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# Once a friend, always a friend? Effects of homophily on women's support networks across a decade<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This study uses data collected on 42 women and 432 members of their social networks across a 10-year period beginning with the women's return to school in midlife. The paper addresses three questions: (1) To what extent did the *same* individuals continue to be active members of the women's social support networks across the decade; (2) to what extent did educational similarity explain which individuals continued to be active members of the women's networks; and (3) did educational similarity explain patterns of both support and socializing? The analyses revealed that between one-quarter and one-third of the associates named as sources of school/work support, general emotional support or socializing continued to be named 10 years after the first interview. The analyses also demonstrated that associates' educational attainment was important in explaining which individuals continued to serve as sources of support for school/work; however, educational attainment was not important in explaining which associates continued to serve as sources of either general emotional support or socializing.

*Keywords: Interpersonal relations; Homophily; Returning students; Social support; Transitions*

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## **1. Introduction**

Status transitions often produce substantial changes in the structure and function of individuals' interpersonal networks. These alterations have been examined in a variety of contexts, including becoming married (Fischer, 1986), divorced (Leigh and Grady, 1985; Spanier and Thompson, 1987; Johnson, 1988), widowed (Lopata, 1979; Anderson, 1984; Morgan, 1989; Morgan and March, 1992), parents (Waldron and Routh, 1981; Belsky and Rovine, 1984; McCannell, 1987), family caregivers to the elderly (Morgan and March, 1992; Sutor and Pillemer, 1993; Sutor et al., 1995), and unemployed (Larson, 1984; Newman, 1988; Larson et al., 1994). Most of these studies have focused on the short-term effects of transitions on interpersonal networks; in contrast, we examine the long-term effects, using data from a 10-year panel study of the networks of 42 women who experienced an increasingly common transition – the return to higher education in midlife.

In this article, we address three specific questions: (1) To what extent did the *same* individuals continue to be active members of the women's social support networks across the decade; (2) to what extent did educational similarity explain which individuals continued to be active members of the women's networks; and (3) did educational similarity explain patterns of both support and socializing?

Returning to school provides a particularly valuable context in which to address these questions. First, returning to school is a status transition that is increasingly common among women in the United States; in fact, in 1992, approximately one-third of all women college students were 30 or more years of age (US Bureau of the Census, 1994, p. 177). Further, and more importantly, returning to school in midlife produces a change in reference groups and identities that often occurs when individuals experience other status transitions, such as becoming married (Fischer, 1986), becoming parents (Waldron and Routh, 1981; Belsky and Rovine, 1984; McCannell, 1987), or entering or reentering the labor force (Gouldner and Strong, 1987). Thus, the findings from the present study can shed light on processes of long-term network change beyond the specific status transition under investigation.

## **2. Conceptual framework**

Theories of reference groups and homophily, as well as previous empirical studies of interpersonal relations, suggest that status transitions produce significant changes in individuals' social networks. Proponents of homophily theory have long argued that individuals are more likely to develop and maintain supportive relationships with others to whom they are similar on important social dimensions (cf. Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954; Merton, 1968; Bell, 1981; Feld, 1982; Marsden, 1988). One consequence of most status transitions is a decrease in individuals' similarity to some members of their social networks, and an increase in their similarity to others. Such changes in homophily become important in structuring individuals' relationships following transitions, since

shared values and life experiences lead structurally similar associates to be the most emotionally supportive and least critical of one another (cf. Thoits, 1986; Sutor and Pillemer, 1993; Sutor et al., 1995). This pattern has been particularly well-documented when individuals have become divorced (cf. Weiss, 1975; Spanier and Thompson, 1987; Johnson, 1988), widowed (cf. Lopata, 1979; Morgan, 1989; Morgan and March, 1992), parents (Gottlieb and Pancer, 1988), caregivers to elderly parents (Sutor and Pillemer, 1993; Sutor et al., 1995), and unemployed (Newman, 1988).

This line of research has demonstrated that dimensions of similarity made salient by status transitions are important within the first year or two following major life events; however, it has not been shown whether these dimensions of similarity continue to be important in structuring relationships across a longer period. Perhaps the dimensions of similarity that are important shortly after the acquisition of a new status fade in importance as the individual moves further from the transition. Such a decrease in salience would be likely when the new status is not permanent (e.g. caregiver to an elderly parent), or when the status is permanent but diminishes in importance (e.g. military veterans).

By contrast, when a new status continues to be a major source of identity across time, similarity on this dimension may endure as an important factor structuring relationships. This is the case generally when individuals acquire major family statuses such as becoming married or parents. This may also occur when individuals assume non-familial statuses – especially when the transition involves the adoption of new reference groups. For example, religious similarity is likely to remain salient in structuring the relationships of individuals who convert to fundamentalist denominations.

### *2.1. The return to school as a status transition*

Acquiring the status of college student is particularly likely to have long-range effects on structuring personal networks, because higher education produces marked changes in attitudes and values (Cherlin and Walters, 1981; Ferber, 1982; Thornton et al., 1983; Dambrot et al., 1984; Pascarella, 1991) – especially among women who return to school in midlife (cf. Fischer-Thompson and Kuhn, 1981; Sutor, 1987b). Women who make this transition appear to be likely to experience changes in their attitudes and values primarily as the result of their adoption of the academic community as a reference group. In turn, these women tend to reduce their contact with and closeness to associates without college experience, and increase their contact with and closeness to college graduates (Sutor, 1987a, Sutor, 1987b, Sutor, 1987c).

We believed that educational similarity would continue to be important in structuring the women's relationships after they completed school, as the result of the substantial change in reference-group orientation that they experienced during their enrolment. In particular, we anticipated that the women would be more likely to maintain supportive relationships with associates with college experience, even several years after leaving school.

Further, and of equal importance, we anticipated that educational attainment would be more important in explaining patterns of support for women's work/school roles than for 'general' emotional support or socializing, since the value similarity associated with

educational similarity would be the most salient in this context.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we hypothesized that across time the women would disproportionately select better educated associates as continued sources of support for work and school, but would not use this characteristic when selecting sources of general emotional support or socializing.

### 3. Methods

#### *3.1. Data collection and procedures*

The T1 and T2 interviews were conducted in person between 1980 and 1982, at the beginning and the end of the women's first year of enrolment in a large public university in the northeastern United States. Only one of the women had completed a Bachelor's degree previously or had attended a university within the previous 10 years. All of the women were married and had at least one minor child living at home at the time they entered the university. Fifty-six women were interviewed at T1 and T2, representing approximately 70% of the married mothers over 25 years of age who entered the university as matriculating students in 1980.<sup>3</sup> We were able to contact and reinterview 44 of the original 56 returning students in 1991 (T3).<sup>4</sup>

The mean age of the 42 women on whom we collected T3 data was 38 (SD = 5.8) at T1. All of the returning students were white and non-Hispanic. At the beginning of the women's first year of enrolment 67% of the women were not employed, 23.5% were employed part time, and only 10% were employed full time. At the end of the year, 55% were not employed, 32% were employed part time, and 12% were employed full time. By T3 the proportion of women who were not employed had dropped to 17%; 36% were employed part-time and 48% were employed full-time.

The women and their husbands had experienced a substantial increase in income across the decade, most of which was due to the women's completion of school and reentry into the labor force in relatively highly paid professions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Our decision to view work and school as structurally similar phenomena is based upon considerable evidence that there are substantial parallels in the causes and consequences of women's participation in the labor force and higher education in midlife (cf. Sutor, 1987b). Further, labor force participation and educational attainment appear to have similar effects on patterns of returning students' support and interpersonal stress (Sutor et al., 1995).

<sup>3</sup> A more detailed discussion of the ways in which the sample was drawn can be found in Sutor (1987a), Sutor (1987b), Sutor (1987c), and Sutor (1988).

<sup>4</sup> Two of the 44 women were omitted from the analysis because they had moved a substantial distance since T2 (2000 miles in one case; 500 miles in the other).

<sup>5</sup> At T1, 22% had a total family income of less than \$25 000 during the year of the study, 32% had a total family income between \$25 000 and \$34 999, and 46% had an income of \$35 000 or more. Thus, the majority of the women had a total family income somewhat above the national median of \$25 169 for white married couples (US Bureau of the Census, 1983, p. 430).

By 1991, women's median family income had climbed to approximately \$85 000, more than twice the national median (US Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 464). Some of the increase can be accounted for by inflation; however, more than half of the increase can be accounted for by the women's own incomes, which were approximately three times the national average for white women (US Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 466).

### 3.2. Measurement

#### 3.2.1. Social network function

At both the beginning and the end of their first year of enrolment, and again 10 years later, the women were asked name-elicitation questions regarding their sources of emotional support, instrumental support, and interpersonal stress, both specific to the return to school and work, and more generally. They were also asked with whom they socialized most often. The respondents were also asked a series of questions about each of the associates they named, including the associate's sociodemographic characteristics (age, educational attainment, marital status, etc.) and the structural relationship between the respondent and the associate (i.e. whether the associate was a friend, sister, etc.). At T3 the women were asked about changes in the sociodemographic characteristics of each of the associates named at T1 or T2, regardless of whether those associates were named spontaneously during the T3 interview.<sup>6</sup>

Altogether, the women named 1030 network members. Given that our focus is on persistence of support and socializing, we restricted the sample to only the 419 associates who were named as sources of emotional support or socializing at T1.

Network members were classified as a source of emotional support for school at T1 or T2 if they were named in response to any of the following questions regarding the women's return to school: (a) "Whom do you talk to when you find it difficult being a wife, a mother, and a student at the same time?"; (b) "Whom do you talk to when you feel guilty about having returned to school?"; and (c) "Whom do you talk to about your schoolwork?" (The last question was asked as one of a series of questions about emotional support for various other issues; thus, it is unlikely that the women interpreted this question as regarding instrumental help for difficulty with schoolwork.) Network members were classified as a source of emotional support for work at T3 if they were mentioned in response to any of the following questions regarding their employment: (a) "Whom do you talk to when you find it difficult to have a job and be a wife and mother at the same time?"; (b) "Whom do you talk to about your work?"; (c) "Were any of your friends particularly supportive of your being employed during the past year?"

Associates were classified as sources of socializing if they were mentioned in response to the question: "What are the first names of the people whom you get together with or talk to on the phone most often?"

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<sup>6</sup> The women were asked whether any of their associates had returned to school since the T2 interview. In cases in which the associate had returned to school, we asked how many years of education s/he had completed. Thus, for almost all of the associates, the measure of educational attainment reflects any changes since T1. However, in the case of 58 of the 72 associates who were themselves returning students at T1 or T2, we did not collect information on the number of years of education they ultimately completed. To address this oversight, we assigned those cases 16 years of education. Our rationale for this is that most studies, our own included, have found that more than 80% of women who return to school ultimately reach their degree goals (cf. Smithers and Griffin, 1986; Pirnot, 1987); thus, we felt that the least measurement error would be introduced by assuming that the returning students who had been named during the respondents' first year of enrollment had completed at least an undergraduate degree by 1991. It is important to note that we conducted analyses using the education that those associates had completed at T2; the findings were essentially the same as those found when assigning those associates 16 years of school.

At each wave, network members were classified as a source of general emotional support if they were named in response to either of the following two questions: (a) “Whom do you talk to when you feel bothered by day-to-day things?” and (b) “Whom do you talk to about personal problems?”

### 3.2.2. *Control variables*

Three variables that have been found to be associated with emotional support and socializing were included as controls in the multivariate analysis: (a) kinship status, (b) relationship closeness, and (c) change in marital status. Although it is not clear whether friends are as great a source of emotional support as kin, friends have been found consistently to be a greater source of socializing (cf. Allan, 1979, and Fischer, 1982, for studies showing kin provide more emotional support than do friends; and Sutor and Pillemer, 1993, and Wellman and Wortley, 1990, for studies showing friends and kin to be similarly important sources of emotional support; also see Wellman and Wortley, 1990, and Connidis and Davies, 1990, regarding kinship status and socializing).

The literature provides a more consistent picture of the effects of both emotional closeness and change in marital status on social networks. Closeness has been found to predict emotional support (cf. Fischer, 1982; Wellman and Wortley, 1990); while divorce has been found to produce substantial changes in the structure and function of individuals’ support networks (cf. Antonucci, 1985; Leigh and Grady, 1985; Spanier and Thompson, 1987; Johnson, 1988; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989). Thus, it seemed essential to include both of these variables in the multivariate analysis.

Kinship was dichotomized for the present analysis (kin = 1; non-kin = 0), as was change in marital status (1 = same spouse; 0 = divorced/widowed). Closeness was a three-category variable, based upon the respondent’s reports of closeness to each of her associates (1 = not very close; 2 = close; 3 = very close).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Persistence of support network activity*

We began by examining the extent to which the associates named at T1 continued to be members of the women’s active support networks at T2 and T3. Of the 199 associates who were named at T1 as providers of support for school, more than two-thirds (68%) were named again at either T2 or T3, as shown in Table 1. Not surprisingly, the degree of persistence was greater from T1 to T2 than from T1 to T3. Only 48 (24%) of the original 199 associates were mentioned at both T2 and T3, while 87 (44%) were mentioned again only at T2. Although some might argue that these data show a low level of stability of school/work support, we suggest that these data show surprisingly high stability, considering the 10-year interval between T2 and T3, and the tremendous change in the women’s lives during this period.

The continuity of associates providing general emotional support is quite similar to that of associates providing support for school and work, as shown in the middle column of Table 1. Almost two-thirds (66%) of the associates named as sources of general

Table 1

Persistence of support across time by type of support

	School/work	General	Socializing
Named at T1 only	32.2 (64)	34.0 (73)	51.6 (131)
Named at T1 and T2 only	43.7 (87)	32.6 (70)	25.2 (64)
Named at T1, T2, and T3 <sup>a</sup>	24.1 (48)	33.5 (72)	23.2 (29)
Total <i>N</i> (named at T1)	199	215	254

<sup>a</sup> This category includes a very small number of associates who were named at only T1 and T3.

support at T1 were named at either T2 or T3; slightly more than one-third were named at all three interviews.

The pattern of socializing showed substantially less stability than that of either types of emotional support. More than half of the associates (52%) named at T1 were not named again at either T2 or T3.

#### 4.2. Educational attainment and network function

As discussed earlier, we were particularly interested in examining the effects of educational attainment on patterns of support and socializing. Specifically, we hypothesized that associates with greater educational attainment would be more likely to remain active members of the women's school/work support networks than would those with less education; we also anticipated that educational attainment would play a weaker role in explaining the persistence of associates as sources of general emotional support or socializing. To investigate this, we compared the educational attainment of those associates who continued to be named as sources of support or socializing with those who did not.

Consistent with our hypothesis, associates who continued to be named as school/work supporters across the decade were more likely to be better educated. As shown in the left-hand column of Table 2, individuals who were named only at T1 had completed

Table 2

Mean educational attainment of associates by wave named and type of support

	School/work	General	Socializing
Named at T1 only	13.93	14.71	14.17
Named at T1 and T2 only	14.74	14.03	14.65
Named at T1 and T3	15.74	14.98	14.15
<i>F</i> (for linearity)	11.86	0.31	0.04
Significance of <i>F</i>	0.01	0.58	0.85
Total <i>N</i> (named at T1) <sup>a</sup>	192	202	249

<sup>a</sup> Associates who were under 21 years of age at T1 were omitted from this analysis, as were associates for whom we did not have educational attainment.

only 13.9 years of education, while those who were named at T1 and T2 only had completed 14.7 years, and those who were named across all three waves had completed 15.7 years.

By contrast, there was no effect of educational attainment on the persistence of associates as sources of general support or as socializers, as shown in the middle and right-hand columns of Table 2. These bivariate findings support our hypothesis that educational attainment is more important in explaining school/work support than explaining either general emotional support or socializing.

The multivariate analysis shown in Table 3 provides further support for our hypotheses regarding the effects of educational attainment on support and socializing. This analysis showed that educational attainment continued to be an important predictor of school/work support, even when controlling kinship status, closeness to the associate at T1, and change in the respondent's marital status. In fact, educational attainment was more strongly related to continuation as a source of school/work support than were any of the other variables in the analysis. However, educational attainment was not related to whether associates continued to be named as either sources of general emotional support or as socializers.

It is interesting to note that the women were often aware of the importance of educational similarity in structuring which associates served as sources of support for roles outside of the home, as indicated by their responses to open-ended questions about their friends' and relatives' attitudes toward the return to school and toward their reentry into the labor force. When the women were enrolled in school, they often referred to associates' educational attainment as an important factor in their relationships:

I would say that the majority [of my neighborhood friends] don't feel people should be going to college ... They think I'd come off of my high horse and be okay [if I dropped out]. A few of my friends through [work] have gone to graduate school and it's a wonderful feeling to see them. Friends I associate with who [didn't go to college] say "What are you trying to prove?"

I think [my mother] was more or less communicating her own fear that I would learn so many big words that we couldn't communicate ... because, I guess, she saw my vocabulary changing.

Educational attainment continued to play a role in friends' and relatives' attitudes as the women assumed their new occupational positions. The women were especially aware of the fact that other women who had returned to school were primary sources of emotional support for work:

I guess all of us that went to [back to school] were very supportive of one another. And continue to ... give each other support.

It is worth noting that the effect of kinship status and closeness were consistent with cross-sectional studies of network functioning, suggesting that these factors affect maintenance of networks in much the same way that they affect networks at any one point in time. Closeness at T1 was, overall, the variable that best predicted whether associates would continue to be sources of support and socializing (Table 3). Further,



Table 3  
Regression analysis of persistence of support and socializing from T1–T3

	School/work support		General emotional support		Socializing	
	<i>b</i> (SE <i>b</i> ) <sup>a</sup>	beta	<i>b</i> (SE <i>b</i> )	beta	<i>b</i> (SE <i>b</i> )	beta
Associate's educational attainment	0.089 *** (0.020)	0.326	0.033 (0.021)	0.105	0.005 (0.019)	0.017
Associate's kinship status (0 = non-kin; 1 = kin)	0.199 + (0.115)	0.133	0.410 *** (0.117)	0.246	-0.231 + (0.125)	-0.123
Closeness to associate at T1	0.281 *** (0.076)	0.280	0.312 *** (0.087)	0.251	0.449 *** (0.072)	0.401
Change in respondent's marital status, T1–T3 (1 = no change; 0 = divorced/widowed)	0.146 (0.127)	0.081	0.145 (0.127)	0.075	0.151 (0.124)	0.075
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		0.185 ***		0.176 ***		0.147 ***
<i>n</i>		171		202		240

<sup>a</sup> Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

+  $P < 0.10$ ; \*  $P < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $P < 0.001$ .

kin were more likely than non-kin to continue to provide both types of emotional support, but were less likely to continue as members of the active networks of socializers.

Surprisingly, change in marital status had relatively little effect on the continuity of ties, in contrast to what the literature on divorce suggests (cf. Leigh and Grady, 1985; Spanier and Thompson, 1987; Johnson, 1988; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989). We question whether the difference between our findings and those of others may lie in the fact that we included in our analysis only cases in which the respondent had remained living in the same general area. Since individuals who become divorced are more likely to relocate than are their still-married counterparts (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Johnson, 1988; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989), some of the network changes that are attributed to divorce may actually be a function of relocation rather than of marital status (cf. Gouldner and Strong, 1987; Allan and Adams, 1989; Connidis and Davies, 1990, regarding proximity and relationship maintenance).<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

The findings presented here contribute to a long line of research demonstrating the importance of status similarity for structuring interpersonal networks. What is unique about the present findings is that they show how changes in similarity that are produced by status transitions can have long-term consequences for interpersonal relationships. Further, they demonstrate that it is not merely homophily in general that structures relationships, but homophily that is salient for particular social network functions. Specifically, for the returning students whom we studied across the 10-year period, associates' educational attainment was important in explaining which associates continued to be sources of support for the women's school and work roles; however, this dimension of similarity did not help to explain which associates continued to be sources of general emotional support or socializing.

These findings are consistent with arguments by Cohen and McKay (1984), Feld (1984), Morgan (Morgan, 1989; Morgan and March, 1992), Pearlin (1985), and Wellman and Wortley (Wellman and Wortley, 1989, Wellman and Wortley, 1990) suggesting that sources of support are likely to vary substantially according to the specific life event or problematic situation at hand. The 'specificity hypothesis' contends that different problems will call for variations in the kinds of supportive resources needed, and therefore in the specific individuals who serve as sources of support as well. Our findings extend this line of reasoning by suggesting that homophily is consequential for explaining *which* specific associates are likely to become and remain active members of an individual's support network. In particular, the associates who are most likely to serve as sources of support are those whose similarity has become salient as the result of

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<sup>7</sup> Examination of the networks of the two relocated women whom we omitted from the analysis revealed substantially greater change in associates than that found in the other 42 networks. For these two women, there was almost a complete turnover in their networks of school/work support, general emotional support, and socializing.

a particular status transition or life event. Further, the characteristics that may be most predictive of associates' provision of one dimension of support may not be predictive of associates' provision of other dimensions of support.

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