

Mapping the Misunderstood Non-traditional Male College Students

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ABSTRACT Life at institutions of higher education can be confusing and demanding for non-traditional male students. They non-traditional students have a different set of demands on their time and lifestyle that make them unique. The paper explores the experiences of non-traditional male undergraduate students. The study was conducted at an institution of higher education in Southern Africa. Eight non-traditional male students were purposively selected for the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The study revealed the students pursued their studies for diverse motives. The multiple roles are both beneficial and costly to their studies and families. There was no indication that they consulted their peers and use support services at the university to deal with their unique situations. The findings underscore the need for university counsellors to help non-traditional students adapt to the multiple roles of student, spouse and parent. Academic and non-academic units at the University should tailor their programmes to meet the unique academic, economic and psychosocial needs of non-traditional students.

INTRODUCTION

Non-traditional students refer to students who are over 25 years of age. They have responsibilities but return to school on a full time or part-time basis (Benhoff 1991). Similarly, Cross (1980) defines the non-traditional student as an adult who returns to school full- or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other responsibilities of adult life. According to Benhoff (1991), non-traditional students are also known as adult students, re-entry students, returning students, and adult learners. The students can be married, divorced or single. They may be with or without children. In addition, the students may be employed or unemployed. Non-traditional students tend to be typically older than traditional students (Evelyn 2002). Thus, the students have both school and non-school commitments. The number of older students on campuses swelled dramatically in the United States of America. Trends have shown that non-traditional students are the fastest-growing subgroup of the student population (Niner 2006).

Non-traditional students tend to be more diverse in their motivations for attending college

and have had experiences in life that broadened their general outlook (Compton et al. 2006). Reasons for male non-traditional enrolments include personal growth, financial opportunities and societal expectations (Bye et al. 2007). Many male non-traditional students come back to school for upward progression and secure high paying jobs requiring new knowledge, skills, and/or credentials (Brazziel 1989), family life transitions such as marriage and self-fulfillment (Aslanian and Brickell 1980). Compared to younger college students, non-traditional students tend to be achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental level (Cross 1980). They prefer student centred learning approaches and strive to integrate academic learning with their life and work experiences (Benhoff 1991). However, the two major challenges that they face include financial and family demands (Richter-Antion 1986).

Choy (2002) contends that non-traditional students struggle to give adequate attention to all their responsibilities due to time constraints. They struggle to juggle the roles of student, worker, and family member (Muench 1987). Non-traditional students' financial obligations are demanding. Spouses, children, parents or grand parents may constitute their dependents that they are expected to support (Free Application for Federal Student Aid 2006). These students strive to complete degrees for varying reasons

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that include self fulfillment, advancement or promotion and/or career change (Niner 2006). According to Kim (2002), non-traditional students experience a myriad of challenges that include delayed enrollment into university education, attending part-time degree programmes, being financially independent of parents, working full-time while enrolled and having dependents other than a spouse.

Competing Roles

The rigours of university life can be demanding, especially with non-traditional students juggling multiple responsibilities such as being a student, parent, spouse and working full time (Galvin 2006). They may be staying off-campus, hence, commute to the college on a daily basis. This minimises their access to academic facilities at the university. In addition, as parents and husbands, they are expected to fulfil their family obligations (Benshoff 1991). However, the competing roles make the students unique and in need of more support than the ordinary student.

Benefits to Academic Work

A recent study reported that marital bliss can be a stress-buster (Baran et al. 2011). Marriage brings growth and social support to the spouses (Isom 2011). Although marriages are stressful, they make other stress in life easier to handle, thus, acts as a buffer against stress. In the same vein, Henion and Burt (2010) argued that marriage reduces illegal and aggressive behaviours in men. The rates of antisocial behavior decline when one marries. A study by Feldman (1973) found that married men performed better academically.

Costs to Academic Work

Dawna-Cricket-Martita and Negy's (2003) study found that married students had moderate difficulties adjusting to the demands of higher education relative to unmarried students. Although social support from families and friends correlated with improved adjustment to college, support from the students' spouses was not associated with improved college adjustment even when the spouse was also a student. Married students reported a high level of marital distress on multiple relationship dimensions. Con-

fidence and support were some of the factors that were found to influence the evaluation of multiple roles as empowering or inhibiting (Carney-Crompton and Tan 2002).

Transitional Characteristics of the Students

Lauzon (1989b) posits that non-traditional students undergo sequential three phases of educational transition. At the first phase, the student is pre-occupied by adapting to the new role of student. It is associated with much academic stress. During the second phase, the student realizes that family life has suffered as a result of the studies. The student tries to make up by being available for the family, sometimes at the expense of the academic studies. Lastly, phase three is characterised by attempts to balance studies and family responsibilities enough to succeed in the endeavor.

Coping Resources

Previous studies showed that non-traditional students consult their peers on education-related issues (Lundberg 2004). They seem not keen to use academic and social support services provided by the institution (Keith 2007). However, they have stronger relationships with administrators and place a greater value on faculty interaction than their traditional counterparts (Lundberg 2004).

According to Weisenberg (2001), "being a non-traditional student is a strain that requires not only a variety of transition coping skills, but also the ability to use them in a flexible/appropriate manner" (p. 38). The change of roles is a source of stress. The role change creates self-concept changes (Walters 2000). Non-traditional students experience anxiety with the transition until they eventually incorporate the transition into their daily routine (Choy 2002). The students' relationships with their families will most likely change. Some students experience less support from their family and friends than originally expected (Weisenberg 2001). Consequently, some non-traditional students may not be able to cope with the stress of negotiating their non-traditional characteristics with the demands of school (Choy 2002).

From the ongoing, available literature suggests that family/school conflict is an area that has generally been less explored globally, and in

particular Africa. Family/school conflict refers to the demands faced by married students (Hammer et al. 1998). Most previous studies focused more on the academic experiences of women as they juggled the demands of both family and career (Cinamon and Yisrael 2002). Comparatively lesser scholarly attention was given to the multiple roles of being a student and in marriage among men. While the demographic characteristics of the non-traditional students are well understood, their attitudes about their multiple roles have not been thoroughly researched. In the meantime, there lacks a solid body of research from which to draw interventions for male non-traditional students in Southern Africa.

Research Questions

The present study, therefore, investigates the experiences of male non-traditional college students. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- ♦ What motivates male non-traditional students to enrol into degree programmes?
- ♦ How are the male non-traditional students affected by the multiple responsibilities?
- ♦ What coping resources do male non-traditional students use?

METHODS

Research Design

The research for this study was conducted qualitatively in order to explore the experiences of non-traditional male college students. The phenomenological research design that was used allowed the researcher to gain in-depth information as well as a contextual perspective in order to understand how the non-traditional male students construct their social realities within their particular social context (Greenstein et al. 2003). Phenomenology provides insight into the meaning of lived experiences. It breaks down the text into clusters of meaning to compose a story or a 'detailed account' of lived experiences by staying close to data itself (extensive use of quotations) (Greenstein et al. 2003; Starks and Trinidad 2007).

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participating students. According to Oliver (2012), purposive sampling is a form of

non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher. In the present study, the selection decisions were based upon a variety of criteria which include being a university student, male gender, married and willingness to participate in the research. Purposive sampling was preferred because its results are usually expected to be more accurate than those achieved with an alternative form of sampling (Castillo 2009). Furthermore, it is suitable for choosing a very rare group of people for a particular research study. In the present study, married male students are regarded as non-traditional.

Participants

Eight undergraduate non-traditional students (mean age = 33.5 years; age range = 26 to 41 years) were selected for the study. The students were selected from a class pursuing a degree in psychology at a university in Southern Africa. The university is situated in a rural community. Most of the students at the university were from historically disadvantaged Black African communities. Participants were purposively selected from a group of non-traditional male college students who were prepared to be participants in the study. All the participants were Black African. They were in the second year of study. The eight participants were staying with their spouses.

Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants using a prepared interview guide. Semi-structured interview technique was preferred because it allows informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Cohen and Cabtree 2008). The interview guide was flexible in that it allowed me to follow up on interesting avenues that emerged to get a fuller picture (Patton 2002). Probing enabled me to get in-depth information on the experiences of married undergraduate female students. To ensure trustworthiness in data collection and research data, the interview guide was pilot-tested with three students who did not take part in the main study. Cross comparison of responses by the eight participants was done.

Procedure

Data were collected by the author through face-to-face interviews with the eight participants. Individual interviews were conducted with each of the participants. All interviews were conducted in a tutorial room. The interviews were conducted in English as all the participants spoke it fluently. Brief interview notes were taken and the conversations were recorded using an audio tape. Each interview took 45 to 57 minutes per participant.

Data Analysis

All the audio taped interview conversations were transcribed. Content analysis was used to analyse data. Data were coded as every line was carefully read. Data that were related to the already classified patterns was identified and combined. The related patterns were catalogued into sub-themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thereafter, central themes were identified (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). The responses were then grouped within the central themes. The main themes include reasons for studying for a degree, benefits of marriage to academic studies, costs of marriage to academic studies and coping strategies.

Ethical Considerations

The following research ethics were observed. The researcher obtained permission to conduct the study from the participating university. The purpose of the study and all activi-

ties to be undertaken during data collection were explained to the participants prior to obtaining individual consent. Participation in the study was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Reporting was done anonymously as actual names of participants were not used. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Eight participants were included in the unstructured one-to-one interview sessions until data saturation was reached. Table 1 reflects the themes and sub-themes that have emerged during data analysis using the Tesch's open coding method and below the presentation of direct quotations from the participants' responses are written in italic followed by literature control to re-contextualise the findings in existing literature.

Through this study, the author obtained valuable insights into the motives for studying, impact of marriage on academic studies and coping resources used by married undergraduate male students. Each theme has sub-themes. The researcher presents the major themes and the subsequent sub-themes by giving supportive responses given by the participants.

Theme 1: Reasons for Studying for a Degree

The motive for studying was one major theme that emerged from the present study. Four reasons emerged from the responses given by the

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
1. <i>Reasons for Studying</i>	1.1. Support the family 1.2. Humanitarian motive 1.3. Academic motive 1.4. Security
2. <i>Benefits of Marriage to Academic Work</i>	2.1. Getting support from the spouse 2.2. Motivation to study for the good of the family
3. <i>Costs of Marriage to Academic Work</i>	3.1. Failure to concentrate because of unresolved family problems 3.2. Overwhelmed by family responsibilities 3.3. Lack of time to give attention to the family 3.4. Failure to meet some basic needs of the family 3.5. Staying away from the family
4. <i>Strategies for Coping with the Dual Responsibilities</i>	4.1. Sound time management 4.2. Separation of roles and responsibilities 4.3. Flexibility 4.4. Regular communication with the family 4.5. Spending quality time with the family

participants. Married male students enrolled for tertiary education with the ultimate goal of supporting their families. The three motives were the humanitarian-related, academic-related and security-related reasons.

Sub-theme 1.1: Support Family

Cognisant of the traditional role of father and husband, three participants reported that their academic studies were meant to benefit their families. The finding is depicted in the following vignettes:

I would like to provide for my family. I want to improve the welfare of my family. (Participant 1)

I would like to support my family. (Participant 6)

I want my family to be financially stable. (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 1.2 Humanitarian-related Reason

Another popular motive was the humanitarian-related reason. Some participants indicated that upon completion of their studies, they hoped to use the acquired knowledge and skills to help people in their communities. The finding is demonstrated by the following statements:

I would like to help people to solve their problems. I will focus on social problems such as substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and poverty. These are the main problems that affect people in my community. (Participant 1)

I want to help families cope with their daily problems. Of particular concern is divorce and abandoned children. (Participant 5)

I would like to help people who are experiencing social problems. (Participant 8)

Sub-theme 1.3: Academic-related Reason

Two participants reported that upon successful completion of their first degree, they intended to further their studies by pursuing a Master's degree. This is supported by the following responses:

After completing my degree programme, I would like to further my studies by enrolling for a master's degree. (Participant 1)

I want to complete my degree programme in record time and register for a master's degree. (Participant 2)

Sub-theme 1.4: Security

Job security was another reason that was cited by three participants. The participant had the following to say:

I would like to get a decent job... (Participant 1)

I would like to get a regular income... (Participant 5)

I want to get a stable job. (Participant 7)

Theme 2: Benefits of Marriage to Academic Studies

It emerged from the study that the participants felt that their marriages were beneficial to their studies. The participants' responses suggested that spouses give support and that being both a father and husband spurred them to work hard for the good of their families.

Sub-theme 2.1: Getting Support from the Spouse

One participant indicated that he got support from his spouse. The participant had the following to say:

Being married is a benefit because I get a lot of support from my spouse. She encourages me to do well in my studies. She wants me to excel in my studies. Her support keeps me focused. (Participant 1)

Sub-theme 2.2: Motivation to Study for the Good of the Family

Some participants pursued their studies with a view to improve the welfare of their families upon completion. They were inspired to work hard by their traditional role of husband and father, hence, they were to provide for their families. The following excerpts attest to the finding:

As a married man, I have the responsibility to meet the needs of my family. The responsibility motivates me to do well in my studies. (Participant 1)

It helps me to put more effort and take my studies seriously. I have to work hard for the good of my family. (Participant 5)

Being both a husband and father inspires me to do well in my studies. I know I have a wife and children to look after. (Participant 7)

Theme 3: Costs of Marriage to Academic Studies

The participants indicated that their roles of husband and father impacted negatively on their academic work. Four challenges were highlighted. Some participants were overwhelmed by the dual roles of husband/father and student. Lack of time to give attention to the family, failure to meet some basic needs of the family and staying away from the family were the other three problems.

Sub-theme 3.1: Failure to Concentrate Because of Unresolved Family Problems

One participant (16.7%) reported that he struggled to concentrate on his studies as and when marital conflicts arise. The participant said the following:

Being a husband sometimes affects my studies because when a misunderstanding arises between me and my wife, I usually lose focus and fail to concentrate on my studies. (Participant 1)

Sub-theme 3.2: Overwhelmed by the Dual Responsibilities

Although indicating that he was flexible, one participant (16.7%) indicated that he sometimes struggled to balance the two responsibilities of being a father/and and students. This finding is illustrated by the following vignette:

It affects my studies in that I have to be flexible and be a real father and husband at home. At the university, I need to be a serious student. Sometimes it is difficult to balance the two. (Participant 2)

Sub-theme 3.3: Lack of Time to Give Attention to the Family

It also emerged from the study that there was lack of time to give due attention to the family. This affects the marriage. It was difficult to even spare time for recreation activities with the children because of the demanding academic work. This finding is illustrated by the response that was given by one participant (16.7%). The participant said:

My studies do affect my marriage in that there are times when my family needs me but I

can't spare time for them. I cannot even play with my child because of pressing academic work. (Participant 2)

Sub-theme 3.4: Failure to Meet Some Basic Needs of the Family

Since they were out of employment, two participants indicated that they could not adequately provide for their families. This finding is demonstrated by the following statements:

My child expects me to provide all the things that she wants but I cannot because I am a full time student. I am not working. I feel that my child does not regard me as a responsible father. (Participant 3)

I do not provide adequately for my family because I am not working. (Participant 4)

Sub-theme 3.5: Staying away from the Family

One participant reported that staying away from his family affected his marriage. The participant said the following:

Also, I stay very far away from my family. This has a negative impact on my marriage. (Participant 4)

Theme 4: Coping Strategies

Despite acknowledging that their multiple roles were a cause of concern, the participants indicated that they were coping with the demands. They attributed their ability to cope with the multiple roles to internally located coping resources. This suggests that the participants had an internal frame of reference. The coping strategies that the participants used were the ability to separate roles and responsibilities, flexibility, regular communication with the family and spending quality time with the family.

Sub-theme 4.1: Sound Time Management

Two participants attributed their ability to cope with the demanding dual responsibilities of being a married man and student to good time management. This finding is supported by the following responses:

I manage my time very well. I create time for my studies and spare time for my wife. (Participant 5)

Good time management is the thing that makes me cope. I spare time for both my studies and family. When I am at school I phone my family. More often, at home I do my academic work when the opportunity arises. (Participant 4)

Sub-theme 4.2: Separation of Roles and Responsibilities

Most of the participating students indicated that they were able to separate the dual responsibilities of being married and student. At home they behaved as husband and father, and at college they behave like students. The following excerpts attest to the finding:

I am coping with the roles of being a husband and student. (Participant 1)

I cope because I am flexible enough to handle the pressure of being a student, husband and father. I know the difference between a student and a husband. At the university I behave like a student and at home I become a real father or husband. (Participant 7)

I make sure that during long weekends and vacations I spend quality time with my family. When I am at the university I call them frequently. (Participant 3)

It is a little bit difficult but I try my level best to cope with the demands of being a student and having a family. Good time management is the thing that makes me cope. I spare time for both my studies and family. When I am at school I phone my family. More often, at home I do my academic work when the opportunity arises. (Participant 5)

Sub-theme 4.3: Flexibility

One participant indicated that his flexibility enabled him to cope with the dual responsibilities of being a father/husband and student. The participant said the following:

I cope because I am flexible enough to handle the pressure of being a student, husband and father. I know the difference between a student and a husband. At the university I behave like a student and at home I become a real father or husband. (Participant 2)

Sub-theme 4.4: Regular Communication with Family while at College

Two participants reported that they maintained constant contact with their families.

When they were at college, they made phone calls to their families. The following statements demonstrate the finding:

I make sure that during long weekends and vacations I spend quality time with my family. When I am at the university I call them frequently. (Participant 3)

It is a little bit difficult but I try my level best to cope with the demands of being a student and having a family. Good time management is the thing that makes me cope. I spare time for both my studies and family. When I am at school I phone my family. More often, at home I do my academic work when the opportunity arises. (Participant 6)

Sub-theme 4.5: Spending Quality Time with the Family

One participant indicated that he spent quality time with his family. The participant had the following to say:

I make sure that during long weekends and vacations I spend quality time with my family. When I am at the university I call them frequently. (Participant 8)

DISCUSSION

Through this study, the author obtained valuable insights into the challenges and coping resources used by undergraduate married female students. The researcher discusses the reasons for enrolling into undergraduate studies, followed by the challenges that the participants were going through and then the strategies that they were using to cope with the demands of the dual responsibilities of wifehood and student.

Reasons for Studying for a Degree

The study revealed that non-traditional male students return to college for multiple motives. The motives include supporting the family, humanitarian-related, academic related and security reasons. The finding is in line with Bye et al.'s (2007) and Niner's (2006) assertion that non-traditional male students enrol at institutions of higher learning for personal growth, financial opportunities and societal expectations. Similarly, other researches reported that non-traditional students come back to school for upward

progression and secure high paying jobs requiring new knowledge, skills, and/or credentials (Brazziel 1989), family life transitions such as marriage and self-fulfillment (Aslanian and Brickell 1980).

However, there was no evidence to support the notion that non-traditional students enrol into degree programmes for interest in the subject matter and desire for intellectual stimulation (Shaub 2012). This shows that in depressed economic societies such as Southern Africa, men are pre-occupied with the need to provide basic needs to their families. In addition, prestige was not a motivating factor. Contrary to the above findings, Buddeberg-Fischer et al. (2003) observed that non-traditional male students score higher on independence, decisiveness, self-confidence, activity and income, although, prestige was not supported. Earlier, Clayton and Smith (1987) reported that non-traditional students' decisions to pursue an undergraduate degree include self-improvement; self-actualisation; vocational; role; family; social; humanitarian and knowledge.

Benefits of Marriage to Studies

The study suggests that non-traditional male students are more diverse in their motivations for attending college and have had experiences in life that broadened their general outlook (Compton et al. 2006). All the participants reported that their marriages were beneficial to their studies. Being both a father and husband spurred them to work hard for the good of their families and communities at large.

Costs of Marriage to Academic Studies

Giving credence to Galvin (2006), the rigours of university life can be demanding, especially with non-traditional students juggling multiple responsibilities such as being a student, parent, spouse and working full time. As parents and husbands, they are expected to fulfil their family obligations (Benhoff 1991). The participants indicated that their roles of husband and father impacted negatively on their academic work. Richter-Antion's (1986) finding that financial problems and family demands were the major challenges faced by non-traditional male students finds support in the present study.

In addition, the participants reported that their studies also impacted negatively on their other roles of husband and father at home. Their studies compromised their other roles in that they failed to fulfil to the expectations of their spouses and children. This finding is in line with Dawna-Cricket-Martita and Negy (2003) who asserted that married students reported a high level of marital distress on multiple relationship dimensions. Challenges such as feeling guilty about not being there for the children, feelings of responsibility for maintaining their role within the family, making compromises in career due to family considerations and minimal individual free time (Terrell 1990) were confirmed by the present study.

In the same vein, the findings of the present study support several previous studies. Choy (2002) reported that non-traditional students struggle to give adequate attention to all their responsibilities due to time constraints. The students struggle to juggle the roles of student, worker, and family member (Muench 1987). Non-traditional students' have demanding financial obligations as they are expected to provide for their families (FAFSA 2006). All these challenges were cited by non-traditional male students who took part in the present study.

Coping Strategies

The findings of the present study seem to support previous studies that reported that marital bliss can be a stress-buster (Baran et al. 2011). Marriage brings growth and social support to the spouses (Isom 2011) and makes other stress in life easier to handle, thus, it acts as a buffer against stress. Despite acknowledging that their multiple roles were a cause of concern, the participants indicated that they were coping with the demands. They attributed their ability to cope with the multiple roles to good time management. This suggests that the participants had an internal frame of reference. They praised themselves for desirable conduct. In addition, the non-traditional students were operating the phase three of their transition in education (Lauzon 1989). They were preoccupied with making attempts to balance studies and family responsibilities enough to succeed in the endeavors. There was no evidence to suggest that the students were consulting their peers (Lundberg 2004) and using academic and social support

services provided by the institution (Keith 2007). Thus, non-traditional male students have special needs, hence, they require flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental level (Cross 1980).

Implications of the Findings

Life at institutions of higher education can be confusing and demanding for non-traditional male students. They non-traditional students have a different set of demands on their time and lifestyle that make them unique. Colleges, especially through the Student Affairs Division and Faculties should identify and meet the unique needs of the ever increasing number of non-traditional students. Thus, institutions of higher learning should re-think the focus of academic and student affairs programmes.

Over and above the regular programs and services geared to the traditional-age student population, institutions of higher learning should expand their student provisions to include: separate registration, better preparation of faculty and staff to meet the needs of non-traditional students, better preparation and faculty to meet the various social needs of non-traditional students, advising and orientation, financial assistance and housing and additional academic support.

Institutions of higher learning should offer social activities tailored to meet the unique needs of non-traditional male college students and their families. Faculties should come up with innovative and creative approaches that would enable them to effectively communicate and address the academic and social needs of non-traditional male students.

CONCLUSION

Non-traditional students bring with them desires and needs that are different from their traditional counterparts. The students pursue their studies for diverse motives. The multiple roles are both beneficial and costly to their studies and families. There was no indication that they consulted their peers and use support services at the university to deal with their unique situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings underscore the need for university counsellors to help non-traditional students adapt to the multiple roles of student,

spouse and parent. Academic and non-academic units at the University should tailor their programmes to meet the unique academic, economic and psychosocial needs of non-traditional students.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study was qualitative in nature, therefore, its findings may not be generalised across populations. Future research is needed to better understand gender differences in the multiple roles for non-traditional students. Research can be extended to a comparison of academic experiences of traditional and non-traditional students.

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