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CASE STUDY: ROLE STRAIN EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL PARENT STUDENTS

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Key words: role strain, parent students, multiple roles, role conflict, non-traditional student.

Abstract. This article sets to explain how parent students experience and act in relation to role strain in a situated role context of a large public university. The goal is not only to understand the parent students' role strain, but also how they mediate such role strain in the situated social context. Document analysis, observations, shadowing activities, and qualitative interviews used in the study showed that single international students experience the variety of categories of the role strain: the role overload, role contagion and the role conflict [1]. The study further suggests that the key psychological, social, and cultural mediators can play an important role in addressing the role strain.

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СИТУАЦИОННЫЙ АНАЛИЗ: ОПЫТ РОЛЕВОГО НАПРЯЖЕНИЯ СРЕДИ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ СТУДЕНТОВ С СЕМЬЯМИ

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Ключевые слова: ролевое напряжение, семейные студенты, многочисленные роли, ролевой конфликт, обусловленный социальный контекст, международные студенты.

Аннотация. Целью данного исследования является изучение феномена конфликта социальных ролей студентов с семьями в контексте ведущего государственного университета. Задачей является не только анализ ролевого конфликта и ролевого напряжения, но и подходы, используемые такими студентами в ситуационном контексте социальных взаимодействий. В исследовании использовались качественные методы сбора (интервью, наблюдения) и анализа данных (метод ситуационного анализа - кейс-стади). Дается широкое теоретическое объяснение феномена ролевого конфликта и его компонентов. Новшество исследования состоит в том, что были выявлены психологические, социальные и культурные медиаторы, позволяющие снизить ролевой конфликт.

Introduction

With larger number of parent students attending universities it is important to understand how they perform the demanding multiple roles that result in a "role strain." The role strain often has negative connotations and our proposed research aims not only at studying how parent students perceive and experience the role strain in their daily lives, but also how they mediate such role strain in the situated social context of a large residence complex on a public university campus.

Literature Review

Role Strain. Role strain and role conflict theory has been often developed within the psychology field; as the ego, the psyche, and mental well-being are often the goals and focus of this research. Role strain has often been linked to such issues as depression, anxiety, and mental hardships bringing forth the tools

and perspectives of psychology [2]. In this study, we will neither make this claim, nor will we speak to the psychological effects of this issue. Instead, we will focus on the lived experience of those undergoing role strains. In 1960 Goode defined role strain as the “difficulty in meeting given role demands.” [3, c. 485] this speaks simply, to both a state of mind but also a process and state, and the process of role strain and the state of multiple role demands will be the focus of our study. Goode further theorized, “an individual’s total role obligations are over-demanding” [3, c. 485] and described five ways an individual attempts to reduce role strain, which he called compartmentalization, delegation, elimination, extension, and barriers to intrusion. To reduce role strain, decisions are made to continue or leave role relationships or to bargain with other stakeholders to meet role demands.

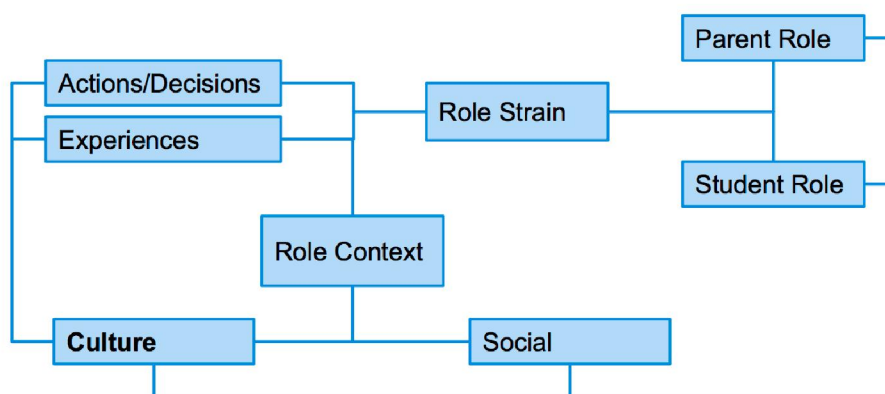
Role strain assumes the confluence of multiple roles and responsibilities [3; 1; 4; 5]. This confluence of roles may take on many forms such as a priest giving non-secular advice, a teacher being a caregiver and disciplinarian, or a police officer being a father and husband [3]. There has been a lot of research discussing the multiple roles and role conflicts that can occur between work and family life, mostly negatively depicted [7]. Then such researchers as Gove (1972), Marks (1977), and Sieber (1974) explained the expansion theory of role strain that implies that additional roles are beneficial [цит. по 6]. The rewards of one role can expand to others. Further, Pearlin (1983) related role strain to stress [цит. по 7]. Baruch and Barnett (1987), Greenberger and O’Neil (1993), and Simon (1997) contended rather than counting the number of roles held when looking at a role strain, what is important are the types of roles, the combination and complementarity of the roles, and how the roles are perceived [цит. по 7]. Not much research focused on added dimensions to role strain, therefore, in our study we aim to investigate how the variability of role context (gender, family composition, age of children, socio-economic status, presence or absence of other adult family members) influences students’ perception of role strain.

A remarkable researcher in this field is Alice Home. She published many papers on role strain [1; 4; 5]. In her studies, she combined qualitative and quantitative methods by employing a self-administered questionnaire and then interviewing few students using a purposive sampling approach. She reported that role conflict was most pronounced between student and parenting roles. Furthermore, in 1997, Home contended that role strain is composed of the variables of role conflict, role contagion, and role overload. Role conflict (simultaneous, incompatible demands from two or more roles) was usually the greatest factor in role strain. Coverman in 1989 stressed that role overload existed “when persons (usually women) simultaneously fulfill multiple roles, such as spouse, parent, and paid worker” [8, c. 967]. Role contagion is described as a preoccupation with one role while fulfilling another, such as worrying about a school assignment while at work or home preparing dinner [8; 1]. Home also found that role conflict was most pronounced between student and parenting roles. This was confirmed in a later study. The perception was that family and student work “just never ends” [1]. Giancola et al., (2009) as cited in Rowland (2010), in a more recent study, found students reported the greatest stressors were school-family conflict [9]. Low incomes, course work, and children under age 13 were all factors in role strain in female students [1; 4; 5].

Yet, the best predictor of role strain is the individual’s own perceptions of role demands. Feldman and Martinez-Ponz (1995) conducted a study, which examined the individual’s perceptions of role strain using the variables of self-efficacy and self-esteem [цит. по 9]. Students reported lower perceptions of role strain when perceptions of self-efficacy and self-esteem were high. Low income became the most significant variable in role strain once perception of role demands was factored out because of time and energy spent to cover expenses are limited [10].

Conceptual Framework

Our case study will be ultimately inductive, but through our initial pilot work, a tentative framework has emerged. Through our pilot work, we began to notice the unique impact of role context, specifically social and cultural characteristics, on participant’s experiences with multiple roles. The literature also highlights how role context may impact role strain, as characteristics such as; family structure, community supports, number of children, etc., can mitigate or exasperate individuals’ feelings of strain and conflict [1]. This was also found in our pilot work, as we saw these social characteristics shape the day-to-day experiences of these parent students, and therefore we will continue to explore this interaction.



Picture 1: conceptual framework of the study

In this study, we hope to understand and dive deeply into how these cultural elements, shape, exasperate or mitigate what the research has defined as role strain, as well how these cultural elements affects the day to day lives of these individuals.

Findings

The pilot study yielded two major findings. The first one is that parent students experience high role strain that results from their multiple roles as a parent, student, spouse, and employee. The second major finding that we suggest could be a focus of the proposed study is that the specific role context in which international students operate can play an important role

Role Strain

The data collected reflects the major components of the Role strain theory used as a conceptual framework for the proposal. Home suggests there are three major aspects that lead to role strain: the role overload, role contagion and the role conflict [1]. These categories emerged consistently throughout interviews, document analysis, and observations and yielded most of the results.

Role overload (insufficient time to meet demands). Role overload led in many cases to sacrifice, which in turn resulted in guilt. Continuous lack of time leads to multitasking and often to compromising the quality of students' learning. Some schedule their classes based on their children's time in school. Others only skim readings while in transport or completely neglect them. Students study while at work, in a public library's children departments and lower their academic goals. Many are not involved in social life and student organizations, those who do often find it challenging to put their social time against the time with their children on the scale.

All of the research participants indicated that education of their children was very important. While schooling allowed students to have more time off children and use it for studying and work, it also posed some significant challenges. This often caused the role overload with overloading the parent role when they had to respond promptly to the school requests.

In many cases, the overload happens on participant's student roles. A nursing student has an academic advisor who resides in Hershey, PA, and she has to travel there every Thursday. The advisor asked the student to move there, but she did not want to leave the Blue Course community, because there were a number of Korean families there.

A student has to drive 12 hours to drop his kids off his parents' house so that he can study for a continuous period of time. He essentially has to exchange 1 hour of driving to 1 hour of studying. It particularly challenges him when he has to write a larger project to work on.

Role contagion (preoccupation with one role while performing another). Role contagion may prohibit one from doing other things even if they want to do them or may result in poor quality of performing the roles. Observations in a public library children's department demonstrated that many of the students experienced role contagion. We observed several women who were trying to work on their iPads and laptops while watching their children play in the library. Others were trying to read fiction books or taking a nap. In most cases, those attempts were not very successful; one mother were frequently distracted by their fighting, quarrelling, and crying children. Another woman had to breastfeed a baby

while trying to read a book simultaneously.

Role conflict (simultaneous, incompatible demands). Role conflicts often resulted from the need to attain to educational, logistic, and emotional needs of children. Even with all the planning that students do to perform their roles, unexpected events can alter the plans completely. Children are prone to get sick, district cancel schools, new pressing activities appear suddenly, and research meetings may be set up at inconvenient times:

Other demands may appear on the academic and workplace. Most graduate students with families have assistantships. One person has to travel to Hershey for her work, another has to teach two classes, others take time off work to attend classes, or prioritize children over their academic lives, resulting at least in one case in a lower grade.

Mediators of the Role Strain

While all of the participants experienced role strain, most of them used coping strategies such as compartmentalization (to avoid role contagion and use time efficiently), calendaring (time-management), delegation (inviting children to help with household tasks), extension (engaging into transactions with community) to mitigate the role strain.

Psychological mediators (self-esteem and self-efficacy). While this was not a focus on the pilot study, it was found that students have a high self-efficacy and self-esteem to cope with their roles. Data suggests that participants grow in their self-confidence in solving problems: *“That’s really difficult for me, but I’m getting better.”*

One of the keys to increased self-efficacy is time management that was consistently mentioned by the research participants. For instance, a single father with two children has three calendars (indicating his, his daughter’s and his son’s activities) on his refrigerator. He refers to the calendars several times during the interview. He says it works well but points at a major limitation of his planning: *“I can only run it week to week I cannot plan too far ahead. You know, I’ve got to make it from Monday to Friday and we will worry about next week next week.”*

The continuous need to fulfill different roles made respondents to be more concentrated. They know exactly what their priority is at any given moment; they try to “compartmentalize” their activities as much as possible.

Social mediator (support seeking). The pilot study supported the literature that indicates family as the primary support in mitigating the role strain. However, it has also found that such social mediator as a community can be strong mediators of role strain. Another source of support comes from the community. The respondents all live in Happy Valley Student Housing, which has many families with children. One of the strategies to seek support among parents are babysitting exchanges with other students. For example, an international female student has an arrangement in which she babysits her neighbor’s two children on a *quit pro quo* basis. This allows her some time to study, especially since the community climate is very children friendly. An American student keeps a list of phone numbers: *“I try to get as many people as I can to help me. If something is coming up, I typically have like three people just in reserve. I have a list of phone numbers. This is where I will go down if something comes out.”*

Community support extends not only in the residence, but also within the university and workplace. An American single mother praises her employer for giving her days off for writing papers, visiting schools for data collection and taking classes during the workday. An international student shares: *“Yeah, I would say having Mindy as my advisor has been probably the most important thing for me. As having someone who understands what it means to be a parent and work on a degree, because she was and so I think that she understands.”*

Cultural mediators. Cultural factors encompassed the relationships within a family, intergenerational support, and support from similar ethnic groups. For example, a Korean student relies on the Korean community support and considers it a major asset of living in the Blue Course Apartment Complex. Her mother does not speak English and acts as the mother to both the student and her two children.

In some cases, international students engage their children in helping with household maintenance issues. This form of delegation is considered normal and a child may be expected to clean the house and help to prepare food: *“Also I am trying to make her to be independent so she can do the laundry and folding things like that.”* Cultural mediators are a promising avenue for the proposed study and needs to be given considerable attention.

Conclusion

Universities continue to enroll a growing number of international parent students, yet knowledge on the experiences and systems of support for these students is limited. Through our pilot study we talked with multiple organizations that work with international students at the university, and none of these programs addressed the unique experiences and needs of international students who are parents. These parent students and their education are ultimately shaped by their multiple roles and responsibilities as well as their cultural context. It is therefore important to understand how these students experience their education, as a means to support this population and the diversity in our community.

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