



Balancing Postgraduate Studies, Career, and Family Responsibilities: The Critical Role of Spousal Support in Academic Success Among Male Breadwinners

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ABSTRACT

It can be difficult to balance postgraduate studies with work obligations and family obligations, especially for male breadwinners who are frequently expected to perform several demanding roles. These people usually bear the burden of providing for their families, being emotionally available at home, and having the mental rigor needed for advanced coursework. This study investigates the influence of spousal support on the academic progression and psychological endurance of men enrolled in master's or doctoral programs, who also maintain full-time employment and have dependent families. Fifteen male postgraduate students who were identified as the primary breadwinners in their households participated in semi-structured interviews as part of a qualitative case study design. Three crucial aspects of spousal support, emotional (such as empathy, encouragement, and understanding), instrumental (such as shared childcare and household responsibilities), and motivational (such as affirmations and belief in the student's long-term goals), were identified through thematic analysis as being crucial to these men's academic experiences. The results show that partners who actively participate in the academic journey, by recognizing its importance and easing daily stressors, create an atmosphere that maintains motivation and lessens fatigue brought on by stress. On the other hand, a lack of cooperation or understanding from the spouse exacerbates feelings of loneliness, guilt, and conflict between home and school obligations, which frequently results in poorer academic performance or postponed completion. The study emphasizes how important family dynamics, particularly spousal involvement, are in influencing male postgraduate students' academic performance, despite the fact that they are usually disregarded. It makes the case that when designing student support programs, these domestic factors should be given more institutional recognition. In addition to calling for future research to investigate focused interventions that actively involve spouses or partners in strategies to improve academic persistence and completion among working postgraduate students with family commitments, this study adds to the body of literature by highlighting the gendered and familial realities of postgraduate study.

Keywords: Postgraduate studies, spousal support, male breadwinners, work-family balance, academic success

Introduction and Background

Many people believe that postgraduate education is a means of intellectual growth, career mobility, and professional development. The need for advanced credentials, especially master's and doctoral degrees, has grown dramatically as global knowledge economies continue to change. This is especially true for working professionals who want to improve their credentials while keeping their jobs (Almeida & Teixeira, 2021). However, pursuing postgraduate studies while juggling work and family obligations creates a special set of challenges, particularly for those who are a part of traditional family structures.

This balancing act is especially difficult for male breadwinners, who are typically positioned as the main financial providers in many households due to their cultural and economic status. These men frequently have to balance long workdays, financial commitments, household duties, maintaining emotional bonds with partners and kids, and regular academic participation. If not properly managed, the cumulative stress of these roles can result in burnout, disengagement from school, or strained family ties (Molepo & Mutshaeni, 2022). Research indicates that when a person is overburdened with the demands of multiple roles, it can result in high levels of stress, diminished cognitive function, and poor academic performance (Zhou, 2023). The masculine ideal of being a reliable provider clashes with the student identity that demands vulnerability, time commitment, and focus, causing conflicting expectations for male students who balance the triple burden of family, career, and education (Khan & Ali, 2023).

Spousal support becomes a vital but underutilized resource in this situation. It has been discovered that emotional support, like empathy and encouragement, lowers anxiety and increases perseverance in college (Singh & Thomas, 2021). Postgraduate students' logistical burdens are directly lessened by instrumental support, such as assistance with parenting and housekeeping. Furthermore, a spouse's comprehension of the goal and long-term benefits of academic dedication can have a big impact on a student's motivation and sense of self-efficacy, particularly when they are feeling worn out and uncertain (Williams & Peterson, 2021; Marumo & Ramoroka, 2024). The quality of relational dynamics in the home, such as shared decision-making, marital intimacy, and gender role negotiation, significantly influences the student's academic path in addition to providing practical and emotional support.

The possibility of successfully juggling conflicting obligations rises when spouses view postgraduate study as a joint investment rather than an individual endeavour (Matlala & Morake, 2023). On the other hand, a lack of support can result in relational conflict, psychological withdrawal, or guilt, all of which put academic success at risk.

The domestic aspects of postgraduate persistence have not received enough attention from academic institutions and policymakers, despite the growing number of mature students enrolled in postgraduate programs, many of whom are professionals and parents. The majority of student support models ignore the impact of gendered expectations and family systems in favour of academic and financial considerations, especially for men who frequently experience silent pressure to "cope quietly" (Zulu & Dlamini, 2022). By investigating how spousal support helps male postgraduate students, especially those who are full-time workers and the primary breadwinners in the family, manage and excel in their academic endeavours, this study seeks to close this gap. By doing this, it presents family dynamics as an important but often overlooked factor that influences postgraduate success.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. **How do male postgraduate students experience the balance between career, family, and academic responsibilities?**
2. **What forms of spousal support contribute most significantly to their academic success?**
3. **What challenges arise in maintaining this balance, and how does spousal support mediate these challenges?**

Understanding these relational and contextual dynamics is essential for building **inclusive, family-aware academic support systems** that improve student retention and completion rates, particularly among postgraduate students who are navigating multiple adult roles.

Literature Review

Higher education research is increasingly concerned with the relationship between postgraduate studies, career commitments, and family responsibilities, especially as more mature students return to school while continuing to fulfil their roles in the home and at work. The growing number of working professionals enrolled in postgraduate programs has highlighted the psychological and structural obstacles they encounter in preserving balance among these conflicting fields (Almeida & Teixeira, 2021). Time constraints, role conflict, and emotional exhaustion have been cited by academics as the main barriers to effective postgraduate participation. Academic preparation is frequently pushed to the margins of late evenings and early mornings, according to Turner and Martin (2021), who contend that students juggling conflicting responsibilities suffer from "persistent time poverty." Role overload is a phenomenon that can result in cognitive exhaustion, decreased academic motivation, and poor performance when the demands of work, study, and family overwhelm an individual's capacity (Zhou, 2023).

The difficulties faced by male postgraduate students, especially those who are the primary breadwinners, are exacerbated by gendered norms that uphold the notion of the man as the provider, protector, and leader. According to Cheng and Lopez (2020), men are frequently expected to maintain family authority, which includes carrying out marital and emotional duties, in addition to meeting financial obligations. Despite their historical roots, these cultural norms frequently conflict with the rigorous requirements of postgraduate study, forcing male students to constantly adapt psychologically (Zulu & Dlamini, 2022).

In the face of these obstacles, spousal support becomes a critical factor in determining academic perseverance and well-being. The stress brought on by role strain and academic pressure can be mitigated by emotional support, which includes empathy, reassurance, and active listening (Nguyen, 2023). Students can recover time and mental energy for academic focus when they receive instrumental support, such as assistance with household chores, parenting responsibilities, and logistical coordination (Williams & Peterson, 2021). Resilience and commitment have also been demonstrated to be greatly increased by motivational support, in which spouses verbally affirm educational goals and offer encouragement during setbacks (Smith & Jones, 2022).

Despite its significance, men navigating traditional family structures receive little attention in the literature on spousal support in postgraduate education, which is disproportionately focused on female students or couples with two careers. Because of presumptions about male autonomy and emotional independence, spousal support for male students is frequently hidden or viewed as less important in patriarchal contexts (Khan & Ali, 2023). Furthermore, research rarely examines the ways in which masculinity norms affect how male students perceive and receive support. According to Turner and Martin (2021), a lot of men internalize the idea that asking for or relying on spousal support is a sign of weakness or failure, which causes them to underuse the support networks that are available.

Recent research is starting to investigate this oversight. According to Matlala and Morake (2023), male postgraduate students in rural South African households were subjected to overt and covert pressure to put earning a living ahead of their studies, with their academic obligations occasionally viewed as a luxury rather than a need. Participants who had spouses who agreed on the long-term benefits of education, on the other hand, reported higher levels of emotional stability and academic success.

Therefore, there is still a large research gap about male breadwinners even though spousal support is now generally recognized as being essential to postgraduate success, particularly in terms of emotional and logistical buffering. This disparity includes a lack of knowledge about how support is negotiated, internalized, and implemented in homes where gender norms are still prevalent.

By focusing on the experiences of male postgraduate students juggling the triple demands of academic study, family, and career, this study helps close that gap. It critically looks at how various types of spousal support work in this situation and how cultural ideas of masculinity influence support and self-

management dynamics. By doing this, it broadens our understanding of student support beyond what is offered by institutions and into the home and interpersonal domains, where a large portion of postgraduate study success, or failure, is negotiated.

Theoretical Framework

A good framework for comprehending the experiences of male postgraduate students balancing several obligations is role theory. According to this theory, people have several roles with different expectations, which can lead to conflict or stress when those roles vie for scarce resources like time and energy (Biddle, 2018). When the demands of work, family, and academic roles are incompatible or too much to handle, the idea of role strain, which is especially pertinent to this study, occurs (Goode, 1960; updated by Nguyen, 2023).

This is further supported by social support theory, which highlights the benefit of interpersonal relationships, particularly spousal support, in reducing stress and encouraging flexible coping mechanisms (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Williams & Peterson, 2021). A spouse's emotional, practical, informational, and appraisal support can help maintain academic perseverance by promoting role balance and lowering role stress.

These theories collectively provide a framework for the study's exploration of role conflict experienced by male breadwinners and the crucial buffer that spousal support provides to support academic achievement.

Methodology

15 male postgraduate students enrolled in master's or doctoral programs at a South African university were chosen for this qualitative study using a purposive sampling technique. Every participant had a job and was the main provider for their family, which included spouses and kids. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually over a period of four weeks in order to collect data. Participants' experiences juggling work, school, and family life, the type and effects of spousal support, and difficulties encountered were all covered in the questions. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were made, and they were then thematically analysed using the six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Since there were no vulnerable populations or sensitive personal identifiers involved, this methodology was chosen to obtain deep, contextualized insights into the participants lived experiences without needing ethical clearance.

Results

Three main themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data, shedding light on the real-life experiences of male postgraduate students juggling work, school, and family obligations. The intricate relationship between home life and academic pursuits is reflected in these themes: Multidimensional Spousal Support, Role Conflict and Fatigue, and Spousal Understanding of Educational Value.

1. Multidimensional Spousal Support

Participants repeatedly underlined that spousal support was complex and included motivational, instrumental, and emotional aspects. During times of high stress, emotional support was given through active listening, patience, and verbal encouragement.

One participant (Participant 04) remarked, "She listens and reminds me why I started this degree, even when I come home grumpy from work."

Time and space for academic activities were made possible by instrumental support, especially the assignment or taking on of childcare and household duties.

"When I'm studying late, my wife looks after the kids; her assistance helps me feel at ease. I couldn't have survived the first semester without her" (Participant 08).

Consistent affirmation and shared enthusiasm for academic achievements were also reported as forms of motivational support, which maintained dedication to long-term objectives.

"She celebrated when I passed my proposal presentation. That moment reminded me that I'm not doing this alone" (Participant 11).

The findings show that spousal support extended beyond tangible help to include emotional presence and symbolic affirmation, which together formed a critical support structure enabling academic continuity.

2. Role Conflict and Fatigue

Experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion from playing several roles at once, employee, student, husband, and father, was a common theme among participants. The majority of participants talked about rigorous daily schedules that started early in the morning and ended with late-night study sessions.

"I get out of bed before the sun comes up, work all day, and then come back to finish my homework. I'm sleeping with the textbook open by 11 p.m. (Participant 02).

Weekends were equally packed, according to several participants, frequently involving unpaid work or family responsibilities that interfered with study time. Role conflict resulted from this, especially when expected household duties or marital commitments conflicted with academic obligations.

"I feel like I'm failing everyone, my wife when I can't give her enough time, my boss when I'm distracted, and my supervisor when I miss deadlines" (Participant 06).

Fatigue was not only physical, but also psychological, as several participants reported feeling guilty, irritable, and having less mental clarity. While some were able to manage these tensions with the help of their partners, others characterized the experience as overwhelming and isolating, particularly when there was a lack of instrumental or emotional support.

3. Spousal Understanding of Educational Value

Participants emphasized that their ability to continue their education was significantly impacted by how legitimate their academic endeavours were seen to be in the home. Participants said they felt more motivated, focused, and supported when their spouses saw postgraduate education as a shared family investment.

"She is aware that this qualification will eventually help our family. Even when I'm exhausted, her confidence in my academic abilities motivates me to persevere." (Participant 10).

Participants who had partners who did not fully comprehend or support their academic goals, on the other hand, reported higher levels of emotional tension, conflict, and performance anxiety. Some said their partners were resentful of the time away from family life or emotionally distant.

"I can tell my wife isn't really on board because she keeps asking when I'll be done. Feeling like I'm being judged at home makes it difficult for me to remain motivated. (Participant 07).

Others said they had to defend their academic commitments all the time, especially when there were no obvious benefits right away. This caused tension in their relationships and damaged their academic confidence.

Overall, respondents said that a key component of successfully juggling conflicting obligations was a spouse's understanding of the long-term benefits of education and their alignment with the student's academic objectives.

For male postgraduate students, these three themes collectively show the complex ways that academic engagement and home life are entwined. In addition to serving as a stress reliever, spousal support also helps students stay persistent in their studies. On the other hand, a lack of support or a misalignment of values can exacerbate role conflict, cause weariness, and even impede academic progress.

Discussion

The results of this study support and broaden the body of knowledge regarding the crucial function of spousal support in mitigating the strains of juggling postgraduate coursework, work, and family obligations. The data unequivocally show that male breadwinners who receive multifaceted support from their spouses, motivating, instrumental, and emotional, are better able to balance their conflicting responsibilities and maintain their academic involvement. These results are consistent with those of Williams and Peterson (2021), who contend that among mature students, spousal involvement dramatically lowers psychological stress and improves academic resilience.

The findings theoretically confirm the applicability of social support theory and role theory. According to role theory, people who have several demanding roles are more likely to experience stress when expectations don't align (Zhou, 2023). As they balanced the dual responsibilities of being a family man, a student, and a provider, study participants frequently experienced feelings of exhaustion, emotional strain, and internal conflict. Spousal support serves as a protective mechanism that helps the male student balance these competing roles and preserve functional equilibrium, especially when it involves understanding and task-sharing.

This study made clear how important emotional and motivational support are. The student's sense of purpose and academic identity were positively impacted by spouses who verbally encouraged and celebrated academic milestones, demonstrating their belief in the educational process. This result is in line with Nguyen's (2023) assertion that family members' emotional support and affirmation can serve as internal motivators that counteract stressors from the outside world.

This study's focus on marital relationships and expectations of masculinity, aspects that are frequently overlooked in postgraduate education literature, is among its most notable contributions. While previous studies have tended to focus on the difficulties faced by female students in fulfilling their familial responsibilities, this study emphasizes how male students also manage household dynamics, such as emotional intimacy, sexual expectations, and traditional provider roles. When men were unable to fulfil these expectations while pursuing rigorous academic work, they occasionally expressed feeling guilty or emotionally strained. These results are consistent with the findings of Khan and Ali (2023), who contend that men are more likely to experience academic burnout when patriarchal gender norms limit their capacity to ask for and accept help.

Furthermore, whether postgraduate study is seen as a family investment or a personal indulgence seems to depend on whether the spouse understands the long-term value of education. Higher levels of motivation and less domestic conflict were reported by participants whose spouses shared their academic objectives. On the other hand, conflict developed and frequently undermined the student's academic focus when spouses saw the student's academic endeavours as a burden or a diversion. This dynamic highlights how academic success is relationally embedded and demands a more nuanced view of academic labour as a family project rather than just an individual undertaking.

Implications for Practice and Policy

These results point to a number of useful applications. In order to provide family-inclusive support systems, higher education institutions must first acknowledge the family contexts of postgraduate students, particularly mature male students who work full-time jobs. A more encouraging learning environment can be created, for instance, by offering counselling services that include or extend to spouses, holding family-friendly orientation sessions, and holding workshops on juggling work and school obligations.

Second, flexible learning policies can ease stress and lower dropout rates. Examples of these policies include part-time pathways, hybrid learning formats, and deadline extensions for students with family responsibilities. In addition to fostering academic achievement, these accommodations would advance gender parity in postgraduate study participation.

Third, employers and legislators ought to take into account incentives like paid study leave, tuition reimbursement plans, and work schedules that accommodate families for workers who want to continue their education. By reducing institutional friction that frequently forces students to choose between academic advancement and financial security, such policies would acknowledge education as a national developmental goal (Matlala & Morake, 2023).

Directions for Future Research

This study creates significant opportunities for additional research. Future studies could examine the ways in which cultural norms pertaining to breadwinnership, masculinity, and educational authority affect the availability and acceptance of spousal support in various sociocultural contexts. Studies that compare people from various racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds may shed more light on the intersectional barriers that influence men's postgraduate experiences.

Moreover, studies that follow married male students' academic progress over time, regardless of the degree of spousal support, may be able to measure the long-term effects of relationship dynamics on academic persistence and completion rates. Examining the coping mechanisms used by spouses, especially women who assist male postgraduate students while juggling their own obligations, is another intriguing line of research.

Conclusion

This study adds to an expanding corpus of work that highlights postgraduate students' real-life experiences juggling several adult responsibilities. In particular, it demonstrates that a key factor in the academic achievement of male breadwinners juggling advanced education, careers, and families is spousal support. The data indicates that male postgraduate students are better equipped to handle the demands of conflicting responsibilities without experiencing burnout or academic disengagement when there is spousal support, especially in the emotional, instrumental, and motivational forms.

Reduced emotional exhaustion, improved academic focus, and a stronger sense of purpose were all consistently reported by participants who talked about their spouses' multifaceted support. In contrast, a lack of awareness or proactive support at home frequently resulted in elevated levels of stress, guilt, and tension, factors that jeopardize academic performance as well as the health of relationships. The results also highlight relational aspects of postgraduate study that are frequently disregarded, such as negotiating emotional reciprocity, conjugal intimacy, and conventional gender norms.

Crucially, this study broadens the scope of postgraduate support beyond the individual student to encompass the home and social environment where postgraduate study occurs. Universities need to understand that postgraduate students, especially older men with families, are not isolated individuals but are instead intricately woven into family networks that influence their ability to thrive. Therefore, family-aware frameworks that involve spouses, encourage flexible learning pathways, and offer tools for juggling work, study, and life should be incorporated into institutional policies and student support services.

The policy environment and the workplace are also affected. Given that postgraduate education is a private and public good, employers and legislators should endeavour to create supportive infrastructures that encourage working adults to pursue higher education. Examples of such infrastructures include study leave, financial aid, and flexible scheduling. Future studies ought to examine the ways in which cultural conceptions of fatherhood, academic aspirations, and masculinity impact the dynamics of spousal support in various communities. Cross-cultural and intersectional analyses would shed light on how diverse social norms mediate the experience of postgraduate study among men. In order to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the shared labour and emotional negotiations involved in academic pursuits, studies that incorporate the perspectives of spouses themselves are also necessary.

In conclusion, institutional design and individual ambition are not the only factors that influence male postgraduate students' success in juggling dual roles as family men and workers. It also depends on the home, which is a place where routines, relationships, and resilience are developed. This study urges a paradigm change in the way colleges, employers, and legislators view and encourage postgraduate success in the twenty-first century by acknowledging the importance of spousal support.

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