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## **Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Role Dissonance in Female Non-Traditional Students**

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*This article reviews literature on non-traditional students, role dissonance, and the unique challenges faced by individuals who must balance the role of postsecondary student with a multiplicity of other roles. From the foundation of Erikson's (1959/1980) identity development theory; Gilligan's (1982/1993) theory of moral development; and other research on role identities, the author proposes a theoretical framework for examining role dissonance and its effect on the postsecondary educational experiences and persistence of female non-traditional students. A developmental task central to the academic and personal success of the female non-traditional student is her progression from a belief that she must sacrifice herself to be considered a good person to the realization that caring for herself, in the same way she cares for others, is the higher good. Student development occurs during the process of re-evaluating and negotiating roles and the evolution of an internally grounded, rather than externally based, identity. Concluding the article are recommendations for practice and future research.*

**Keywords:** adult learner, female, non-traditional student, persistence, role dissonance

Non-traditional students enter the arena of higher education with a multiplicity of roles and responsibilities, even before they add the role of student to the list (Chartrand, 1992; Kasworm, 1993; Kelly, 2013). These roles may include employee, partner or spouse, parent, caregiver, neighbor, or volunteer. One of the challenges for adult students is learning to balance family, work, and community commitments with the responsibilities of student life (Forrest & Peterson, 2006; Kelly, 2013). According to Forrest and Peterson (2006), non-traditional student identities are not defined primarily by their student role, but are instead formed by an intersection of all the roles they assume while living out their daily lives. While maintaining multiple roles can be beneficial, care must be taken to minimize role dissonance and the stress that can result (Burke, 2006; Dalla, Moulik Gupta, Lopez, & Jones, 2006; Marcussen, 2006). Women who must integrate the role of student with the roles of partner and/or parent have an especially challenging task since research shows that women typically carry a disproportionate responsibility for child and home care (Dalla et al., 2006).

This article has two purposes. The first is to explore current literature on the experiences of non-traditional students in postsecondary educational institutions. The

second is to outline a theoretical framework for understanding the particular experiences of female non-traditional students (FNTS) who simultaneously occupy multiple roles and the effects of role dissonance on their persistence in higher education. This theoretical understanding is informed by Erikson's (1959/1980) identity development theory, Gilligan's (1982/1993) theory of moral development in women, and insights from various identity theories, in order to provide student affairs practitioners and educators with a more thorough understanding of the challenges faced by this student population.

### **Literature Review: Non-Traditional Students**

Recent statistics show that non-traditional students make up nearly 40 percent of undergraduate enrollment in the United States (Schuh, Jones, Harper, & Associates, 2011). Nearly 60 percent of all non-traditional students are female (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Johnson, 2003). Students are considered non-traditional for many reasons. For example, they are older than 23; are veterans; attend school full or part-time; are employed full or part-time; have dependants or other family responsibilities; or are married, divorced, or widowed (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012).

Non-traditional students may also be referred to as adult learners. Adult learners are described as "those whose age, social roles, or self-perception, define them as adults" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 11). Adult learners and non-traditional students share many characteristics, and for the purposes of this article, the terms will be used interchangeably. Both non-traditional students and adult learners must balance many roles and identities (Chartrand, 1992; Kelly, 2013; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Each family, work, and community role comes with certain expectations and demands, which must be adjusted when the responsibilities of the student role are added (Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2002).

The many roles assumed by the non-traditional student may be incompatible with one another, and this conflict between roles, or role dissonance, can cause anxiety and stress for the individual (Burke, 2003; Marcussen, 2006; Settles et al., 2002). Students may feel as if there is no way to win in these situations. In addition to the demands faced by multiple roles and responsibilities, adult learners are usually compelled to pursue higher education as a result of some change or stressor in their lives, such as job loss, change in career path, or the loss of a spouse through divorce or death (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Adult learners enter higher education experiencing an array of stressors associated with family, job, and community commitments.

Cross' (1981) research on deterrents to adult learning further explains the challenges faced by non-traditional students. Deterrents are grouped into three types of barriers: *situational*, *institutional*, and *dispositional* (Cross, 1981). Situational barriers are those that result from the situation and context of one's life circumstances, such as lack of money, transportation, or child care (Cross, 1981). Institutional barriers are described as practices and procedures within the educational system that have the effect of excluding or discouraging adults from pursuing educational endeavors (Cross, 1981). For example, inconvenient class schedules and extensive general education requirements better suited for students right out of high school are considered institutional barriers. Finally, dispositional barriers are linked to negative attitudes, beliefs, and anxieties an

individual may have about his or her ability to learn or to perform college-level work (Cleary, 2012; Cross, 1981). Each of these deterrents significantly affect the experiences of the non-traditional student.

Even when an adult manages to overcome the aforementioned barriers and accept the new role and responsibilities of student, the institution of higher education in which he or she enrolls may not have an accepting or inclusive climate. According to Hagedorn (2005), despite ongoing growth in non-traditional student enrollment, postsecondary institutions have been slow to make the structural and procedural changes necessary to better serve the adult student population. Indeed, “strongly held social norms emphasize that formal education is for the young” and adult students are perceived as “out of sequence” (Hagedorn, 2005, p. 22). Student affairs practitioners and faculty members often rely on pedagogical teaching methods suited to youth, rather than an andragogical approach more appropriate for adult learners, putting the non-traditional student at a disadvantage (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). Clearly, the challenges faced by non-traditional students are many.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Female non-traditional students (FNTS) are not easily compartmentalized into neat categories or developmental stages. They come to the learning environment with complex lives and a multiplicity of roles, responsibilities and experiences already in place (Kasworm, 1993). For this reason, the author utilizes diverse theories to develop a new theoretical approach for understanding role dissonance and persistence in this student population. The goal of this approach is to better inform the perspectives and practices of student affairs practitioners and educators in higher education as they seek to understand the complex realities of FNTS and to serve them.

Erikson’s (1959/1980) identity development theory delves into the process of identity development throughout the lifespan. Erikson describes eight stages of development, each distinguished by a psychosocial *crisis* or *turning point*, that must be resolved by balancing the internal self and the external environment. The fifth, sixth, and seventh stages of Erikson’s theory are the most relevant, in that they address the age ranges and identities of most non-traditional students who find themselves balancing many roles. Stage five, *identity versus identity diffusion*, finds adolescents searching for congruence between their social identities; how others see them, and their personal identities; how they see themselves (Erikson, 1959/1980). Incoming college freshman, straight from high school, may still be struggling with this phase, most traditionally-aged students move into stage six during their college years.

Stage six occurs in young adulthood from ages 19 to 40 years, and involves the conflict between *intimacy* and *isolation* (Erikson, 1959/1980). The central focus of individuals in stage six is the building of intimate committed relationships. It is during this stage that, according to Chartrand (1992), “the developmental tasks of early adulthood shift from negotiating an identity to realizing occupational and family goals” (p. 194). The crisis in stage seven is *generativity versus stagnation* and relates to the desire adults have to support and to give something of themselves to the next generation and typically lasts from age 40 to 65 (Erikson, 1959/1980).

Relationships with partners and children and improvement of their career options and skills are central to the lives and identities of adult learners. According to Erikson's (1959/1980) theory, the roles most salient to the identities of adult learners, including FNTS, will be those roles relating to family and vocation. Because these roles are essential to adult identity development, any role that conflicts with these primary roles, such as the role of student, is likely to cause dissonance and increase stress for the individual (Burke, 2003; Marcussen, 2006; Settles et al., 2002). For example, a married adult student might have to choose between writing a research paper over the weekend and going to a movie and dinner with his or her spouse. While the role of spouse may be more salient to this adult learner than the role of student, the pressure of a deadline in the class might result in a choice to put the student role first, at least temporarily. The student's spouse may understand and the decision reached easily, however, in many cases, negotiating roles and priorities is an uncomfortable and stressful process for non-traditional students with many competing responsibilities.

While Erikson's (1959/1980) theory provides a broad framework for human psychosocial development, Gilligan (1982/1993) addresses the moral development of women, in particular. Gilligan's theory asserts that relationship, care, and responsibility form the basis of women's moral decision-making and the manner in which they understand, judge, and mediate conflicts between roles. The theory is structured around three levels and two transitions between those levels. The first level of moral development in women begins with an *orientation to individual survival*, then transitions from *selfishness to responsibility*. In the second level of the theory, *goodness as self-sacrifice*, women seek social acceptance and tend to conform to conventional female gender values to avoid conflict and retain their connection to others (Gilligan, 1982/1993). For example, if a FNTS, who is also a mother, has an opportunity to present her research at a conference on the same evening that her child is performing in a school play, the responsibility she feels as a mother will conflict with her responsibility as a student. Because the FNTS's role of parent is more salient at this stage of her development, she may decide to stay home from the conference to attend the play, especially if she seeks to avoid conflict and gain acceptance by conforming to societal gender expectations.

A period of questioning and doubt ushers in the second transition: *from goodness to truth* (Gilligan, 1982/1993). Women in this transitional phase begin to wonder if taking care of their own needs, as they have cared for the needs of others, is part of responsible living. "For the first time, the individual views the examination of her needs as truth, not selfishness" (Gilligan, 1982/1993, p. 113). In this stage, a woman begins to realize that there are alternate ways of responding to life's choices that take her own needs into consideration.

Finally, in level three, Gilligan (1982/1993) proposes that nonviolence and the mandate to avoid causing harm become the principles by which women make decisions and judge actions. At this point, the individual reveals the existence of a respect for self that allows her to balance the meeting of her needs with the meeting of other's needs. At this third level of development, the FNTS whose child is performing in the school play investigates ways in which her own needs can be along with the needs of her child. The woman may decide to go to the conference and arrange to see the dress rehearsal of the

play, instead. In reaching level three, women exhibit the ability to make each decision based on its merit and individual characteristics rather than on societal expectations and gender norms. According to Gilligan, the majority of women do not develop this ability, but instead remain in the second level, making decisions based on societal gender norms in the attempt to gain acceptance and avoid conflict.

### **Role Dissonance and Persistence**

Most individuals perform and maintain various role identities in their everyday lives (Burke, 2003; Marcussen, 2006; Settles et al., 2002). Whether the role identity is mother, partner, spouse, or student, there are certain demands and expectations that accompany each role (Settles et al., 2002). At times, the demands of the student role may conflict with the demands of the others and make it difficult for the FNTS to perform all tasks to her own or to society's standards (Burke, 2003). At some time or another, most FNTS will experience some difficulty in performing one or more of their roles as a result of the responsibilities of another role (Settles et al., 2002). One stressor FNTS have to negotiate every day is the continual moving back and forth between roles in order to preserve the interests and well-being of themselves and those closest to them (Burke, 2003; Gilligan, 1982/1993).

Settles et al. (2002) offer several insights into the factor of salience in role conflict. The most salient roles are those that are most central and important to an individual's sense of self. Accordingly, not every role will be as meaningful as another, and the more salient roles will have the greatest influence over an individual's thoughts, decisions, and behaviors. When there is conflict between roles, a FNTS is likely to resolve the conflict rather quickly by reducing or terminating involvement in the role that is less important to her and focusing on the role she considers more personally relevant (Dalla et al., 2006). The many stressors associated with family, job, and school often challenge the coping and time management skills of FNTS and have a negative effect on persistence. For many, the easier choice when confronted with multiple demands for their time and energy is often to give up their educational goals in order to alleviate dissonance and distress (Dalla et al., 2006; Jazvak-Martek, 2009). Since it is likely that most FNTS will face at least some level of role dissonance, and since the stress and discomfort of role dissonance can provoke FNTS to abandon their efforts to earn a postsecondary degree, it is vital that educators implement research-based programs and practices to support the success of this population.

### **Suggestions for Practice**

Student affairs practitioners and faculty can help FNTS navigate role conflicts by encouraging students in the transition to Gilligan's (1982/1993) third level of development, which is marked by care of self in balance with care for others. This can be especially difficult for women to implement in their everyday lives because, in many cultures, they are still expected to provide the majority of childcare and housekeeping duties (Dalla et al., 2006). It is important to take into consideration that non-traditional students may "stop out," or take a break for a time, and that this pattern is not the same as

“dropping out,” and may actually be in the student’s best interest at times (Hagedorn, 2005). Yet, if the role of student is deeply meaningful to the student, she may attempt to negotiate the competing roles by enlisting more help from the institution or from her family and friends (Settles et al., 2002). Thoughtful staff and faculty will encourage this process.

The situational factor most strongly related to persistence for FNTS is a strong support system of family and friends, and while student affairs practitioners may have little control over this factor, they can educate the students as to its necessity (Chartrand, 1992; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). In some situations, counselors or advisors may need to assist FNTS in discussing their needs and possible changes in their responsibilities at home with their spouses or other family members. Rather than waiting until students find themselves struggling with conflicting roles and responsibilities, institutions can take a proactive approach by offering a Saturday orientation for FNTS with free daycare and a student panel discussion by FNTS alumni. The panel members can share their experiences as adult learners and also explain what the college experience will be like for spouses and children.

FNTS may also benefit from any number of other support programs, such as study skills classes, tutors who are also adult learners, and peer support groups. Assistance with financial aid applications is crucial for many FNTS. Training in time management and how to prioritize tasks should be offered, as well (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). While these resources are likely available on most college campuses, staff and faculty must be intentional about making FNTS aware of their existence.

One of the ways that adults negotiate conflicting roles and identities is through constructing and sharing their life stories (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The personal narratives individuals construct help them make sense of adversity in their lives. When they are able to find redemptive meaning in suffering and develop a sense of personal agency, they tend to enjoy greater levels of psychological well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Advisors and faculty can help adult students make meaning of their struggles and can promote this sense of personal agency and well-being by allowing adult learners to share their life stories. In fact, warm, positive interactions with caring staff and faculty are essential to the persistence of FNTS (Capps, 2012; Hagedorn, 2005). Johnson’s (2003) interviews with FNTS found that patient, caring student affairs practitioners and instructors are providing essential support and affirmation to FNTS that the students describe as having a positive impact on enrollment and persistence. With the large number of FNTS currently enrolled in higher education, and projections that this number will increase, staff and faculty should be proactive in developing services to meet the unique needs of this student population.

## **Conclusion and Future Study**

FNTS are certainly not a monolithic group. Further research can be conducted exploring the effects of role dissonance on women from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. For example, how does the stereotypical role of the “strong, Black woman” influence Black FNTS (Collins, 2000)? Another group that could be studied is Latina students and the ways in which their collectivist culture and the placing of family needs

before their own may affect persistence (Ortiz & Pichardo-Diaz, 2011). Studies should be conducted to measure the impacts of various programs and interventions to determine whether or not they are actually beneficial to the population they aim to serve. The more knowledge that is gained regarding different sub-groups of students, the more that educational programs and student services offered by postsecondary institutions can be tailored to student needs.

When roles collide, adult learners are faced with difficult decisions. FNTS often begin by trying to meet all the expectations both at home and at school, but realize, at some point, that they cannot do it all. For a FNTS, finding her role as student in conflict with her role as partner, parent, or caregiver will lead to some level of anxiety and stress (Dalla et al., 2006; Jazvak-Martek, 2009). A FNTS in Gilligan's (1982/1993) second level of development experiences significant distress from role dissonance because she feels pressure to perform according to conventional women values. When faced with escalating levels of tension and distress, the student may see leaving school as her only option. With the support of professional student support staff and instructors, the student can learn to negotiate the expectations and tasks associated with the conflicting roles, and the levels of distress may diminish enough that she is able to persist in her educational endeavors.

A developmental task central to the academic and personal success of the FNTS is her progression from a belief that she must sacrifice herself to be considered a good person to the realization that caring for herself, in the same way she cares for others, is the higher good. Personal growth of the student occurs during the process of re-evaluating and negotiating roles and the development of an internally grounded, rather than externally-based, identity. At this point, it is crucial that individuals in both the home and school environments understand the complexity of the challenges FNTS face and, as Sanford (1967) instructs, provide the necessary support to meet those challenges.

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