Suitor 1987a; Suitor and Keeton 1997; Suitor, Pillemer, and Keeton 1995). These changes have been found to be consequential for women’s interpersonal relations with their husbands, friends, and parents (Suitor 1987a, 1987b, 1987c; Suitor et al. 1995). However, to date, there has been no attention given to the long-term consequences of mothers’ return to school on their children’s educational aspirations and outcomes. Thus, this is the first study to address this issue.

Our analyses revealed that mothers’ return to school affected her children’s educational aspirations and outcomes only under particular conditions. Theories of socialization posit that parental modeling has a profound effect on children’s outcomes (cf., Arnett 1995; Gecas 1976, 1981; Gecas and Burke 1995; Singer 1981); consistent with this argument, we found that the return to school affected their children’s aspirations and educational attainment only when mothers provided highly successful role models. In families in which mothers successfully completed their undergraduate degrees following the return to school, most or all of the children also completed college by early adulthood. Furthermore, these mothers reported that their enrollment had positive effects on their children’s educational aspirations and outcomes. In contrast, when women left school without completing their degrees, few or none of their children completed college themselves, and almost none of these mothers reported that their enrollment had any effect on their children. Thus, consistent with the patterns shown in studies of academic success among children living in poverty (Newman 1999a, 1999b; Rosier 2000), role models must succeed, as well as attempt to succeed educationally, to have positive consequences for those who are observing them.
Mothers’ role modeling was the most consequential when fathers were poorly educated and did not support their wives’ enrollment. When mothers’ return to school was driven by personal interest rather than career concerns, their successful completion of their studies appears to have overridden the effects of their husbands’ poor education and lack of enthusiasm regarding college. However, when mothers returned only to achieve particular career goals, even the successful completion of their studies was unable to overcome the cultural climate produced by their husbands’ experiences and behaviors; in these cases, children’s educational achievements mirrored those of their fathers. Not surprisingly, in these cases, mothers reported that their return to school had no positive effect on their children’s educational aspirations.

Both the findings presented here and those presented in other analyses of data from this study reveal the importance of women’s motivations in their educational outcomes and those of their children. Much of the literature on status transitions focuses on the role of significant others in the adjustment to new roles (cf., Antonucci, Akiyama, and Takahashi 2004; Suitor and Pillemer 2002), with much less emphasis on the motivations of the individuals experiencing those transitions. Findings from this study suggest that there should be greater attention to the reasons that individuals acquire new social statuses when studying adjustment to role transitions. The analyses presented here demonstrate that women’s motivation for their return to school affects their children’s educational outcomes, particularly in families in which husbands had not completed college. Other analyses of data from the study have shown that both husbands’ and parents’ support played small roles in whether the women completed their degrees relative to the motivations that led the women to return to school (Suitor 1987c, 1988). This may help to explain why although husbands’ educational level was related to the support they provided their wives during the enrollment (Suitor 1988), there was no association between husbands’ education and wives’ completion of their degrees.

Based on the literature on gender and childhood socialization regarding education (Hauser and Wong 1989; Hopcroft 2005; Powell and Steelman 1989, 1990; Teachman 1997), we anticipated that daughters would receive greater benefit from their mothers’ return to school than would sons. However, this was not the case; sons’ and daughters’ aspirations and outcomes were equally likely to be affected by their mothers’ educational success. We were surprised by this finding; perhaps future studies that collect data from adult children as well as their mothers will be able to shed light on the way in which sons and daughters are affected similarly by their mothers’ educational role modeling.

In summary, the findings we have presented suggest that women’s return to school has the potential to create changes reaching substantially further than their own attitudes and educational outcomes. It is important that the questions addressed in this study regarding the effects of mothers’ educational success and motivations on children’s outcomes be examined using panel data from large-scale representative surveys. Furthermore, since educational outcomes continue to differ across racial/ethnic groups, it is important to examine whether mothers’ return to school has similar effects across various groups. If the results of such studies mirror those presented here, they will suggest that mothers’ return and
successful completion of college may be a vehicle by which children’s educational aspirations and motivations can be substantially improved.

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NOTE
1. Although the full-time and part-time designation matches the cases, the majors have been changed to related disciplines to maintain confidentiality.

REFERENCES


Unforeseen Consequences of Mothers’ Return to School


