Educational Careers, Returning to School and Work-Family Concerns (2008)

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

Due to changes in the economy and increasing variability in the patterning of work and family roles, returning to school after a period of full-time employment has become commonplace (Altucher & Williams 2003; Arnett, 1998; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Clarkberg, 1999; Elman & O’Rand, 2002; Felmlee, 1988; Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; Han & Moen, 1999a, 1999b; Henretta, 1994; Levy, 1986; Moen, 2002; Monks, 1997; Oppenheimer, 2003; O’Rand & Henretta, 1999; Pallas, 2003). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), nearly three-quarters of American undergraduates are at least “minimally nontraditional” in that they possess one or more of seven characteristics, including delayed enrollment, part-time student status, full-time employment, financial independence, and responsibility for dependents. Age is another frequently used indicator of non-traditional or returning student status, and it has been estimated that 38.8% of individuals enrolled in degree-granting institutions will be 25 and over by 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Returning students can be defined as adult students who are currently enrolled in a post-secondary degree-granting or continuing education program following a discernable break in their education, who may or may not have had any prior post-secondary education (i.e., including college “dropouts” and delayed-entry students), and who have already established occupational and, oftentimes, family careers. This group is distinguished from “traditional students” (who follow an uninterrupted “K through 16” path) and from continuously-enrolled adult students who pursue a slow, but direct path to higher degrees (i.e., “gradual” students).

Returning to school is a key life course transition, and must be understood in the context of the past and present circumstances that shape the decision to reenroll, as well as the short- and long-term consequences of returning. Several theories have been proposed, separately and in conjunction, to explain motivations for and consequences of returning to school, including human capital, status attainment, status maintenance, and cumulative dis/advantage theories (e.g., Elman & O’Rand, 2002,
However, a life course perspective (e.g. Elder 1998; Bradburn, Moen & Dempster-McClain 1995), which links macro- and micro-levels of analysis and bridges normative and interpretative approaches (Marshall, 1996), is perhaps most useful for understanding work-to-school transitions. The following life course concepts are particularly relevant: educational careers, trajectories, and pathways (Gorard et al., 1998, 2001; Kerckhoff, 1993, 1996; Pallas, 2003); historical time and place, timing in lives, linked lives, human agency (Elder, 1998, 1999), and; life course flexibility (Settersten, 1999) and differential developmental trajectories (Savin-Williams, 1998).

The life course principle of historical time and place (Elder, 1998, 1999) highlights the ways in which individual development is shaped by historical events and trends. For example, the G.I. Bill dramatically altered the educational careers of World War II veterans, many of whom would not have otherwise pursued higher education (Sampson & Laub, 1996), and the Civil and Women’s Rights Movements of the late-1960s and early-1970s likewise expanded educational opportunities for women and people of color (Bradburn, Moen & Dempster-McClain, 1995). The enrollment of non-traditional age students in higher education increased during both periods. This, paired with economic shifts, set the stage for current rates of participation by adult students.

The concepts of life course flexibility (Settersten, 1999) and differential developmental trajectories (Savin-Williams, 1998) illustrate larger historical trends that have made returning to school a regular occurrence. These concepts point to a loosening of developmental age-norms (Neugarten, 1979; Riley & Riley, 1999) and increasing heterogeneity in life course pathways (Kerckhoff, 1993). Although the element of personal control and choice has always been central to human development, the role of human agency in the construction of the life course has arguably become more important than ever given the broad array of contemporary life options (Elder, 1998; Schwartz, 2000). Indeed, personal preferences and motivations seem to play an important role in work-to-school transitions, particularly for middle-class men (Hostetler, Sweet & Moen, 2007; Maynard & Pearsall, 1994; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). From a life-course perspective, however, it is also important to recognize the “constraints of history and social circumstances” (Elder, 1998:4) that limit the expression of agency. For example, while many aging baby-boomers may find returning to school to be a desirable and realistic option as they contemplate their post-retirement lifestyle, others face cultural and economic barriers to taking full advantage of life in the “third age” (Rubinstein, 2002; Weiss & Bass, 2002).

Other constraints come in the form of family responsibilities, and the challenges of integrating work and family careers. The life course principle of linked lives highlights the web of interdependent relationships that influences, and is influenced by, significant life decisions. For women, in particular, the decision to reenroll is often precipitated by shifts in family roles and responsibilities (Aslanian, 2001; Bay, 1999; Bradburn, Moen & Dempster-McClain, 1995; Carr & Sheridan, 2001; Pascall & Cox, 1993; Rice, 1978; Ross, 1988; Shields, 1993). Finally, returning to school should be understood as a transition located
within the context of work and family careers linked both synchronically, in terms of present demands and opportunities, and diachronically, in terms of past experiences and future goals. The concepts of educational trajectory and pathway (Gorard et al., 1998, 2001; Pallas, 2003), which focus respectively on the individual and social-structural levels (Pallas, 2003), draw attention to the ways in which educational participation is shaped by the patterning of earlier life-course events.

In summary, returning to school is an increasingly common transition that should be understood against the backdrop of linked individual, family and career pathways, reflecting past decisions, future goals, and current motivations, resources and constraints (Elder, 1999; Gorard et al., 1998, 2001; West, 1995; Woodley, 1987). This transition occurs in particular socio-historical contexts, including expectations and opportunities related to age, gender, race/ethnicity, class, etc. (e.g., Riley & Riley, 1999). Both the decision to return to school, and the short- and long-term impact of reenrollment on work and family life, are shaped by this complex interweaving of social-cultural and individual-developmental factors.

**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

The increasingly common nature of returning to school reflects profound shifts in the work and family careers of Americans (Henretta, 1994; O’Rand & Henretta 1999; Settersten, 1999; Wallulis, 1998), and poses particular challenges for work-family integration. For many workers, returning to school is a necessity in an era in which corporate downsizing and outsourcing are widespread, skill sets become rapidly obsolete, and the idea of a lifelong commitment between employers and employees is largely a thing of the past (Baumol, Blinder & Wolff, 2003; Cottle, 2001; Levy, 1986; Piore & Sabel, 1984; Reich, 1991; Thurow, 1992). The large scale participation of women in the work force, in addition to exposing the myth of separate spheres, has also helped to undermine the assumption that career paths are always, or should be, continuous and linear (Bradburn, Moen & Dempster-McClain; Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, 2002; Moen, 1985; Moen & Han, 2001). Although some individuals are forced to retrain, others voluntarily return to school as part of a career-change strategy—a not uncommon path for women who have taken time off from paid employment to care for children (Bradburn, Moen & Dempster-McClain, 1995) and an increasingly popular option for men dissatisfied with their jobs (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Scala, 1996).

At the same time, those who might benefit the most from adult educational participation, including single parents, individuals lacking job security and/or opportunities for career advancement, and those disadvantaged by early life-course events and/or ascriptive characteristics (e.g., race, gender, social class background), may be the least able to return to school or may be selected into lower-quality educational programs (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, 2002, 2007; McClelland, 1990; Pallas, 2003). Given that work-family scholarship has focused disproportionately on the experiences of white, middle-class couples and families (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006), the study of diverse
educational trajectories and pathways promises to enrich our understanding of racial, ethnic and class differences in the patterning of work and family transitions.

Finally, as returning to school becomes a more prominent feature of work and family careers, the balancing act threatens to become even more difficult. Full-time enrollment is a luxury relatively few families can afford (Kasworm, 2003), so most returning students are forced to simultaneously meet work, family and school responsibilities. And given the rising cost of tuition and the relative paucity of employer-provided or other non-loan tuition assistance, returning to school typically poses financial challenges in addition to increased time demands. For single and lower income parents, the need to further invest in one’s human capital resources (particularly in an era of welfare “reform”), and the difficulties associated with integrating work, school, and family, may be especially pronounced. At the same time, reenrollment can be personally and professionally rewarding, and its rewards and challenges often go hand in hand. A key challenge for work-family scholarship is to illuminate whether and in what ways work-to-school transitions serve to reduce, maintain, or exacerbate status dis/advantages (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Elman & O’Rand, 1998b, 2007; Felmlee, 1988; Pallas, 2003).

State of the Body of Knowledge

To date, research on returning to school has primarily addressed three questions: Who returns and why, how do they do as students, and how does returning impact their lives? This entry will focus mainly on the first and third questions, as they are particularly relevant to the intersection of work and family careers. Unfortunately, relatively little longitudinal research has been conducted on these topics, and no studies to date have provided a comprehensive developmental portrait of return-to-school pathways. Nevertheless, past research has identified many of the factors that appear to predict work-to-school transitions, and other research has explored potential short- and long-term consequences of reenrollment. This research is reviewed below, following a brief summary of some of the demographic characteristics of returning students.

Demographic Characteristics of Returning Students

The profile of the average returning student is difficult to determine given the lack of comprehensive statistics covering the wide range of programs in which they participate, including continuing education, certificate, and undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Several studies indicate that, in keeping with general trends in higher education, women outnumber men among returning students (Brady, 1984; Kasworm, 2003; Rice, 1978; Scale, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In fact, by 2010 it is estimated that nearly 62% of students over the age of 25 enrolled in degree-granting institutions will be women (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). With respect to race and ethnicity, African-American and Latino/a students are generally more likely to delay post-secondary enrollment (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005;
Elman & O’Rand, 2004, 2007), but there is evidence that racial disparities in adult educational attainment may actually increase by midlife (Jacobs & Stoney-Eby, 1998). And not surprisingly, participation declines steadily with age, with more than two and a quarter million 25 to 29 year olds and just under 75,000 senior citizens enrolled in degree-granting programs in 2003 (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

In the same year, 62.5% of students 25 and over (not all of whom would be classified as returning students) attended part time. Seventy-one percent of students were enrolled in undergraduate programs, 26% in graduate programs, and 3% in professional programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). The level at which returning students participate obviously depends on previous educational attainment and occupational and socio-economic status. For example, recent research suggests the Latino and African-American adult students are more likely to enroll in non-degree and/or lower quality educational programs (Elman & O’Rand, 2004, 2007). By comparison, in a recent study of middle-class women who returned to school, the majority were seeking graduate or professional degrees (Sweet & Moen, 2007; see also Bradburn, Moen & Dempster-McClain, 1995). The average returning student works at least 35 hours per week, is married and has other dependents, although male returning students are more likely than their female counterparts to be single (Kasworm, 2003; Maynard & Pearsall, 1994; Sewall, 1984). According to Kasworm (2003), nearly 40% of returning students require some form of financial assistance.

Within the undergraduate population, non-traditional students are more likely than traditional students to be enrolled in 2-year public schools or for-profit schools, and they are less likely to complete degrees and more likely to discontinue their enrollment within a few years (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), and this is particularly true of low-income, minority, and part-time students (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Jacobs & King, 2002; McClelland, 1990). Indeed, within three years of matriculation in 1995-96, 51% of bachelor-level students and 62% of associate-level students dropped out (compared to 12% and 19% of traditional students), and only 11% of “highly nontraditional” bachelor’s candidates who started in 1989-90 completed their degrees after five years. Non-traditional students are particularly at risk for dropping out in the first year of their studies. Compared to traditional undergraduates, non-traditional undergraduates more commonly define themselves primarily as workers (as opposed to “students”), and they are more likely to say that their work helps them prepare for their careers but also hinders their ability to take classes and achieve satisfactory grades. Not surprisingly, they are also over-represented among distance learners. Among the reasons non-traditional undergraduates give for enrolling, personal enrichment, gaining skills, and earning a degree or certificate rank at the top (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Motivations for returning to school, and other precipitating factors, are explored in greater depth in the following section.
The Decision to Return

Although the use of the word “decision” implies that returning to school is primarily a matter of choice shaped by individual preferences and motivations, it is essential to consider the resources, constraints, and other experiences that precipitate reenrollment. This is consistent with a life-course perspective on human agency (Elder, 1998). As already indicated, several theories—sometimes competing, sometimes complementary—have been proposed to explain who returns to school, why, and under what circumstances, and these theoretical perspectives will certainly be addressed. However, in keeping with a life-course approach, the following analysis focuses (somewhat chronologically) on the factors that shape educational pathways and trajectories, including initial ascriptive characteristics, developmental history and prior educational attainment, job history and current working conditions, family resources and demands, and personal motivations and resources.

Ascriptive Characteristics. Despite the separate discussion of the demographic characteristics of returning students (above), questions of who returns and why are obviously intertwined. As already indicated, women, people of color, and individuals from a low-SES background are more likely than middle class white men to experience discontinuity in their educational and employment careers (Bradburn et al., 1995; Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, 2004; Hostetler et al., 2007). However, the impact of gender, race, and socio-economic background on adult educational participation depends, at least in part, on prior educational attainment (see below), type of educational program, and timing of reenrollment. For example, African-Americans, Latinos, and lower-income individuals may be more likely than comparison groups to delay initial post-secondary enrollment (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Hearn, 1992), and are more likely to be selected into non-baccalaureate adult educational programs (Elman & O’Rand, 2004; 2007), as already indicated.

On the other hand, entry into a four-year, baccalaureate program or retraining in the wake of job loss, particularly in the years of settled and middle adulthood, may hinge on the presence rather than absence of social and material resources, including early (i.e., parental) resources and prior educational attainment (Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 2004; 2007). According to Elman and O’Rand (2004, p. 154), “the most advantaged of the disadvantaged” may actually be the most likely to return to school, including those individuals with unstable or unrewarding jobs who have a history of socio-economic and/or educational advantage.

With respect to gender, although delayed initial enrollment may be more common for men as a group (Hearn, 1992), occupational and educational discontinuity seem to be a more prominent life-course feature for at least certain cohorts of women, given the combination of expanded career opportunities and family demands that vary over the life course (Bradburn et al., 1995; Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, 2004; Hostetler et al., 2007). Finally, variable participation rates by birth cohort may reflect historical
shifts in opportunity structures (e.g., GI-Bill, life-long learning among baby boomers) (Bradburn et al., 1995, O’Rand & Henretta, 1999; Sampson & Laub, 1996).

Questions remain about the extent to which ascriptive characteristics are directly or indirectly related to work-to-school transitions in adulthood. Some evidence suggests direct, continuing effects due to discrimination and not explained by other social and educational background factors (Elman & O’Rand, 2004). However, most approaches posit an indirect relationship through early socialization experiences, previous educational attainment, etc.—topics addressed in the next section.

**Developmental History and Prior Educational Attainment.** From the perspective of status attainment and human capital approaches, ascriptive characteristics are linked to occupational outcomes indirectly through factors such as parental educational and occupational background and related values, the transmission of these values and other socialization experiences, and educational attainment (Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, Pallas, 2003). And a cumulative dis/advantage model (or “Matthew Effect”) predicts a snowballing effect, whereby initial status advantages and disadvantages are magnified over time such that the most advantaged individuals enjoy greater access to educational resources and reap greater rewards from their educational investments throughout the life course, and visa versa (Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, 2004, 2007; McClelland, 1990; Pallas, 2003).

Accordingly, whereas those disadvantaged by their social origins stand the most to benefit from returning to school, existing research evidence suggests that it is individuals with the greatest prior investment in and commitment to education who are the most likely to reenroll, particularly in high-quality and/or degree programs (Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, 2002, 2004, 2007; Gorard et al., 1998, 2001; Hight, 1998). At the same time, there is likely a ceiling effect for prior educational attainment (Bradburn et al., 1995; Pallas, 2003). So although many college graduates return to pursue an advanced degree (to remain competitive in an increasingly technological and specialized economy or to change careers), it is those individuals with some previous college but without a four-year degree who are most likely to reenroll, given the significance of the baccalaureate credential and the reality that relatively few people ever pursue or complete education beyond the undergraduate level. Indeed, as already indicated, most degree students over 25 are pursuing bachelor’s degree, and “earning a degree” is a very important motivation for nearly three-quarters of non-traditional undergraduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, 2005). On the other hand, a recent study (Hostetler, Sweet & Moen, 2007) found that having (or lacking) a bachelor’s degree is unrelated to current return status among middle class couples, but this study does not specifically address differences in the motivation to reenroll based on prior educational level.

Although work-to-school transitions are often motivated by a desire to improve one’s credentials, particularly in a changing economic landscape (Baumol, Blinder & Wolff, 2003; Cottle, 2001; Elman &
O’Rand, 1998b; Levy, 1986; Piore & Sabel, 1984; Reich, 1991; Thurow, 1992), these transitions are also conditioned by a variety of other “pushes,” “pulls,” and developmental factors. In addition to the factors already discussed, life-course experiences outside of the educational and occupational domains, and the timing and sequencing of developmental transitions across domains, also contribute to the shaping of educational trajectories (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; McClelland, 1990; Pallas, 2003). Although life-course patterns have arguably become more heterogeneous in recent years (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, 2002, 2007; Henretta, 1994; Modell & Goodman, 1990; O’Rand & Henretta 1999; Settersten, 1999; Shanahan, 2000; Wallulis, 1998), normative ideas about the appropriate timing and sequencing of developmental milestones persist (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Pallas, 1993). These normative patterns are captured by the life-course concepts of “social time,” (Elder, 1978; Neugarten, 1979), “family clocks” (Altucher & Williams, 2003), and “career clocks” (Han & Moen, 1999a, 1999b). Life-course theory and research also highlight the influence of earlier events (or non-events) on later decisions and experiences (Moen & Wethington, 1999). While developmental variations are tolerated now more than in the past, the failure to make expectable transitions “on-time” and in the expectable order can shape developmental outcomes throughout the life course (Hogan, 1980; Elder, 1978; Elman & O’Rand, 2004; Pallas, 1993).

The completion of schooling remains one of the primary markers of the transition to adulthood (Lerner, 1995; Schaie & Willis, 2002) and has traditionally been accomplished prior to entering the work force, getting married and starting a family (Beutell & O’Hare, 1987; Bradburn, Moen & Dempster-McClain, 1995; Modell, 1989; Schlossberg, 1970). Out-of-order transitions can delay schooling. For example, individuals who marry and/or have children at an early age may be particularly likely to experience gaps or interruptions in their education (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 2007; Felmlee, 1988; Hostetler, Sweet & Moen, 2007; Lowe, Hughes & Witt, 1989; Lowe & Witt, 1984; Kerckhoff & Parrow, 1979; McClelland, 1990; Teachman & Polonko, 1988).

Early marriage and parenthood are “especially strong transmitter[s] of cumulative disadvantage for women and those from non-privileged statuses” (McClelland, 1990, p. 102), who may be more likely than comparison groups to drop out or delay postsecondary education after taking on family roles in late adolescence or early adulthood. The postponement of educational and career goals may be a particularly common experience among women, who have traditionally been expected to prioritize the needs of their families, and their husband’s careers, over their personal career development (Bielby & Bielby, 1992; Elman & O’Rand, 1998a; Felmlee, 1988; Moen, 1985, 1991, 1992; Moen & Han, 2001; Moen & Yu, 2000). The greater representation of women among returning students supports this point, but may also reflect broader educational trends. In contrast, Elman and O’Rand (2007) found that early marriage reduced the odds of returning for men but was unrelated to women’s reenrollment.
Finally, both life course theory and human capital theory would predict an association between returning to school and age. From the perspective of human capital theory, educational investments should be made early in the life course (Light, 1995; Marcus, 1986); the later the investment, generally speaking, the lower the lifetime economic returns. The relationship between age and reenrollment should be particularly strong for men, whose career paths typically follow a more linear pattern (Davey, 2003; Mohney & Anderson, 1988; Moen, 1985). Surprisingly, then, Hostetler, Sweet and Moen (2007) found no relationship between age and return status, for either men or women, in a sample of working couples. This finding underscores the extent to which Western industrialized nations like the United States “tolerate and make room for educational ‘late-blooming’” (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998:514; see also Astone et al., 2000), and highlights the value of education as a lifelong process (Marshall & Tucker, 1992).

Job History and Current Working Conditions. Work-to-school transitions may also be precipitated by work-related events and/or motivated by current working conditions. In the current era of corporate restructuring, many individuals may be forced to seek retraining following a loss of benefits or a job loss due to downsizing or outsourcing (Ashton & Iadicola, 1989; Attewell, 1999; Baumol, Blinder & Wolff, 2003; Cottle, 2001; Elman & O’Rand, 1998b; Henry & Basile, 1994; Levy, 1986; Piore & Sabel, 1984; Reich, 1991;Thurow, 1992; Zippay, 1991). Although women and non-white men may be more vulnerable to such career disruptions, and career discontinuity is generally predictive of educational reentry, processes of cumulative dis/advantage are also at play in the relationship between job history/resources and returning to school. Specifically, individuals who have significant work-related resources, but a mismatch between their resources/skills (e.g., computer skills, control over work, flexible hours, good health) and rewards (e.g., pension benefits), may be the most likely to pursue additional training or education at midlife, particularly in the context of high-quality and/or baccalaureate-level programs (Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 1998b, 2007; Kasworm, 2003).

If a given work situation is not conducive to reenrollment, those who have the option may also change jobs voluntarily in anticipation of returning to school, moving into jobs with greater flexibility and/or tuition benefits. Accordingly, Hostetler et al. (2007) found that returning students are significantly more likely than those individuals who have never returned to school to have experienced a recent voluntary job change. As Elman and O’Rand (1998b) illustrated, a variety of different work pathways can lead back to school, and work-related predictors of reenrollment interact with ascriptive characteristics, life-course events, and earlier educational experiences.

Somewhat independent of their prior trajectory, and whether pushed by the threat or reality of job loss or pulled by the promise of greater rewards, many adults return to school for career-related reasons. This appears to be particularly true for men (Morstain & Smart, 1977; Scala, 1996; Schlossberg, 1970; Tittle & Denker, 1977; Widoff, 1999). For example, in one of the earliest studies on returning to school, Tittle and
Denker (1977) reported that the “older” male students in their sample were almost twice as likely as their female counterparts to list job improvement/advancement as the most important reason for taking classes. More recently, Scala (1996) found that men rank both getting a degree and job-related training higher than women as motivating factors for reenrollment. She concluded that male returning students take a more instrumental approach to their education (see also Britton & Baxter, 1999). On the other hand, Maynard and Pearsall (1994) came to the exact opposite conclusion, and Sewall (1984) reported no gender differences in motivations for returning. Gender differences are more apparent with respect to family demands, addressed in the following section.

Life Stage and Family Demands. In keeping with the life-course concept of linked lives (Elder, 1998), family demands and responsibilities play an important role in deciding whether and when to return to school. Competing work and family roles (or “role incompatibility”) typically discourage reenrollment, particularly for women (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Elman & O’Rand, 1998a, 2002; 2007; Teachman & Polonko, 1988). However, some dual-earner couples are able to adapt work hour arrangements to fit life stage demands (Becker & Moen, 1999; Moen & Sweet, 2003), which can facilitate a return to school. Given the continuing cultural salience of women’s traditional roles as wives and mothers, women’s returns are more commonly precipitated by triggering family-level events and/or the easing of family responsibilities. Some examples include geographic moves, divorce, the entry of children into school, and the departure of children from the home (Aslanian, 2001; Bay, 1999; Bradburn, Moen & Dempster-McClain, 1995; Carr & Sheridan, 2001; Pascall & Cox, 1993; Rice, 1978; Ross, 1988; Shields, 1993).

Not only do women more commonly postpone educational reentry based on where they are in the family life cycle, but they also tend to include the entire family in the decision-making process, while men often decide to reenroll without consultation or coordination with family members (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994). Gorard et al. (2001:175) have described women’s deference in these matters as “enforced altruism.” In general, women are more likely to consider external, situational factors in their deciding to reenroll.

However, not all women put off the decision to return due to family responsibilities. A recent study surprisingly found that, within a sample of middle-class, dual-earner couples, the women most likely to return are those with the heaviest combination of work and family demands, namely women with young children who are also working more than 45 hours per week (Hostetler et al., 2007). While this finding suggests that the “super woman” is alive and well, the authors also reported that these women had more help with child care than their counterparts who were not presently in school, reinforcing the importance of family resources in facilitating women’s returns.
At the same time, gender role expectations do not always serve to facilitate men’s reenrollment. According to older research, men with family responsibilities may feel pressure to fulfill the role of breadwinner, and may therefore be deterred from deviating from a normative career trajectory for the purposes of returning to school (Gilbert, Manning & Ponder, 1980; Mohney & Anderson, 1988; Schlossberg, 1970; Tittle & Denker, 1977). More recent research suggests that single men may be more likely to return than their married counterparts (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994; see also Sewall, 1984), and certain sub-groups of men (e.g., Latino men) may be more constrained by traditional role expectations (Abreu, Goodyear, Campos & Newcomb, 2000). Clearly, gender and family roles have much to do with the decision of whether and when to reenroll.

**Individual Agency and Choice.** While structural resources and constraints undeniably shape the return-to-school pathway, the role of human agency is far from irrelevant (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Hostetler et al., 2007; Pallas, 2003; Sweet & Moen, 2006). Indeed, Pallas (2003, p. 182) recently argued that, in order to more fully understand work-to-school transitions, more attention needs to be paid to “theories of individual action,” including rational actor theory. Among other important individual-level factors, personal preferences, ability and aspirations (e.g., McClelland, 1990), and other psychological resources must be considered. For many returning students, reenrollment reflects “planful competence” (Clausen, 1991, 1993; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Shanahan, Elder & Miech, 1997) and “proactive life planning” (Kasworm, 2003), concepts that highlight individuals’ conscious, motivated and often skillful efforts to determine the course of their lives. Self-determination may be a more important dynamic for middle-class men who reenroll (Hostetler et al., 2007; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998), as suggested above. For example, men’s returns are more likely to be motivated by personal preferences and utilitarian concerns (Morstain & Smart, 1977; Scala, 1996; Schlossberg, 1970; Tittle & Denker, 1977; Widoff, 1999), and, as mentioned above, men more commonly make the decision to reenroll largely on their own (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994). Britton and Baxter (1999) similarly reported a greater tendency among men than women to describe the decision to re-enter school according to a self-conscious, self-focused narrative of personal transformation. On the other hand, Hostetler et al. (2007) found a high degree of perceived mastery among both men and women who are currently enrolled, although it is not entirely clear whether this is an antecedent, consequence, or both. Finally, recent research by Elman and O’Rand (2007) indicates a complicated relationship between self-efficacy and school reentry in their sample: High levels of self-efficacy reduced the odds of returning but, among the sub-sample of returning students, increased the odds of entry into a four-year degree program (vs. pre-BA certificate and degree programs).

In summary, the first step in the return-to-school path--the initial "decision" to return--emerges from the particular mix of life opportunities and challenges, work and family experiences and personal resources.
Short- and Long-Term Consequences of Returning to School

As a key life course transition, returning to school must be understood not only in terms of antecedents, but also in terms of its impact on subsequent experiences and development, which together constitute the return-to-school pathway. Hence, the second major area of research on the topic has addressed the short- and long-term consequences of returning. Research on the short-term consequences has focused on the experience of students while they are enrolled, and particularly those experiences related to work-family integration. And although relatively few longitudinal studies have been conducted to date, research is also beginning to address the longer-term social, psychological and economic effects of returning.

Short-Term Consequences. In keeping with the different circumstances under which men and women return, reenrollment appears to have more significant short-term consequences for women’s lives. Not surprisingly, the challenges posed by school reentry are greatest for those women who are employed and/or raising young children. At the same time, women may also be more likely to take advantage of the opportunities for personal growth and development offered by the return to school experience.

One of the greatest concerns of returning students, irrespective of gender, is feeling burdened by and torn between conflicting role responsibilities (Hybertson et al., 1992). Role-related stress, strain and/or conflict may be particularly pronounced for returning women, most notably those attempting to integrate school, work and family (Dill & Henley, 1998; Gerson, 1985; Gigliotti & Huff, 1995; Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986; Kasworm, 1990; Kelly, 1990; Kinsella, 1998; Maynard & Pearsall, 1994; Rice, 1978; Scala, 1996; Sewall, 1984; Sweet & Moen, 2007). With so many time pressures and competing demands, returning women may have little time left over for other activities or for themselves (Dill & Henley, 1998). The challenges are even greater for single mothers, women with young children, and women with limited income (Home, 1998), and the types of conflicts encountered may differ for professional and non-professional women (Beutell & O’Hare, 1987). The inherent difficulty of concurrently managing work, family and school responsibilities is compounded, for returning women, by an inequitable division of household labor that doesn’t typically change much once they reenroll (Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986; Kelly, 1990; Sweet & Moen, 2007). Nor do returning women necessarily receive the emotional support they need from husbands (Berkove, 1979; DeGroot, 1980; Hooper, 1979; Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986; Kasworm, 1990; Maynard & Pearsall, 1994), though the level of support received by women depends at least in part on their husband’s own educational level, with more educated husbands providing more support (Suitor, 1988).

Although men may also encounter difficulty in their efforts to balance different roles (Widoff, 1999), their lives are generally less disrupted by reenrollment (Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986). Most notably, men face fewer conflicts than women in meeting their family responsibilities (Scala, 1996; Gilbert, Manning & Ponder, 1980; Home, 1998; Ballmer & Cozby, 1981). For example, in one study in which most of the
male students were parents, not one identified family demands as a problem (Gilbert, Manning & Ponder, 1980). In another study, male returning students (who were not necessarily working full time) actually reported having more time for home activities because their schedules were more flexible (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994). When men do experience role conflicts, they most commonly feel torn between their work and student roles, and their conflicts often stem from personal and interpersonal dissatisfaction and from career uncertainty and/or feelings of inadequacy (Gilbert, Manning & Ponder, 1980). And although some evidence suggests that men may require more counseling than women while enrolled (Williams et al., 1973), male returning students tend to receive more support from spouses and families (Berkove, 1979; DeGroot, 1980; Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986; Kasworm, 1990; Maynard & Pearsall, 1994). Lacking a supportive spouse or family, single male students don't fare as well. They may experience a significant decline in their standard of living (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994) and may be in particular need of counseling (Williams et al., 1973).

For married adult students, reenrollment can take a toll on the marital relationship. Increased demands, decreased “quality time” together, and the perception of insufficient support can lead to marital conflict and dissatisfaction when one spouse returns to school on a full-time basis (DeGroot, 1980; Rice, 1978; Suitor, 1987, 1988; Sweet & Moen, 2007). Marital satisfaction drops for both spouses when wives reenroll, and particularly for men, who may also experience a decline in family satisfaction (Rice, 1978; Suitor, 1987, 1988; Sweet & Moen, 2007). Marital happiness among adult students not surprisingly depends on the level of support received (DeGroot, 1980), and, as addressed above, women typically receive less support. In the absence of family support, returning women may be more vulnerable to depression (Roehl & Okun, 1984), but women may also get more support from friends and classmates (Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986).

Fortunately, not all of the short-term consequences of returning to school are negative. For women, in particular, returning to school may be a particularly important turning point (Clausen, 1995; Wethington, 2002), providing unique opportunities for personal growth. Female adult students are more likely than male counterparts to experience role expansion (Gilbert, Manning & Ponder, 1980), and many find that, after reenrolling, they receive greater pleasure and gratification from their role portfolio (Gerson, 1985). Returning women may become relatively less committed to family roles and more committed to the student role (Suitor, 1987), and those women most invested in their student role tend to receive a boost to their self-image and self-esteem (Shield, 1995). Other benefits reported by returning women include increased personal satisfaction, greater opportunities for the pursuit of goals (Sweet & Moen, 2007), more respect from others, more meaning, variety and purpose in their lives (Gerson, 1985), and enhanced social and personal growth and development (Arnold et al., 1993; Brady, 1984; Sweet & Moen, 2007).
Men may also reap immediate benefits when they reenroll. In one study, mentioned above, men were actually more likely than women to view returning to school as an end in itself (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994). Many of these men saw their reenrollment as an opportunity to reconnect with the community and they subsequently experienced increased concern for others. However difficult the initial adjustment may be, returning to school is a positive and beneficial experience for many, if not most, adult students.

Before moving on to a consideration of long-term outcomes, it should again be noted that returning students in general, and those who delay their initial post-secondary enrollment in particular, may be somewhat less likely than “traditional” students to persist and/or to complete a degree (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Kempner & Kinnick, 1990; Temple & Polk, 1986; U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Clearly, the challenges associated with the integration of family, work, and student roles contribute to these differential completion rates.

**Long-Term Consequences.** Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the long-term psychological, social and economic consequences of returning due to a lack of good longitudinal research. The economic implications of returning to school have received the most attention, although findings are somewhat inconsistent. According to an older study by Featherman and Carter (1976), discontinuities in educational careers have relatively little impact on subsequent work-related outcomes, including job prestige and earnings. Hogan (1980), on the other hand, provided evidence that “disorderly transitions” to adulthood (e.g., marriage prior to the completion of schooling) are associated with lower earnings and smaller returns to one’s educational investment.

More recent studies may at least partially clarify these discrepant findings. Light (1995) provides evidence that returning male students receive smaller wage increases than their continuously employed counterparts, but that this gap appears to close over time. Leigh and Gill (1997) also compare the wages and salaries of returning students and those who followed a continuous educational path. The economic pay-off was essentially the same for returning and continuous students, with the exception of returning students who pursued but did not complete a 4-year degree, who earned less than their continuously-enrolled counterparts. These two studies are at least somewhat at odds with the predictions of human capital theory (Light, 1995; Marcus, 1986), and suggest that returning to school may offer economic returns throughout the working years. Elman and O’Rand (2004, p. 129) offered words of caution about these contradictory findings and the tendency to rely on “standard wage difference models” given the diversity of educational pathways and trajectories—a source of variability only rarely taken into account.

Unfortunately, we know much less about the long-term impact of returning on family life or on individual well-being and development. In their review of the literature on returning to school, Bradburn, Moen and Dempster-McClain (1995) conclude that school reentry can be a significant turning point in the lives of women that reshapes subsequent developmental pathways, particularly for women who postpone
educational and career development to raise a family (an experience more common among older cohorts). Returning to school is likely to be also an important developmental transition for men, and perhaps especially for those men who reenroll for motivations related to, and/or who subsequently experience, personal growth. The long-term developmental impact of reenrollment, for both men and women, is an important area for future research.

Implications for Research and Policy

The emergence of discontinuous educational trajectories as a common alternative to more traditional pathways poses challenges and opportunities for individuals, families, and the workplace. This temporal expansion of educational opportunities has obvious implications for individual growth and collective socioeconomic empowerment, but these opportunities and the rewards of reenrollment are differentially distributed according to gender, race, class, etc. For women returning students, in particular, the benefits of returning to school can come at a high price, taking a toll on marital relationships and family life at least in the short term. To date, research on the consequences of reenrollment has typically compared returning students to either “traditional” students or to those who never return. An important objective of future research will be to more fully explore “within-group” differences in the educational trajectories and pathways of returning students (Elman & O’Rand, 2004). Understanding the diversity of contemporary educational careers will require integrative approaches and models that account for the wide variety of factors that shape them. Specific questions that need to be addressed include the following: Which reentry pathways are most strongly associated with personal growth, family well-being, economic empowerment, and other positive outcomes, and how might these “optimal” pathways vary depending on gender, race, and social origins? Which personal, family and work-related resources predict a successful return to school experience? How can we ensure a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities and rewards? These and other important questions can only be answered with long-term longitudinal data, and through an understanding of returning to school as embedded within larger life-course pathways.

Given a climate of welfare “reform” and the dismantling of entitlement programs over the last three decades, significant investment in education at the state and federal levels seems unlikely in the near future, though the tide may finally be turning. Such investments are absolutely essential if we ever hope to achieve educational equity. Clearly, individuals and families would also benefit from employment policies that facilitate reenrollment, and which help employees manage concurrent work, family and school responsibilities. This might include tuition reimbursement and other incentive programs as well as the full range of family-friendly policies, including flextime, flexplace and reduced hours (Christensen & Staines, 1990; Kanter, 1977; Staines, 1985; Staines & Pleck, 1986; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001; Thomas & Ganster, 1995).
The benefits to employers are not as clear cut. The long-term impact of reenrollment on job performance, commitment and satisfaction remains largely unknown, and is also an important area for future research. On the risk side of the equation, employers have to consider not only the direct costs of such policies and programs, but also the indirect costs associated with replacing employees who use their enhanced educational credentials to seek greener pastures. At the same time, employees tend to be more committed to jobs that offer flexibility, choice, and opportunities for growth and advancement (Catalyst, 1998; Lorence & Mortimer, 1985). Indeed, the promotion of lifelong learning may be one of the hallmarks of the “healthy workplace” of the 21st Century. Thus, it may be in the best interest of both employers and employees, and in our national interest, to promote work environments that allow for the integration of work, family and educational careers.

References


