ROLE STRAIN: A LOOK INTO BALANCING MOTHERHOOD AND EDUCATION

A Project

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by
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Division of Social Work
Abstract

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by

Christina Irene Daugherty

This research study examines the challenges 15 women reported in their role as mothers and students. The purpose of the study was to explore the barriers many women encounter regarding role conflict from two or more competing social roles, one of which included being a mother of young child. Using a qualitative approach, this study gathered data from fifteen participants through open-ended interviewing questioning, using a structured interviewing tool. The subjects in this study were female college students attending a graduate program at an accredited university. All participants were mothers of a child who was six years old or younger. The risks and economic and social costs involved in successfully balancing motherhood and graduate level work became evident in the themes that emerged from the narratives provided by the participants. Themes emerged concerning; 1) the motivational factors women feel to pursue higher education, 2) internalized and externalized blame, 3) relationship status, 4) employment and 5) the challenge of having young children. The findings present the conflict between various commitments these women often balance, such as childcare, domestic and academic responsibilities. Suggestions for policy changes are discussed as well as the
need to widen accessibility and participation in graduate studies for working-class women who have young children.

______________________________, Committee Chair
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______________________________
Date
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I want to thank Billy, for being my partner, my best friend, and my biggest supporter. I couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you to my Mom & Dad for their unconditional love and support. Most importantly, I want to thank my son, William, for teaching me the greatest lessons in life and giving a whole new meaning to this experience. I would like to dedicate this project to Noni, for setting an example of what is means to be a strong woman.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

What does it mean to be a mother? What roles do women traditionally hold in the family? Are the expectations of women according to the institution of family vastly different from ones outlined two centuries ago? Or do women now possess the power to dictate their life choices concerning family, education and career? In 1945, the family was defined as “a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption; interacting and communicating with each other in their respective roles (husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister)” (Burgess & Locke, 1945).

This study will examine challenges mothers face as they balance the roles of caregiver and student. Specifically the study will examine obstacles women encounter as they take responsibility for caring for their young child or children, while at the same time attending a university as a student in a graduate program. Responsibility that comes along with marriage, family and child rearing can be emotionally, mentally and physically stressful for both men and women. Women, however, seem to bear the burden more often than men, and society continues to maintain unrealistic expectations of motherhood and care giving. Women are faced with the female expectations of society, forcing them to choose between two images:

(1) the “superwoman,” the good wife and/or mother who also can effectively attain educational and career success and (2) the “satisfied single” – a woman (either
lesbian or heterosexual and usually employed) who is happy not having a serious relationship (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2000). Therefore, even in a time of increasingly liberal attitudes, women continue to be stereotyped culturally by themes of the good girl/bad girl or virgin/whore. How deep are these stereotypes actually embedded in society’s attitudes and beliefs? Regarding gender attitudes and beliefs, our society is undergoing indecisiveness and hesitation because on the surface the problem seems to be resolved. On the one hand, women have gone into space as astronauts, and on the other hand women allow themselves to be objectified in music videos and reality television. It is still true that living in our society remains a different experience for men than for women.

Specific concepts are important to understanding the challenges and obstacles mothers will encounter as they pursue their goals of higher education. First the definition, concepts and stereotypes associated with gender will be covered to give perspective on a broad and often controversial topic. The term gender describes the societal attitudes and behaviors expected of and associated with the two sexes. Another concept is gender identity, which refers to the degree to which an individual sees her or himself as feminine or masculine based on society’s definition of appropriate gender roles (Burke & Cast, 1997).

The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2010) defines a family as two or more people who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption and are residing together in a household. Society has made progress by eliminating gender roles from the definition of family.
However, the change in the definition does not account for all the barriers women still face when they pursue alternative roles in place of or additional to the role of “mother.” A new female expectation has emerged over the past 20 years, referred to as the “professional woman,” who is independent, ambitious and self-confident (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2000). Women are seen in all fields of study and in most professions. After taking the reins through social movements such as feminism, on the surface it appears that women are in control of their lives, personally and professionally. As a result, many women attempt to take on multiple roles of wife, mother, and student.

When the surface is pealed back, does the layer underneath reveal a truth about the untold struggle women wage in their journey to play the role of superwoman? Mothers are often the main victim of this struggle, as they carry many obligations and social roles that create conflicts in their personal relationships, identity and achievement goals.

A motivational factor for this research was essentially personal. I became a first-time mother during my second year at Sacramento State University as a student in the social work graduate program. Another reason was to examine the way other females have coped with being a full-time mother and a student at the same time. The purpose of this study was to enhance the understanding of mothers’ everyday experiences as a primary caregiver and a student.
Background of the Problem

A large amount of literature in the United States suggests that female college students are sexually active, and recent empirical research suggests that approximately 12% to 23% of college females become pregnant (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). The Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) conducted a study examining the strong role that the age of the mother plays in influencing a wide range of birth outcomes (e.g., birth defects, multiple births, birth weights) (Matthews & Hamilton, 2009). This study also determined that the average age of first-time mothers increased by 3.6 years from 21.4 in 1970 to 25 in 2006. Although research suggests women are having children later in life on average this issue still affects the group of women who are interested in attaining higher educational goals (i.e., graduate or doctoral programs). As women achieve higher educational goals, the more likely they are to delay motherhood, commonly placing them in the age range of 25-30 as first-time mothers.

Higher education does not have a strong history of responding affirmatively to the personal needs of students. In past decades, parental accommodations were unnecessary when a majority of students were men with stay at home wives (Denker, 2009). Today, however, as more women enter graduate programs in pursuit of higher education, there is an increasing need to understand the personal and institutional barriers that women face when and if they choose to become a parent. This choice, planned or unplanned, results
in many women attempting to balance the conflicting demands of academic life and family life.

Throughout history women have been in the role of mother, with society holding specific expectations for the appropriate behaviors men and women should exhibit. Men are expected to adopt the role of breadwinner, and women the role of caretaker, specifically referring to the gender-role expectation for women known as the “mother-mandate” (Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2008, p. 223). The mother mandate involves social and cultural forces suggesting that all women should fulfill their role as a “good-mother,” will be measured by the number of children and amount of time spent with those children (Barling, MacEwen, & Nolte, 1993). Pursuing higher education removes women from the home and promotes their individual capabilities. The good-mother stereotype, a set of expectations of role satisfaction for mothers based on external perceptions, may impede a woman’s ability to socially integrate and adjust upon the return to school after the birth of a child (Mottarella et al., 2008). This presents a powerful barrier to female success given that social integration has been identified as a critical element in retention for all students. Thus, this gender stereotype among fellow college students can potentially be a serious challenge to women who return to school after having children.

The barriers women face are often described in research as issues increased by the individual’s life choices or psychological view (Barling et al., 1993; Brown & Amankwaa, 2007; Mottarella et al., 2008). Women need support on a macro level of
society. Public policy does not value the challenges women face in the dual role of mother and student. Society expects women to act as the primary caregiver, thus devaluing their role outside of the home. Public, affordable childcare is a priority for mothers who want to obtain higher education or success in the work place. However, not many childcare options are available for mothers that are also affordable. The lack of childcare causes emotional and financial stress to many mothers who juggle both roles. Lack of high quality, affordable childcare exemplifies the way women are de-valued in public policy and programs. Our current values, laws, employment policies and culture are detrimental to children and disastrous for mothers committed outside of the home (Brownsmiller, 1999).

Some observers have suggested that social pressures not to have children are becoming too strong, especially for most young, highly educated women (Josselson, 1996). In the 1970s, Betty Friedan (as cited in Lamanna & Reidmann, 2000) expressed concern that the element of choice was being eliminated and saw little hope for improvement, “if some women had to give up motherhood to keep on in jobs or professions as my generation gave up jobs and professions to make a career of motherhood” (p. 72). As a result of cutting health, nutrition, social service, financial aid, and education programs the welfare of children has been greatly compromised. Partly because of these cuts and the absence of national support for the family wage, children under six years of age have the highest rate of poverty (23% in 1996) of any age group (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). The lack of childcare
can be categorized as a major barrier to mothers who are also students. The inability of women to support their family on a working middle-class wage, especially as single mothers, is an even greater problem and often the key motivating factor leading women back to school. As mothers decide to return to school for various reasons, their role as a mother may begin to conflict with their role as a student, creating inconsistency and contradiction within themselves and the household.

The term role conflict refers to emotional conflict that arises when competing demands are made on an individual in the fulfillment of his or her multiple social roles (Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009). Tension is created between women’s roles in the public sphere of formal institutionalized education and their roles and responsibilities in the private sphere of home and relationships (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2000). Women are expected to take on both roles if they wish to continue in educational pursuits. Sexism and the power of interpersonal relationships between men and women influence women’s acquired feelings of guilt and foster the conflict between personal and educational commitments. Unfortunately, gender stigmas are still relevant today and view women’s challenges in performing dual social roles as a normal part of their participation. These barriers will continue to affect women until their role of a student is no longer as an “additional” duty to their private obligations and commitments (Stockdell-Giesler & Ingalls, 2007).
Statement of the Research Problem

As an exploratory study, this project will examine the conflicting roles of motherhood and education. In particular, the study will investigate about various challenges women face as they attempt to parent while also enrolled and participating in a graduate program at an accredited University. As stated in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2008), Section 1.05, Cultural Competency, it is important that social workers understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to all the varying demographics. This study will contribute to the base of knowledge about social oppression among women who are balancing motherhood and higher education and will provide an opportunity for study participants to examine their own experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the barriers many women face regarding role conflict from two competing social role commitments. This study will benefit the field of social work by examining discrimination on the micro, mezzo and macro levels. On the micro level, women who participate in this study will benefit from the exploration of their own experiences and will have the opportunity to process through challenges that may have affected their lives in a number of different ways. On a mezzo level, universities with students participating in this study might experience an increased level of self-awareness and self-examination. On a macro level, social policy and programs
benefit from greater self-examination and from the continuous reassessment of issues that
directly affect equal rights.

**Research Question**

This study will examine the following research question: What challenges do
women face when taking on multiple strenuous social roles? Specifically, what barriers
do women face while balancing motherhood and education (i.e., graduate school)?

**Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory**

The theoretical framework for this study will focus on the feminist theory.
Feminism is both a political movement and a mode of analysis of social issues.
Feminism gained widespread recognition in the 1950s and 1970s as a result of the
women’s movement and is often associated with social action (Cooney & Robert, 2005).
Feminist theory has multiple branches under the general approach to feminism. These
different schools of thought have varying philosophies as well as approaches to address
behavior and social inequality based on gender. Overlaps occur within the separate
schools of thought, in turn, practitioners have a tendency to pull from several feminist
theories to enhance practice effectiveness (Greene, 2008).

Liberal feminist theories hold that men and women are essentially the same
because the capacity to reason is the defining characteristic of being human and is not
gender specific (Greene, 2008). Gender differences such as physical aptitudes are not
seen as important and should not be the basis for determining resources or opportunities.
Liberal feminist theory considers it is the disparity in social conditions, not innate
differences in the ability to reason, that has interfered with women’s achievements (Tuttle, 1986).

During the last 35 years progress has resulted from the demands of liberal feminism for equality in the areas of employment and education. Equal treatment of men and women is sought after in public policy, in areas such as education, employment, property rights, credit and housing. The practice of “adding women” to professional and educational fields traditionally over-populated by men is an example of how liberal feminism is applied to gain equal opportunities for women.

Socialist feminism is another branch of a feminist perspective that focuses on women as a class that is not recognized in societal policy and programs (Greene, 2008). Socialist feminism believe that because society has made women responsible for activities in the home that women lack access to money. Women’s child-rearing and other responsibilities for maintaining their homes are not included as a part of capitalism, therefore contributing to sexism by separating home and work (Greer, 1999).

Feminism adopts the view that patriarchal social structures privilege men as a group and afford those opportunities and resources that are not equally available to women as a group. This theory uses oppression to describe the social condition of women as a group, although some women have more privileges than others, such as class, sexual orientation, color, etc. Feminism does not convey that oppression of women is the only form of oppression, but the theory does recognize the fact that all women are affected by oppressive factors. Oppressive forces that serve as barriers to women are not
always recognizable and are even sometimes rejected by women who identify barriers but do not want to be seen as critical of men (Longres, 2000).

Liberal feminism insists on the biological similarity between men and women. Any differences that occur between men and women are the direct result of socialization, not biology (Greene, 2008). For example women are conditioned to meet men’s needs and thus may appear to be accepting of the patriarchal structures. Challenges women face that are often viewed as personal issues are actually the result of oppressive political factors. Thus, psychological problems experienced by women, such as depression, are viewed as the consequence of oppressive societal conditions. This perspective focuses on the social and cultural construction of meanings and maintains that nothing can be understood separate from its context. The person-in-environment is a key principle that guides the feminist theory, focusing on how the individual relates, reacts, and internalizes events occurring in both the private and public sector (Greene, 2008).

**Application of Theory to Research**

This research project focuses on the challenges women face as they take on dual roles in the separate realms of motherhood and education, while applying the theoretical approach of feminism. Feminism has certain basic assumptions, but the central theme is that social structures privilege men and oppress women, as a group. This study examines from the viewpoint of women and how they experience challenges when faced with conflicting social roles. Authors of feminist family-therapy approaches have expanded
treatment methods to ensure that women are not victims of oppressive family structures and processes.

The common focus of feminism is to support women in the family structure by addressing women’s needs in families and by ensuring that the family therapy does not ignore or sacrifice women’s need for the “good family” (Hochschild, 2003). Feminist approach understands the difficult experience women face as they struggle to conform to expectations of the family structure. Women’s groups have been building feminist consciousness since the 1970s because of the impact these groups had on women’s understanding of their common experiences and the bonding that occurred (Greene, 2008). In contemporary times, social workers develop support groups for women that foster bonding through common experiences, where pain and strengths can be shared and validated, along with giving a voice to women’s individual experiences. As related to the theoretical framework, women in the study are able to discuss their personal experiences, which is beneficial in order to process and validate various situations and emotions that were the direct result of oppressive structures.

Giving women the opportunity to tell their story or describe their experiences in different social roles addresses the invisibility of the female experience. This research will build on women’s awareness about male dominance in their lives and possibly help them recognize survival behaviors they exhibit that are commonly mistaken by society and traditional therapy as pathological responses. Through narration of their experience women are assessing psychological effects of oppressive social conditions. The theory of
feminism guides the research project by addressing different aspects of social injustice that women experience in their everyday lives (Greene, 2008).

**Assumptions**

The following assumptions have been made in this study: (1) women who are both mothers and students face challenges and (2) many of these challenges are based on gender and oppression towards women.

**Justifications**

The results of this project may assist social workers and other professionals who work with children and families to evaluate their practice. As noted in the NASW, social workers are responsible to remain informed and proficient in professional competency. This includes remaining current on social issues and literature in the field of practice. Hepworth, Rooney, Dewberry Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, and Larsen (2010) state that “self-awareness and self-evaluation” (p. 76) are both important aspects of ethical and competent professional practice.

Implications of this project for the field of social work include contributions to the body of knowledge related to the worker’s direct practice with clients. In particular this project will investigate the challenges women face every day as they maintain commitments to dual social roles in the context of structural oppression. Specifically, the project will enhance the way social workers relate and understand women’s personal experiences. Also, it will give social workers and other professionals in the field the opportunity to empower women both individually and collectively to change themselves...
and the surrounding conditions and structures that create oppression. Gaining knowledge on the topic of inequality will enhance social workers ability to develop a positive therapeutic alliance with the clients.

**Delimitations**

No information about client behavior or outcomes is discussed or analyzed. The focus of this study based primarily on the experiences of women, with the use of interviews to gather information, which delimits the study by removing the ability to verify the results independently. The interview subjects must be enrolled at an accredited university and must have at least one child six years or younger.

**Summary**

Chapter 1 was an introduction to this research study, which will qualitatively examine women’s experiences with conflicting social roles. It discussed the research question as well as the guiding theoretical framework. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on this topic and will contain sections on the history of women’s rights and policy, concepts of motherhood and family structure, gender roles, the role women play in education, and gaps in the literature.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review is organized into four sections. The first section focuses on the history of women’s rights in policy and education. The second section covers various concepts of motherhood and the family. The third section examines gender roles and stereotypes. The fourth section looks at women’s current role in education. The final section of the review points out the gaps found throughout the examination process of the literature.

History of Women’s Rights in Policy and Education

Emily Davies wrote the book *Higher Education of Women* in 1866 in which she defined the goal for women to be the best wife and mother, and any education not central to these objectives was considered unnecessary (Davies, 2006). She argued during the discourse of the work that men also should strive to be good fathers and husbands and that education does not limit their ability to do so. She felt women should not become better mothers or wives through ignorance and disregard of other responsibilities outside the home.

Women have been the gender responsible for and capable of creating new life. Historically, however, they have been considered not only intellectually inferior to men but also the source of temptation and evil (Collins, 2003). Josselson (1996) described how Greek mythology presents the example of Pandora, a woman who opened the
forbidden box and brought plagues and unhappiness to mankind. Early Romans described women as children, the gender that would forever be inferior to men. Christian theology perpetuated these views, and in Eastern cultures the attitudes towards women were extremely negative, prohibiting them from owning property or the remarrying (Collins, 2003).

Maternity, according to Weiss (2000), is the natural biological role of women and has traditionally been regarded as their major social role as well. Today, contraception and in some areas, legalized abortion have helped women to gain increased control over their body and decisions concerning childbirth. Although these developments have freed women for roles other than motherhood, the cultural pressure for women to become wives and mothers still prevents many talented women from finishing college or pursuing careers (Tuttle, 1986).

Traditionally, a middle-class girl in Western culture learned from her mother's example that cooking, cleaning, and caring for children was the behavior expected of her when she grew up. Tests made in the 1960s showed that the scholastic achievement of girls was higher in the early grades than in high school (Peril, 2006). The major reason given was that the girls' own expectations declined because neither their families nor their teachers expected them to prepare for a future other than marriage and motherhood (Weiss, 2000). This trend has been changing in recent decades.

Formal education for girls historically has been secondary to that for boys. In colonial America girls learned to read and write at dame schools (Peril, 2006). They
could attend the master's schools for boys when there was room, usually during the summer when most of the boys were working. By the end of the 19th century, however, the number of women students had increased greatly (Tuttle, 1986). Higher education particularly was broadened by the rise of women's colleges and the admission of women to regular colleges and universities. According to Moen, Erickson, and Dempster-McCain (1997) in 1870 an estimated one-fifth of resident college and university students were women. By 1900 the proportion had increased to more than one-third (Josselson, 1996).

Women obtained 19% of all undergraduate college degrees around the beginning of the 20th century. By 1984, the figure had risen sharply to 49% (Tuttle, 1986). Women also increased their numbers in graduate study. By the mid-1980s women were earning 49% of all master's degrees and about 33% of all doctoral degrees. In 1985 about 53% of all college students were women of that 53%, one quarter of the women were 29 years or older (Tuttle, 1986).

Sarah Evans (1980) studies the first women's rights convention that took place in Seneca Falls, N.Y., in July 1848, finding that the declaration that emerged was modeled after the Declaration of Independence. According to Evans (1980) the Declaration of Independence claimed that "all men and women are created equal" and that "the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman" (p. 199). Following a long list of grievances were resolutions for equitable laws, equal educational and job opportunities, and the right to vote. Women were not granted
the right to vote until 1920, 72 years after the first rights convention took place. Long overdue, women triumphed in receiving the same right as men to vote, however inequality in the various institutions, such as the home, workplace and educational system continued to flourish.

Specific historical events, such as war, depression, inflation and social change affect opinion, choices and the everyday lives of families. The work of sociologist Glen Elder (1974) and Stephanie Coontz (1996) serves as a reminder of all the differences each decade held for women in the past. The construction of family has varied between the experience of the great depression and the optimistic 1950s. In the depression years, couples delayed marriage and parenthood and had fewer children due to financial struggles. During World War II, married women were encouraged to get defense jobs, and it was common for them to work in factories. At that time daycare centers were popular with working mothers. For affluent people in the 1950s, marriage and large families were an affordable possibility. Mothers, acting as the primary care taker, stayed at home with the children (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2000). As the economy expanded, the divorce rates slowed their long-term increase (Easterlin, 1987).

Historical change includes specific events along with short and long term change in human life. As recently as a hundred years ago, one-third of our population died before reaching adulthood. At present, on average three-fourths of the U.S. population lives to be 65, and many people reach 85 and older. The consequences of this length in life span includes an increase in years invested in education, longer marriages for those
who do not divorce, and a longer period in which parents and children are both adults (Lammana & Reidmann, 2000).

Most research credits feminist ideology as the main contributing factor pushing the major social movements throughout history. Starting with the women’s movement in 1848, society was forced to look at equality on a political level, which eventually led to social perspective theories that grew from the hostile times seen in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminism is a theory that derives from the broader conflict perspective, which calls attention to the unequal power of groups (Ferree, 1990).

The family values campaign have an antifeminist tinge…There was a lot of emphasis on the selfish career woman,…the self-indulgent women or the promiscuous woman…At first, it was all about the decline of motherhood…then recently the emphasis began to shift from motherless America to fatherless America…It’s a huge movement now and its really about restoring the father to his rightful place as the head of the household. That is what I have a problem with and restoring sharply differentiated roles of mothers and fathers. (Dreman & Hagar, 1997, p. 12)

Biblarz and Stacey and others argue through research and literature that significant advancements in women’s rights have occurred over the past century. However, as society grows with complexity, so do the challenges that prevent women from successfully maintaining private and public social roles.
Obstacles in Motherhood and Family

Literature on motherhood and the concept of how the family is defined has been widely scrutinized and debated (Fanshel, 1976; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Much of the literature examines women’s reluctances to threaten their intimate relationships through participation in educational activities (Wiess, 2000; Winterson et al., 2012). Intimate relationships with husbands, friends, and children are particularly important, and the husband seems to set the tone for the rest of the household (Stalker, 2001). Literature portrays the challenges women encounter as mothers in the private sphere that may pull them away from participation in the public sphere. It is suggested that these challenges may come from the family and the home and may result from women’s primary role as child bearer and caregiver (Soura, 1988). The point that resonates deeply is that obstacles women find when they attempt dual social roles can often be reinforced by guilt when women sacrifice family time to meet educational demands (Stalker, 2001).

A large portion of the literature discussing motherhood and balancing roles outside of the family concentrates on work instead of education (Stalker, 2001). There is a body of literature related to work and family based largely on a critique of normative academic structures and how they have not served women (Ricco et al., 2009). This literature in general is grounded in personal experience and feminist ideology and seeks to question higher education structures that have excluded women in general and especially women who are mothers and wives (Wolf-Wendal & Ward, 2006).
The clockwork of the academic career is distinctly male. It is built upon men’s normative paths and assumes freedom from competing responsibilities, such as family, that generally affect women more than men (Winterson et al., 2012). The majority of the struggle between home and academics fall on mothers, who are the primary caretakers. Since men have traditionally been privileged in areas of work and education, literature and research imply that women, although present in both areas, have a more difficult experience balancing motherhood and other social roles outside of the family (Ferree, 1990). Mottarella et al. (2009) defines these unrealistic expectations of mothers when discussing the “good mother” role. As mentioned previously, good mothers are held to gender specific expectations that fit stereotypical behavior and attitudes towards children and family.

Literature presents mothers who report that pursing postsecondary education provides important modeling for their children (Ricco et al., 2009). In addition, students who are mothers also describe their education as a transformative experience that changed and strengthened their identity and self-esteem, leading to personal empowerment (Rubin & Wooten, 2007). Although women report that continuation of education can be self-fulfilling and empowering, many women still struggle with the challenges that occur between motherhood and educational or occupational pursuits. Feminism holds the perspective that male dominance exists in the family and that society is oppressive to women. This remains a controversial theory, because arguments against
feminism resist these theories of inequality and reject the idea of oppressive barriers to women.

Edward Kain (1990) analyzed what he called “the myth of the family decline” and argued that today’s families must be understood as one component in a culture of rapid social change. Even though our society is experiencing rapid social change, our expectations of motherhood remain steady and secure. Mothers typically engage in more hands-on-parenting and take full responsibility for children. Thompson and Walker sum up their review of literature by coining fathers as “playmates” and mothers as “caregivers.” The unpredictability of the U.S. economy has had strong effects on families. In 2002, 70% of families reported to be two-parent household, and that in 50.5 percent of those families, both parents work full-time. In 2003, 74% of children ages 0-3 were in non-parental childcare and 63% of families considered at or below poverty level used non parental child care. Furthermore, 69% of children with mothers who are college graduates were in non-parental childcare (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). What exactly do these numbers illustrate? In general, the higher level of education completed might result in better employment, meaning mothers must rely on child care in order to maintain employment. Additionally, mothers who are affected by poverty also use a high level of childcare outside of the home. This may be related to programs that are offered for parents with low economic status, such as head start childcare programs. Stigmas are attached to mothers who stay-at home with their children, send their children to childcare, and mothers who return back to work to soon after having a child (Weiss, 2000).
Gorman and Fritzsche noted (2002) the impact of maternal role satisfaction on perception of the employed mother. Gorman and Fritzsche (2002) investigated the good mother stereotype by conducting a research study that employed 207 participants. All participants in this study were undergraduate students from a large southeastern university and the median age was 19. The participants were asked to give their perception on commitment and child rearing abilities of a fictitious mother (independent variable) in six different written scenarios (dependent variable) that changed dependent upon when she returned to school after the birth of her child. In this study, one scenario presented a mother who stayed at home and expressed satisfaction with her decision was seen as a more committed mother and more selfless than an employed mother who was satisfied with returning to work. Another scenario displaying a mother who took six months maternity leave and was dissatisfied with her decision to return was rated higher than the mother who was satisfied with returning to employment. Despite the fact that satisfaction with one’s parental role was strongly linked to positive parental and child interactions (Barling et al., 1993), the good mother stereotype influenced perceptions of working mothers, and the happily, employed mother was perceived in a negative light. The message, therefore, is ‘stay at home or wish you did’ (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002).

The existence of the good mother stereotype in employment contexts certainly raises the question of how prevalent this concept is in educational environments. Gender role theory would suggest similar findings in both employment and education contexts. However, the role of the student differs from the role of an employee. As presented by
Mottarella et al. (2009), differences exist between students and employees; for example the student role offers a flexible schedule, opportunity to do coursework at home, and perhaps ability to take online courses. The commitment to a career may be perceived as a life-long endeavor; pursuing a degree is time-limited with an end goal. It is agreed that we need to examine the motherhood mandate and the impact of gender-role stereotypes in the educational context. The approach used to examine the mother mandate leaves out important reasons student and employee roles differ. When looking at the role of a graduate student, the schedule may be inflexible and online classes may not be an option. The responsibility of course work may create additional stress to the student who has other important obligations such as work and family.

As Pillay (2009) examined the roles of academic mothers, she concurrently applied theories from both Grosz (1990) and Foucault (1997). Grosz argued that feminist theories need both to criticize and create, and Foucault’s conception of subjugation held that motherhood is one subjugated knowledge that should be brought from the margin to the center. Stalker ultimately suggested that academic institutions should strive to inscribe motherhood into the fabric of being an academic mother. This is theoretically done by embracing perceived oppositions rather than being regulated and even paralyzed by them (Pillay, 2009).

Arlie Hochschild (2003), a professor at UC Berkeley and also the author of several prize-winning books about the balancing act of modern two-job couples at home and at work, is the innovator who introduced the concept of emotional labor.
Hochschild’s research was motivated by boundaries that are drawn within relationships between the individual’s inner and outer experiences. She also applied her perspective on emotion to the American family, which she still described as “stuck” in the book, *The Second Shift*. This study researched 10 heterosexual, married couples with children under the age of six over a two- to five-year time span. Hochschild conducted a longitudinal study beginning in 2004 that followed a similar study she conducted in 1989, investigating obstacles married couples face along with the examination of the gender roles in modern society.

Hochschild’s (2003) research found certain themes during the course of interviewing and observing modern couples who both work and parent. These themes of conflicting roles of the work place and the home are extremely similar to the obstacles women face when juggling family and education. The point remains that women always worked two jobs, only generations ago they worked mostly on farms or domestically and raised their children. Now, the majority of women work outside the home, which creates a very different dynamic and a whole new set of issues for the family. As Hochschild (2003) illustrates,

Women live a life divided between the two competing systems, two clashing rhythms of living, that of family and the workplace. The revolution has influenced women faster than it has men. The unevenness of this revolution has driven a wedge between husbands and wives. (p. 124)
One out of five men in the study conducted was as involved at home as his wife. This seemed to be a generational cycle, passed on from father to son, training them to do certain chores when they were young. Three kinds of tension were highlighted as problems two-job marriages encounter. One tension was between the male and female expectations of the opposite gender at home and at work. The second was the desire of couples to live the old fashioned life (wife at home and husband working) but the need for dual incomes. The third tension is more invisible, nameless and serious: that between the importance of a family’s need for care and the devaluation of the work it takes to give that care (Hochschild, 2001).

A study conducted by Joyce Stalker (2001) described two categories of situational obstacles: attitudinal and practical. Adult participants consisted of 89 students between the ages of 23 and 54 with children between the ages of 7 and 14. Subjects were recruited from southwestern university and consisted primarily of Caucasian, Hispanic and African American women. This study asked the participants to complete a self-report measure of attitudes associated with their student and social roles, rated on a five-point scale. The first instance explained the attitudes of those around women, such as their support systems identified as integral to women’s participation in education. These relationships or lack of such can also create obstacles. They may interfere with women’s roles as students by decreasing their ability to receive major benefits from their education (Stalker, 2001). Many studies, like this one, describe how positive support systems can determine a mother’s ability to succeed in school. As mentioned previously, demanding
tensions that are reported by most mothers act as barriers to educational goals. The presence of a support system, mainly thought of as a husband or children is not enough, that support system must alleviate stressors impacting the student in order for her to achieve success in academic programs.

**Gender and Social Roles**

A survey of the literature on academic mothers shows some familiar and repeated trends. One major trend is that academic mothers, who balance education and motherhood, live in two separate and conflicting worlds. In a study of 22 tenure track mothers, Stockdell-Giesler and Ingalls (2007) found that academic mothers said balancing professional responsibilities with the care of children is exhausting and overwhelming under the best of circumstances. As one mother put it “each role absorbs enormous psychological, intellectual, and emotional energy” (p. 11).

The concept of “greedy institutions” put forth by Coser (1974) is a helpful conceptual lens to view the tensions emerging from conflicting social roles. Greedy institutions are those that seek exclusive and undivided loyalty. Further, they exercise pressures on component individuals to weaken their ties, or not to form any ties, with other institutions or persons that might make claims that conflict with their own demands. Research that looks more generally at the dynamics of academic work and motherhood is imbued with depictions of fear and tension. Turner (1990) refer to the “conflicting demands” as a way to characterize the conflicts that emanate from work and family, a concept that is consistent with Coser.
While research has focused on negative consequences of dual roles played by college mothers, the more positive implications of multiple roles for these women have not been adequately explored (Christopher, 2005). Mothers attending college as students are in a unique position as parents; they share oftentimes with their own school age children the important and demanding social role of a student. The research that has been conducted on this population is primarily concerned with psychological stress resulting from conflicts among student, family, and work roles and with identifying the antecedents of stress and the impact of role conflict on academic performance (Ricco et al., 2009).

A recent study conducted in 2009 at Southwestern University, examined mothers’ reasons for going to college and effects upon conflicting social roles. Eighty-nine of mothers with children between the ages of 7 and 14 years were recruited from psychology and human development departments. The college mothers completed self-report measures of attitude associated with their role as student and parent. The overall finding in this study is that some positive results can be found when mothers are students and are parenting a child who is also a student. Modeling academic motivation was one result discussed in this research study. However, it focused on children seven years old or older, which leaves out mothers with younger children who are also trying to balance conflicting social roles.

A research study by Motteralla et al. (2008) examined college students’ perceptions of other students who returned to school after having a child. Undergraduate
students at a four-year university were asked to rate their perceptions of a mother who returned to school after giving birth and another student who discontinued her studies after having a child. The 205 participants rated the women who elected to return to school as significantly less feminine and more dominant, arrogant and cold-hearted than the other mother who did not return to school.

Stalker (2001) discussed ideas of surrounding stereotypes of roles commonly associated with men and women. Men, viewed as rationale thinkers, are the patriarchs of the family. Women are caring and emotional and often the main caregiver for the children and the home. These are traditional views most literature refers to in order to make the point of gender differences. However, some research does argue in favor of women, conceptualizing the theory of feminism, which insists upon equality between men and women. Unfortunately, most of the literature suffers from using gender-neutral model research, which is based on a blame-the-victim, individualized view of the potential learner.

One specific study discussed the concept of misogyny and how men’s day-to-day practice of malevolence toward woman must be considered as partially responsible for social injustice. While exploring men in relation to women, this study also outlined how fundamental misogynists view women in terms of how they desire women to be or how they fear women to be. It suggest that the real danger lies in playing one set of values over another, in other words deeming men and heterosexuality as the norm and women and homosexuality as deviant (Stalker, 2001). This study highlights a refreshing concept,
different from what is discussed in most literature concerning gender differences and factors leading to struggles with dual social roles held by women. The most interesting point Stalker made is when contemporary misogyny is discussed, thus creating a circular idea that ties in old myths, making them applicable to explain current issues:

For example, as industrialized societies emerged, women were increasingly pushed into private-sphere roles and responsibilities and thus became dependent on men for financial support. This in turn forced a vision and treatment of women as grasping and mercenary. In contemporary times, women’s power and independence increased as, among other things, they moved from the private sphere onto the public sphere. This happened within a context of decreasing economic and political stability. As a result, that movement increased the intensity of actions of contempt and cruelty against women. (Hochschild, 2001, p. 29)

In this research study examining misogyny as the root of problematic dual social roles for mothers, the author states that it is impossible to rectify misogynistic actions because their nature is subtle and difficult to resist. The literature implies that women internalize perceptions set by men and therefore perpetuate the inequality that still exists in society. This concept, linking misogyny to all social injustices against women, has valid points and, at the same time is flawed by generalizing all women as victims. After all, women are able to shape their environments actively and act against misogynistic
practices, and thus destabilize and reshape traditional, debilitating beliefs or norms held by society.

Several studies of reproductive decision making (e.g., Currie, 1988; Soloway & Smith, 1987) report the perceived importance of meeting educational and career goals before starting a family. But they fail to address material differences in work experience and differences among careers in terms of how easily goals can be met. Studies from the 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Lemkau, 1979; Trigg & Perlman, 1976) typically focused on personality traits and an inventory of masculine and feminine characteristics that accompanied traditional and non-traditional career choices. This focus has paved the way for research, which explores the social context of individual career choices.

The work of Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles, 1987) is notable for addressing the extent to which gender socialization mediates people’s subjective values—which in turn influence educational and occupational choices. Embedded in this work is the assumption that women are more likely than men to “value” family over paid employment or education, with obvious consequences for their choices. Gerson (1985) pointed out that women’s labor or educational experiences may significantly shape the choices they make as mothers, sometimes challenging long-held beliefs and intentions. In research on women’s family and employment choices, Gerson found women who intended to pursue careers after having children, but later changed their minds due to unsatisfactory work conditions. She also found women who intended to stay home with their children but instead returned to work because they found their jobs satisfying and
fulfilling. Women have been rethinking career options and expanding educational horizons, however, there has not been a reciprocal rethinking of their childbearing opportunities. Their career and education seem to exist in a separate sphere from marriage and family expectations (Ranson, 1998). Women continue to struggle in balancing dual roles at home and in academics. Fighting for equality, the women’s movement started decades ago, and still seems to remain as an issue presently affected women in today’s society.

**Women’s Role in Education**

Decades of research detail the obstacles that face adult learners as they attempt to engage in educational activities in a variety of locations (Pillay, 2009; Polakow, 1993; Riedle, 1991). Much of that research focused on particular kinds of activities, participants, and providers. One group of research focused specifically on the obstacles faced by women students in tertiary education, that is, university or community college (Ashton, 1976; Fraser, 1979). Within that literature, the topic mainly covered described the tension women experience between the public sphere of formal, institutionalized education and their roles in the private sphere of home and relationships (Stalker, 2001). Research revealed that women feel pulled in very different directions by the two “greedy institutions” (Edwards, 1993, p. 62) of the family and education, the notion of the two spheres provides a useful foundation for theorizing their experiences. Most research done relating to greedy institutions has examined the relationship between family and work, especially military families (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986). Work and higher
education have both been described as institutions requiring the full attention of a person. Moreover, qualities associated with higher education, like competitiveness and individual achievement, much like qualities linked to work, are contradictory and deemed inappropriate for success in the family (Edwards, 1993).

Over the past forty years, the number of women with children in the work force has steadily increased. In 1960, only 19% of mothers with children under the age of six were working. By 1990, this number increased to 56%. By 1999, 64% of women with young children worked outside the home (Wolf-Wendal & Ward, 2006). These trends translate to women in the academic labor force as well. The most recent data provided in research is from the National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF), which shows that 31% of women full-time faculty (of all ranks) have at least one dependent. Seventy percent of male full-time faculty members (of all ranks) have children (Perna, 2001). From these findings, an example is presented of more full-time male instructors with children who are working in education. Thus, a higher number of men are able to work and have children, personally because it is easier for them to do so than for women, who rank lower in recent statistical data.

The literature suggests that as more women enter the work force and educational system, there is an increasing need to understand institutional barriers, challenges and triumphs that women face as they balance conflicting demands of academic life and family life. The American Sociological Association and American Association of Colleges and Universities have given attention to issues associated with work and family.
Further, the Chronicle of Higher Education increasingly pays attention to work and family concerns for women (Wilson, 2009). Clearly this testifies that work and family concerns are on the contemporary conscience of higher education.

When women became visible in academia in the 1960s and 1970s they did so under the banner of equality. What this meant was they were given a space in an already-defined physical and intellectual arena they were expected to emulate, proving they were equal to men (Pillay, 2009). McCorkel and Myers (2003) suggest that the dominance of male thinking is more than just an expression of sexism.

They argue that it is a fundamental privileging of elite men’s systems of thought such that knowledge emerging from their unique experiences and interests permeates our (lesbians, women, people of color) conceptions of the social world and influences how we interpret our lived experiences. (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 202)

The patriarchal foundations of educations have been well researched and documented (Valdivia, 2010). Feminist scholarship has made substantial contributions to feminist theories yet has not adequately transformed our experience into theory and philosophy. Specifically, the politics of what is means to be an academic mother has not been theorized sufficiently. Despite the mention in most research that more women are now seen in academic life, men remain the frame of reference. It is not discussed, however, how universities and colleges will make institutional sacrifices to accommodate academic mothers (Pillay, 2009). The concerning aspect of using the word
“accommodate” is that it suggests the universities must simply make subtle or discrete changes. There is a lack of research focusing on real political change that is needed in order to witness fundamental changes in the traditional institutions such as academia, along with many others that also have been controlled by the White males of higher socio-economic class.

An overwhelming amount of literature suggests that students over the age of 25 are the fastest growing group of nontraditional students in our colleges and universities, and the continued success of postsecondary institutions may be linked to meeting the needs of nontraditional female students (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002; Hepworth et al., 2010; Winterson et al., 2012). Many of these female students are mothers, and this group, in particular, has been recognized as particularly at-risk for attention due to lack of financial and social support. To begin to address these issues, Senator Elizabeth Dole introduced the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Act in 2005, which proposed grant support for colleges to develop services for pregnant and parenting students. This bill was rejected by Congress, highlighting the values and priorities of the political power on the importance of education (Mottarella et al., 2009).

In order to retain female students who are mothers, these women must feel accepted as equally important to academic integration (Tinto, 1975). For example, one woman who participated in a qualitative study expressed feeling out of place and uncomfortable on campus when she returned to school following the birth of her first child (Motterella et al., 2009). In recent literature Stalker (2001) asserted that many
studies researching women’s obstacles to education suffer from the same flaws as general literature on obstacles to adults’ participation.

Davies, Osborne, and Williams (2002) conducted a research study with nine participants who were preparing to enter into a college university graduate program the following year. The study used a questionnaire, which allowed participants to describe the decisions of mature students to enter higher education. In their study they highlighted the importance of “pragmatic” needs of career advancement and/or higher earnings and, on the other hand, of a growing attachment to academic learning for students and potential students. Motivation itself was not enough for students to enter educational programs. For most students, it was the ability to translate aspirations into action that was the essential motivating factor, even for the highly ambitious students.

Barriers to entry were linked to the realities of mature student’s lives: a multiplicity of roles, costs of study, the importance and value attached to caring responsibilities and time management problems. Reay (2003) focused her attention on working-class women and illustrated that in making the decision to pursue higher education, mature women were juggling extensive working commitments or childcare and domestic responsibilities with studying. Moss and McDonald (2004) also showed that once women entered higher education, the whole experience was an ongoing struggle to create time and space for studying.
Gaps in Literature

The experiences of female college students who are raising children while pursuing higher education have received limited attention in the educational and psychological literature (Christopher, 2005). The literature is most disappointing in its lack of theoretical depth, an essential component of gender-sensitive work (Stalker, 2001). First, much of the research is presented through anecdotal stories, designed to give voice to women’s experiences. Without a theoretical framework, they do little to move the readers’ understanding forward or to create new meanings. Second, the concepts of sexism, power relationships, and patriarchy are usually only hinted at as an explanation for women’s experiences. Third, studies that do undertake theoretical analysis tend to follow well-worn intellectual paths. These flaws would not be so concerning if obstacles to women’s participation had been reduced. Although women are now participating in greater numbers within most academic settings, there is an international trend in which women are distributed unequally among faculties, qualifications and hierarchy (Edwards, 1993).

Most of the literature concerning women’s multiple social roles focused on women in the work force (Coontz, 1996; Tomeh, 1978; Vozzola, 1998). This was a flaw, because most of the research that was examined had to pertain to mothers pursing higher education. This topic has not fully been investigated and therefore women’s experiences still need an outlet to describe barriers in order to make changes on two specific levels of policy. In general, and probably more feasibly, there is a need for the state to respond to
the circumstances of women students with familial commitments. There is a limited amount of literature that addresses the concern on the lack of programs existing within the universities. Furthermore there is a lack of care and consideration provided for students currently enrolled in the university system and absence of students who are directly affected by these issues.

Research in general did not address incentives and support that should be given to women with family responsibilities to facilitate undergraduate and graduate educational endeavors necessary to achieve their full potential. On a practical and more immediate level, this research study addresses the need suggested by Reay (2003) for higher education institutions to adopt a more flexible organizational arrangement to reduce stressors related to many women’s experiences of role strain. This study also addresses the gap in research focusing on policies and programs available to mothers in higher education. Related to this gap in research is the call for additional research into transforming current university practices to provide a more positive experience for the non-traditional student like the women in this study. This study concentrates on issues suggested by Vryonides and Vitsilakis (2008) proposing that as increasing numbers of women enter academic institutions, policies must reflect issues concerning these students in successful completion of higher educational programs.
Chapter 3

METHODS

**Introduction**

This study will utilize a qualitative research approach. The grounded theory was used as the guiding paradigm in this exploratory study. A feminist theoretical framework directed the philosophical standard for the evaluation process. This project employed phenomenological content analysis along with coding and categorizing themes found within the twenty interviews that were conducted. A detailed description and discussion will be presented on each element of the research design used in this project.

**Research Question**

The project investigates the following research question: What challenges do women face who have a young child and are also a student in a graduate program?

**Qualitative Approach**

The qualitative approach is used to describe and gain greater insight into issues of human conduct that are not easily reduced to relying on indicators such as measurements or tests (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). For example, in a qualitative study of adolescent depression, the researcher would be more likely to study a much smaller sample and conduct extensive and varied direct observations and in-depth interviews. The sample would need to be small enough to permit the researcher to describe the everyday life of the subjects in detail so that the reader would not question the existence of depression within each participant. In other words, small and focused samples are used more often
than large samples. Qualitative research aims to gain greater insight into human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. The qualitative method investigates the why and how of decision making, compared to quantitative research, which aims to investigate the what, when and where of decision making. The method of qualitative research is particularly effective for investigating subtle distinctions and nuances of attitudes or behaviors (Royce, 1991). In qualitative research, data is collected in three main ways, 1) direct in-person observation, 2) in-depth interviews, and/or 3) participation logs (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). The data that is collected usually consists of written observations of the participants, recorded answer given verbally by participants during an interview or recorded actions of participants. Data is not standardized in qualitative research, which is more commonly seen in quantitative studies. The qualitative method requires the researcher to analyze the data by interpreting a number of themes and common threads, and then look further to also find the absence of commonality within those themes. This type of research allows for a more direct engagement of the participants, by offering their own words, ideas and experiences (Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

The main advantage to qualitative research is the direct contact between the researcher and participant. From this contact, the researcher can record and observe affect and reactions during the interview or observation process (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, the researcher can ask clarifying and follow-up questions as needed. The qualitative approach does not use pre-formulated answers to questions seen in standardized testing, allowing the participants more freedom to give honest and specific
answers. Qualitative studies use open-ended questions in the interview, where the participants give their own answers. Individual meanings and experiences are the focus of qualitative research, rather than the researcher leading answers formulated in pre-selected or closed ended questioning. Another advantage is that qualitative research can often be inexpensive compared to quantitative research studies (Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

Disadvantages to consider when using a qualitative research approach include its subjective nature and lack of generalizability. Inherently, qualitative research integrates subjectivity and personal bias of the researcher into study. When the researcher analyzes the data and pulls out various themes, meanings and words can be open to interpretation. Most qualitative research uses a small sample size and can be subjective, therefore it is not usually representative of the greater population. This type of research is difficult to duplicate, and at times the bias of the researcher is projected during in-person interviews with participants. Projection of researcher bias happens more frequently in qualitative research interviewing than in other data collection techniques (Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

**Exploratory Studies**

This research is an exploratory study, designed to provide a starting point for further investigation. Exploratory studies aim to establish a research base from which additional questions can be investigated with more specific research inquires (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). One criticism of exploratory studies is that a satisfactory answer is rarely provided in response to the research question.
Grounded Theory

The approach guiding this research project is the grounded theory, which begins with observations and looks for patterns, themes, or common categories. The trends and theories that emerge from this investigation will address the question that is asked in this research study. Themes that emerge will be compared and contrasted to find similarities and differences within the evidence of the same phenomenon in similar cases (Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

Feminist Theory

According to Greene (2008), feminist theory seeks to understand the nature of gender equality. Framework under this philosophy examines women’s social roles in many different fields of study. Examples of challenges women face are discrimination, oppression, stereotyping, patriarchy and objectification. Researchers explore feminism through open-ended questions and focus on content of the participants experience in order to clarify misconceptions from the point of view of the woman. In the end, the researcher’s goal is to understand the participants’ unique experience pertaining to many oppressive forces they face as the balance conflicting social roles.

Phenomenological Theory

Phenomenological research is a method participants experiences and their description of those experiences to understand the fundamental nature of human activities and behavior (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). The phenomenological study will be used to gain
greater understanding of the participant’s experiences as well as the context and situation in which they occurred.

**Content Analysis**

Content analysis is a systematic method of examining the content of communications. This involves counting words, phrases, concepts, column inches, minutes of airtime, or even number of hits on a website. Two types of content analysis were used in this study, manifest and latent content. Manifest content is the clearly visible content of the communication, for example, the number of times a specific word was mentioned in the interviews by the participants and various themes that emerged from reviewing the material. Latent content refers to the underlying meaning that was found after themes emerged and findings that were identified (Rubin & Babbie, 2009).

**Study Population**

The subjects in the study had to meet certain qualifying criteria in order to participate. All of the participants were women who had a child six years old or younger. If the participants had more than one child it was permitting as long as one child was six or younger. The subject in addition to being a mother had to be a current student attending a university graduate program. The program was unspecified, the only defining regulation was that it be of graduate level work, thus focusing on attainment of higher education. The focus of the structured interview centered on each participants’ experience as a mother and student.
Sample Plan

This study was conducted by interviewing women who are students at various universities in California. The snowball sampling method was used in this research study. The sample size consisted of 15 women who were interviewed and consented to participate in this study. According to Rubin and Babbie (2008), snowball sampling is often complimentary to exploratory studies. Snowball sampling functions by expanding the subject pool when the researcher asks subjects to refer additional, potential subjects to participate in the research study. Advantages to this method of sampling are that it creates a sense of uniformity, where all participants have similar qualifying characteristics and cohesion between the participants as they are involved in the referral process. It was important to have a sample with similar experiences but also enough variety to compare and contrast experiences, adding to the validity of the study. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. All of the women were directly spoken to and asked to be a part of this study; they agreed to participate and signed informed consent.

Data Collection

The researcher asked fellow CSUS students known to her if they would be able to suggest other students who were mothers in a graduate program who might be interested in participating in this study. Mothers who were interested in participating gave their contact numbers to the original participants, who passed them on to the researcher. The researcher contacted the women and confirmed their interested in participating in this
study, if they did not want to participate the researcher thanked them for their time and no further contact was initiated. If interest was expressed, the researcher emailed an informed consent attachment to them to review and later sign before participating in the interview (see appendix A).

The participants were interviewed in a place that was private and convenient to them. Before the interview began, the informed consent was reviewed and signed. The participant had the opportunity to reject audio recording, none of the participants opted to refuse recording the interview. The interview lasted between 30 and 35 minutes and at the end of each interview the participants were thanked for their time and offered the option to receive a summary of the research findings.

**Instrumentation**

Data was gathered using standardized open-ended question in interviews and the responses were recorded. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted at a time and place that was convenient for the participant. All interview sites were private and agreed to in advance before the interview took place. To address the possibility of comprising internal validity through instrumentation changes a standardized list of questions was created prior to the data gathering. Twenty-eight questions were developed in order to illicit unique responses from each participant when addressing the same subjects found in all of the interviews (see Appendix B). The questionnaire was necessary to ensure uniformity and consistency in all interviews. Uniformity is important during the interviewing process because standardized
questionnaires help to ensure consistency of the topics covered and decreases interjection of interviewer bias. The order of questions and responses allowed for content analysis to also become more standard. Using the standard, pre-developed interview gave each participant the same opportunity to answer questions and express their feelings on each topic.

One disadvantage of the standard open-ended interview is that it can impact the natural flow of conversation by relying primarily on predetermined questions. To counter this effect, the interviews included follow up questions intended to illicit further information on the original topic. The follow up questions also allowed for flexibility on the part of the researcher to pursue topics at greater depth with individual participants who had more experience in different aspects of the research.

Advantages of open-ended questions are that they give respondents the opportunity to express answers to the questions in their own words and to respond with as much detail as they want. Open-ended questions also allow for complex answers and for the use of self-selected vocabulary. Over the course of all of the interviews, open-ended questions can create various responses from each participant. Disadvantages of open-ended questions include: differences in participant’s ability to articulate thoughts, long replies that can be time-intensive to transcribe and code, open-ended replies that can digress from the topic, and answers that vary greatly from each other and may be difficult to compare and develop common themes based upon (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). The interview process mimics a social relationship and requires adherence to social norms and
expectations. The researcher must follow specific guidelines when conducting face-to-face interviews.

**Data Analysis**

After all of the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed into word documents and printed. The data was then reviewed and analyzed for content, themes, differences, concepts and connections. The researcher reviewed interview transcripts three times in order to effectively process material. The first review was used to identify relevant passages that represented themes in the material. The second, reviewer served to highlight keywords for each theme. Finally, the researcher read through the data to further examine highlighted passages to apply latent content analysis to determine underlying meanings within each theme.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

A Request for Review by the Sacramento State Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects was submitted as required to the Division of Social Work Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. After review, the committee approved the study as “Minimal Risk.” No subjects were contacted nor data collected before the approval was received.

All participation was voluntary and all of the subjects were informed that their participation was voluntary. They were also advised that they could decline to answer any specific question, and that they could end the interview at any time. Subjects were referred throughout the study using a “pseudo” name. All information from the
interviews was held as confidential. The recording of the interviews were erased as soon as they were transcribed. All print outs of the interviews were kept in a locked cabinet at the home of the researcher and were destroyed after completion of the analysis. The participants were advised of the study process and confidentiality in the informed consent. All participants read and signed the consent to Participate in Research form (informed consent), which was kept locked cabinet and destroyed at the completion of the research study.

**Summary**

This chapter focused on the qualitative and exploratory design of this research study. This study investigated the challenges women face when involved in conflicting social roles. The sampling techniques and criteria for inclusion were described. Additionally, this chapter reviewed the method of collecting and analyzing data. Finally Chapter 3 discussed the procedures for protecting human subjects.
Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This qualitative research study used open-ended interviews in order to obtain data from the desired population of participants. Fifteen participants were interviewed in private locations. Participants are mothers who are currently enrolled in a graduate program in California. All participants have at least one child who is six years old or younger. The goal of this study was to investigate what challenges mothers may face as they pursue graduate level education. The participants were asked a series of 28 questions (see appendix B) regarding their experience as a mother and as a student in a graduate program. The interview addressed various issues of concern, such as the positive and negative aspects women face as a mother and a student, the additional stress or support a partner or family creates, and how economic conditions may influence parenting and educational decisions.

Participant Demographics

In this qualitative study all 15 participants who were interviewed were female. Ethnicity and race were not addressed in the interview questionnaire. Therefore, demographics on race and ethnicity were not recorded and will not be speculated on for purposes of accurate data analysis. Ten out of the fifteen women who participated viewed their current economic status to be low income. Five women reported that they were middle economic class. Six participants were CSUS students in the Masters of
Social Work graduate program. Four participants are currently enrolled in the Masters of Arts (M.A) Counseling program, with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy (M.F.T), at Sonoma State University (SSU). Three participants were students in the Masters in Social Work program at California State University Chico (CSUC). One participant was enrolled at California State University, Sacramento in the Masters in Education graduate program. Finally, one participant is currently a student at Meridian University in the M.A Counseling program, with a concentration in M.F.T.

All 15 participants are expected to complete internship hours as part of a graduate program curriculum. Some of the participants worked in addition to internship hours and some were completing an internship at their place of employment as a job conversion. Four participants are completing their internship at their current jobs, with different job duties as part of a job conversion. Seven participants were working at a part-time job in addition to an un-paid internship. Four participants were not working outside of their un-paid internship placements. Four women had one child under the age of six and five women had two children six years old and under. Five participants had three children, some of whom were under six and some who were over the age of six. One participant has six children, one of whom is two years old.

**Interview Responses**

The interview consisted of 28 open-ended questions. Five out of the 28 questions covered demographic information. After the two main inclusion criteria were met (graduate student and mother of a child six years of age or younger), the participants were
asked how they are different after becoming a mother? All of the participants answered that their life is very different than before they had children. Some participants answered that it is different now and has become more hectic and chaotic. Others said it is different in terms of lessons learned and the positive rewards of motherhood. The second part of this question inquired if the participant had children before or after beginning a graduate program. All 15 participants had children or a child before they enrolled in a graduate program. This means that the youngest child of a participant in this study was two years old.

**Scheduling Tasks**

The participants were asked how their lives have changed since they became mothers. The majority of the subjects reported that scheduling was a crucial aspect in their lives in order to maintain routines and make sure tasks or priorities are accomplished. One mother with two children ages two and four reported:

> The main thing is I have to make a schedule based on the kids’ schedule and the availability of childcare. Also, I miss the kids or feel guilty about being away for so long and think about them a lot when I’m away. This creates a sense of urgency to get back to them as soon as classes are over, making the occurrences of spontaneous study groups and homework sessions practically non-existent.

**Budgeting Time**

Many of the mothers described the changes because of motherhood as primarily related to “budgeting” time and making a detailed daily schedule to make sure everything
got done. Some even mentioned that now, as mothers, they have much less alone time and try to accomplish tasks in the most time-efficient manner to fit in everything. Having children has created a sense of recognition of priorities. One mother who was 31 years old with three children ages two, five and 13 reported:

When you have children you have to learn to recognize your priorities and to not take school as seriously. What I mean by that is, my children come first so I don’t have as much freedom or time to myself like I used to. Any free time I do acquire is dedicated to school, which definitely has moved down on the list of priorities.

Involvement of Fathers

Another interview question addresses the issue of parental help, asking participants what the role of the child’s/children’s father is, also, how much involvement he has. Some participants have children with multiple partners, or in one case a participant’s first husband passed away and she remarried. Most participants discussed their current relationship in response to this question. Six participants (40%) reported that the father of their child or children has no involvement in their lives. Three (20%) reported that the father has minimal involvement but does not live in the home. Six mothers (40%) said that the father is involved and shares the home, but the degree of involvement varied among participants.

Some women who live with the father of their child reported that although they live together, they still feel that the father contributes less. In some instances when the mother and father do not live together but maintain a positive relationship, the children
struggle with their parents separation and want to see their father more often. When the father was present in the home it did not seem to make a significant difference to the mothers in terms of providing support with daily responsibilities. Three participants (20%) said that the father is very involved and contributes equally to the family, not always with childcare but financially (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Singe Mother*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
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*Mothers as Primary Caregivers*

The interview addresses the topic of care giving in the household and asks if the participant feels she is the primary caregiver. All 15 participants reported that they feel they are the primary care giver. Whether the father was absent or present in the home all mothers answered yes to being the main care taking in the home. Reasoning and justifications differed afterwards, but initially all reported that they consider themselves the main caretaker of the children or child. Most participants simply answered yes, others gave explanations for why they did more, being either that the father supported the
family in other ways (i.e., finances) or the father just did not contribute as much time into the care giving as the participant. One mother explained:

My husband is entirely responsible for the financial support of our family while I am responsible for the kids and the household. When we were ready to start our family we decided to do it this way because we wanted to have our children with us as much as possible before they started school and he makes much more than me at his job.

Another participant described her role as primary caregiver:

Yes I am the main caregiver in my household. I take care of health care, mental health, school functions, preparing the children for school, parent-teacher conferences, cooking, shopping, and homework, all of it basically. All of the responsibility falls on my shoulders, especially the nurturing, I make sure the children are taken care of and they have everything they need. I do all the decision making period, even as far as finances are concerned because I make more money than he does so in a way he depends on me financially.

One participant who was born in Southeast Asia felt that her role as primary caregiver was not a result of stereotypic roles played out between men and women. She reported that, “I do more work at home and with the children because that’s who I am, it is my nature.” Other women in the study attributed their role as primary caregiver to uncontrollable circumstances throughout life or the lack of support offered by others, such as lack of childcare, family, or financial stability. In result, eleven out of the fifteen
women externalized blame for their role as the primary caregiver and one participant seemed to internalized blame, thus taking responsibility for any difficulty she had balancing multiple obligations outside the home (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Primary Caregiver*

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*Assessment of Motherhood*

Participants were asked how they assess motherhood. Ten participants (67%) reported that motherhood was a full-time job. Many (11 participants, 73%) stated that motherhood has changed them and it is the most important role they will play in their life. Others discussed how motherhood is challenging (60%) but rewarding (67%). Most responses (12 participants, 80%) addressed that motherhood, although stressful and challenging, is a life changing experience. Motherhood was also described as an overall rewarding and transforming experience. The responses varied less on this question; many participants gave similar answers, and almost all of the participants reported
regarding motherhood positively in some aspect. The participant from Southeast Asia reported her husband gave up his job and moved United States to help his elderly parents:

I am not the only one who has changed, my husband and I are from a country that values community, respecting and honoring the elderly. We came here to help his parents and he is supporting my decision to go to school. This takes time away from my role as a mother, which is more important than my role as a student.

The variation of responses highlighted the wide range of emotions the women connected with their evaluation of motherhood.

**Social Adjustments**

Participants were asked how their social life changed after the birth of their children. Most participants reported that their ability to interact socially had changed. Some said that they still have a social life; it just revolves around their children now. Others discussed interacting socially only with other parents. Some mothers reported that their social life has changed dramatically and some said the concept of a social life is non-existent compared to what it was before children. One example of a mother reporting how her life has changed after children reported:

There are two things that have happened with my social life in terms of kids. First, social events require more planning and more involvement with other people for support. In addition, having young children at home has caused sleep deprivation, so there isn’t as much motivation or energy to go out as there was
before. Needless to say, I do have a social life, just a different kind of social life than before kids.

**Time Constraints**

Thirteen out of fifteen (87%) participants commented on having less free time or alone time as a result of motherhood. Fourteen out of fifteen (94%) reported that they participate in fewer social activities with friends, and if they do attend social events or activities they involve friends who also have children. Ten participants (67%) stated they spend far less time with single friends or friends without children. In addition, motherhood has served as an opportunity to develop new friendships with other parents. Five participants (34%) reported that they do not have any time for socializing. Describing how all their free time is spent with children, doing homework and/or working. The most common response focused on time and how most challenges derived from time limitation or scarcity of time.

Participants were asked what would make motherhood easier. Ten participants (67%) answered that not working while in school would make motherhood easier. Some mothers added that they unfortunately have to work for financial reasons. Many participants said that motherhood would be easier if they had more support in terms of family or affordable childcare. One participant answered that “open dialogue about expectations and what it means to be a parent” would make it easier to be a mother. Another participant discussed the need for more time with children, explaining that the demands of school, work, and homework require so much time that motherhood ends up
taking a back seat to other responsibilities too often. In effects motherhood would be
easier if support was more accessible in terms of reliable, trustworthy, and affordable
childcare. All of the participants preferred family or close friends to watch their children
over daycare centers. The mothers who do not work reported that they stay home with
children for various reasons including lack of affordable childcare, family support, or
inflexible internship or school schedules.

Alternative Activities

The participants were asked what they would enjoy doing more with their
children. A common response (74%) was being able to spend time more time with their
child or children. Spending time doing recreational activities (13 participants, 87%) was
the main response given by participants. They reported that with other obligations such
as school, work and internships, they often were too busy to engage in leisure activities
with their children or families. One mother with three children and a live in partner
reported:

I would enjoy going on more outings with my kids if I had more free time and I
wasn’t so stressed out about work and school. When I do spend time on the week
nights or weekends with my family I end up feeling guilty that I am neglecting an
important assignment that is due. There is always some pressing responsibility
like work or school. I never feel totally relaxed. If I had more time more with my
kids, I would spend it being present in the moment with whatever we are doing,
not worrying about homework or tests. I wish I was able to be more present and
available to my children. I don’t like them to see me stressed all the time or feel like they can’t ask me to play with them or take them on a fun outing.

Many reports involved the concept of wanting to go out into the community more and participate in family activities together. Other than family outings, participants also reported, just being able to spend more time at home together as a family as an enjoyable activity. Due to the time consuming responsibilities of school and work, most mothers felt they did not have enough time to spend with their family.

**Concerns of Mothers**

Participants addressed what concerns they have as mothers. A common response given was whether good choices are being made for their children and if they are raising their children with morals and instilling values and traditions in their children. Eleven out of fifteen participants (74%) commented on how they are affecting their children’s future with their choices. Some put it in terms of their ability to raise successful adults (47%) and others said they worry about their children’s health, safety and well-being (40%). Many of the participants discussed their concern for providing a safe environment, enough food, clothing and preparing their children to be independent. Another concern that five (34%) participants mentioned was how quickly society is changing and how difficult it will be for their children to thrive in this economy and in the future. The concerns differed in some aspects; however, in general a high concern was how the mother’s choices would later affect their children.
Support Systems

The interview covered the topic of support systems that the participants considered to be of help in terms of advice, childcare, and finances. Half of the subjects reported that they did not have family nearby and relied on outside help for childcare. In most of these cases the women also waited longer to return to school after having children. They reported that it was easier to attend graduate classes and complete the high level of course work when children attended daycare, preschool or elementary school. The other half of the participants reported having family living in the same town/city or financial support provided by their significant others. The participants who depended on their partners for financial support were able to work less and choose high quality childcare. The women in the study who had to work for financial reasons, found a greater challenge in finding reliable child care when family was not an option and reported having fewer support systems. However, women who were single mothers reported that they qualified for community based childcare and various grants provided though financial aid.

The women who had family (i.e., mother, father, extended family such as cousins or aunts and uncles) living close to them found it easier to depend on them for child care and were able to rely less on daycare centers, which was reported as a less favorable option financially. One mother with three young children, the youngest two years old, reports the following:
We have some support in terms of our relationship because we see a therapist for relationship counseling, in terms of family, we do not have anyone close by to help us with the kids. I cannot afford to send my youngest child to daycare for two reasons, one I am having difficulty with finances, and, secondly, all the daycares are full and there are long waiting lists. My partner can help with finances to some degree but does not make a lot either. My older children are in school during the day while I’m at work, so I have had to bring my youngest child to work with me, which is becoming a burden at work. I am struggling at the moment because I do not have enough support in terms of childcare or financially.

The subjects varied on their responses to this question because it was very different for each individual in terms of what family member were available or how many daycare programs were offered in different cities and towns where they lived. Many of the participants (67%) said that they depended on community resources and friends. Some said that when they were in a situation with no support available and as the primary caregiver, often had to cancel obligations such as class or work. The level of support systems reported by the participant directly affected their levels of stress, ability to accomplish various tasks and attendance at school or work.

**Mother vs. Student**

Participants were asked, “How is your overall attendance in school since you have become a mother?” Eight women (54%) said their attendance patterns have changed after they became mothers. Seven women (47%) reported that their attendance was good
and they make it to most classes. Some mothers reported a pattern of missing classes due to children’s school functions, illness or childcare conflicts. Other participants described school as such an important responsibility, they felt pressure to make it to class and made sacrifices to avoid missing. One question asked the participants to give specific examples of why they would need to miss classes. All of the participants reported that if they missed class, it was due to their children, being sick or childcare conflicts.

One mother talking of her experience with attendance while enrolled in the social work graduate program at California State University, Sacramento said:

> My attendance has been pretty good, I miss maybe one day a semester and it is always due to my children being sick or childcare cancelling. It is such a sacrifice and an effort to get to school that it is rare now for me to miss, even if I’m sick. I usually only miss class now if it comes to my children needing me at home. Also, attendance is such a big deal for most of my teachers that if I miss two classes my grade is automatically lowered and if I miss three classes I can fail the class. There is so much pressure surrounding good attendance I work really hard to make sure I do not miss.

The pressure of missing class was high stress factor for many mothers. When attendance was not a large factor in grading it positively affected academic performance and reduced stress.
Consideration for Academic Mothers

The participants were asked about the level of understanding and consideration given by professors when they have to miss class. Ten participants (67%) said absences are not considered acceptable, and they lose participation points for missing class. Five participants (34%) indicated that their teachers are understanding and take family emergencies into consideration. Five participants (34%) reported that professors understand when they miss class and it does not affect their grade. Most of the participants (74%) claimed that it does affect their grade and their teachers take absences seriously; missing too many classes can lower grades and potentially lead to failing the class. One subject who was originally born and raised in Southeast Asia gave a different response to this question:

When I miss class it is not because of my children or my husband, I am the one to blame, I also do not feel I deserve special treatment from my teachers for missing. I chose to be in this program, knowing it was going to be difficult and that I have a young child to care for. I knew what my challenges would be so why should I expect anyone to give me special considerations or differential treatment?

This experience reported by one participant indicated internalized blame for challenges that developed as a student, however the other fourteen participants (94%), attributed an externalized blame for arising academic challenges (see Table 3).
Table 3

*Internalized Blame*

The participants were asked how they faced challenges in regard to motherhood and education.

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<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage of participants</th>
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<td>No</td>
<td>95</td>
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*Expectations of Preferential Treatment*

Participants were asked what kind of treatment they should receive as a student who is also a mother. Eleven participants out of fifteen (74%) felt they should receive more understanding from their teachers when issues come up at home, and that grades should not be affected by absences. Four participants (27%) reported that they feel it is fair that they are held to the same standard as the rest of the students who do not have children. Another common response was, “I expect to be treated fairly, meaning I do not feel I should be treated differently just because I am a mother.” Other mothers felt the opposite:

I am in the graduate program for social work and it feels like students who are single or don’t have children are favored at times. I feel like my barriers are not
even considered, and we are supposedly working towards helping others and often ignore people in our own department who need help.

Although responses varied, participants seemed to agree on the idea that their grades should not be determined by absences beyond their control, thus referring back to the concept of externalized blame.

**Successful Completion**

When the interview asked if the participants expected to graduate on time, the unanimous response was yes. All the participants (100%) felt that they will graduate on time and whether they were enrolled in a two- or three-year program did not factor into the outcome. The next question asked how their finances have been affected by motherhood. All 15 participants said their financial situations have changed since becoming a mother. Some said that now they are struggling financially and other said it has been more difficult but they are still financially stable. It made a difference if the participant had an additional source of income, such as a partner who also worked or was the main financial contributor; financial aid and student loans were also variables that were mentioned. The participants mentioned various challenges but all seemed unanimous about their ability to successfully complete the graduate program in which they were enrolled.

**The Trifecta: Motherhood, School, and Work**

Participants were asked whether they worked in addition to attending school. Ten participants (64%) said they work either part-time or full time in addition to school. For
some that meant they were involved in a job conversion, where they fulfill their internship hours at their current place of employment, and others work outside of their field placement. Five mothers (34%) said that they do not work in addition to school and field placement, which is considered an unpaid internship. Seven out of the ten (70%) women who work in addition to school have part-time jobs in which some are also completing hours of their internship as a job conversion. The women who are completing a job conversion reported that that is the only option that allowed them to complete internship hours and continue to work part-time; therefore making the same amount of money as before they entered the program. Women in a lower economic status or single mothers were more likely to work in addition to attending school full-time (see Table 4).

Table 4

Employed

The participants were asked how they faced challenges in regard to motherhood and education.

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Challenges of Working

The next question asked if the participant’s current job helped or interfered with their role as mothers. Four women out of the eleven participants (36%) that work in addition to school and internship said that their jobs are helpful. Seven women (64%) said their jobs have interfered. The women who said their jobs are helpful gave reasons such as being able to bring their child or children to work when needed, the ability to take time off when necessary and flexibility in their work schedule. The women who said their job has interfered provided examples such as inflexibility in weekly work schedule, inability to leave work or call out when their child is sick or child care conflicts emerge, and lack of community resources in terms of affordable or available child care coinciding with work schedules. One mother, listing her challenges working, while in enrolled in a graduate program at CSUS reported:

Since I am working full-time I have missed my children’s field trips and other school events. I missed the ability to help my older child who is in high school now. Because I work and go to school I have trouble finding time to do any extracurricular events with my children. At the current moment I’m just trying to make sure my youngest child who is three has child care while I’m working and in school. So no, my job has not been flexible with my schedule and considerate with how much I have on my plate. Working full time at a place where there is no flexibility has made it more difficult.
Working Flexibility

The mothers who reported having flexibility with their current place of employment also reported that this was helpful in accomplishing schoolwork under a constantly changing schedule. One mother describes her experience with working part-time while completing a job conversion and also as a student at Sonoma State University enrolled in the graduate program for Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT):

I am able to bring my youngest child to work with me when I need to during the week. My job has been very flexible with allowing me to bring my son to work, while also completing my internship hours as a job conversion. This flexibility has been extremely helpful in this stressful time in my life. If I couldn’t bring Evan to work with me when I don’t have child care or take off time when he or one of my other children is sick, I don’t know what I would do. I wonder what other women do that don’t have flexible jobs but also have a demanding schedule. Flexibility and understanding in the workplace are crucial to my success.

Lessons Learned

Participants were asked, “What have you learned since your baby was born?” Answers to this question varied, and each participant gave a different answers based on different life experiences. A few themes emerged however through closer examination of the participants’ responses. One theme that was commonly used discussed a great appreciation for motherhood and the importance of the bond between mother and child. Beyond the bond created between mother and child, other participants listed
characteristics like patience and strength that they felt were gained after becoming a mother. One mother describes her experience:

Motherhood is not easy; being a mother is a full-time job with no breaks or time outs. It is my job to make sure my kids have morals and values, which is a lot of pressure and I don’t take lightly. It’s much different than I thought it would be; juggling all of these responsibilities is much harder to do than it seems. Being a parent is one of the most rewarding experiences and at the same time can be so overwhelming that I feel like giving up sometimes.

Three participants (20%) discussed how motherhood has taught them what was important in life and given them the ability to let go of trivial matters. Four mothers (27%) mentioned that motherhood has taught them to enjoy life. The most common response from the participants mentioned the positive rewards that result from motherhood despite the various challenges or obstacles.

**Regret vs. Satisfaction**

Another question asked the participants if they could change anything about their life, would they or would they make different decisions if they were given a second opportunity. Three out of the fifteen participants (20%) said they are content with the way that their life is unfolding and they would not change anything. The other 12 participants (80%) mentioned various goals they wish they would have accomplished sooner or things they wished were different about their life. Many participants (74%) mentioned that they would have wanted to finish academic goals before their children
were born, in order to spend more time with their children when they were ready to be parents. Some mentioned that it hypothetically might have been easier financially to have children before entering a graduate program. Others said that a graduate program is so demanding that having children later in life would have been a better choice.

A mother reports her thoughts about motherhood and graduate education:

It would have been easier to finish school first, then have children, that way I could focus on me. Now I have to sacrifice time with my children to accomplish my goal. I always feel guilty for neglecting one or the other (children or school), but the reality is I have to finish so I can hopefully get a better job and provide for my children, creating stability. In the meantime I am absent often from my children’s lives, more than I want to be, that is the ironic part.

This was an example of a theme which emerged about sacrifices mothers make in order to accomplish educational goals.

Another subject described her ideas of what she would do differently if possible

In general I am happy with the decisions we have made. Everything worked out the way it was supposed to. I can’t say I wish things were different because then if I changed them I wouldn’t have my two beautiful children, who mean the world to me. That is really all it comes down to is how much I love my babies. If I have to make a few sacrifices here and there that’s fine.
This answer indicated a theme where the mother feels content with parenting and academic choices. Different perspectives were given in response to this question and the participants answers varied in what changes they would make.

**Advice to Future Mothers/Students**

The subjects were asked what advice they would give to other mothers pursuing graduate degrees with young children. The responses varied in this question as well because the participants have lived very different lives and have different outlooks on what they value. Some values and fundamental ideas were similar in regards to advice the participants wanted to pass on. For example, mothers (40%) suggested that other mothers in a similar situation ask for advice and let loved ones around them know what they need and how they can help. Other suggestions (47%) were to set clear expectations and try to stay organized (54%). Participants advised mothers to take time out for themselves, make time to de-stress and learn how to set limits. One common response given was:

> Take it one day at a time, make schedules so there are clear expectations, make sure you try and spend time with your children as much as you can. I don’t have all the answers, I am figuring out as I go along. Most important, children grow up so fast so cherish it.

The advice from the participants was insightful and meaningful themes developed from the experiences of the women in this interview.
The Journey of Motherhood

Mothers said (27%) they wanted other mothers to follow their dreams and listen to their hearts. It was a common response from the participants that other mothers try to give credit where it is deserved. One mother advised:

Try not to feel like it all needs to be done in a certain time frame. Life is a journey and not a destination. Try to withhold enough of yourself for your children and family to make it the whole way through. Allow yourself room to just be present and have fun with your children, even if it means sacrificing time spent on school work or household chores. Remember that being a mother to young children is only for a brief moment in time and before you know it they are all grown up and don’t want to have a tea party with you anymore or spend the afternoon looking for ladybugs, so take time and enjoy it. I am very organized but I learned early on in life a valuable lesson: plan your next day the day before and be ready for whatever may come. Allocate time for life’s little surprises and you will be happier and less stressed.

Many of the participants felt it was important to recommended living near family members (47%), having a stable home environment (40%) and taking alone time (60%) in order to be successful at balancing both roles as a mother and a student. These suggestions are beneficial to future mothers who wish to pursue graduate programs.
Additional Comments

The final question asked the participants if there was anything they wanted to add. Five out of fifteen participants (34%) said no. Ten participants (67%) gave responses, some which were long and others that were short and direct. One mother said, “Motherhood is the hardest, most demanding job you will ever take on but also the most rewarding one if you let it be.” Another mother said:

- Society makes it hard for women that want both worlds, like a career and motherhood. People think this is a problem from the past, but I’m finding that it still applies, and what the problem seems to be is that people think it isn’t an issue anymore. It is hard for me to accomplish my educational goals while having a young family. Either we sacrifice our goals and desires in education or sacrifice family, children, motherhood or personal time. When I am doing one thing I feel like I am neglecting another in the process. I am considered a bad mother if I don’t spend enough time with my kids, or I am just a ‘stay-at-home mom’ or a housewife if I don’t pursue higher education and have a successful career.

The 10 participants who chose to add further information gave the following suggestions:
1) cherish time with children,
2) consider the financial situation prior to beginning a graduate program, and
3) in order to reduce stress levels take time out for self.
Themes

From the interview process, five primary themes emerged:

1) Economic status influences the level of difficulty mothers experience in higher educational programs.

2) The relationship status of the participants did not affect their role as primary caregiver in the household.

3) Women who consider themselves to be in a relationship are under additional stress.

4) The age of the child plays a large role in challenges mothers encounter when in school.

5) Participants either externalized or internalized blame based on cultural influences.

Summary

Chapter 4 discussed and reviewed the questions asked and responses obtained with fifteen participants as part of this research study. The challenges women face as students in a graduate program and mothers of young children were covered in the interview with questions concerning specific issues on financial stability, childcare, support systems, and academic goals. Chapter 5 will draw conclusions and describe recommendations. The limitations of this study and implications for social work practice and policy will be examined.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This research study focused on 15 mothers, who shared their experiences as mothers while trying to continue their education as students in a graduate program. The findings in this qualitative study gathered information from the participants from open-ended interviews, where the participants were able to describe their individual and uniqueness outlook on motherhood and higher education. This chapter will focus on implications from this study as they relate to the field of social work. Recommendations and conclusions will be discussed and examined in order to provide an outline for future studies and will also cover limitations found after the research was complete.

Summary of Findings

This research study asked the question: What challenges do women face when taking on multiple strenuous social roles? Specifically, what barriers do women face while balancing motherhood and education (i.e., graduate school)? The answer to this question is not exact, the results were found to be complex and diverse based on the varied experiences of the mother who participated in this study. The findings from this study differ from those described in research conducted by Joyce Stalker. Stalker (2001), explain that woman are a product of a misogynistic culture that has only changed on the surface over time, and the paradigm of male dominated roles is still strongly present in barriers affecting women’s ability to achieve equality.
This research indicates that the roles of being a mother and student can be performed simultaneously. Providing unconditional love, relationship with the father of the child, the availability of affordable, quality child care, economic status, and how the woman internalized or externalized blame all are important factors associated with the choices participants made when they decided to begin, or finish a graduate program with young children. The experiences of the women in this study seemed to reflect how women in specific situations handle strenuous social roles and responsibilities, such as motherhood and higher education. The shared experiences of the women suggested that even though balancing graduate level work with the demanding responsibilities of motherhood is challenging, the commonality among the women was that it is possible and even rewarding to be a mother and a student, despite various obstacles.

**Motherhood Values and Priorities**

The themes of economic status, whether the participant was single or in a relationship, responsibility as the primary care giver, age of the child or children, and how blame was interpreted were all related because they described in some aspect how the women cope with their circumstances. Two themes, relationship status of the mother and how the mother interpreted blame and guilt both suggest what values were most important to the women. Some mothers internalized blame for leaving their child to attend to the demands of school and work. Other mothers externalized blame, attributing social barriers, such as academic institutions, romantic partnerships, or the eminent demands of work, as factors affecting their time and ability to care for their children.
Regardless of whether the blame or guilt was introverted or extroverted, the evidence displays how the women value motherhood and prioritize the needs of their children despite the challenging barriers that school may also present simultaneously. Studies support that motherhood becomes a top priority for women after having children and is also consistent with child development theories that suggest women experience a transitional process of development that leads to responsibility of another human being (Longres, 2000; Reay, 2011).

The relationship status of the mother is connected with the previously mentioned theme of motherhood values and responsibilities because the ability of the mother to care for her children with additional and strenuous duties depends greatly on support. In most cases the women mentioned the presence or absence of support from a significant other. In the cases where the women were in a relationship, their partners seemed to create additional stress for the women. Instances where the woman was single created less stress, more time with their children and increased eligibility for affordable, available childcare when participants were in school. The women all wanted more time with their children and indicated feelings of valuing the rewards of motherhood over the positive aspects associated with relationships or intimate involvement.

**Women as Primary Caregivers**

Another theme that relates closely with the two previous themes was the consistency between the women in the study who all felt they were the primary care taker in the household. This was consistent across the spectrum of women in a relationship and
single participants. Whether the mothers felt that they lacked support, or that it was their natural maternal instinct that resulted in their role as primary care giver, it did not change the evidence connecting all the mothers in this study. This factor not only indicates the usually natural and unconditional bond between a mother and child, but the unchanging issue that women still feel that they are doing the majority of the nurturing and care taking in regards to their children.

**Challenges of Mothering a Young Child**

Another important theme that emerged was the age of the child or children of the various women who participated in the study. Mothers with young children (i.e., two years and under) increased the challenges they encountered. For example, mothers of children under two, and first time mothers had a more difficult time adjusting to the conflicting demands of motherhood and school. This was a common issue for women who were still breastfeeding or had not been away from their children for long periods of time prior to beginning a higher educational program (i.e., graduate program). According to John Bowlby (as cited in DeHart, Sroufe, & Cooper, 2004), attachment is the lasting psychological connectedness between human beings. The central theme of attachment is that mothers who are available and responsive to their infant’s needs establish a sense of security in their children. Knowing that the caregiver is dependable creates a secure base for the child to then explore the world, developing independence and creativity. Object relational theory, an offshoot of psychoanalytic theory, suggests that development is primarily based on the individual’s relations to objects, in particular, their mother
(DeHart et al., 2004). This theory also suggests that the relationships that are initially formed during early interactions with primary caregivers can be seen as patterns later in life. Although these patterns can be altered, they often remain strongly influential throughout one’s life (Greene, 2008). In reference to the theories of attachment and object relations theory, it can be assumed that early childhood development is crucial in the psychological patterns formed within an individual. In other words the theme emerging from this study holds true to various theories that imply the importance of early mother-child bonding and the normalcy of conflicted feelings when leaving a young child during the first two years, especially for a first time mother.

**Impact of Economic Status on New Motherhood**

Economic status of the participant was another theme that emerged. Participants, who classified their economic status to be low or middle class, were at risk for more challenges in terms of balancing roles as a parent and a student. The high demands of a graduate program (e.g., tuition, work load, class scheduling, etc.) co-occurring with the trying responsibilities of motherhood made it more challenging for women on the lower end of the economic spectrum. Factors such as social class and gender affect the individual’s ability to attain certain levels of success due to economic and societal oppressors (Greene, 2008). This theme was consistent with the feminist framework guiding the study, indicating women face high levels of oppression based on gender, economic class, and ethnicity. These factors lead to more challenges and obstacles that many women experiencing financial difficulty may encounter.
In conclusion, a number of themes were identified from the various responses given by participants that illustrated their experiences as mothers involved in higher educational programs. In summary the study was based on qualitative research, which included in-depth, open-ended interviews. Conclusions cannot be applied beyond the group of participants used in this research.

**Implications for Future Research**

The one major limitation of this study is that the sample includes only fifteen mothers attending graduate programs at accredited universities. The small sample size may be biased towards participants who find it easier to talk about their experiences in motherhood and education. The constraints imposed on the recruitment process to mothers and full-time students in a graduate program, who had a child six years old or younger meant that it would have been impossible to sample randomly. However, the final sample included participants with a range of socio-economic backgrounds, number of children, and cohabitation arrangements with the biological father.

A number of themes were identified from the various responses given by participants that illustrated their experiences as mothers involved in higher educational programs. In summary the study was based on qualitative research, which included in-depth, open-ended interviews. Conclusions cannot be applied beyond the group of participants used in this research. It is acknowledged that some of the study limitations include a small sample size of 15 participants, with specific qualifying characteristics.
Other aspects of the study were also addressed, such as the challenges that many women face while balancing roles of motherhood and higher education.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

This qualitative study impacts the social work field on three levels of Micro, Mezzo and Macro Practice. The women in this study gave a deeper insight into their experiences of balancing motherhood and higher education (i.e., graduate program). These experiences revealed specific challenges and adversities many women face as they attempt to maintain certain expectations of mothers and students simultaneously.

Applying the participants’ experiences to the field of social work is beneficial in order to adapt to current changes and problems that are affecting a population of society.

Micro social work practice addresses issues on an individual level, in terms of therapy, group work, or case management. In order for social work practice to meet ethical and professional standards, social workers must understand which issues are affecting specific groups or individuals. Many women are faced with the challenge of dividing their time, energy and finances between motherhood and education, which creates a tension and conflict. It is important for social workers to understand the implications for women when balancing strenuous social roles. The participant’s individual experiences give meaning to this research study by helping to identify factors that can either support or delay the completion of a graduate program. Stressors that result from role conflict can benefit professionals in the field with case assessment, intervention plans and treatment goals. Universities in various communities should
increase awareness and develop programs to support their students who are struggling with childcare, high costs of academics, and lack of support from individual graduate programs. Gaining knowledge and insight into the challenges and barriers women face, is beneficial to community members, community based services and universities in the communities.

Mezzo social work practice influences community based services. The findings from this study are useful to communities because individuals who are attending universities are members of the community in various areas. The mothers who are experiencing challenges are students enrolled in accredited universities in California. The challenges women encounter when pursuing higher education is a concern that often is overlooked. The integration of community programs would be beneficial to address issues of mothers who commute to school, lack of quality childcare available to student-mothers and the increase of financial hardships with the additional graduate studies. Social workers in the field may use their connections and resources in community based services to raise awareness, acceptance and support for mothers attaining higher education.

Policy or Macro social work practice definitely needs to address the lack of quality childcare that is available to mothers based on widening requirements for eligibility. Results from this study indicate that many mothers struggle with finding affordable or quality childcare, which restricts education and employment opportunities. It is necessary for policy to make changes that reflect current issues that have negative
and adverse affects on a specific population. In this study women commonly described feeling torn between care giving in the household and pressure to advance professionally. This clash in ideology is affecting policy, modified programs and services are needed to meet the unresolved issues occurring between motherhood and education.

**Conclusion**

The findings in this study, that combined interrelated themes from fifteen mothers enrolled in a graduate program, contributed to the literature on role strain and mothers balancing conflicting social roles. The results of this study cannot be generalized but can provide a context for increased awareness and understanding. Specifically, the findings of the study indicate that to better address childcare and financial issues of mothers in higher educational programs, universities must increase awareness and consideration of these various circumstances highlighted by the participants lived experiences. Furthermore, the findings from this study can be used to understand current dilemmas students face by presenting fifteen cases of mothers with young children, who are currently attending an accredited university graduate program. The resulting themes that emerged from this study provide a greater insight into the experiences of these mothers, which emphasized common threads and differences among the participants. From these themes, some implications can be assumed, for instance this research implies that eliminating barriers for women who are mothers, including discouraging stereotypes, would be beneficial to support higher education and academic success for students with young children. The results of the present study indicate that while many social barriers
have been eliminated in the academic institution, women who return to school (i.e.,
graduate programs) within the first six years of their children’s lives, need extra support
from the universities and specifically, individual academic programs to ensure success in
the pursuit of higher education.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Sacramento State University

Title of Project: A Look Into Balancing Motherhood and Education.

Researcher: Christina Daugherty, MSW II Student

Participant's Printed Name: __________________________________________

This is a research study that looks at motherhood and graduate education. Expectations are to identify a more effective means to reduce stress of women balancing school and motherhood. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. You may discuss any questions about this study with researcher or with your family and friends or order to make your decision to participate. If you decide to participate you must sign this form to show that you want to take part in an interview.

Purpose of the Research

You are being offered the opportunity to take part in this research study because you are a mother of a young child or children and you are also in a graduate program at a university. This research study is being done to find out whether roles of motherhood and education pose challenges to women and whether these roles make it more difficult for women with children to complete graduate programs.

Approximately 20 people will participate as subjects in this research study.

Time Duration of the Procedures and Study

If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last approximately 40-60 minutes. You will be asked to be interviewed in a private room on CSUS campus one time.
Discomforts and Risks

There are minimal risks associated with this research.

Possible benefits to the participant:

The possible benefit you may experience from participating in this research includes a gained perspective on roles as a mother and student and how they influence one another. Another benefit may be that participants gain insight on how to reduce challenges that arise in the future concerning this topic of concern. However, there is no guarantee that you will benefit from being in this research study.

Possible benefits to others:

The results of this research project may guide professionals working with mothers who suffer from role strain implications.

Statement of Confidentiality

Your research records that are reviewed, stored, and analyzed at Sacramento State University will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home.

In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Your participation in this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people may become aware of your participation in this study. For example, the following people/groups may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research.

- The Sacramento State Institutional Review Board and
- The Sacramento State Human Subjects Protection Office

Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your
research record private and confidential but absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

There are no costs associated with this interview.

**Compensation for Participation**

You will not receive any compensation for being in this research study.

**Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this research, your major responsibilities will include answering questions as part of an interview. You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. If you decide not to participate or if you decide to stop taking part in the research at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Contact Information for Questions or Concerns.**

You have the right to ask any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints or concerns or believe you may have developed an injury related to this research, contact Christina Daugherty at 707-972-7122. You may also contact the research advisor for this study, Dr. Bankhead at bankhead@csus.edu.

If you feel you need further assistance regarding counseling services please contact the Counseling and Psychological Services at Sacramento State University 916-278-6416.

**Signature and Consent/Permission to be in the Research**

Before making the decision regarding enrollment in this research you should have:
- Discussed this study with an investigator,
- Reviewed the information in this form, and
- Had the opportunity to ask any questions you may have.

Your signature below means that you have received this information, have asked the questions you currently have about the research and those questions have been answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated form to keep for future reference.
**Participant:** By signing this consent form, you indicate that you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research.

__________________________ __________ ______ ________________
Signature of Participant   Date  Time  Printed Name

This interview will be recorded by audio tape, If you do not wish to be recorded please check the appropriate box below.

Yes ___

No, I do not want to be recorded _____

**Person Explaining the Research:** Your signature below means that you have explained the research to the participant/participant representative and have answered any questions he/she has about the research.

______________________________  _________ ______
Signature of person who explained this research Date  Time            Printed Name

*Only approved investigators for this research may explain the research and obtain informed consent.*
*A witness or witness/translator is required when the participant cannot read the consent document, and it was read or translated.*
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Christina Daugherty  
Thesis Project: A Look Into Balancing Motherhood and Education  
Advisor: Dr. Bankhead

1. How old are you?
2. How many children do you have and what are their ages?
3. What is your education level? Are you currently a student?
4. What is your social class? (low income, middle class, upper income)
5. If yes, what academic program are you enrolled in?
6. How is your life now that you have children? Did you have children before or after you began your graduate work?
7. What things have you had to start doing differently as a result of having children and attending graduate school? What have you stopped doing since you’ve had children?
8. What is the role of the child’s/children’s father? What is his involvement with your children? (helpful or stressful)
9. How do you and the father get along?
10. Do you feel you are the primary caregiver of the child?
11. How do you assess motherhood?
12. How has the baby or other children affected your social life?
13. What would make motherhood easier?
14. What would you enjoy doing more with your child/children?
15. What are your concerns now that you are a mother?
16. What kind of support system do you have? Who helps you in terms of advice, child care, finances etc?
17. How has your overall attendance in school been since you have become a mother?
18. When you miss class, how often is it because of your children? (daycare conflicts, financial reasons, children are sick, etc)
19. When you miss class because of reasons mentioned above, how understanding or considerate are your teachers?
20. What kinds of preferential treatment do you expect now because you are a mother?
21. Do you plan to graduate on time? Yes, No?
22. How have your finances been affected since you became a mother?
23. Do you currently work, in addition to going to school? Are you full time or part time?
24. Has your current job helped or interfered with your role as a mother?
25. What have you learned since the baby has been born?
26. What things, if any, would you do differently?
27. What kind of advice do you have for other mothers in graduate programs with young children?
28. Is there anything you would like to add?
REFERENCES


Weiss, J. (2000). *To have and to hold: Marriage, the baby boom and social change.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

