

ABSTRACT

Mature Women in Higher Education: Exploring Conflicts and Stresses

Angela Ikoline Gordon-Stair

This study examined the impact on the lives of mature women of their participation in full-time undergraduate degree programmes at the University of the West Indies, Mona. Factors explored included the women's stated motives for entering the university; differences in these motives based on specific demographic and biographic characteristics; the impact of this experience on their multiple gender roles; the personal and/or institutional challenges these women faced, and the coping mechanisms they employed in order to persist with their programmes of study.

Moser's articulation of the triple roles of women and the psychodynamic reformulation of the concept of psychic conflict, provided the theoretical framework for this research project. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology was used. Participants were 67 women age 30 years and older who completed questionnaires. Treatment of the data was both descriptive and causal comparative. From these 67 women, 16 of those who indicated a willingness to participate in the second phase, were selected for in-depth interviews. Three years after this initial interview, 10 of the 16 women whom it was possible to trace, were again interviewed. The data from both sets of interviews were treated qualitatively using an inductive approach. The data were further refined using the *QSR NUD*IST4* computer

software package for qualitative data analysis.

Overall, the data showed that most women had career related motives for entering the university which spoke to the women's desire for financial independence and status enhancement. All the women experienced in varying degrees, the conflicts and the resulting guilt with anxiety and/or depression as they attempted to meet the varying role expectations. Their perception of the impact of their student role on their relationships with their partners and their children varied. Disruption in the areas of both their reproductive and productive roles was the main personal barrier the women faced while institutional barriers were of two types; those related to their academic life and those of a service nature. Means and mechanisms employed by the women in order to persist with their academic programmes included seeking help at various levels both within and outside the family including paid help, reliance on their religious faith, and support from other students with whom they studied. Compartmentalization of their lives, denial and rationalization were among the coping mechanisms used.

This study adds to the very limited body of knowledge on mature West Indian female students in higher education, a growing group on which very little research has been done. The study's findings are discussed in relation to previous research, and with respect to their implications for mature women, their families and the university.

Keywords: Angela Ikoline Gordon-Stair; mature women; higher education; Caribbean.