Family Environments of Women Who Return to College

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This study investigated various aspects of the impact on family environments when mature married women return to college. Thirty-nine women who had returned to college and their husbands were compared to 39 nonreturnees and their husbands on the Moos Family Environment Scale and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale. It was found that there were both positive (e.g., intellectual-cultural) and negative (e.g., greater conflict) aspects of family environments of returning women. The findings' implications for counseling such populations of college women are discussed. The need for longitudinal studies in this area to determine the impact on the family created by a woman's return to school is suggested.

Can a marriage survive when the wife discovers her brain? The population of mature women returning to school after an extended period of wife/motherhood is growing every year. These returning women are often interested, dedicated students showing seriousness of purpose and strong motivation (Cless, 1975; Hechinger, 1975; Markus, 1974). Such high achievement requires an investment of time, energy, and ego into school which previously had been spent nurturing a family. This siphoning of energies into academic pursuits appears to have some positive effects on family relationships, in the form of increased admiration between spouses (Ballmer & Lee, 1971; Ballmer & Cozby, 1974), and possible financial advantages seen as a result of the wife's increased education (Watkins, 1974).

However, negative changes seem inevitable as well – changes which could cause serious disruptions in a marriage. The Ballmer and Lee (1971) study noted...
that while the husband admired his wife more as an individual after her return to school, he felt she no longer spent enough time with him, his sex life was deteriorating, and he saw her as much less dependent upon him, both financially and emotionally.

A follow-up of this 1971 study supported these findings, with additional evidence that the wife was also experiencing conflict between her own self-fulfillment and what she regarded as “family duties” (Ballmer & Cozby, 1974). Other studies have pointed out that the majority of returning women find the school experience enjoyable and vastly rewarding on a personal basis, but often suffer guilt and worries connected with taking time away from their homes and families (Letchworth, 1970; Markus, 1974; Astin, 1976). As Bardwick (1971) has pointed out, the return of a woman to higher education is somewhat different from her return to a working environment. The woman who returns to work is often satisfied with a relatively limited job as long as her motive to earn a little money is met. In contrast, the woman who enters higher education is accepting a commitment to a high standard of performance and effort, which she and her husband may be ill prepared to accept (Lee, 1973). When she discovers that she is capable of fulfilling this commitment and proceeds to demonstrate her academic proficiencies, it appears to present a threatening situation to both marriage partners.

Husbands of returning women appear to feel ambivalence about their wives’ new roles. They are proud of their wives’ accomplishments, but are often made uncomfortable by their spouses’ new autonomy (Ballmer & Cozby, 1974). These feelings of ambivalence appear to be in opposition to the findings of Astin (1976). The majority of the husbands in her sample reported only anticipation of positive results from the wives’ reentry, with relatively few suggesting negative outcomes. However, the women in Astin’s sample were involved in continuing education programs, while the women in the Ballmer & Cozby (1974) study were involved in programs leading to a degree. The amount of commitment tends to be quite different in pursuing an academic degree, as Bardwick (1971) and Lee (1973) have suggested, which may lead to feelings of threat on the part of the husbands. Such feelings support the contention that as women’s competencies increase and their dependencies decrease, marital conflicts arise (Liddick, 1974). Paul Bohannan (1972) suggests that conflict may be the result if the men have remained relatively static in their own personal growth. Bohannan sees the growth of one partner and the static nature of the other as one of the six primary stages of marital discord.

The returning college woman seems to see herself during the initial college semesters as a homemaker who is going back to school, while the woman who has more college credits sees herself as a student with home responsibilities (LeFevre, 1972). This change in role perception brings personal conflict, as evidenced by the numbers of returning women seeking counseling on the campuses for what they see as attendant marital conflicts (Davis, 1974; McGowan, 1975;