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WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN IRELAND: FACTORS LINKED TO THE CESSATION OF FORMAL EDUCATION IN ADOLESCENCE AND RE-ENTRY INTO EDUCATION IN MIDLIFE

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INTRODUCTION

A higher education puts a woman in control of herself and that lasts a lifetime. According to DeMott (1990), the resource most widely used as a tool for upward mobility is education. However, for many women, the opportunity to pursue a second or third level education does not present itself at age appropriate times. There are many issues related to the educational choices women make in late adolescence and throughout their lifespan. This paper endeavours to investigate and make proposals based on findings which could contribute to the understanding of the psychosocial backdrop to the choices women make regarding education both in late adolescence and in midlife. This paper will report demographic information, women's reasons for discontinuing formal education and women's reasons for returning to education. It will also explore women's perceptions of personal goals in their early twenties. Correlations of independent variables will also be reported to identify links between socioeconomic factors and the pursuit of educational goals.

Women's educational experiences are often disrupted by circumstances beyond their control. According to Goldthorpe (1996), the prevailing culture of

more advantaged classes leads parents within these classes to set a higher value on education than parents in other classes. Parents in more advantaged classes are better equipped to encourage and promote educational success on the part of their children. The concept of social class for psychology implies that social class may importantly shape, constrain, and mediate the development and expression of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes (Stewart and Ostrove, 1993). Social and economic factors are indistinguishably intertwined as a significant indicator of success at second and third-level education.

There are a number of factors which encourage women to return to education in midlife. Women in midlife often pursue education as changes in socioeconomic factors and in social roles permit greater amounts of time that can be used for personal development. A significant number of women are choosing to re-enter the educational setting to pursue new or continuing goals. Long and Porter (1984) coined the term "time gap" which reflects a woman's realization that she has many years left before retirement age, with perhaps no husband due to separation, divorce or death; no children at home; and no means of supporting herself socially or economically. Cornwall (1991) suggests that educational institutions serve as a supportive holding environment for women in transition. Overwhelmingly, the most cited reason for re-entry into the educational system by mature women is cognitive interest and a desire to learn (Novak and Thacker, 1991). The second most important motivating factor for returning to higher education in adulthood is personal growth and satisfaction (Ibid). According to Scala (1996), women were more likely to state that they came back to college because they always wanted to go to college but never had the opportunity. Many women in midlife have, for the first time since their early twenties, the freedom from the constraints of social role involvements to make choices regarding their personal futures (Mitchell & Helson, 1990). Women's construction of possible selves are more likely to be sociocentric or connected than men's construction of possible selves (Curry et al., 1994). Feelings of connectedness and relatedness are part of girls' self concept (Chowdrow, 1978). Although some of women's experiences of self may be achieved in isolation from other people, by far the greater portion of women's sense of self arises out of relationships with others (Snygg & Combs, 1949). It is often therefore not until social role constraints have lessened that women again begin to consider how to develop themselves.

The questions this paper endeavours to address are what factors may influence if young women drop out without completing second level education, what factors indicate that young women will enter third level education at the appropriate age and what factors are linked to women returning to education in midlife. The literature suggests that, in adolescence, parental expectations and socioeconomic factors are linked to attainment of educational goals (Vallerand et. al, 1997). In midlife, social role constraints are correlated with the choice to pursue further education. This paper investigates whether the women who did not pursue education in late adolescence in retrospect perceive that education was always a goal for them. Mitigating factors inhibiting the pursuit of educational goals or the lack thereof are explored.

THE STUDY

Sample

This study, conducted in 1999, was designed to explore the links between socioeconomic factors and education in a broad sample of women in midlife. As a result, the research focused on five sub-groups: [1] women pursuing university education in midlife (N=20), [2] women with leaving certificate education and no university education (N=20), [3] women with no leaving certificate education (N=20), [4] women pursuing leaving certificate education in midlife (N=20), [5] women who earned their university degrees directly after leaving school (N=20). The participants pursuing education in midlife were selected from Trinity College and Dublin based Vocational Education Programs. The women not involved in education in midlife were drawn from friends of the groups pursuing education.

All 100 women were between the ages of 35 and 55; their partners on average were two years older. All had been married at some point; 78% were still married, 20% were separated and 2% were in second relationships. All of the participants had at least one child; 78% had three children or less. There was a wide variety of types of employment held by the participants, and by their partners, although they tended to cluster in the higher social classes if the level of education was higher. Most of the participants gave birth to their first child between the ages 21 and 25. This is true of all the groups except the Trinity Alumnae Group in which (55%) of the participants gave birth to their first child when they were 30 years of age or older and 85% were 26 or older.

Measures

The present study explored the possible differences in attitudes and beliefs of the five groups of women. Demographic information was collected which included the following variables: marital status, partner's age, level of education of the respondent partner, number of years married, number and ages of children, occupation and partner's occupation, years at present employment, salary range and partner's salary range, joint bank account, own bank account. Information was collected on the women's educational achievements and their goals both in their early twenties and in midlife through a semi structured interview. The questions were related to current goals and current perception of past aspirations. The following variables were included in the semi-structured interview: personal goals in early twenties, current ultimate goal, conflict associated with current goal, current mental stimulation, lack of mental stimulation, reason for cessation of pursuit of formal education, reason for return to formal education. The Personal Attitudes Rating Scale was developed by the researcher to measure self-actualization. The questions on the Personal Attitudes Rating Scale (PARS) were adapted from three existing scales; Shostrom's Personality Orientation Inventory (Shostrom, 1962), Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale (Robinson and Shaver, 1973, pp. 107-111 and 227-234) and the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Roid & Fitts, 1988). Four existing instruments were used in conjunction with PARS to measure self-

actualization, ego identity, self perception and general health: The Short Index of Self-Actualization(Jones & Crandall, 1986), the Ego Identity Scale (Tan et al.,1977) the Adult Self-Perception Profile (Messer & Harter, 1986) and the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1978).

Results

Socioeconomically there were marked differences between the 5 groups which constituted the sample. Perhaps the most interesting finding is the number of women who responded that they had no income; between 50% and 85% of women from all the groups except the Trinity Alumnae Group reported that they have no income. Those who were employed had incomes at the very lowest level, and this was true even for the majority of the Trinity Alumnae group, of whom, 59% reported incomes of less than £15,000 per year. However, 36% of the Trinity Alumnae group had an income over £22,000 p.a.; neither the No Leaving Certificate Group or the Leaving Certificate Now Group had any respondents in the last two categories. The women in the Leaving Certificate at 18 Group also had a higher level of income indicating that the higher the education level the more likely one is to have a higher income level. However, it is clear that no matter what the education level, women have a lower work place attachment than men and this is reflected in their salaries.

The total number of women with partners was 80 and all partners were employed. Focusing on the partners of the women 6% of husbands/partners had an income between £5,000 and £10,000 p.a., 9% had an income level between £10,000 and £15,000, 22% had an income level of £15,000 to £20,000 and 14% between £20,000 and £25,000, 38% were in the more than £30,000 bracket. The partners with the lowest income levels were married to the women in the No Leaving Certificate group. The partners with the highest incomes were with the women in the Trinity Alumnae Group.

In response to the question 'what is your occupation': 46% responded housewife, 24% responded full time student, 2% self employed, 18% full time professional employment, 7% part time employment, 2% professional part time employment and 1% responded unemployed. It is interesting to note that only one woman considered herself unemployed while 70% of the women were not earning a paycheck. The financial arrangements of the women were as follows: 78% of the women had their own bank accounts; 64% had joint bank accounts; all 100 women had either their own bank account or joint bank accounts with their husbands/partners.

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELECT INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Table 1 illustrates the correlations between the education level of the participants and other salient independent variables. For all of these correlations N=100.

Table 1
Correlations between Select Independent Variables

Variables	Partner's Ed Level	Partner's Salary	Partner's Occupation	Age Birth	Child Number	Own Salary	Own Occupation
Education	r=.57,	r=.46,	r=.26,	r=.55,	r= -.20,	r=.51,	r=.54,
Level	p<.05	p<.000	p<.01	p<.000	p<.05	p<.000	p<.000

There was a strong correlation between a number of the independent variables and education level; education level was highly correlated with partner's educational level, partner's salary, partner's occupation, age when first child was born, number of children, own income, own occupation, own salary.

Major Personal Goals in Early Twenties

The participants were asked, "What were your major personal goals in your early twenties?" Table 2 shows that, for the majority of participants, except the Trinity Alumnae Group, to get married was the number one response under this category.

Table 2
Number One Response to "What were your major personal goals in your early twenties?"

Response %	Group 1 Trinity Students	Group 2 Leaving Cert at 18	Group 3 No Leaving Cert	Group 4 Leaving Cert Now	Group 5 Trinity Alumnae
Get Married	55	40	55	55	25
Children		5	10	15	5
Wealth			5	15	10
Career	30	35	20	5	35
Happiness	15	20	10	10	25

The participants second responses to this question, illustrated in Table 3 indicate that to have children was the second most important goal for all of the women except the Trinity Alumnae group. They differ from the other groups on both of these responses with their responses being spread more heavily over the wealth, career and happiness categories.

Table 3
Number Two Response to “What were your major personal goals in your early twenties?”

Response %	Group 1 Trinity Students	Group 2 Leaving Cert at 18	Group 3 No Leaving Cert	Group 4 Leaving Cert Now	Group 5 Trinity Alumnae
Get Married	20	35	35	20	20
Children	50	45	50	55	10
Wealth	10	5		5	25
Career	15	10	5	15	25
Happiness	5	5	10	5	20

Why the pursuit of formal education ended

The participants were asked what circumstances led them to cease pursuing formal education when they did (Table 4).

Table 4
Number One Response to “Reasons for Finishing Formal Education”

Response %	Group 1 Trinity Students	Group 2 Leaving Cert at 18	Group 3 No Leaving Cert	Group 4 Leaving Cert Now	Group 5 Trinity Alumnae
Expectation	70	40	40	16	
Money	5	20	10	50	
Job	15	20	10	28	
Poor Results		15		6	
Married	10		35		
Rebelled		5	5		
Degree					100

The most common response for all the groups except the Trinity Alumnae Group was that parents did not encourage or expect their daughters to continue with formal education. This was particularly so in the Trinity Students Group. One woman from this group responded with a certain amount of anger:

My father wanted us to get out there and earn money and find a man. He felt his job was done the day we finished the Leaving Certificate. Passing was not even that important, we just had to

finish out the time. He thought what is the point of educating the girls they are just going to get married and have babies anyway. My brother is a dentist. That always made me very upset. I was smarter than he was in school and I got nothing. It didn't bother me so much when I was younger. It's as I got older I saw the injustice.

50% of the women in the Leaving Certificate Now group responded that money was the overriding factor in their decision to stop pursuing formal education; a further 28% indicated that they stopped pursuing education because they had a job. Money and job were the second highest responses in the Leaving Certificate at 18 group also. A woman from the Leaving Certificate at 18 Group responded:

I got a job with the bank and loved it. I had my own money, clothes and had my friends. It was a very happy time in my life.

The highest percent of those who said that they had left school to get married was in the No Leaving Certificate Group; 35% responded they left school to get married. One woman from the No Leaving Certificate Group said:

Where I come from you just got married. You had a baby the same year and you got on with it. It was what growing up was all about. We were just kids really but we thought when we got married and had a baby we were grown up.

Table 5 indicates the responses of the women when asked “What made you return to formal education” the women’s responses were distributed in the following categories.

Table 5
Number One Response to “What Made You Return to Education? ”

Response %	Group 1 Trinity Students	Group 2 Leaving Cert at 18	Group 3 No Leaving Cert	Group 4 Leaving Cert Now	Group 5 Trinity Alumnae
For Self	25			47	
Always Goal	30			21	
Career	20			26	
Opportunity	20			5	
Family Gone	5				
Post Grad					40
NA		100	100		60

25% of the Trinity group responded that they were pursuing a degree for 'something for themselves' and 30% indicated that it was always a goal. 47% of the Leaving Certificate Now group responded that they were pursuing education for something for themselves and 21% responded that it was always a goal.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results indicated that level of education is linked to socioeconomic status. The women in the two groups with lower levels of education were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, the women with higher levels of education were from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The results clearly indicate that socioeconomic background is a strong predictor of women's education level. The results support a number of theories relating to education and socioeconomic background. According to Goldthorpe (1996, p. 488), "the prevailing culture of more advantaged classes, it is held, leads to parents within these classes setting a higher value on education than parents in other classes and being better equipped to encourage and promote educational success on the part of their children". Members of the middle and upper classes are more likely to be educated than members of the lower classes (Ibid). The concept of social class for psychology implies that "social class may importantly shape, constrain, and mediate the development and expression of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, motives, traits and symptoms" (Stewart and Ostrove, 1993, p. 476). According to DeMott (1990), the resource most widely trusted as a tool for upward mobility is education. The women who tend to return to education in midlife are usually middle-class with a comfortable lifestyle (Ibid). The women who tend to leave school before completing secondary school requirements are from more disadvantaged backgrounds than those who stay. The results of this study clearly support these theories.

The participants were asked why they stopped pursuing formal education when they did. The most common response for all the groups except the Trinity Alumnae Group was that parents did not encourage or expect their daughters to continue with formal education. The second most common response for the Leaving Certificate Now Group was that money was the overriding factor. Socioeconomic factors were a concern for the Leaving Certificate Now Group when they left school, and they appear to remain a concern for them now; the Leaving Certificate Now Group had the lowest personal incomes and their partners had lower incomes than the partners of the other women. Money and job were the second most common responses for the Leaving Certificate at 18 Group. This finding has a different significance for this group in that with a Leaving Certificate education, the women in this group were employable in relatively high paying jobs in the late sixties and early seventies. University education was not a prerequisite for entry into the workforce in the same way that it was in the nineties. The highest percentage of those who said they left school

to get married was in the No Leaving Certificate Group. This is reflective of the conservative traditional social norms of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in the late sixties and early seventies.

The women in the Leaving Certificate at 18 Group, the No Leaving Certificate Group and the Leaving Certificate Now Group noted more often than the other women that they felt restricted by the educational system and rebelled as a result of the perceived lack of autonomy. Those students involved in this study who rebelled failed to achieve their Leaving Certificate qualification by age eighteen or failed to pursue their intellectual potential at third level. The literature suggests that the teacher's expectations of the rebellious child influences student achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Teacher expectation predicts achievement more strongly for low achievers than for high achievers (Madon et al., 1997). The participants with the lowest levels of education reported that teacher perceptions of them were negative and that that affected their sense of competence in the academic arena. Perceived competence, individuals' beliefs that they are doing well or are making progress toward their goals, is an important factor in goal attainment (Bandura, 1982; 1991; Harter, 1989; Ford, 1992). Clearly, the women involved in education in midlife have reassessed expectations of them and have redefined the expectations that they have for themselves.

Lacking formal education can mean lacking depth and meaning in life which can make women feel inferior and less adequate in relation to other people and the type of work for which they are qualified (Bailey, 1982). The participants were asked what made them return to formal education. The most common answer for the Trinity Students Group was that it was always a goal. The second most common answer was *'something for myself'*. The most common response for the Leaving Certificate Now Group was *'something for myself'* followed by career. Career and opportunity when combined was the single most important factor leading the Trinity Students Group to return to education. Research indicates that these responses are not uncommon. Scala (1996) found that women, when asked why they returned to education, stated that they always wanted to go to college but never had the chance. Cox (1991) found that women reenter the educational system for personal growth and satisfaction. Women in midlife often pursue education as changes in other roles permit greater amounts of time that can be used for personal development (Cornwall, 1991). Women often realize during midlife that they have a limited number of years left before retirement, with perhaps no husband due to separation, divorce or death, no children at home and no means of supporting themselves socially or economically. Cornwall (1991) suggests that educational institutions serve as a supportive holding environment for women in transition. This was certainly true for the participants of this study. Goals, accomplishment and fulfillment were repeated themes associated with the pursuit of formal education in midlife. Goal attainment through formal education, which was perhaps inconceivable for some women twenty years previously, plays an important role in women's discovery of potential in midlife.

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