

Family, Social Life, and Leisure: Cultural differences among university students in Caracas and in Montreal

Abstract

Research was carried out with respect to adult students enrolled in first and second cycle programs at the Simon Rodriguez University, of Caracas, and at the Université de Montreal. The objective was to compare the effects that studies can have on various dimensions of adult life, effects being taken to mean either reactions or perceived changes in a specific context (spouses, children, parents, friends, colleagues). The results of the research show that the major difference between the two groups lies in three of the dimensions of adult life: family, social life, and leisure activities. Types of reactions and perceived changes otherwise present many similarities.

Résumé

Une recherche a été menée auprès d'étudiants adultes inscrits à des programmes de 1er et de 2e cycles à l'Université Simon Rodriguez de Caracas et à l'Université de Montréal. Le but était de comparer les impacts que peuvent avoir les études sur diverses dimensions de la vie adulte, les impacts étant entendus soit comme des réactions, soit comme des changements perçus dans un entourage spécifique (conjoint, enfants, parents, amis, collègues de travail). Les résultats de la recherche indiquent que la différence majeure entre les deux groupes réside dans la conception de trois des dimensions de la vie adulte: la famille, la vie sociale et les loisirs. Par ailleurs, les types de réactions et de changements perçus présentent de nombreuses similitudes.

It is already known that adult learners cannot dissociate their family, social life, and professional experiences from their educational plans. In this context, it is no surprise that the fact of pursuing studies while keeping the other dimensions of one's adult life active elicits reactions among family and friends and causes changes in one's relationships. There are a certain number of studies

available concerning problems caused by a return to school. Several of these were carried out in the 1970s when the so-called phenomenon of the "re-entry woman" came into being. The novelty of the phenomenon and the fact that women very often returned to school after many years devoted to bringing up their children and to family tasks, and that a certain number of them had to continue to assume these duties, aroused the interest of researchers and the publication of numerous articles, such as those of Astin (1976), Beckman-Smallwood (1980), Berkove (1976), Berman-Brandenburg (1974), Brooks (1976), Dibner (1976), Geisler and Thrush (1975), Hooper (1979), Kehr-Tittle and Rubin-Denker (1977), Letchworth (1970), McCrea (1979), Roach (1976), and Rice (1979) to name only a few.

Researchers such as De Groot (1980), Gilbert, Manning, and Ponder (1980), Huston-Hoburg and Strange (1986), Ladan and Crooks (1975, 1976), and Lance, Lourie, and Mayo (1970) have tried to find whether the effects of studies differed in men and women. And others focused on the effects on work, social life, and leisure activities. Effects on work can be found in the research of Dufresne-Tassé, Delarue, Marx, Ané, Lefebvre, & Bélanger (1986), West *et al.* (1986), and Watkins (1974). Certain effects on social life and leisure activities are identified in Bialeschki and Henderson (1986), Dufresne-Tassé *et al.* (1986), and West *et al.* (1986).

In this research, the purpose was to determine whether there were cultural differences in adults' perception of the effects of studies, that is, comparatively in Caracas (Venezuela) and in Montreal (Canada), how do adults experience their studies? Do the studies cause reactions and perceptible changes among adults' relationships? Are there major differences from one country to the other?

In the following pages, a brief description of the sampling and data collection procedures is given and the profile of the subjects researched, together with some of the findings, is presented.

Methodology of the Study

The sampling procedure

A certain number of criteria, adapted to the situation of each of the two institutions where the research was conducted, served to identify the student population to be contacted. The subjects had to have work experience; to have returned to school or perceive themselves in a continuing education process; and to be enrolled in a baccalaureate or master's degree program. They had to be far enough advanced in their program to have the impression of being on the point of finishing, what is called here the "psychological threshold." In Montreal, 93 individuals had crossed this psychological threshold whereas in Caracas there were 162.

It would have been preferable to constitute two stratified samples by level of studies (undergraduate and master's) and by sex, for it is probable that the perceptions of the respondents would vary according to those two variables. In actual fact, in Montreal, it was the characteristics of the population that partly determined the sample. Thus, because they were so few in number, all the men meeting the criteria were contacted; three refused to participate in the study. As regards to women, all were chosen randomly. A sample of 51 persons was constituted, 16 men and 35 women. However, in Caracas, recourse was made to volunteers. Fifty persons equally distributed among undergraduate and master's degree programs were selected to constitute a sample of 17 men and 33 women.

Data collection

It was impossible to construct a valid questionnaire, because all dimensions of the effect of studies was not known. Therefore the semi-structured interview was chosen as a means of exploring these dimensions. All the interviews, lasting about an hour and a half, were taped. At the start of the interview, only the main themes were identified; the subjects were invited to give a general account of their studies and then to speak about their effects. Questions were asked during the interview to clarify one point or another or to address a dimension not spontaneously dealt with. At the end of each interview a series of questions was introduced for the purpose of establishing the respondent's profile, e.g., age, civil status, presence of children in the home, main activity, and so on.

This research focused on the effects of studies, effects taken to mean, first, reactions perceived among family and friends and, second, changes perceived in the relationship with these persons. The following dimensions of adult life were identified: family life, work, social life, and leisure activities. To allow for cultural differences, it was left up to the respondents to define what they meant by family life, social life, and leisure activities.

Analysis of the Data

The results were identified by content analysis; also used was what L'Écuyer (1986) calls "an open model", that is, apart from the themes suggested, all the categories were created on the basis of the interviews; there was no pre-set analytical frame. Thus, the definitions, were derived from a list of all the statements collected in Caracas and Montreal, then the synonyms were grouped and categories, reflecting the elements described in the interviews, were created. Only after these operations were the results from each country distinguished. The same procedure was followed for the content analysis of each theme. The list of statements was first of all reduced by

synonym grouping, then the remaining statements were categorized, classified, and finally quantified. Frequencies and proportions of the persons expressing their views were established but are not all reported here since what matters is not so much the weight of each of the statements but rather consideration of the common perceptions and differences.

Respondents' Profile

The characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Characteristics of respondents in Caracas and Montreal

Characteristics		Caracas (N = 50)	Montreal (N = 51)
Sex	Men	17 = 34%	16 = 31%
	Women	33 = 66%	35 = 69%
Average age		36 yrs.	39 yrs.
Range of age		24 – 52 yrs.	26 – 56 yrs.
Civil status	Single*	14 = 28%	13 = 25%
	Married/Common-law union**	28 = 56%	28 = 55%
	Widowed/Separated/Divorced	8 = 16%	10 = 20%
Children	With children	27	29
Level of studies	Undergraduate	25 = 50%	17 = 33%
	Master's degree	25 = 50%	34 = 67%
Main activity	Paid work	49 = 98%	41 = 80%
	Studies	1 = 2%	9 = 18%
	Other	– –	1 = 2%
Studies	Return	50 = 100%	29 = 57%
	Continuing process	– –	22 = 43%

* In Caracas, persons living in a common-law union and without children claim to be single, since common-law unions are illegal.

** Married persons and those living in common-law unions were placed in one category. In Montreal, two persons said they were single while speaking about their life partner. They were classified according to the category of their choice.

In Caracas, the profile was as follows: most of the respondents were women (66%) and were married (56%). They were aged 24 to 52, for an average age of 36; they were enrolled in an undergraduate program (50%) or master's studies and, for 98% of them, work was the main activity.

In Montreal, the majority was also women (69%), and most often married (55%). They were aged 26 to 56, for an average age of 39; most of them were enrolled in a master's program (67%) and work was the main activity of 80% of them. Since the characteristics of the two populations are not known, there was no way to verify the representativeness of the respondents.

Perceived Effects on Family Life

During the preliminary discussion, it was anticipated that, between the subjects from Montreal and Caracas, there would be a difference in the perception of family, so a distinction was made between immediate family and extended family and the respondents were invited to define the family. When addressing the question of effects on family life, the subjects were asked: Who is your immediate family? Your extended family?

From spontaneous identification of the persons constituting their immediate family, five types of definitions were obtained as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Types of definition of the immediate family

Definitions	Caracas	Montreal
1) Persons who have blood relations and/or marriage relations and who live together	16 = 32%	—
2) Persons who live together as a couple, and have no children	6 = 12%	5 = 10%
3) Persons who live together as a couple and have children	13 = 26%	20 = 39%
4) Person who lives with her/his children	—	6 = 12%
5) Persons who have blood relations but do not live together	4 = 8%	4 = 8%
6) Other definitions	11 = 22%	16 = 31%

In Caracas, the most common description (32%) corresponded with the first definition, i.e., persons with whom they have blood relations (parents, siblings) and/or conjugal ties and who live together. Another fairly frequent definition (26%) was: persons who live together as a couple and who have children. In Montreal, the most frequent description (39%) corresponded with the third definition. In both Caracas and Montreal the immediate family usually consisted of persons living with the respondent.

None of the subjects in Montreal gave a description corresponding with the first definition. This first observation pinpointed an important cultural difference: the conception of the immediate family. In Caracas, when respondents spoke of the reactions of their immediate family or of the changes perceived in their relationships with it, a larger number of persons living under the same roof was included. Another characteristic specific to Caracas concerned single persons who all lived with members of their family, whereas in Montreal, none of the singles defined his or her immediate family as being persons living under the same roof.

Since the reactions and changes differ in their psychological importance according to the person to whom they are attributed, it was possible to distinguish between the spouse's reactions, those of the children, and, lastly, those of the other members of the immediate family.

Effects on spouse

In each of the two groups, there were 28 people living as a couple. The most commonly perceived reactions were: support (C = 52%; M = 52%), understanding (C = 22%; M = 59%), and collaboration (C = 15%; M = 41%), especially with daily tasks. Also noted were the acceptance of the studies, interest in the spouse's studies, and even stimulation to study. Although for most of the persons living with a spouse, their studies were encouraged and they perceived support (particularly moral support), several respondents (C = 22%; M = 11%) had to bear the burden of the spouse's displeasure. Moreover, in Caracas, there were the added elements of indifference and jealousy.

Among the changes perceived in the relationship with the spouse, "the reduction in the time spent together, especially on weekends," was most often mentioned (C = 18%; M = 33%). The respondent had to study, do assignments or, as was the case in Montreal, attend classes; the time reserved for the spouse (and for the family in general) was thus reduced. In some cases, the gradual estrangement ended in a break (C = 11%; M = 26%).

In Montreal only, it was also mentioned that studies had required painful adjustments (30%) or had created psychological estrangement (22%). To avoid the risk of going their separate ways, certain persons (30%) talked at home about the things they were learning; others, however, seemed bewildered because the spouse was not interested in their studies (15%).

Effects on children

Twenty-seven (27) persons in Caracas and 29 in Montreal had children at home at one time or another during their studies. They had an average of two children ranging in age from one to 20, the majority being between 7 and 17 years old.

Some of the respondents said that their children had had no reactions because they were used to seeing the parents studying or being outside the home. For others, the reactions perceived in both Caracas and Montreal were pride: "they told friends about it" (C = 25%; M = 29%), but also complaints (C = 33%; M = 24%) because the parent was not often at home.

There were other perceptions, too. In Caracas, the parents mainly perceived support and encouragement (58%). In Montreal, they noted in their children not only a stimulation to study "like Dad or Mom" (29%) and interest in the parent's studies (19%), but also incomprehension (19%) on account of the reduction in family activities on weekends and during the holidays. In cases where the children were old enough to react, but still too young to organize their leisure activities, negotiations and adjustments had been necessary.

The changes perceived in the relationship with children were noted mainly in Montreal (37 statements compared with 6 in Caracas), and this is a surprising element in these findings. Of the 28 Venezuelan parents likely to report changes, only 14 did so (including the parents of children used to their absence). It may be hypothesized that the Caracas parents paid less attention to their children's reactions or, since the immediate family was larger, other persons took charge; the physical and psychological absence of the student-parent was probably less keenly felt.

The only change perceived in the two contexts was an improvement in communication (C = 25%; M = 24%); the studies apparently enabled certain student-parents to understand their children better, to be more attentive, and to be emotionally closer (19%) to them. Other changes mentioned in Montreal indicate that the children's leisure activities had been sacrificed, reduced, or completely disorganized (62%), their studies having forced them "to calculate the time spent with the children" (29%). This was not done without some trauma but, said one of them, "if I put too much emphasis on that, I could put my studies into question."

Effects on other members of the immediate family

Up to now, the effects on the spouse and children living with the student-parent have been examined. The family picture will be completed with an analysis of the effects on the other persons identified as members of the immediate family.

In Caracas, 29 of the respondents included more than spouse and children in their immediate family. Other members were usually fathers and mothers and siblings living with them. The situation was different in Montreal. Sixteen persons included in their immediate family people with whom they were not living: these were a friend, parents or sibling, or a daughter with her children. It is no surprise to note that the respondents were more numerous in Caracas since the immediate family, as noted above, is more extensive there. It is interesting to note that in Caracas, it seemed easier to talk about these people's reactions (54 statements) than about those of the spouse (47 statements) or children (24 statements). Would these people perhaps make themselves felt more? Would more importance possibly be given to their reactions? Or would it quite simply be less of an effort, from an intimacy point of view, to talk about these people's reactions?

The perceived reactions were far more numerous in Caracas than in Montreal (C = 54 statements; M = 19 statements) yet they were similar in both places. Some people (C = 5; M = 1) indicated that there had been no reactions since "people were used to seeing them study." Among others, perceived reactions were support, most often moral support expressed as encouragement, and occasional financial support (C = 72%; M = 25%), but also dissatisfaction (C = 14%; M = 6%) on account of the less frequent contacts.

As regards changes in the relationship, few seem to be perceived: 10 in each city. When there were changes, these were expressed either in terms of a closer relationship or discussions on certain themes of studies, or in terms of fewer meetings, or embarrassment and conflicts because interests had become too divergent, or because pressure against the studies had become too strong.

In short, the effects of studies on the immediate family may be summarized as follows: for most of the respondents, both in Caracas and in Montreal, spouses were fairly favourable to studies, and gave support and encouragement. However, these studies often modified the relationship in the couple since less time was spent together. When the spouse lacked understanding or was not interested, studies were harder to pursue. A psychological gap was created which, in some cases, ended in the breakup of the relationship.

Student-parents who had children at home experienced problems, such as displeasure, because the parent's presence was reduced and family activities were subject to constraints, mainly of time.

In families in which persons other than the spouse and children were living (only in Caracas), these persons mainly showed support and pride. Thus they gave positive reinforcement to the efforts of the person who was studying.

Effects of Studies on Work

If the studies elicit reactions and modify family relationships, what happens to work relationships?

First of all the work dimension was reported to be important in the life of most of the respondents. In Caracas, 98% of them had a paid job compared with 80% in Montreal. They worked an average of 33 hours a week in Montreal and 37 hours in Caracas. Some had an 8 to 15-hour week and others might work as much as 60 hours.

The effects of studies on the work dimension were examined from four different viewpoints: the reactions and changes perceived in the relationship 1) with one's immediate superior, 2) with colleagues, 3) with subordinates, and 4) the effects of studies on the job.

Effects on the immediate superior

The term "immediate superior" was not defined. During the interviews, certain respondents spoke of this person as being someone who worked very closely with them whereas others, particularly the educators/teachers, indicated that this person was not working in the same location.

In Caracas, 46 persons, and in Montreal 34 persons mentioned their immediate superior. Many (C = 33%; M = 44%) declared that there had been no reactions, that they had not perceived any either because they were not in contact with the latter or because they had not spoken to him/her about it or, lastly, because "the studies were required by the job and it was therefore unnecessary to talk about them." When reactions were perceived, the respondents had noted support (C = 46%; M = 38%), understanding (C = 11%; M = 24%), and interest (C = 11%; M = 18%). There seemed to be a greater perception of support from immediate superiors in Caracas. This might be explained by the existence of a law which obliges employers to grant their employees a number of hours' leave annually for studies. Nevertheless, in both Caracas and Montreal, negative reactions such as reluctance to give time off for courses, incomprehension, sarcasm, and distrust were also noted. Furthermore, in Caracas only, some of the respondents had noted greater respect for opinion given, but also envy/jealousy.

The respondents gave few responses relative to the changes in their relationship with their immediate superior (C = 48%; M = 38%) and, on the whole, they provided little information. The changes that were mentioned stressed either greater confidence in the person's personal abilities with regards to the "boss", or greater difficulties in relations sometimes caused by less submissive, more critical attitudes.

Effects on colleagues

In Caracas, of the 48 persons having work colleagues, eleven said they had perceived no reactions from them and one had not informed colleagues that she was pursuing studies. In Montreal, among the 35 persons who had colleagues at work, twelve had perceived no reactions and five had said nothing about their studies.

When there were reactions, these usually took the form of support and encouragement (C = 28%; M = 38%), curiosity and interest (C = 19%; M = 26%), recognition of competence (C = 22%; M = 15%) often expressed as requests for their opinion or as respect for opinions given, and, in some cases, as stimulation to embark on studies. But the reactions were not all positive. Several respondents noted signs of envy (C = 24%; M = 24%), or sarcasm and incomprehension (C = 11%; M = 21%).

In examining the changes perceived in the relationship with colleagues, there were fewer statements in Caracas (C = 25; M = 41), and most of these indicated an absence of change; in other words, "relations had remained good." In Montreal, in the context where colleagues were informed, discussions on the subject were mentioned and, since communication was improved, a more open and direct relationship existed. In a few cases, there was either an enhanced perception of colleagues, or it was noted that relations had become more distant or difficult.

Effects on subordinates

In this category, the subordinates were defined as persons working under the subject's direction or, since many of them were working in the educational sector, students.

In Caracas as in Montreal, most of the respondents did not talk about their studies to subordinates. When they did, and when there had been reactions, these had been interest, support, and a few signs of envy. As to remarks about changes, more numerous in Montreal (C = 19; M = 43), these came mainly from educators. In both places, mention was made of improved communication, a different perception, and/or a better understanding of students. In Montreal, the respondents also mentioned a more egalitarian relationship, greater helping skills, and a more humane attitude.

In short, an examination of the effects of studies on work life revealed that a fairly large proportion of the respondents enjoyed support and interest on the part of their immediate superior and their colleagues. However, it must also be noted that relations, either with the immediate superior or with colleagues, had been troubled by negative reactions such as incomprehension, envy, sarcasm, and mistrust.

Effects of Studies on the Job

Considering that most of the respondents perceived themselves as about to complete their studies, there was a question as to whether the latter would have an impact on their job.

In Caracas, 28% of the respondents gave no indication of the effects that studies might have on their job. This was interpreted as an absence of expected effects. Thus, in Caracas, a greater proportion of students apparently embarked on studies while knowing that this would change nothing in their job (C = 40%; M = 29%). Moreover, in both Caracas and Montreal, a fairly large proportion (C = 36%; M = 29%) studied with the hope of eventually obtaining a raise in salary, a promotion, or a more attractive job.

It should not be concluded that the studies had no tangible effects. In Caracas, 22% had already derived a certain benefit from them in the form of a promotion, or raise in salary. In Montreal, 41% had obtained either a raise in salary or a teaching assignment, had become involved in a process of professional reorientation, or had obtained a new job.

Effects on Social Life

During the preliminary discussions, it was observed that for certain respondents the notions of social life and leisure activities were hard to separate. Thus, as soon as a respondent addressed this question, we asked: "What does social life mean to you? What are leisure activities? Is there a difference between the two?"

Table 3
Description of social life

	Caracas (N = 45)	Montreal (N = 48)
Meetings with friends	29 = 64%	24 = 50%
Meetings with family	28 = 62%	13 = 27%
Meetings with colleagues	11 = 24%	10 = 21%
Meetings with fellow students	8 = 18%	3 = 6%
Participation in association activities	3 = 6%	4 = 8%
Other	2 = 4%	8 = 17%

For some people, social life meant "family life" (C = 6; M = 1), or social activities with fellow students (C = 1; M = 3). For others, social life and leisure activities meant the same thing (C = 3; M = 15), but for most there was a difference between these two dimensions.

As indicated in Table 3, social life was defined as meetings either in or outside the home with people belonging to one or the other, or both, of the following categories: friends, family, fellow workers, fellow students. Participation in association activities was also considered as social life by some.

A study of the definitions shows that, in Montreal, the respondents had less of a tendency to include family and fellow students in social life. Otherwise, the other elements of social life differed little from one context to the other.

The respondents addressed the effects on social life in two ways: effects on their relationship with friends and effects on social life. The general view, effects on social life, were mentioned far less (C = 8 statements; M = 16), so it was decided to report only the effects on relations with friends. Nine people, in Caracas as well as in Montreal, indicated that relations had remained unchanged, in other words, frequent or limited depending on how they had been prior to the studies. The changes mentioned most often showed that meetings with friends had become less frequent (C = 28%; M = 43%) because there was less time available. In certain cases (C = 6%; M = 20%), this situation had led to reflection on the choice of friends, especially those who were frequented out of habit. It was also noted that the growing gap in common interests could lead to the loss of friends (C = 6%; M = 16%). On the other hand, some people (C = 16%; M = 12%), reported that fellow students had joined and widened their circle of friends. Moreover, in Montreal, some respondents indicated that they had a more open and more helping attitude, and had a better perception of their friends; and others admitted being less attentive because of being too focused on the "inner turmoil" caused by their studies.

Effects on Leisure Activities

In Venezuela, there is no expression equivalent to that of leisure activities. Two terms are used: *entretenimiento* and *diversion*, the first being used to describe the activity of those occupying themselves with doing something they like, the second indicating an activity mainly performed to pass the time. What distinguishes the first from the second is the fact of spending time in a pleasurable way.

From the list of various pastimes, the following definition was developed: leisure activities (or *entretenimiento* and *diversion*) are relaxation activities, individual or group; they can be physical (e.g., sports, exercises), cultural (e.g., theatre, concerts), or artistic (e.g., painting). It should be noted that physical activities differed considerably between Caracas and Montreal. Thus, in Caracas, only dancing, bathing at the beach, mountain hiking, and jogging were mentioned, whereas in Montreal, numerous indoor sports were listed.

Another important difference appeared in Caracas: only 18 persons mentioned the leisure dimension. And once the distinction was made between social life and leisure activities, the effects were addressed as if the two dimensions were one and the same thing, whereas only three persons, in their definitions, integrated social life and leisure activities. Could this be because *entretenimiento* and *diversion* are mainly experienced in a group and thus would be part of family life for some and of social life for others? Yet many of the respondents identified as leisure activities those that they performed alone, such as reading, for example. As in Caracas, no specific effects on leisure activities other than those already mentioned for the social life dimension were given, thus it is not possible to present a comparative analysis of the replies.

Conclusion

This empirical research permitted a better understanding of the phenomenon of studies in the life of adults attending university within two different cultures. The methodology used highlights the elements that may be universal and those that are cultural.

The cultural differences are shown mainly in the description of three of the four dimensions explored: family life, social life, and leisure activities. Once these differences were taken into account, it was noted that many of the reactions and changes perceived in the relationship with family, the work environment, and with friends were similar in the two countries.

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