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A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Perceptions of Single Mother College Students

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A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Perceptions of Single Mother College Students

by

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M.A. St. Mary's University Minnesota

A Dissertation Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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May 2021

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DEDICATION

The following pages are dedicated to my grandmother, my mother, and my daughter.

“Here’s to strong women.

May we know them.

May we be them.

May we raise them.”

- Unknown

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I would like to thank my husband, Christopher Weddle (DJ King Otto), who paid almost as much emotional tax as I did through this process. Thank you for taking on so much during the past few years in my emotional absence. I could not have juggled everything without your support and delicious meals every single day.

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ABSTRACT

As parenting students are an underserved subset of the growing nontraditional college student population in the United States, this study aims to understand and illuminate the experiences of single mother students while in pursuit of a post-secondary credential. This research is motivated by the following research questions, viewed within the context of a participant's identities: How do single mother college students perceive institutional support services? How do single mother college students experience their interactions with faculty? What institutional systems are in place that pose the biggest barriers to persistence and degree completion for single mother college students? A phenomenological qualitative study using an intersectional theoretical framework was conducted at an urban community college in the Midwest in pursuit of insight into these questions. Thirteen single mother students were recruited to participate in one-on-one interviews via a recruitment statement on a survey and word of mouth. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants in the survey and interviews. The findings of this study provide insight to the perceptions of a largely invisible student population, during a global pandemic, while offering awareness of how larger societal structures influence student experiences. The findings inform institutions on ways to support parenting students in their pursuit of a post-secondary credential.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Today's college campuses are increasingly diverse. The definition of *nontraditional* seems to be continually expanding and the number of nontraditional students seeking a formal education continues to rise. For example, the term *nontraditional college student* can be used to describe students of color, students that are experiencing working class poverty, students who are first-generation, and/or students considered independent by the United States Department of Education for federal financial aid purposes. Independent includes students in one of the following categories: over age 24, have dependents who receive more than half of their support from the student, homeless, students with veteran status, and more (Federal Student Aid, 2020).

According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR, 2018a), nearly half of all independent college students in the United States (U.S.) are parents of dependent children. Forty-three percent of those student parents are single mothers (Reichlin Cruse, Holtzman, Croom, & Polk, 2019). For students of color, single mothers represent a much higher number: 31% of all Black female college students in the U.S. are single mothers, compared to 17% of Latina and 13% of White female college students (Reichlin Cruse, Milli, Contreras-Mendez, Holtzman, & Gault, 2019). While parenting students represent a significant population on college campuses, they remain a largely invisible population as one is unable to tell parenting status by appearance alone.

Nestled under the overarching term of *nontraditional*, the intersectionality of single mothers seeking an academic degree is extensive. The impact of a completed degree program on these students' (and their children's) lives goes beyond increased job opportunities and income, as does the impact on society. Yet, over half of all single mothers drop out of college before earning a degree (IWPR, 2018b). Can colleges and universities impact this statistic? What are the

perceptions of single mother college students regarding existing institutional services? Does the number of resources, level of understanding, and advocacy provided by an institution influence a woman's motivation to persist? How does a woman's identity influence how she experiences her time on a college campus? These questions are scarcely covered in existing research and may inform how institutions can better support single mother college students.

Statement of the Problem

Single mother college students, many of whom are also women of color, first-generation, and low-income, represent a significant marginalized minority on college campuses. These students have not traditionally been served well by higher education as demonstrated by low degree attainment rates. Review of literature reveals this group of students have not been a focus of expansive research as traditional students have been. However, the motivations of single mothers, the challenges they face in pursuing a degree program, and the benefits that accrue to them and others when they do attain a post-secondary credential is addressed in existing literature and examined in chapter two.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of students living, working, parenting, and studying at an intersection of multiple marginalized identities. The researcher hoped to discover how the experiences of single mothers pursuing a post-secondary credential are informed by identity, and ultimately learn effective ways institutions can increase persistence for all single mother college students at an urban two-year college. Nontraditional students, including single mothers, will continue to seek degrees as the cost of living continues to increase and employers demand a post-secondary credential. While limited, existing research has provided valuable insight into the motivations and

challenges of this population. However, there are many facets of single mothers and their experiences while pursuing a degree that are lacking in existing literature. Any research done in this area can inform practice that will allow institutions to better support parenting students.

Research Question(s)

The follow research questions guided this qualitative phenomenological study:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of institutional barriers?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of institutional support services?

RQ3. What are the perceptions of interactions with faculty?

RQ4. How do single mothers experience higher education at an urban 2-year college?

RQ5. How are these perceptions and experiences similar or different within the context of identity?

Theoretical Framework

Women have long been on the short end of power dynamics in the United States as is evidenced by graduation rates, income, and leadership roles. In order to best elevate the individual voices of women in this study, Lather (1991) noted that a feminist research approach was needed to "...correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 28). As the research questions above were examined in the context of identity, the researcher sought to center the individual experiences of the women involved, understanding the ease in which looking for in-group difference and similarities tend to come at the cost of excluding other aspects of one's identity. Therefore, the framework of intersectionality was used to guide inquiry and analysis.

Grounded in Black feminist thought, intersectionality provided a theoretical framework which focused on the lived experiences of study participants and recognized identities such as race, gender, class, among others as interdependent rather than independent (Bowleg, 2012; Gopaldes, 2013; Strayhorn, 2017). Furthermore, the framework of intersectionality calls for researchers to position the multiplicity of the participants' marginalized identities within the larger power structures at play in our society (Abes, 2012; Bowleg, 2012; Carastathis, 2014; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). For purposes of this study, the dynamics of power and privilege will be examined and applied to the higher education system. A historical context of intersectionality as a theoretical framework is provided in chapter two, while further information on the methodology and research design specifics used for this research can be found in detail in chapter three.

Key Terms

First-generation: An undergraduate student whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019).

Independent: Students in one of the following categories: over age 24, married or separated, pursuing a master's or doctorate degree, have dependents who receive more than half of their support from the student, homeless or unaccompanied youth, students with veteran status, emancipated minor, and more (Federal Student Aid, 2020).

Single mother: (For the purposes of this study) A woman who identifies as raising dependent children alone.

Time poverty: When there is not enough discretionary time to engage in activities that build social and human capital (Kalenkoski & Hamrick, 2014).

Wrap-around services: Intensive and holistic supports that address a student's non-

academic (i.e. emotional, social, financial, or basic) needs (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2015).

Delimitations

Due to time limitations and convenience, one urban two-year college in the upper Midwest was chosen for the site of this study. The researcher chose to focus on the experiences of single mother college students at the exclusion of other parenting students. The initial research plan was to facilitate focus groups of women based on racial identity. Due to limitations listed below, the researcher instead chose to facilitate one-on-one interviews with a sample that closely represented the racial make-up of the student body at the research site.

Limitations

The convenience sample for the study was drawn from the list of parenting students as held by the institution; not all student parents identify themselves as such to the institution. The experiences of the sample may not reflect the experiences of degree-seeking parents in rural areas, other urban areas, or nationally. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest in the community surrounding the research site in summer 2020, the second recruitment cycle and subsequent interview schedule was delayed. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment was done virtually and via word of mouth, and interviews were held via online meetings using Zoom software. As single mothers were significantly impacted by the events of 2020, a high level of participant attrition occurred.

Scope

This study took place at an urban community college in the Midwest and focused on self-identified single mother students enrolled at the college during the year 2020. A demographic survey used for recruitment purposes was distributed via email January 2020, September 2020,

and January 2021; interviews began December 2020 and concluded January 2021.

Assumptions

The researcher held the following assumptions:

- Participants' ages would range from 24-40 years old
- Many would come from low socio-economic backgrounds, be Pell Grant eligible, and experiencing basic needs insecurities
- Most would be first-generation college students
- Most would be attending school part-time
- Some would be experiencing mental health issues
- They would not feel valued as a holistic person in their classrooms
- Participants would be honest while taking the survey and participating in the interviews
- Participants would likely be experiencing time poverty and stress which would impact their ability to focus on their studies
- The multiple identities represented and acknowledged by participants would impact their experiences within the higher education system

Significance of the Study

When a single mother graduates, the return on investment (ROI) is exceptional for the student, her family, the institution, and for society. While the existing literature has little on the ROI of obtaining a degree, Gault et al. (2018) determined that based on today's cost of college, when single mothers graduate with an associate degree, they receive a 1,645% return over their lifetime. While impressive, these numbers do not capture the other numerous positive outcomes associated with single mother degree completion for families and society. Some are described by

Gault et al. (2018) as “...higher rates of employment, improved health, increased civic engagement, and improved outcomes among the children of college graduates” (p. 1). In addition, single mothers with associate degrees contribute “\$36,300 in additional taxes over her lifetime, and those with bachelor’s degrees pay an additional \$84,200 in taxes” (p. 8).

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (Minnesota State) is the third largest system of two- and four-year colleges in the country, and the number one educator of global majority and indigenous populations in the state of Minnesota (Minnesota State, n.d.a). Minnesota State has set ambitious strategic goals for itself starting with its vision: “Ensure access to an extraordinary education for all Minnesotans” (Minnesota State, n.d.b). In fall 2019, the Chancellor introduced the Equity 2030 plan in which the Minnesota State system, along with its partners will “eliminate educational equity gaps at every Minnesota State college and university” by the year 2030 (Minnesota State, n.d.c).

Rising tuition due to loss of state funding means the cost of post-secondary education – even when obtained through the low-cost provider Minnesota State, presents a barrier to attainment for many students. The 36% of Minnesota State students that are Pell grant eligible find the cost even more challenging. Pell eligibility is an indication of low-income status; the number of students qualifying for the grant has increased 13% over the past 10 years and continues to rise (Minnesota State, 2016). Many Pell eligible students are also students of color, over 24 years of age, and first-generation resulting in a compounding effect of marginalization which in turn results in low graduation rates for these students (Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz, & Hoops, 2007).

The existing literature explored in chapter two provided valuable insight into the motivations and challenges of this population, and the benefits when they complete a degree

program. However, until there is an increase in degree completion among this population, educational equity will not be achieved. It is imperative that current research reflect methods to better support these women to positively impact persistence and degree completion.

Although there are no specific state-level data on single mother student enrollment numbers, a recent report released by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) estimates there are 30,626 single mother college students in Minnesota as of December 2019 (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019). Higher education trends suggest most parenting students are enrolled at those two-year colleges and within the Minnesota State System, there are 30 two-year colleges located throughout the state. Likely, the MinnState System is the number one educator of parenting students in the state.

In times of major budget restrictions, higher education institutions are often looking for ways to curb expenses. Leaders may believe the only way to support single mother college students is to invest money in support services. However, a handful of articles that are not peer reviewed have provided simple suggestions of how institutions can do better in supporting student parents in very low-cost ways, such as allowing priority registration to ensure access to courses that work with their schedules, making space for a diaper or food pantry, or developing an online group for student parents where they can share resources or discuss strategies for balancing their busy lives (Kruvelis, 2017).

The researcher intended to corroborate those ideas with this research, and perhaps uncover new ones through interviews with parenting students to inform Minnesota State, and other higher education institutions on low-cost, yet effective ways to increase persistence among this significant population of college students. The researcher felt starting with an understanding of how this population might experience their education was a good place to start this inquiry.

Conclusions

Parenting college students, with the majority being single mothers of color, are a sub-population of nontraditional students that higher education institutions cannot afford to ignore. Student parents represent a significant number of college students in the U.S. today. At public two-year institutions, where the number of nontraditional and independent college students represent the majority, student parents can be found in even greater numbers.

Using a qualitative approach, the researcher's goal was to discover how the experiences of single mothers pursuing a post-secondary credential are informed by their identities, and ultimately discover impactful ways institutions might increase persistence for all single mother college students at an urban two-year college. Highlighting the voices of single mother students to uncover ways in which they feel a public two-year institution can best support their persistence and degree completion and contributing to the lack of research on this student population were also paramount objectives. Existing literature which speaks to the role of the community college in educating students with children, the motivations and challenges of parenting women as they pursue a degree program, and the benefits of degree completion for this population are examined in the next chapter, while details of the methodology used are outlined in chapter three.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Community colleges have historically welcomed people representing non-dominant identities seeking a formal education. Single mother college students are a significant population often served by public two-year colleges. The following review provides an overview of existing literature on the role of community colleges in the United States and the factors impacting persistence of community college students. The review examines current research focused on college students who are mothers, including examination of challenges to degree attainment, which motivations and supports increase persistence, as well as outlining the benefits of degree completion for this population. Finally, this section provides context on the chosen methodology and framework for the study.

Methods of Searching

Finding existing peer-reviewed literature focused on college students who are parents was challenging. Using primarily Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete, and ERIC as the databases, many of the obvious keyword combinations such as “student parents (or student-parents, or parent students),” “parenting college students,” or “college/university/post-secondary students who are parents,” resulted in references about the parenting of college students or some related topic, not about college students who were parenting their own children. Expanding the search to “single mothers or single moms or single parent” AND “college or university,” “post traditional female students,” or “African American returning students,” helped. Generally, once an article was found that focused on students raising children, the researcher would seek out the references cited by that article to build the cache of literature.

Context

The Institute on Women's Policy Research (IWPR) provides a wealth of statistics on college students who are parents of dependent children through their Student Parent Success Initiative. According to the IWPR, in their report *Understanding the New College Majority: The Demographic and Financial Characteristics of Independent Students and their Postsecondary Outcomes*, parents of dependent children make up 26% of our country's population, translating to five million college students, or nearly half of all independent college students (2018a). Forty-three percent of those student parents are single mothers (Reichlin Cruse, Holtzman et al., 2019). As described in *Time Demands of Single Mother College Students and the Role of Child Care in their Postsecondary Success* (2018b), a briefing paper by IWPR, single mothers face many challenges in completing a college degree, which result in over half of single mothers dropping out of college before earning one (para. 1).

Role of the Community College

The IWPR report *College Students with Children: National and Regional Profiles* noted, "...community colleges enroll the largest share of student parents: nearly half of all student parents, or approximately 2.1 million students, attend public two-year institutions, representing 30 percent of the total community college student body" (2017). Community colleges have a long history of educating nontraditional college students. The open access traditionally attributed to public institutions has allowed students from diverse backgrounds to seek out degree and training programs from such institutions. Students who seek comparatively low-cost program options, offered via flexible delivery methods, are often students who bring with them many responsibilities outside of school which contribute to challenges in persistence.

Two-year public institutions have played an important social role in the United States.

Theoretically formed in the 1800's, these institutions were the result of a need to provide educational alternatives to a traditional four-year baccalaureate degree (Jurgens, 2010; Smith Morest, 2013). However, federal government policies shaped what would become an attainable educational path to nontraditional college students such as women, people of color, and veterans. For example, The Morrill Act (signed hand in hand with the Land Grant Act) of 1862 provided cash to institutions in states required to prove that admission criterion did not include race (Jurgens, 2010). By the late 1940's, spurred by the effects of war and the G.I. Bill of Rights which provided educational benefits to veterans, in combination with increases in technology, and general recognition of a needed skilled workforce, two-year institutions had cemented their place in higher education as offering general and occupational education to a diverse sector of people with a wide variety of postsecondary needs (Jurgens, 2010; Smith Morest, 2013). Other actions taken by state and federal governments during the 20th century such as the formation of the Tribal Colleges and Universities, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA allows undocumented immigrants enrolled in school to remain in the U.S.), or the Post-Secondary Enrollment Options program (PSEO allows high school student to dual enroll in a college for free) have encouraged an even more diverse student body to seek out U.S. public higher education institutions.

Over the last few decades, the public, two-year college role has expanded to include developmental and Adult Basic Education, English as a second language coursework, and coursework for students in high school, in addition to flexible course offerings including online, continuing education, or learning community cohort classes. This expansion in course offerings, coupled with open access admissions policies, has resulted in many first-generation, working, low-income, older, or parenting people choosing to pursue higher education at public two-year

college campuses. Due to the varying needs of these students, community colleges have increasingly recognized the need to provide support to their diverse students beyond academics. Providing holistic or wrap-around support services which speak to the many barriers today's students face has been shown to improve persistence rates (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, 2020), and may include services such as career counseling, financial resources, transportation assistance, health, or legal services (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2015).

Persistence of Community College Students

Regardless of the categorical identifications of the typical community college student, overall rates of persistence are low. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, overall persistence rates at two-year colleges for 2016 were at 62% (2018). For Black students, rates were 56% and for Hispanic students, rates were at 62.7% for fall 2016 entering cohorts. Because two-year public institutions are state funded, it is imperative they retain their diverse students to ensure degree completion. However, shrinking budgets have resulted in fewer support services for these students (Smith Morest, 2013).

Today's students are dealing with unprecedented issues that affect persistence. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous students attended school part-time so they could continue to work. Yet, despite being employed, many students still dealt with housing and food insecurities. According to a 2015 national study of basic needs insecurity in higher education, 52% of community college students experienced housing insecurity, with 13% of community college students reporting homelessness at the time. Similarly, 52% of students reported experiencing food insecurity, with 20% qualifying as hungry (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). According to a mixed-methods study done with community college students, Spaid & Gillet-Karam (2018) found that women of color and single parents were the most food insecure

students. Being a recipient of the Pell Grant was found to be a predictor of this insecurity for women students as well. Katz (2013) facilitated a qualitative longitudinal study with women pursuing a degree while on welfare. Survival narratives were the focus in which mothering students described five basic needs categories they continually struggled with: physical (housing, etc.), material (clothing, etc.), educational (books, etc.), health (dental, etc.), and family (daycare, etc.). Education, while a pathway for many to a living wage job and an end to generational poverty, can be impossible to obtain when basic needs are not met.

COVID-19

The global pandemic of COVID-19 served to highlight and make worse many of the struggles that college students were already facing. Higher education institutions were forced to quickly transition to completely online coursework spring 2020, further marginalizing students with low levels of digital literacy and those who lacked access to the technology required to be successful in an online classroom. According to a fall 2020 Higher Ed Student Success Survey (Hobsons, 2020), the pandemic had a negative impact on the academic success, physical, and mental wellbeing of students. The survey also revealed that students are not getting needed support due to not accessing institutional resources available to them (p. 2).

The pandemic disproportionately affected women and single mothers in the United States. According to Ewing-Nelson (2021) of the National Women's Law Center, "Women have suffered the majority of pandemic-related job losses: since February 2020, women have lost over 5.4 million net jobs, and account for 55.0% of overall net job loss since the start of the crisis" (p. 1). This is because women were more likely to be employed in sectors hit the hardest by the pandemic such as leisure and hospitality, government, and retail (Ewing-Nelson, 2021; IWPR, 2021). According to Barroso and Kochhar (2020), in the six months following the start of the pandemic, single mothers saw the largest drop in employment compared to other working parent

groups; Black and Hispanic women experienced the highest losses (p.1-2). IWPR (2021) explained clearly why student parents should be a focus of pandemic policy decisions:

Student parents sit at the intersection of risk in this moment of global pandemic. More than half of student parents have children under age six (53 percent) and 41 percent have children ages 6-17. Child care and K-12 school closures mean these parents are juggling 24/7 care and homeschooling on top of completing their own coursework—creating particular strain for the nearly two million students who are single mothers. Many also have limited or no broadband internet access and inadequate technological resources to meet both their own and their children’s remote educational needs (p. 1).

Challenges to Degree Attainment for Single Mother Students

Regardless of unprecedented challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought, single mothers pursuing a degree have traditionally faced the same challenges that other students who are not parents face, that post-traditional (older and working) students face, the same challenges that students struggling with finances face, and many of the same challenges that married student parents face. Single parents face the added challenge of being the primary caretaker of their child(ren), which led to the additional stress of needing to fulfill multiple roles alone. Marginalization, financial barriers, and role conflict were some of the challenges covered in existing literature.

Marginalization

Sexism and racism are pervasive in higher education (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Thomas, 2001) and have been shown to impact persistence rates. Throughout the research reviewed on single mother college students, they, particularly single mothers of color, frequently expressed experiencing the same microaggressions, stereotypes, and spokesperson pressure as other

students of color did, in addition to experiencing the disparaging stereotypes our society has about single mothers (i.e., welfare queen) (Coker, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). Research found that single mother students, regardless of race, also experienced spokesperson pressure, prejudice, and lack of understanding from faculty, staff, and students who were not parents (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Yakaboski, 2010). Sealey-Ruiz (2013) found the mothers in her study felt isolated, marginalized, and discouraged when dealing with the sexism, racism, and stereotypes that were found on their college campuses.

Women in the research reported feeling isolated by their exchanges with faculty and staff. Often interpreting their exchanges as ones of apathy or victimization (i.e. you made your bed, now lay in it), the women in multiple studies reported their relationships with faculty as a barrier to their success (Coker, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Yakaboski, 2010). Coker (2003) found that feeling marginalized negatively influenced students' perception of their academic ability, and relationships with others.

Financial Barriers

Cost of education. The cost of obtaining a degree was a barrier for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and even more so for single mothers. As sole providers for their families, single mothers often experience financial insecurity and are more likely to live in poverty, with little to no money to contribute to college expenses (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; IWPR, 2018a). Attending college required the need to rely on financial aid, including loans, to pay educational and living expenses (IWPR, 2018a; Katz, 2013; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Schumacher, 2013; Thomas, 2001).

Debt. Dependence on student loans has resulted in a 20-30% increase in student loan debt for single parent students, compared to other students (IWPR, 2012). Many times, a single

financial emergency can derail a single mother's education as these students often do not have the financial resources to deal with unexpected events. Lashley & Ollivierre (2014), found that lack of financial stability "...created extreme hardship and led to feelings of inadequacy" among the mothers in their study (p. 147).

Childcare. Access to quality, affordable childcare was the most frequently acknowledged barrier of single mothers throughout the research and was shown to influence persistence rates (Beeler, 2016; Cerven, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; IWPR, 2018b; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Yakaboski, 2010). Costs for childcare range from about 26% - 33% of the median annual income of single mothers according to the IWPR. Unfortunately, campus-based childcare centers have been decreasing over time, with less than half of public institutions providing such a service in 2018 (IWPR, 2018b).

Role Conflict and Time Demands

Much research described the challenges these women faced resulting from role conflict, and how competing priorities made persisting in college difficult (Beeler, 2016; IWPR, 2018b; Katz, 2013; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Thomas, 2001; Yakaboski, 2010). Balancing life roles as mothers, employees, students, sole providers, friends, and family members takes time and energy. As humans with only 24 hours in a day, it can be challenging to feel confidently devoted to each role. Role conflict was shown to cause feelings of guilt and stress among single parent students (Haleman, 2004; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014).

The time demands facing single mothers are much more intense than female students without children. According to an IWPR analysis, single parent students spent an average of nine hours a day on care and housework (about 50% of waking hours), compared to under two hours spent for women college students without children. Single mother students therefore spent much

less time on activities that positively impact student success such as studying, sleep, socializing, and exercise (IWPR, 2018b).

Increasing Success for Single Mother College Students

All the challenges facing single mothers while pursuing a degree result in these students being some of the most creative, resilient, and motivated students on college campuses today. However, the strengths these students bring to college campuses are not often recognized in the research. These women make use of the resources available to them outside the campus setting for support. Many rely on resources provided by the institution, and most create their own ways of coping with the challenges described above to persist and complete their degree program.

Personal Supports

Family and friends. Research with student mothers, suggest that having emotional support from family and friends can be instrumental in the transition to college, and persistence while pursuing a degree (Cerven, 2013; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). However, some research pointed out that many single parents lacked a personal support system (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Schumacher, 2013), and therefore had to rely on mentors or formal networks for support.

Personal motivations. Single mothers throughout various studies have indicated their motivation for degree attainment being intertwined with their desire for a better life for themselves and children, and often viewed themselves as role models for their children and community (Beeler, 2016; Butler, Deprez, & Smith, 2004; Cerven, 2013; Coker, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Hinton-Smith, 2015; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013; Thomas, 2001; Van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016). Other motivations described by the literature included personal development (Hinton-Smith, 2015; Van Rhijn et al.,

2016), and wanting to give back to their communities (Butler et al., 2004; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Van Rhijn et al., 2016).

Coping strategies. Coker (2003) discussed coping strategies many of the African American female adult learners in her study employed to persist in their education. Some of which included: humor, silence, compromise, and confrontation. Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Browne Hunt (2013), also discussed the coping mechanisms of African American female college students. They found the women used resistance, self-protective, and collective coping strategies as primary ways of fighting the microaggressions they experienced. Mothers in a study conducted by Katz (2013), described developing time management skills, the benefits of learning to say no, and constructing their narratives to do whatever it took to succeed. Choosing your battles was another skill employed by single mother students as a strategy to persist (Lewis et al., 2013).

Institutional Supports

Financial aid. As financial concerns were top for single parent students, additional financial aid provided by states or institutions was a significant way to positively impact success rates (Brock & Richburg-Hayes, 2006; Schumacher, 2013). Early review of the Louisiana Opening Doors scholarship program by Brock and Richburg-Hayes (2006) found that low-income parenting students who participated in that programming were more likely to be enrolled full time, passed more courses, and had higher rates of semester-to-semester retention compared to the low-income parent students who did not participate. Programming included financial incentives and counseling (p. iii).

Childcare. Quality, affordable childcare offered on college campuses has been shown to increase persistence and completion rates. Data from Monroe Community College as analyzed

by IWPR in 2018 revealed that access to childcare increased their student parent's retention rates, with 71% of student parents persisting fall to fall, versus 42% of student parents who did not utilize the childcare center. In addition, 28% of student parents who used the childcare center graduated on time, compared to just 8% of student parents that did not (IWPR, 2018b).

Wrap-around services. Institutions that provided wrap around services for low-income student parents was shown in the research to have a significant positive effect on student completion rates (Cerven, 2013; IWPR, 2018b). Wrap around services could include outreach, mentoring, peer support, counseling, holistic academic advising, referrals, financial literacy programming, and/or access to emergency financial assistance (Evans et al., 2017; Schumacher, 2013). Katz (2013) found that while campus and community resources were helpful, they were often not enough of them to meet the needs of single mothers in college.

Faculty and staff. While Matus-Grossman & Gooden (2002), found interactions with faculty could be a barrier, some research also revealed that strong relationships with faculty who respected the demands single parents faced were instrumental in the women's ability to be successful (Carpenter, Kaka, Tygret, & Cathcart, 2018; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). Yakobaski (2010), recommended that faculty and staff need to be advocates of student parents and better aware of their needs. Sealey-Ruiz (2013) encouraged institutions to develop greater understanding of African American parenting students to better support them.

Single parent recognition. Institutions can also acknowledge single parents by holding events for parents and children, developing a student parent group, or creating a student parent center (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Single parents in Yakaboski's study (2010), expressed the desire for more family friendly events. Schumacher (2013) recommended institutions integrate academic and family supports to make it easier for student parents to meet their responsibilities

as a student and parent.

Sense of belonging. Many articles throughout higher education research discuss how a student's sense of belonging to an institution can determine success, most prominently in research using Tinto's Model of Student Retention which was developed in the 1970's and focuses on social and academic belonging as a predictor of persistence. However, Deil-Amen (2011) pointed out that traditional models of student persistence (i.e. Tinto's) were developed for, and are based on, the 'traditional' student experience and therefore often discount diverse students' experiences. Therefore, throughout research related to single mother college students, sense of belonging was rarely directly addressed in the research. However, Katz (2013) identified sense of belonging as a need for mothering students, and it was indirectly addressed by recommendations from researchers. For example, Bartman (2015) suggested having institutional supports address ways of helping students overcome "feelings of isolation, invisibility, and separateness experienced by these multiple marginalized students" (para. 9).

Benefits of Single Mother's Degree Attainment

Research shows there are a multitude of benefits when single parents earn a two- or four-year degree. For the larger society, single mother degree attainment is associated with increased earnings, resulting in more taxes paid and use of fewer public benefits. (Gault, Milli, & Reichlin Cruse, 2018). According to the research, women with college degrees were more likely to give back to their communities (Butler et al., 2004; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Van Rhijn et al., 2016). For colleges and universities, who are in the business of educating people, increasing completion rates fulfill a primary goal. Also, retaining single mother students improves campus diversity, which positively impacts the college community overall (Yakaboski, 2010).

Degree attainment benefits families. Mother's degree attainment has been shown to

positively impact health and educational outcomes for their children (Schumacher, 2013).

Sealey-Ruiz (2007) included daughters of three of the women in her study; all three daughters indicated they were “positively affected by their mother’s return to school” (p. 145). Research shows children of mothers with a college degree are more likely to attend college themselves (IWPR, 2017).

Degree attainment benefits the individual. Completing a degree program has a positive impact on a single mother’s self-esteem and self-efficacy (Butler et al., 2004; Thomas, 2001). Lashley & Ollivierre (2014) found that pursuit of education could result in mothers developing other positive characteristics such as increased responsibility, being more supportive to others, and developing a desire to apply spiritual meaning to life. According to Gault et al., (2018) at the IWPR, the financial return on investment is significant: “for every dollar a single mother graduate spends on an associate degree, her family gets back \$16.45 in increased earnings” that’s a 1645% return over a woman’s lifetime (p.4).

As a significant population of students on college campuses, single mothers attaining a degree has many benefits – on both the macro and micro levels. For institutions to best serve diverse students and increase completion rates, it is important that administration, staff, and faculty recognize the valuable experiences parenting students bring to college communities and do what is needed to support their degree attainment.

Research Question(s)

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of institutional barriers?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of institutional support services?

RQ3. What are the perceptions of interactions with faculty?

RQ4. How do single mothers experience higher education at an urban 2-year college?

RQ5. How are these perceptions and experiences similar or different within the context of identity?

Qualitative Research Methodology

The research questions above required an attempt to understand the perspectives of single mother college students. Therefore, a qualitative research methodology was chosen to examine the questions with a level of depth they demanded. Qualitative research is used when a researcher wants “...to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize power relationships... between researcher and the participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 45). The goal with this research was to illuminate the voices of a traditionally invisible population of college students: single mothers.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a methodological approach to qualitative research which attempts to see things from the participant’s point of view (Bogdan & Taylor, as cited in Briggs, Coleman, & Morrison, 2012). As this research was focused on single mothers and their experiences while in pursuit of a post-secondary credential, phenomenology framed the research questions. However, because the participants in this study represented multiple marginalized identities, and the researcher wanted to amplify the unique interconnectedness of those identities within the larger context of power and privilege that higher education has long provided, intersectionality provided the framework in which the research was conducted, and data was analyzed.

Intersectionality

Like phenomenology, intersectionality focuses on lived experiences (Abes, 2012;

Bowleg, 2012; Carastathis, 2014; Freeman, 2019). Unlike phenomenology, intersectionality as a theoretical framework places importance on the *differences* of those lived experiences, which are influenced by the intersectional and multiplicity of the identities one holds including race, age, class, gender, parenting status, and others. At the same time, intersectionality takes care to examine those intersecting identities within larger socially constructed systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Abes, 2012; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Freeman, 2019; Harris & Patton, 2019; Strayhorn, 2017).

Much existing research on intersectionality gave appropriate credit to Kimberlee Williams Crenshaw, Black feminist and legal scholar, as coining the term in 1989 to describe the intersecting marginalized identities Black women held while facing discrimination in the workplace (Carastathis, 2014; Freeman, 2019; Harris, & Patton, 2019; Museus & Griffin, 2011). Yet, it was acknowledged that the concept of intersectionality was first recorded via Sojourner Truth's speech in 1851: "Ain't I a Woman?" when she challenged the idea that her gender and her race were independent of one another as was inferred by her lived experiences (Bowleg, 2012; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Between 1851 and 1989, a number of other scholars and social justice advocates, largely Black feminists and other women of color, continued to push for the use of intersectionality as a socio-political form of activism before it cemented its place in the academic world (Carastathis, 2014; Harris & Patton, 2019; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework has gained in popularity over the last 20 years. During that time, scholars have varied in the application of intersectionality in their research, using intersectionality not just as a methodology, but also as an explicit answer or guide for the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions of their research (Carastathis, 2014; Cho et al., 2013; Garcia & Ortiz, 2013; Gopaldas, 2013). In educational

research, Zuberi (2001, as cited in Núñez, 2014) noted,

Intersectionality invites us to consider the broader social dynamics creating inequality for individuals on the basis of the multiple identities they hold. When focusing solely on the individual level of identity... it becomes all too easy to ascribe educational inequities to perceived characteristics and (in)abilities of marginalized individuals or groups, rather than the economic, social, and political practices that perpetuate these inequities (p. 88).

An investigation into the experiences of college students who are single mothers will likely result in many similarities. However, how socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity, and other identities which situate a woman within a system such as higher education may simultaneously result in differences. Therefore, using a phenomenological methodological approach within a framework of intersectionality provided useful. The rationale for using this methodology will be further explained in chapter three.

Conclusions

Public institutions of higher learning play an extremely important role in educating students with children. Community colleges enroll the most student parents (Noll, Reichlin, Gault, 2017) and while two-year institutions have traditionally provided a platform for nontraditional students to attain post-secondary education, most single mother college students do not graduate within six years, and many never graduate at all. Limited research on this group of students has identified common motivations and reasons parenting students choose to pursue a degree, along with common challenges that present as barriers to degree attainment. However, there are many aspects of academic pursuit by student parents that are lacking in existing literature, such as their perception of institutional barriers or impact of institutional relationships. Using a qualitative research design with phenomenological and intersectional research

approaches, the researcher attempted to identify and give voice to the experiences of single mother college students pursuing a degree program at an urban two-year institution. This research may inform practice that will allow institutions to better support student parents, primarily, single mothers.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

This chapter will review the research methodology for this phenomenological qualitative study centered on discovering how single mother college students experience their education, including how they perceive institutional support services, processes, and relationships. Ultimately, this research attempted to determine how persistence and degree completion can best be supported by an institution for students who are single mothers. A qualitative approach allowed for an understanding of women's experiences pursuing a post-secondary credential while being the primary caretaker for their child(ren). Research approach and design, participants, procedures, data collection, and ethical considerations will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

Research Approach

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach within an intersectional theoretical framework. As outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological approach is best when attempting to understand common experiences of a phenomenon; in this case, the researcher attempted to understand the experiences of students who are the primary caregiver of dependent children at an urban public community college. Furthermore, the researcher believed the perceptions and experiences of the study participants inform their reality. The constructivist (or interpretive) paradigm in which phenomenology is often nestled within reflects this belief as described by Creswell and Poth (2018): "...individuals... develop subjective meanings of their experiences [which are] varied and multiple [and] negotiated socially and historically." This allows a researcher to "...generate or inductively develop pattern[s] of meaning" through their research (p. 24). This is also as supported by Briggs et al. (2012) who described the task of an

interpretive researcher as one which should “...explore the meanings of events and phenomena from the subjects’ perspectives” (p. 20). They noted that the relationship between the phenomenological approach and the constructivist paradigm is reflected in the “detailed consideration... given to the holistic picture in which the research topic is embedded” (p. 24). In this case, the researcher intended to keep the identities represented by each participant in the forefront, thereby placing value on the holistic understanding of the participants’ experiences within higher education.

The researcher also recognized U.S. educational systems as being situated in a white supremacist, patriarchal society. As the study was focused on single mothers, many of whom are women of color, and their perceptions of their college experience(s), the researcher chose intersectionality, which has its foundations in Black feminist theories, as a framework to view the interconnected relationship between the social constructs of identities and the systems of power and privilege we find ourselves navigating. Abes (2009) noted that researchers could “...put aside their theoretical silos to uncover the potential of using interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives in research” (p. 142). It was the researcher’s hope that by using multiple theoretical perspectives, she would uncover deeper insights into the experiences of single mother college students to identify better ways of supporting this student population.

Research Design

This research study used a phenomenological qualitative approach within an intersectional paradigm which consisted of interviews with single mother students attending an urban community college during a year in which both nationwide civil unrest and a global pandemic occurred. The research examined the single mother college students’ perceptions of institutional supports and barriers, classroom experiences, and what the women perceived could

be done by the institution to best support them.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of institutional barriers?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of institutional support services?

RQ3. What are the perceptions of interactions with faculty?

RQ4. How do single mothers experience higher education at an urban 2-year college?

RQ5. How are these perceptions and experiences similar or different within the context of identity?

Setting

The study took place at an urban community college in a mid-sized Midwestern city with a little over 400,000 residents. The city boasts many museums, theaters, and is known for its large arts scene. The state consistently scored high on quality-of-life indexes for its white residents and has some of the largest racial disparities in areas of income, employment, home ownership for its residents of color. During the year in which recruitment for the study took place, the city was the site of a murder of a Black man, George Floyd, by a police officer which sparked world-wide protests and put a spotlight on the area's disparities mentioned above.

The college used for this study is located on the edge of downtown and enrolls close to 10,000 students. Average age of students was 26, approximately 40% of which were Pell grant eligible. Fifty-five percent of students were female. By race, 37% White, 30% Black, 12% LatinX, 5% Asian (Minneapolis College, 2019). Combination of graduation and transfer out rates were 46% (Minneapolis College, n.d.). The college had several support services in place including academic support services (advising, tutoring, career services), and student support

services (multicultural supports, veteran supports, student parent center, health, and counseling services).

Recruitment Survey

Participants were recruited for the study over a period of one year. A 14-question largely demographic survey with an invitation to interview for those who identified as single parents was embedded as the last question on the survey. The survey was developed using Qualtrics to facilitate a cherry-picked sample for the interview phase. A link to the survey, along with an invitation to take the survey was provided for the Dean of Students to send out to student parents. The survey was sent via email three times over a period of 13 months.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the civil unrest following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, dissertation proposal submission and recruitment for the study was stalled until September 2020 at which time the recruitment process started over again. Due to attrition of participants, and a desire to have a sample that represented the diversity of the institution, the survey was sent out a final time in January 2021. (See Appendix A for recruitment survey).

Participants

The primary participants of the study were self-identified single mother undergraduate students pursuing a program at an urban community college in 2020. The following information is intended to provide the reader with greater insight into a few of the identities the participants brought with them to the study. Further description of participant demographics is provided in chapter four. Table 1 provides some demographic information for the 13 participants. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned and will be used throughout the study.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Name*	Age	Resides	Race or Ethnicity**	# of Children	Ages of Children	Attend School FT/PT	Work FT/PT
Alena	29	Rural	Latina	1	11	PT	PT
Brooke	33	Rural	White	1	5	FT	N/A
Clara	45	Suburbs	White	3	24, 16, 15	FT	PT
Daphne	29	Urban	White	1	3	PT	PT
Erika	22	Suburbs	Black	2	5, 6	PT	N/A
Fiona	22	Urban	Hispanic	1	3	PT	PT
Gabriella	19	Urban	Black	1	1	FT	N/A
Heather	32	Urban	White	1	9	PT	PT
Ingrid	33	Urban	Bi-Racial	1	1	PT	PT
Jessica	29	Suburbs	White	1	4	PT	FT
Kristine	35	Urban	Black/Somali	4	14, 12, 11, 7	FT	PT
Laila	34	Suburbs	Asian	6	12, 8, 7, 6, 3, 8mos	PT	N/A
Nadia	34	Suburbs	Somali	1	13	FT	FT

*pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants.

**reflects answer when asked how they identify their race or ethnicity.

Procedures

The researcher met with the Dean of Students at the research site to discuss the potential of using their students for the study on July 10, 2019. The researcher was referred to the Associate Vice President of Academic Operations and Institutional Effectiveness for the letter of permission needed for the IRB application. After some time, the letter of permission was obtained, allowing for submission of the IRB application, and receipt of IRB approval on October 31, 2019.

The Dean of Students emailed the recruitment survey invitation and Qualtrics survey link to 1237 parents on January 27, 2020. The researcher hoped to be in a position to schedule focus groups in March, 2020, but she was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 14 students who indicated interest in further participating were sent email communication in April, 2020.

The civil unrest in the researcher's community in June, 2020 further delayed dissertation proposal defense and scheduling of data collection. Due to the delays in the research process, the researcher essentially started the recruitment process over again in September 2020; the recruitment survey was emailed to 1009 student parents on September 8th. Initially, nine women were invited to join a focus group. Once it became apparent that it was impossible for nine single mothers to be available at the same date and time, the researcher decided to proceed with one-on-one interviews, using the same interview protocol that was developed for focus groups. Nine interviews were completed prior to the December, 2020. As the researcher wanted to be intentional about her sample representing the racial demographics of the institution, the recruitment survey was emailed one last time to 1186 student parents on January 20, 2021. Five additional women interviewed by January 23rd, 2021. The researcher was aware that single mothers were not only juggling school, work, and everyday responsibilities, but they needed to be caregivers 24/7 for their children who could not (in most cases) go to daycare or attend school in-person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the researcher provided a \$25 Visa or Target gift card to each participant after the interview had been concluded as appreciation for their time.

Sampling

A nested-sequential sampling design (Briggs et al., 2012) was used in this study. First, a convenience sample was identified which consisted of students that the institution site had identified are parents, either because they utilized the campus student parent center, applied for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS) grant, or in other ways. A sub-sample from the survey phase was used in the interview phase, hence the nested relationship. The sub-sample was self-selected by identifying as a single parent and leaving contact

information on the last question of the survey to participate further. A total of 51 women and one man expressed interest in participating in the study further over the 13 months of recruitment; 38 women were emailed an invitation to interview. Sixteen women responded to invitations, and 14 women followed through with the interviews, and one was withdrawn from the study after interviewing. One-on-one interviews allowed the researcher to go in depth with each participant and a participant number of 14 allowed for the time needed for coding and analysis.

Protection of Participants

Protection of human subjects participating in research was assured. Participants were first made aware that this study was conducted as part of the researcher's doctoral degree program and that it would benefit her administrative practice via the implied consent at the beginning of the recruitment survey. Once a participant agreed to interview, they were emailed the informed consent, asked to sign and return to the researcher prior to the interview date. Informed consent means that the participants were fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study for which consent was sought. Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Student 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time was outlined both verbally and in writing.

Data Collection

To obtain data for the study, semi-structured interviews were facilitated with 14 college students who identified as single mothers. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a deep understanding of the phenomenon and space for the conversation to evolve organically. Pseudonyms were assigned to each student after the meeting date. The video and audio record, and the transcribe feature from Zoom were used during the interview sessions which was helpful for data analysis purposes. Recordings were held in the cloud until destroyed. Using a cell phone

application, the interview audio was captured via a second method as back up.

Interviews

The focus of the research design consisted of semi-structured interviews with 14 single mother college students who attended the college in 2020. The interviews took place via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic on a day and time most convenient for each participant. The researcher asked questions to understand how the participants viewed themselves as students with multiplicative identities, to draw out the participants' individual experiences with the higher education system. Participants were asked to consider all the different identities they bring with them to the college while answering the questions. Examples of identities were provided (i.e. race, gender, socioeconomic status, mental health). Space was provided for participants to brainstorm ideas of what faculty could do in the classroom and what policies or procedures could change to better support their persistence and attainment. The researcher used the Zoom recording feature which allowed for a visual of the participants and a candid conversation.

Guiding interview questions. Interview questions were designed to allow for concepts related to race, gender, and other salient identities to emerge organically and in relation to the participants' college experiences. Probing follow-up questions, not reflected below, were utilized when needed.

Table 2

Interview Table

	Research Q1 What are the perceptions of existing institutional barriers?	Research Q2 What are the perceptions of institutional support services?	Research Q3 What are the perceptions of interactions with faculty?	Research Q4 How do single mothers experience higher education at an urban 2-year college?	Research Q5. How are these perceptions similar or different within the context of identities?
Interview Q1* Can you think of any institutional processes you had to navigate that proved difficult – particularly because of your parenting status?	X			X	
Interview Q2 Have you experienced institutional processes that proved difficult due to other aspects of your identity?	X			X	X
Interview Q3 Are there processes that you believe have been a barrier to completing your degree program?	X			X	
Interview Q4* Your college offers several support services for their students. Have you found the resources available to you as a parenting student to be enough?		X		X	
Interview Q4a If you have not accessed the student parent center or other support services, why not?		X		X	
Interview Q5* Are there aspects of your identity that you feel are underserved by the college?		X		X	X
Interview Q6 What support services are lacking?		X			
Interview Q7 How has COVID-19 impacted your ability to seek support services from the college?		X		X	
Interview Q8* Have you ever had a particularly positive experience with an instructor due to your responsibilities as a mom?			X	X	
Interview Q9 Have you ever had a negative experience with an instructor due to your responsibilities as a mom?			X	X	
Interview Q10* Do you think your identity influences how instructors interact with you?			X	X	X
Interview Q11 What are ways your teachers could better support you in the classroom as a student caring for children?			X		
Interview Q12* How have the events of 2020 impacted your college experience?				X	
Interview Q13 Do you feel you have enough time in the day to be a mom, a student, etc.?				X	X
Interview Q14 Do you have any additional thoughts about your experiences as a college student with children that you think would be useful for the purposes of this study?				X	
Interview Q15* Demographic Qs					X

*Interview questions shortened for brevity. See full interview protocol in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the interviews were first analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis six-phase approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). Then the researcher analyzed the transcripts using an intersectional lens and a deductive approach to reveal deeper truths about the data.

Thematic Analysis

Phase one. Interview data was transcribed verbatim using the transcription feature in Zoom for all interviews excluding one phone interview which was recorded with a smart phone recording application and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The researcher carefully reviewed and compared the transcriptions to the video and audio files, taking care to make any major and relevant corrections of errors made by the transcription service after downloading into a Word document. Listening to the interview playback while reading and correcting the transcriptions allowed the researcher to become immersed and intimately familiar with the data. During this phase, the researcher began to highlight any interesting data and made notes in the margins of the document of any thoughts about potential patterns.

Phase two. Once the researcher understood what the data consisted of, coding the data commenced using mostly descriptive codes. “Codes identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question” (p. 61). Quirkos 2.4.1 software was employed to help manage and organize the large amount of data to be coded. Thematic analysis is flexible about how to go about segmenting the data to be coded, as long as it is “inclusive, thorough, and systematic” (p. 62). Once the first code was developed, each transcript was read in its entirety, and when needed, a new code was applied until the entire data set was reviewed and coded. After all transcripts had gone through the initial review and coding process, the researcher

repeated the process to ensure all data sets had been systematically and thoroughly coded. This was done using a largely inductive approach, allowing the data to drive the codes. The researcher attempted to remain as objective as possible, not considering the research questions in relation to the data during this time, but rather simply identifying data which seemed meaningful to the participants. The researcher went back and reviewed the transcripts again to compare to the emergent codes which were developed as she became more familiar with the process. Initial coding sessions resulted in 50 individual codes. Quirkos software allowed the researcher to export a report in which each quote under a particular code was listed; reading through it this way allowed the researcher to consider which codes could be combined or were related. Eventually, the researcher ended up with 761 meaningful quotes populating 32 individual codes.

Phase three. While continuing to follow the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2012), the researcher began to sort and collate the codes, identify similarities, and differences among them to develop general themes and subthemes. During the phase of determining themes, the researcher began to identify the relationship between emerging themes and how that relationship might begin to portray “an overall story about the data” (p. 65) in the context of the research questions. The researcher initially created nine general categories, or themes, in Quirkos: Instructor Relationships, College Barriers, COVID, Institutional Supports, Civil Unrest, Identities, Personal Barriers, Outside Support, and Role Conflict and Prioritizing,

Phase four. According to Braun and Clarke (2012) the phase of reviewing themes is a two-step process. First, the themes were checked against the coded data to ensure it represented the data set. If a theme did not work well with the relevant data, the researcher started again. Braun and Clarke (2012) provide a list of reflective questions to ask while reviewing the themes during this step which the researcher utilized, including, “Are there enough (meaningful) data to

support this theme?” Step two of this phase consisted of “reviewing the themes in relation to the entire data set” (p. 65). This involved a final read of the data set, ensuring the themes fully reflected and captured the most pertinent aspects of the data. This phase finalized the categories and allowed the final phase of defining and naming themes to commence.

Phase five. The phase of defining and naming themes is where the “deep analytic work involved in thematic analysis” (p. 67) took place. The researcher developed detailed definitions of each theme, tied the themes together, while in turn addressing each research question. Taking care to name each theme purposefully and thoughtfully also took place during this phase. Eight final themes were identified and renamed, and within those themes 16 subthemes were identified and named (see Themes table in Appendix D). Seven of the themes answered the research questions and are described in detail in chapter four.

Intersectional Lens

At this point, the researcher started anew with each transcript, employing an intersectional lens and an a priori coding approach to identify data sets which spoke to identity or inferred experiences within larger systems of privilege, power, and oppression. After identifying 122 segments of data that hinted at those dynamics, Quirkos software allowed the researcher to view the existing emergent codes with overlapping data sets that inferred privilege, power, and oppression. Intersectional inferences were found within each previously established emergent code. This revelation allowed the researcher to consider the findings in a deeper way. After identifying those overlapping data sets within the established themes, the researcher produced a report of the findings (phase 6) as described in chapters four and five. The intersectional analysis of findings is detailed in chapter five.

Role of the Researcher

An intersectional perspective requires critical self-reflection by the researcher (Christoffersen, 2017; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Recognizing the assumptions held by the researcher is inextricably linked to that critical self-reflection process. The researcher worked in higher education, primarily student affairs, for 11 years prior to the start of this study. The researcher held a Bachelor of Arts in Individualized Studies, with a focus of Urban Social Services, and a Master of Arts in Educational Leadership. The researcher identified as a first-generation student of color, and experienced working-class poverty and single motherhood while pursuing previous degrees. Yet, the researcher recognized that the attainment of those degrees afforded privilege in the society in which she lived and worked. The researcher volunteered as a group facilitator at a non-profit organization which provides wrap-around services to women with young children while they pursue a degree program.

While working in higher education, the researcher's goal was to influence change within the micro system she worked to better serve people of color, women, and people of low socioeconomic backgrounds. Her firsthand experiences pursuing post-secondary education inspired her to do better for those who come after her. By conducting research with single mother college students, she hoped to gain insight into which parts of the institutional system need to change to best serve the women that are doing their best to support their children, get an education, and live day to day in a country that has historically devalued their lives. She believes in the powerful capacity of single mothers and was disappointed in what she saw as a limited capacity of institutions to support those students.

Qualifications

The researcher felt her formal training and professional experience prepared her to conduct this research. Research coursework she had taken in pursuit of undergraduate and graduate level degrees, in addition to an action research project for her master's degree contributed to her formal training around research methods. Interview skills were gained in formal coursework, and studying qualitative research texts authored by Briggs et al. (2012) and Creswell and Poth (2018). The skill of building rapport with participants was gained throughout the researcher's experience in various job roles (most recently as academic advisor), as a group facilitator for a non-profit organization, and as adjunct faculty. The researcher conducted a significant amount of research on the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework before employing it within the research design and analysis of this study.

Ethical Considerations

To conduct this study, the researcher followed the steps outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) in Table 3.2 Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher sought MSUM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects. Likewise, authorization to conduct this study was sought from the institution where the research project took place.

The purpose of study was made known to participants and the wellbeing of the study participants was protected by the researcher clearly explaining their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants read through, signed, and returned to the researcher informed consent forms prior to interviewing. The researcher made it clear they could choose to not answer any question asked of them. She attempted to ask questions that were not uncomfortably personal in nature.

During the collection of data, the researcher ensured she was not in a position of power to the participants. While she worked at the Metropolitan State University - Minneapolis campus, located at the research site, she was off campus, working from home during the time of the study due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who were dual enrolled at Metro State and Minneapolis College, or who were residents of a local non-profit where the researcher was a longtime volunteer, may have known her as holding a position of power by the very nature of her positions at Metro State and the non-profit organization. As far as the researcher knew, participants did not know where the researcher was employed or where she volunteered. The researcher also declined from volunteering during the time in which research took place to ensure anonymity. The researcher built trust with participants by identifying as a member their community as a woman of color who was currently pursuing a degree program, as a former student of the community college research site, and as someone who spent many years as a single mother college student. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity and the data was kept in a secure location.

Conclusions

The researcher facilitated the study at a two-year college in Minneapolis, MN. The sample came from the research site's list of students who identified as parents. A demographic recruitment survey was emailed to those students, and single mother students were cherry picked as potential interview participants. A semi-structured interview protocol was followed with 14 single mothers who agreed to participate. The following chapters outline the results of a phenomenological, intersectional, qualitative study completed with single mother college students at an urban, public, two-year college, focused on discovering the students' perception of their experiences with support services, faculty, and their perspective on how institutions can

best support them to persist to degree completion.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to give voice to a traditionally invisible college population: single mothers. Because perception and experiences are influenced by one's identities, intersectionality was used as a theoretical framework in which to approach the participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis. During the design and facilitation of this research study, twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice were brought to the forefront of the world's consciousness which greatly impacted the population of students chosen for this study and increased the importance of illuminating the voices of these students. The following chapter summarizes the data collection and analysis, details participant demographics, outlines the findings in relation to the five research questions which guided the study, and finally addresses validation criteria used to ensure quality research.

Data Collection

Primary data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with the participants. Thirteen interviews were conducted via Zoom, which allowed for non-verbal communication and visual cues to inform the verbal communication. Zoom software auto transcribes and transcription files are automatically held in the password protected cloud for 365 days, and were downloaded to a flash drive which was kept in a secure location. One interview was conducted over the phone due to physical illness of the participant. The hand transcribed file was added to the folder on the flash drive. Email communication related to member-checking were downloaded and kept in the same folder on the secure flash drive.

Data Coding

Using thematic analysis to review and analyze the data, the researcher initially identified

over 700 quotes which appeared significant to the study. The quotes were first sorted into 50 codes, which were further combined into 32 codes, and analyzed into eight main themes. The researcher then went back to review each data set in relation to concepts of identity, privilege, or oppression. Once the 122 quotes were identified using an intersectional lens, the researcher worked to discover where the initial themes overlapped with the quotes inferring ideas of intersectionality and situating of marginalized identifies within the system of higher education. The result of that analysis is described below and further in chapter five.

Participant Demographics

This study focused on the lived experiences of single mothers pursuing a degree program at an urban 2-year community college. A nested-sequential sampling design (Briggs et al., 2012) was used in this study. First, a convenience sample was identified which consisted of students that the institution site had identified were parents. Then, a sub-sample from the survey phase was used in the interview phase. The sub-sample was self-selected by identifying as a single parent and leaving contact information on the last question of the survey to indicate interest in participating further.

Fourteen women interviewed to provide data for this study. The ages of participants ranged from 19-45. Most participants had one child, one woman had two, one had four, and one had six dependent children. Ages of dependent children at time of interview ranged from 8 months to 16-years-old. The participants represented multiple races and ethnicities; the researcher tried to be intentional about the sample representing the racial make-up of the student body at the research site. Multiple participants spoke of having mental health challenges such as anxiety or ADHD, and/or physical and learning disabilities. English was at least three of the women's second language, one woman was undocumented, and two others described themselves

as immigrants. Most of the participants identified as returning college students, three had been teen mothers. Many were employed, yet many discussed the financial challenges they experienced. One participant had been experiencing pain from a kidney stone during the phone interview which resulted in a shorter interview of 17 minutes. Four of the women had children nearby when participating in the interview which resulted in some interruptions.

One participant was withdrawn from the study after discussion during the interview revealed that she did not attend college in 2020 and was married and co-parenting with her husband. While her ethnicity had not yet been represented in the participant demographics, and she had identified as a single mother at one point in her life, the researcher felt the specificity of inclusion criteria (1. Must have attended college in 2020, and 2. Must identify as a single mother) had to exclude the participant. The final 13 participants are represented in the table below and in the findings as outlined in this chapter.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Name*	Age	Resides	Race or Ethnicity**	# of Kids	Ages of Children	Returning student	School FT/PT	Work FT/PT
Alena	29	Rural	Latina	1	11	Y	PT	PT
Brooke	33	Rural	White	1	5	Y	FT	N/A
Clara	45	Suburbs	White	3	24, 16, 15	Y	FT	PT
Daphne	29	Urban	White	1	3	Y	PT	PT
Erika	22	Suburbs	Black	2	5, 6	N	PT	N/A
Fiona	22	Urban	Hispanic	1	3	N	PT	PT
Gabriella	19	Urban	Black	1	1	N	FT	N/A
Heather	32	Urban	White	1	9	Y	PT	PT
Ingrid	33	Urban	Bi-Racial	1	1	N	PT	PT
Jessica	29	Suburbs	White	1	4	Y	PT	FT
Kristine	35	Urban	Black/Somali	4	14, 12, 11, 7	Y	FT	PT
Laila	34	Suburbs	Asian	6	12, 8, 7, 6, 3, 8mos	N	PT	N/A
Nadia	34	Suburbs	Somali	1	13	Y	FT	FT

*pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants

**reflects answer when asked how they identify their race or ethnicity

Findings

The subsequent findings reflect the investigation into the lived experiences of students pursuing a post-secondary credential while being a primary provider for their child(ren). To allow for deep reflection of their experiences, the following research questions were created to guide the data collection:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of institutional barriers?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of institutional support services?

RQ3. What are the perceptions of interactions with faculty?

RQ4. How do single mothers experience higher education at an urban 2-year college?

RQ5. How are these perceptions and experiences similar or different within the context of identity?

Research Question One: What are the Perceptions of Institutional Barriers?

Theme 1. Getting started was the hardest part. In analyzing the interview data, the themes of admissions, placement, and financial aid processes, including applying for the child care grant, came up as the main institutional barriers for the participants. For most of the women in the study, there presented at least one barrier to getting started at the college as a student caring for children. This theme answers research question one with subthemes of childcare, placement testing, and financial aid or paying for college.

Subtheme 1. Childcare. Many of the study participants started the admissions process before COVID-19 forced institutions to move processes online. They described the challenge of having to figure out childcare in order to make it to appointments on campus as explained by Alena, a 29-year-old woman who immigrated to the U.S. with her family when she was 10-years-old, “It was difficult to even meet some of those appointments, because it's like, I have to

find a babysitter.” Others, including Fiona, a 22-year old woman with a 3-year-old child, echoed Alena’s sentiment:

Being able to meet with all the resources and all the people, all the point of contacts while making sure that my daughter also had care [was difficult] because I don't want to be bringing her around or, you know, having to navigate with her.

However, for Laila, who needed to bring her kids ranging in ages from 0-12 years old (at time of interview) with her at times, she felt the college did a good job accommodating her and her children:

[The college] never had a problem if I had to bring my kids with me to meet with my advisor, or to do my financial aid or anything like that. You know, actually, they were very helpful. They were always giving my kids stuff to play with, or to draw or whatever.

Subtheme 2. Placement testing. Students who do not have college-level writing or math completed often need to take placement tests before getting registered for classes. This is to ensure students are taking courses they are academically prepared for. However, Ingrid, a 22-year-old biracial woman with a 1-year-old child explained the process was a barrier for her:

The beginning part of admissions when you had to do the Accuplacer tests [was difficult]. The times weren't easy to get to. But then also, if you had other stuff going on it kind of caused a problem in the middle of the day so... So yeah, it wasn't that convenient for the Accuplacer testing and then afterwards, everything is supposed to be easy, but to try to figure out the right place to go to, at first, is difficult.

Placement scores were discouraging for more than one woman, and in Alena’s case, her scores, and not placing into college-level coursework discouraged her to the point of choosing to delay her return to college:

When I first tried to go back to college.... you know, you have to take a placement test, see where you place out. Well, I tested very low for math and I honestly, I felt very salty. I was very upset because this is when she told me, she was like “you placed very low, so that means you have to take adult education math.” And to me, that was an insult. I'm like, excuse me, like what? So because of that, I didn't go back. I was like, oh, she told me that I have to take this and that, I'm not going to do that.

Subtheme 3. Financial aid. The financial aid process can be difficult for many reasons. For first-generation college students, or students who are navigating it on their own, it is a far from intuitive process. For students under the age of 24 who may be estranged from their parents, reporting income as a dependent student can prove difficult. Over half of participants identified the financial aid process or figuring out how to pay for college as a significant barrier. Fiona explains the difficulty with navigating the process of figuring out how to pay for college as an undocumented student:

I'm not a citizen and I'm not a resident so I'm not FAFSA eligible. So, having to navigate the whole - how do I go to school without it being, you know, all the money that I didn't have was huge. It's still a worry because my scholarship isn't secure, so funding for school, knowing what I'm eligible to apply for and what I'm not, that makes it really difficult.

More than one woman in the study mentioned the process for applying for the childcare grant was difficult. The difficulty and expense getting into an approved daycare facility, on top of confusion around the process, made women like Jessica and Kristine give up all together and find alternative ways of finding care for their children.

The themes around institutional barriers revealed the women in the study identified most

barriers as occurring before becoming an enrolled student. Primarily having childcare to take care of the steps needed to get enrolled was challenging, along with processes related to placement testing and financial aid.

Research Question Two: What are the Perceptions of Institutional Support Services?

Theme 2. “I feel pretty holistically served” – Alena. A considerable number of women who participated in this study felt their college provided services which made them feel holistically supported and shared they had accessed many of the services. In fact, many of the women were more than happy with what the college had to offer, especially in comparison to colleges they had attended in the past. Brooke, a 33-year-old White woman who identified as having physical disabilities stated, “It is a huge improvement [compared to a previous college] to see all the different areas that they do offer for the different setbacks I have.”

Most mentioned by participants were support services that met their basic needs such as the food pantry and emergency grant services. Laila, an Asian woman living in the suburbs, explained how relieved she was to receive clothing items for her children from the college:

I would say [I have accessed] the food pantry, and I forgot what the other one’s called too because I, just utilized that recently. They gave me like, winter clothing, you know, like shoes and things like that. And I think that that is so, so great that I can get that from school because I never would have imagined having to get all of these things [on my own].

Heather, a 32-year-old White woman, appreciated the wide range of support services offered by the college: “And just thinking outside of the box like, what could we give our students that like in areas that they’re needing - I think that they do a great job at that.” The college did a good job at normalizing the support they provide as described by Fiona:

Everybody at [the institution] has been so great at just being like, “I want to help you,” you know, without it being like, condescending or like a burden and that's been huge for me because I'm really independent. So, having to ask for help and you know pride, is huge. So having somebody be like, “I'll help you, don't worry” [is a relief].

TRIO, tutoring, counseling, the career center, and services around access to technology were other institutional support services the women described as ones that were utilized by them and found to be valuable.

Subtheme 1. They don't keep it a secret. Most participants discussed feeling the college did a good job communicating about the services available to all students, in a way that removed stigma, as summed up by Fiona:

The school did a really good job with making sure people know that they have those [services]. It wasn't like a secrecy thing or, you know, it was like, you need the help you're welcome to come, anybody can come... Also [it] takes that stigma that the only people who access the resources are like, single moms... Everybody was taking advantage of it, cuz everybody was going through tough times... I thought that was cool.

However, despite knowing about the support services available, some of the women shared they had not accessed many of the resources. Some of the participants living in rural areas felt they lived too far away to access some of the resources, like Clara, a 45-year-old White woman: “It could be that I live so far away that it doesn't feel like it's an option to me. Or it's not worthwhile going up there to get some of the things that would be helpful.” Other participants mentioned lack of time as preventing them from accessing resources, or “Just another thing that I would have to find a babysitter for,” as Daphne explained. Others felt they were not eligible for some support services due to their legal statuses such as Gabriella, a 19-year-old Black woman

who is in extended foster care, and Fiona, who is undocumented. Despite not being eligible for all support services, Fiona felt the college provided enough support services for her: “I’m somebody that can’t really I think access all the resources; I found that what [the college] has to offer has been enough for me, it’s been more than I could find anywhere else.”

The Student Parent Center at the college was recognized as a resource for the participants who knew about it, yet they did not feel it was very accessible. Daphne, a 29-year-old with a 3-year-old child stated: “I know that the Student Parent Center is great. But I also know [it is] something that you have to go and you have to be there with your kids.” For Laila, who has six children, the thought of bringing her kids to the Student Parent Center seemed overwhelming: “I’m like, oh, that’s not going to help because it’s my kids, *plus* more kids, and other people. So, I’m like... that’s not gonna work.”

However, two of the women in the study mentioned not knowing about some of the resources available to them. Ingrid thought she didn’t know because COVID-19 likely prevented the school from offering everything they would if classes were in person. Erika, a 22-year-old Black woman with two children said she would’ve utilized the food pantry, if she would’ve known about it: “The food pantry I’ve never used that, I didn’t even know that was the thing. Had I known it was a thing, I would have definitely utilized that.” Clara acknowledged, “I think sometimes when we’re lacking something, we don’t even know what it is that we need.”

The themes related to support services were mostly positive, and it was expressed that the college did an excellent job meeting several needs students experienced. Yet sometimes they felt services were not accessible or there was a lack of knowledge around what exactly was available. COVID-19 was perceived to diminish the amount of support services available for the students, and also prevented some students from accessing resources due to not being on campus.

Research Question Three: What are the Perceptions of Interactions with Faculty?

Theme 3. “Teachers do a pretty good job.” – Heather. Women in the study described the interactions with their instructors as predominantly positive. Many of the women mentioned how understanding and flexible most of the instructors at the institution had been. Women mentioned instructors by name that they had a particularly good experience with. More than once during data collection, the perception that the instructor was particularly understanding because of their own parenting status was mentioned. This was described by Nadia, a working mom with an 11-year-old son who identified as Somali:

There was a couple times where I needed an extension on my assignment, or I reached out just because my son got sick or there was some other - something else came up with him. I expressed that to my professor, and he was really understanding. I think it was because he just had a newborn at the time, so he was like, really happy about that. So, I thought, okay, he has a newborn. So maybe he'll understand it if I tell him what's going on and I did, and he was really understanding.

Laila, who is mother of six children, expressed her gratitude for an understanding professor:

There's times where I said I can't come to class because I don't have anyone to watch my kids, or my kid is sick, or whatever. And this was when it was in person - he's like, “don't worry about it.” He's like, “your family comes first, your kids come first. Don't even worry about class, we'll figure something out.” You know, I really appreciate that he is like that because not all of them are like that.

Having the option of bringing a child to class was very much appreciated by the women in the study as explained by Alena:

If she [daughter] didn't have school one day and I wasn't going to leave her home alone

because she was, you know, younger, I would always email them and be like, “Hey, can my daughter come with?” And some of them were like, “Yeah, absolutely. You know, as long as she’s not disrupting the class that’s totally fine.” I think that was always very nice. However, the women knew bringing children to class was not always a possibility, so giving alternatives as described by Erika was just as appreciated:

I used to bring my kids on campus, and I had some amazing teachers that - he didn't let me stay - but he told me if I come, it was like 20 minutes before class, he sat down and did the lesson with me because he knew I didn't have daycare. And that was amazing.

Flexibility around assignments and being able to involve children in their school was acknowledged by a few of the women as something that was valued. Brooke, a 33-year-old returning student with a 5-year-old son shared:

Due to [my physical disability] she's (the instructor) let me do certain accommodations where I can do oral reports, or I write poetry, so I can do poems. Or, I can do a kids book which is really cool because my son can help me with it. And that was her idea! I was like this is so awesome. What better way to bring my kid into my school and it just covers so many aspects of our life, like everything, you know, “c'mon, we're going to do mom's homework, draw or color picture or something.” It's crazy. It's such a good idea.

That was - I was blown away by that.

Receiving positive feedback due to parenting status was mentioned by a couple of the study participants as something that stuck with them:

My perspective in my writing and my essays was different because I was a mom, but it gave me an advantage because my writing was just like, it comes from a perspective that not everybody else has. So that was good because the professor was really good about

giving me feedback about like, nobody's written about it from this point of view, but I liked it. And so it kind of gives me that reassurance to know that I feel different sometimes, but different is ok (Fiona).

Subtheme 1. Communication goes both ways. The women in the study viewed understanding and communication with faculty as a two-way street and took responsibility for their role in that exchange as described by Alena, “You know, teachers are always wanting to - willing to help you, but I feel like more they know about your life, then the more they're gonna try to understand and try to work with you.” This sentiment was echoed by other women in the study. Clara shared her hope for mutual understating, stating that she wanted her instructors to:

[Understand] that life happens and it's not always when we expect it or planned for certain things. It happens and we have to go with the flow. Instructors need to know that, for me, personally, I'm always going to do the best that I can. And, I realize that my best is not [always] your good enough so, communicate with me and I will communicate with you and if I need to change something, I will, but all I can do is the best that I can.

Erika touched on what happened when she attempted to communicate with her professor, but the two-way street was not a mutual experience:

When I tried to explain to him my background and why I'm failing in school, it was just, uh, “well just go ahead and withdraw” like, he didn't even take the time to hear what I was going through in my personal life, you know. So, I can't say it was because I'm a mom, but I didn't have the chance to explain that to him because he just so quick to ‘whatever’ (waved hand, indicating being dismissed).

Two of the women discussed the lack of consistency or planning on the part of the instructor as being a barrier; not being able to plan in advance for due dates was a struggle as

described by Jessica, “That's been a big frustration this semester so far... it's been really stressful. I'm like, what do you mean ‘week of’, can you please give me a due date? Is it Sunday? Does the week end Sunday?” And for Alena, who worked part-time while attending school, lack of timely access to assignment due dates and materials made her feel like her life revolved around one class:

I feel like most teachers, they would have the entire week laid out like, Sunday. By Sunday, they post everything. This teacher will start to post things either Monday or Tuesday. So with that, I'm having a hard time because yes, I do feel that my life is revolving around this specific class. And it's a class that I'm really struggling with; this is the class that I need extra help with but finding the extra time... and so I am seeing a tutor, which is great, but that's also not enough time with the tutor. Then I tried to meet with my teacher, but because of the timing on when she put out the notes, the video, the homework, I can't get to it. So that's been tricky.

Subtheme 2. “I’ve had a bad experience with maybe one or two” – Erika. While the interactions with faculty were perceived as mostly positive by the women in the study, 10 of the women described a time when they experienced a negative interaction with faculty. Some of those experiences were directly related to a participant’s parenting status as described by Daphne: “My daughter had 103 fever, and she docked me points for leaving. She asked me if I was going to come back after getting her Tylenol. I said no (laughs, incredulous). She docked me points for leaving.” Other experiences centered around lack of understanding from professors around parenting status as described by Alena:

There’s another teacher who was like, “absolutely not -” he spoke to the whole class. He said, “If your child is sick never bring them here or not sick like if - [you don’t have a]

babysitter, whatever, do not bring your child.” I thought that was very harsh because I’m like okay, that’s new, like what’s wrong? I understand, like, depending on the age. But even that, like, hey, man, we’re all going through something and at least we’re here, we’re trying to show up to class. So what if our child is here?

Erika commented on the perceived double standard when an instructor would not allow students bring kids to class, but then had their own kids there: “It was kind of a smack to the face because he would bring his daughter to class like every day.” Other women spoke to feeling like their professors were simply apathetic:

I was just kind of blown off I guess where I was asking questions for help and then the response was, ‘you can find it out yourself’ kind of thing so it’s like [I] wouldn’t ask for help if [I] could figure it out. So that was a little frustrating.

Laila, a woman dealing with physical disabilities, described an experience as leaving her “traumatized” when an instructor wouldn’t work with her after she experienced a life-threatening medical emergency while pregnant, forcing her to withdraw from the course. Her experience has prevented her from retaking the course, even though it is required for her program.

Subtheme 3. Not wanting to take advantage. While the women in the study appreciated the many professors who demonstrated flexibility and understanding, many expressed during the interviews they did not want their parenting status to be perceived as an excuse for not doing the work as described by Fiona, a woman dealing with ADHD:

If I don’t do the work, it’s me, like, treat me like a student - give me the same consequences that you do any other student because it was just me, not focused, not mindful, you know? I think there needs to be more of a balance where we’re not like saying that, okay, we’re going to give a single mom or a single parent an excuse. But also

it's not like, if I am having a rough week with my kid, you're not like, well, that's not an excuse enough. You know, there should be kind of that reasonable sort of thing, I think. Alena expressed understanding of any skepticism on the part of faculty, and shared her experience of seeing how other students have taken advantage of a teacher's flexibility:

I could also see [the instructors] not believing us, like "Do I really believe this? How do I know you're really telling me the truth or not?" Because I feel like I've seen it with other parents, that they use that as an excuse, like, "oh, my kids were sick" – like, were they really? I have friends who have done it and I don't like that because I'm like dude, just because you have the chance to get an extension doesn't mean you should take advantage of it and use it in the wrong way, just for your advantage. No. If you need the help and it's available take it, be grateful, but just don't use it the wrong way.

Themes related to study participants' perceptions of interactions with faculty revealed that the women in the study felt most of the faculty they interacted with were supportive. Yet, most of the women could recall at least one negative interaction, but took responsibility for communicating and advocating for themselves in those relationships. Many of the women spoke of not wanting to be perceived as taking advantage or using their children as excuses.

Research Question Four: How do Single Mothers Experience Higher Education at an Urban 2-year College?

Theme 4. "It's a slow bleed" – Jessica. Participants talked about how long it has taken them to get a 2-year degree, with many of them describing their past attempts at college during the interviews. Some women described regretting not going back to college sooner, and many shared they wouldn't have been able to attend college when their children were younger, so waited until they were older. Other women mentioned that employment kept them from

attending, but for Jessica, she realized that she needs a degree in order to move forward in many areas of her life:

I want to do more at work, I want to do more in the community, and I - you know, if I ever wanted to work for the state, I would need a degree. And if I ever wanted to promotion at work, I would need a degree, and I feel like in a lot of ways, you just cannot get to the table without a degree.

Some of the women, like Erika, described not knowing the language of college and how that presented itself as a barrier which has resulted in “wasted” time and money:

I didn't know the difference between an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree, I didn't know that type of stuff. I didn't know what I wanted to do so I just went right in and it was, I think, I was just doing liberal arts at first. Which I feel like I wasted a lot of time. Had I been ready and educated and known all this stuff before I actually registered for college and wasted financial aid, and wasted time... it would have definitely been easier and I wouldn't have went to college that soon knowing that I wasn't ready.

Depending on student loans to live, in addition to stress around student loan debt accumulation was mentioned by some of the women in relation to this theme.

Theme 5. “I wish there were two of me” – Nadia. Themes of role conflict were mentioned by every woman in the study. Navigating being a student, a mom, and, as of spring 2020, a teacher for their school-aged children was overwhelming for most woman. They incorporated time management strategies such as staying up late, or waking up early to work on school like Erika:

I wake up at 4:30 in the morning and start working on my schoolwork. And my son wakes up at 6:00am, [like] clockwork, every single day. So, I have that hour and a half to

work, and waking up that early - by the time 8:00pm [comes], I'm ready for bed. Women talked about having to put themselves, and their needs on the back burner in order to focus on parenting and school. Fiona mentioned, "I have to get this college stuff, I have deadlines and there was no time to really focus on anything else." Daphne talked about the learning process involved in building time management skills:

I've just recently started to learn to manage my time in all areas of my life so that I get what I need as a human, a mother, a student all those areas but ah, no, I didn't used to think I had time at all. It was always... I mean still, you know, I'm tired as hell right now. Nadia mentioned needing to be intentional about prioritizing herself: "I just started this thing where I'm going to at least try to have two hours to myself like for self-care a week and that's something I'm like, I'm putting that as mandatory." While the women in this study were juggling multiple priorities, many of those with school-aged children commented on feeling lucky that they weren't juggling as much as other single mothers they knew who had younger children.

Theme 6. The pros and cons of a global pandemic. The women in this study seemed to experience college in very different ways after COVID-19 forced them to attend college remotely. For the women that were able to transition to working from home, they seemed to mostly take things in stride and could identify benefits to going remote. For women who had not been working, who lost their jobs, who had lower levels of technological literacy, or those who are not comfortable with online coursework, being a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic was incredibly challenging. Isolation and navigating children's distance learning were challenges that came up for many of the women, whether they were comfortable attending college online or not.

***Subtheme 1. "It's kind of better."* – Alena.** For women living far from campus, going

remote has had time saving benefits as described by Alena:

I don't think tutoring through Zoom was an option before COVID. Due to COVID, that's what all they want you to do. And again, to me, it's perfect, because I didn't want to drive all the way to Minneapolis, just for an hour just so I can do my tutoring. Well, this works great for me, you know, I'm saving gas.

In Jessica's case, she credits the time savings due to working remotely as one of the main reasons she was able to return to college:

I also wouldn't have been able to attend college if it weren't for COVID because... I took public transit... so it takes about an hour and a half daily. And that includes time like, walking from the home to the bus stop and you know, I basically got an hour and a half of my day back plus my lunch hour [due to COVID and working from home].

She expressed the thanks she felt when she was able to transition working from home at the start of the pandemic. Having technical literacy and computer equipment allowed her to treat taking classes "...like it was just an extension of my job." Daphne described seeing classmates struggle, although switching to completely online coursework was not a challenge for her:

I have done online classes before so this shift wasn't so dramatic for me but I'm in a class right now with students that have never done online classes and it's been detrimental [for them]. And I think... it's just supporting my peers to - trying to give them my experience as an online student to try and help them. Giving people grace, understanding.

***Subtheme 2. "I'm struggling so hard."* – Erika.** For those women who identified as hands-on learners, taking classes completely online has been difficult. Erika describes that difficulty with the additional challenge of having to guide her six-year-old son in his schooling:

I'm not an online learner at all. And it's hard because I'm a learner, where if I don't get

something, I'll stay after class with the teacher and get my own explanation so I can understand it. So yeah, we have our Zoom class and stuff. But a lot of the time, I got so much going on, I forget to go on [to] classes because the time passes, I'm doing eLearning with my son... so half the time I'll look at the clock like, 'Oh my God, I forgot my class!'

For those women with lower levels of digital literacy, or access to reliable internet, the transition was made smoother by assistance from the college as described by Brooke:

I did get the hotspot, the WiFi from the college, and also a leasing program for the computer, so that tremendously helped with the meeting those needs. Because otherwise, I'm on my phone. And yes, your phone can work, but it's technology, you know, there's always setbacks with it.

Laila stated, "It does make it a little bit more challenging because I'm not really technology savvy" and Ingrid described, "The fact that everything is online is really difficult." Women mentioned the difficulty in communicating with staff at the college due to having to email or leave voicemails, and not being able to go to campus and ask people in person. The fact of not being on campus felt "just insane" to Clara. Those with school age children described being home with their children all day "brought its own challenges" (Nadia).

Subtheme 3. The significance of support. The support of family members (including kids), peers, organizations, and employers were discussed by the women who participated in this research study. Many women shared the significance of that support in their lives. Heather, who during the interview mentioned that she doesn't have many friends in the area and her parents live an hour away, yet has the support of a local non-profit organization stated:

I think especially when you're a single parent with kids, you have to be able to depend on

other people. I mean, you just have to... A huge reason why I've been able to just maintain stability this last year has been really utilizing those supports that I have within that support network that I've... created for myself.

However, not all women in the study had a support system. Some women described being overwhelmed doing everything on their own: "I am so overwhelmed with all the work and responsibility, and my kids that have to go to school here [at home]" (Kristine). And Laila mentioned how no longer connecting with peers on campus made her feel isolated:

I wish there was more ways - besides being in clubs and stuff, to interact with my peers. I guess like, Zoom calls like this [interview] because I feel so isolated now. You know, that's how I used to interact with people was mostly at school and now I don't.

Multiple themes were revealed when analyzing how the women experienced being a college student while also being a parent. Many of the women described how much time getting a post-secondary credential has taken them, the need to prioritize responsibilities while experiencing role-conflict, and identified pros and cons of the global pandemic that changed their lives significantly in the year 2020.

Research Question Five. How are these Perceptions and Experiences Similar or Different Within the Context of Identity?

Theme 7: Experiences in context of identity. Being a mother to dependent children while pursuing a degree program has its challenges. Throughout the data collection process, participants mentioned identities other than parenting status which they felt impacted their college experience. Some discussed identities which made navigating the higher education system a little bit easier, and others mentioned identities which made attending school more difficult. Sometimes the women in the study described how their identity did not affect their

experiences, but then later shared an incident they experienced related to race, class, gender, or other power dynamics.

Subtheme 1. Language. Higher education in the U.S. is often a solely English-speaking system which can exclude those who were not born speaking American English. Alena, a woman who identified as Latina, spoke to the experiences of not understanding something that was being said or meant, yet feeling the expectation that she should understand:

I feel that, you know, people look at me and they expect me to know a whole bunch of everything. And I'm like, no, I'm sorry, I wasn't born here, so I don't know what you're talking about. I am 29, I moved here when I was 10. So, it's that whole thing like "oh you've been here for so many years, you should know so much." And it's like, no, because I didn't learn English until I was here [for] three years, and even knowing English, that doesn't mean anything. You still grow up in your household and your household is completely different from everybody else's.

College can be difficult to navigate when the financial aid system and other resources have requirements based on citizenship. Fiona, a woman who identified as Hispanic, described how exhausting it is to navigate these systems on her own:

I'm actually undocumented. I have a social and I have status here so I can be here without worrying. But I'm not a citizen and I'm not a resident.... I think a lot of people don't realize that when you're illegal and when you're legal - it's like a spectrum; I'm not either/or so it's like some things are open to me and other things are not. So having to navigate that, and having very few people be in those resources to kind of be like "let me help you" is hard because that means you have to do your own research. It's doable, but it's draining.

However, even students who identified English as their first language find the language of college confusing as explained by Erika earlier in the findings for research question four, and Ingrid here:

I am older going back to school and I've been out of it for a while. It's dumb, they kind of just assume that everybody should get it, where it's like everything is kind of foreign and they assume that you're just going to be able to get one direction and then figure out all the rest of it which, it's kind of difficult. Takes some time.

Jessica identified the privilege of having English as her first language:

There are so many different communication styles, and then when I identify that I don't have the barrier of English being a second language, it's not a second language for me reading or written. I already have comprehension problems reading it, so I would imagine that those that might have that barrier could potentially have an issue with it.

The language of college is difficult for many students, especially students who identify as first-generation or those who were raised speaking the language of poverty.

Subtheme 2. Socioeconomic status. Some of the women discussed their socioeconomic status, and the impact it had on their college experience, such as Erika who quit her part time job because of lack of care for her son after COVID hit:

We're broke, we're strapped for cash, going to school – like, financial aid is not enough. And then the [loans], we have to pay those back, and they gain interest. But I've taken them out every semester because that's the only way I can survive, and now I'm in debt.

Other women discussed relying on financial aid to pay for school and other living expenses.

Ingrid had to cut her hours at work in order to prioritize school, which felt strange for her:

So, it's weird, [I work] 12 to 15 hours per week. And this is the least amount I've worked as an adult, so it feels really strange for me - especially being the caretaker, and the sole provider. But with school, you kind of gotta do that.

Kristine, who has run out of financial aid eligibility, talked about the struggle having to pay for her education each semester has been. While Jessica depended on a scholarship and grants to be able to go back to college, and acknowledged the student loan debt she carries, she shared, "I have a heap of privileges that I'm acutely aware of." She describes growing up in a middle-class family, and while living in poverty at one time, is now upwardly mobile. She explained, "I've got stable housing and, you know, that list can go on... I've got stable internet connection and lots of work flexibility." Heather described receiving certain financial assistance due solely to her status as a single mom, and feeling thankful for that.

Subtheme 3. Mental health. Many participants spoke about the challenges dealing with mental health diagnosis brought to their college experience. Gabriella, a 19-year-old Black woman described,

I do have really bad anxiety, especially when it comes to certain things. Especially when I know there's a time frame for certain things, my anxiety gets really bad and I tend to get overwhelmed and shut down when I feel like I'm missing a deadline or I can't turn something in on time or I have to like constantly contact multiple people just to see like, okay, can I get it in at a certain time.

She described how she just failed her reading class: "I failed it because I have been going through like a lot these past couple weeks, I lost a few family members, housing situations, childcare, making sure my daughter's all right, like mental health... and it's just so much."

Fiona discussed how navigating college with a mental illness is difficult:

So mental health is huge. Um, I actually have ADHD and my whole life that's been difficult... But then when you're in charge of like, being responsible for somebody and providing for somebody, it's like an extra pressure to make sure that you're being the best you that you can be. So that's been pretty difficult... navigating everyday with ADHD is - it's not easy.

Jessica recognized the privilege she holds by being able to access care to deal her with her mental illnesses: “I have a couple diagnosed mental illnesses - depression and anxiety, but I also have great health insurance. I can seek the treatment that I need to cope with those things.” Being a college student while navigating mental health is something some participants described having to adjust to.

Subtheme 4. Race. Gabriella described feeling she needed to meet higher standards due to her race, “Being a African American young woman going to college, you have to meet a certain criteria that they might put on you.” Daphne and Jessica talked about their awareness of White privilege in the interview with Daphne stating: “...as a White person... that's a systemic, nationwide, multi-disciplinary privilege that I hold just by being born in this skin.” A few of the participants shared experiences of discussions of race and racism in their classes, which increased after the civil unrest following George Floyd’s murder by a police officer summer 2020. While three of the women perceived increased conversations around race as positive, Gabriella used the word “awkward” to describe her experience with a class discussion post:

A few students picked something that was kind of racial that happened to them. And with that, in the discussions, it was kind of just... awkward for some of the [White] students. And for the colored students, they actually understood where that person (author) was coming from, seeing the experience that they had. Like, the replies to [the discussion

post] weren't from the White students. I don't even think our instructor actually replied to it either, because I don't think he probably knew what to say, or how to go about the situation, not wanting to create a problem out of just a simple assignment. So, I noticed that a lot of things got left alone.

Ingrid, who stated in the past that she would “joke and say that I'm like a mutt because I have a lot of different things [ethnicities].” She described how others often wanted to label her as German and Black, and then shared an awakening around race due to one of her classes:

That's one thing that we've also covered in one of my classes this year is identity, and also racial identity, and how us, as a society is evolving and so also our look on diversity should evolve too. So that's why I say I'm biracial.

Jessica hoped to gain more language around talking about race in a class she's taking:

As a White person I understand that there are a lot of assumed privileges that I have... I'm taking a Research and Composition for Change class, which focuses directly on race, class, and gender issues right now. So, I'm trying to understand how to express some of those things better.

While not naming race, Gabriella described the assumptions she believes some instructors make about her:

I think for me, my instructors probably have their own agenda of what I am like... I just think they don't know how to approach me in a normal way rather than... in not a somewhat negative way. I think they just feel like I would probably be more loud and obnoxious - just ready to like, be angry at them when they approach me for certain things, when that's not really the case. I'm open to listen, I take critiquing well, I am a critical

person on myself half the time - more than the teacher would be, so I just feel like they don't really know me to a good point where they can understand [who I am].

Subtheme 5. Lack of representation. Fiona discussed lack of representation in her program:

I'm in a program that is mainly men. A lot of women aren't in it, but also aren't that many people of color. So being in there... I have felt like it seems like the things that I might need, or the experience or perspective that I bring, being, you know, a foreigner, being a woman, is not what the program... values. I've never felt like my opinion or my perspective wasn't welcome, but a lot of instances, I feel like I'm different. And being a woman, being a mom especially, like, it's so different in there. So that's one thing that I felt like it - not to say that it's not inclusive because the professors have been great, but I think they're not used to somebody like me that checks all those boxes. So, kind of like a, "okay you're different, and we're going to work with you. Also, there's not much we can do for you." So, that's been different for me. I don't want to say it's difficult; I don't want to say that I felt like, you know, odds were against me or anything, but... my perspective here is very different, I stand out for sure. I don't know if it's a good thing or bad thing, but I for sure stand out.

Kristine felt her identity was not represented in the marketing materials and on website of the institution:

I am a Muslim woman, a black woman. And I don't see that [representation], and I don't feel welcome... Especially after I see the other colleges I was like, wow, this is different from what I was expecting. At least that you never see... a picture of covered woman or any [thing] like that.

Heather described a sense of belonging in the context of one aspect of her identity, when describing her program's Recovery Center: "...I am a little over two years sober. So that is one thing that I really appreciated coming into the program... a big chunk of people are in recovery." Yet, Jessica pointed out how hard it is to feel a sense of belonging when completely online, "It's really hard when you're not on campus to feel like you belong."

Subtheme 6. Interactions. Kristine described feeling there was something about her identity that impacted how people interacted with her; she didn't always know what it was:

Some people, you can tell they don't even want to look at you, they don't even want to interact with you... Whether it's my cover (hijab), whether it is my color, whether it's my - because I'm a woman, whatever the case is, you cannot tell, although some are obvious [with their prejudices].

Brooke explained that her identity influenced how instructors interacted with her, and saw that as necessary:

I do think that they almost have to [treat students differently]. Or then they'll be like that one negative instructor where it's very monotone, it's robotic-like where it's like, treat everyone the same. We can't all be treated the exact same because we all are different - have different aspects of our life. A single parent has way more different aspects than an 18-year-old fresh out of high school.

Fiona acknowledged differences single mothers bring to the classroom, but shared her desire to be treated like any other student:

We're just like any other student. I mean, obviously different perspective, different experience, different things at home but I feel like in a lot of colleges, there's still that kind of like, oh because they are mom than dot dot dot (fill in the blank). I personally

don't want to be identified as a single mom at school, like I want that to be something that if you ask me about me and we start talking, it comes up organically. But I don't want it to be like my name and then, "she's a mom." You know, like I feel that's still really huge in colleges and nobody talks about it but it definitely [impacts] how people treat you as a student.

Identities were discussed in depth during most of the interviews. In addition to the themes described for research question five, participants also mentioned age, criminal background, learning and/or physical disabilities as other identities which impacted their college experience and were described under themes answering preceding research questions.

Evidence of Quality

Trustworthiness

Accuracy of data was assured in this study. The researcher ensured trustworthiness in this study as described by guidelines set forth by Shenton (2004), who based their work on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria for qualitative studies. Shenton (2004) outlined strategies in which qualitative researchers can ensure trustworthiness in their studies, focused on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility is the term Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Shenton, 2004) used to address validity and is described in detail below. Transferability refers to the ability for other researchers to apply findings described above to other contexts (p. 69). The researcher ensured transferability by providing a detailed description of the phenomenon in question, and also making explicit the specific context of the study including the setting and research design. Dependability refers to the extent in which another researcher could duplicate this study. The researcher ensured dependability by outlining specific steps taken in design, data gathering, and

data analysis to an extent in which another researcher could replicate steps taken. Finally, confirmability refers to the findings representing the perceptions of the participants, rather than the preferences of the researcher (p. 72). The researcher ensured confirmability by acknowledging assumptions and bias in chapters one, three, and five, and outlining the delimitations and limitations of the study.

Validity

The researcher followed the strategies for validation as described by Creswell and Poth (2018), incorporating activities throughout the study that ensured validation, using the three lenses suggested: researcher, participant, and reader lenses (p. 260). Through the researcher's lens, data which was non-confirming was attended to and included in the findings, the researcher engaged in reflexivity throughout the study in which past experience and biases were shared with the reader, and the researcher employed theoretical triangulation by using both intersectionality and constructivism in interpreting the data. (Scott, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 85).

To ensure validity through the participant's lens, the researcher did member-checking as needed when reviewing and correcting transcriptions, and with the findings which appeared to answer the first four research questions. However, she chose not to member-check interpretations and findings for research question five or chapter five due to her intersectional analysis of the data. The concepts around power, privilege, and oppression may not be familiar to many of the participants and may not be congruent with their interpretation of what was experienced (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 466).

To suggest validity through the reader's lens, the researcher has provided enough information that another researcher could follow the steps outlined to conduct the study. However, different conclusions may be reached due to space and time in which research took

place, and the influence of identities of researcher and participants. In addition, the chapters were subject to peer review throughout the writing process.

Summary

The preceding chapter described the demographics of the participants in this study, and the findings from semi-structured interviews which provided insight in response to the five research questions that guided this study. Thirteen women with children shared their perceptions and experiences while attending college during a year which brought unprecedented challenges to their lives. They shared perceptions of institutional barriers, knowledge, and access of institutional support services, in addition to recounting interactions with faculty. The participants described their experiences being a mother while pursuing a college education and shared how their identities shaped those experiences. Finally, the researcher described how accuracy was assured in this study and outlined the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and validity.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

One-quarter of all college students in the U.S. are raising children. Yet, college students with dependent children can be found in much higher numbers at public 2-year and for-profit institutions as these institutions have welcomed diverse populations of students since their inception. Women who are attending college while being the primary caregiver for their children have had historically low graduation rates, yet the return on investment when they do complete a degree program is significant (Gault et al., 2018). An investigation into the experiences of single mother college students was completed with 13 women attending an urban community college in pursuit of an understanding of this population's perceptions to find ways of better supporting this significant population of nontraditional college students. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the struggles college students were already facing, and had a particularly significant effect on single mothers, highlighting the need for this research study.

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study, analyzed through a lens of intersectionality. The chapter will provide a comparison of findings within existing literature, and the implications as understood by the researcher. Limitations, recommendations for action and future research will also be discussed.

Summary of Results

The data collected through semi-structured interviews with single mother college students attempted to answer the research questions that guided this study:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of institutional barriers?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of institutional support services?

RQ3. What are the perceptions of interactions with faculty?

RQ4. How do single mothers experience higher education at an urban 2-year college?

RQ5. How are these perceptions and experiences similar or different within the context of identity?

Findings revealed that women often recalled institutional barriers were most prevalent at the beginning of their journey of becoming an enrolled student. Needing childcare to allow for completing admission processes was most mentioned as a barrier. Placement testing and the financial aid process were institutional steps identified by the women as particularly frustrating to navigate.

The participants in the study felt the support resources offered by their institution were varied and met many of their needs. When asked what resources were lacking, few things were mentioned including housing and additional financial support (cash or gas cards). However, while most of the participants were aware of services, some of them did not access services due to distance, not needing them, or the COVID-19 pandemic forcing many supports to move online.

The women in the study mostly perceived their interactions with faculty as positive, and felt supported by most of the instructors they had. They valued the flexibility and understanding shown to them by most faculty and recognized their responsibility for maintaining an open line of communication with their instructors. Yet, there were instances where participants identified interactions with faculty that were not positive or supportive to their persistence or success as degree seeking students; some of those interactions were specific to family responsibilities conflicting with class.

Other themes that arose were the prevalence of role conflict, and not having enough time in the day to do everything that needed to be done. Also, COVID-19 was at the top of all participants' minds, and they shared different experiences related to having to take classes completely online. While exhaustion and mental health were identified as more intense due to current circumstance, the women tried to keep things in perspective and do the best they could to do what was needed. When considering how identity impacted their college experience, some women were able to articulate how they have experienced marginalization or privilege, while other women did not have the language to do so.

Comparison of the Findings with Theoretical Framework and Previous Literature

Research question five asks for analysis of the first four research questions to be made within the context of participants' identities. Throughout the research design, the researcher did not specify which identities mattered to this study, and instead attempted to allow participants to make that determination themselves. This was done by asking them, prior to interview questions commencing, to consider the identities they felt impacted their college experience, and to consider those identities throughout the interview. Examples were given of what was meant by "identities" (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical disabilities, mental health) during the introduction. While some of the interview questions asked participants to consider their experiences based specifically on parenting status, other questions were asked in context of their "other identities" which again, were left to the participants to determine (see Interview Protocol in Appendix C). When asked by participants, the researcher provided additional examples of identities.

While the first interview participant eagerly listed off many of the identities she brought to the college setting, it became apparent with subsequent interviews that many of the women in

this study had not given much thought to “identity” and/or how their identities might influence how they experienced post-secondary education. All of the participants in this study identified as female, as the primary caregiver for their dependent children, and as college students at an urban community college. As sexuality was not mentioned by any of the participants, the researcher assumed all participants identified as heterosexual. Most, but not all, of the women identified as low-income. Overarching similarities among the participants stopped there. The women in this study represented many ages, races, socio-emotional statuses, and living situations. Some participants were employed and they experienced varying levels of economic stress. The number and ages of their children varied, some had the support of family, peers, or employers, and some participants did not mention any outside support.

Theriault and Daniel (2013) noted that employing intersectionality in qualitative research “invites scholars to employ a similarity/difference dialectic throughout their research” (p. 6); somewhat surprisingly, similarities were fewer than imagined among the participants. However, this supports the researcher’s assumption that we move through the world as individuals, shaped by unique circumstance and experiences. This also supports the ontological assumption of phenomenological research in that “reality is multiple as seen through many views” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000, p. 116, as cited in Bowleg, 2008) noted the following:

Researchers who conduct community-based research with historically disenfranchised communities routinely confront the dilemma of “... connect[ing] theoretically, empirically, and politically troubling social/familial patterns with macrostructural shifts when our informants expressly do not make, or even refuse to make, the connections” (p. 322).

On the surface level, this is exactly what happened. For example, just two of the women of color in the study inferred that their identity (race, ethnicity, gender, etc.) impacted how instructors interacted with them. In fact, many of them stated they felt their identity had no influence on how they moved through their college experience. Yet, an intersectional analysis was established by all the women, albeit unintentionally, during the interviews.

The following discussion of findings employed the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality developed by intersectional researcher Núñez (2014). This model helps to “examine how one’s multiple identities intersect with other micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis” (p. 87), which allowed the researcher to further examine the data gathered in an attempt to better answer research question five, “How are these perceptions and experiences similar or different within the context of identity?” In addition, an intersectional examination reveals deeper truths to the answers found for research questions 1-4. It also allowed the researcher to compare and contrast the findings of empirical research outlined in chapter two.

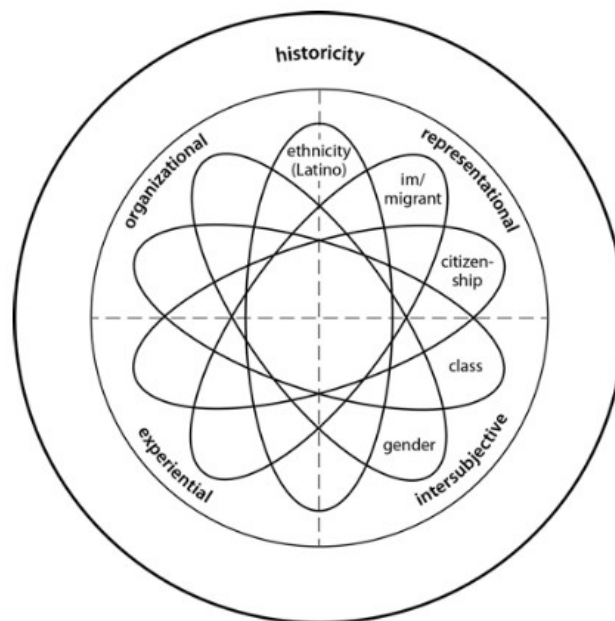


Figure 1. Multilevel Model of Intersectionality

Level 1 (Micro-level): Social Categories and Relations

This level includes “Defining social categories and examining how these social categories relate to one another” (p. 87). Overview of the social categories, or identities, described by the participants at time of this study are as follows:

Alena discussed being first-generation, both in the U.S. and as a college student. English is her second language, she deals with mental health issues, and experienced poverty at one time. She is the mother of an 11-year-old daughter and attends school and works part-time. She lives in a predominantly White, rural area, and described feeling like an outcast at a previous institution. Displays self-efficacy in seeing a tutor, and asking for what she needs from student services and instructors. She identified as Latina.

Brooke mentioned her physical disability, criminal background, economic status, being in recovery, and experiencing a feeling of fear during the summer 2020 civil unrest. Was put on academic suspension due to dropping out of school to move back to her hometown after civil unrest. Initially signed up for college on her own, without help from an academic advisor. Mentioned her grandmother, but did not mention any family support. Has a five-year-old son, and when asked, identified as White.

Clara mentioned her race (White), being an older college student, and being the parent of older children. She works part-time and felt that going back to school was “the best decision [she] ever made.”

Daphne mentioned her privilege as a White woman, that she has strong support (financially and emotionally supported) from both parents who are married to each other. Lives in an upper- middle-class urban neighborhood. Had attended college before having a child.

Erika mentioned being a Black woman, being a teen mom, and experiencing economic

stress. Recently quit part-time job due to needing to care for asthmatic child. Lives in income-based housing. Displayed low self-efficacy by stating “no one told me” related to academics and resources. Has some support from her mother who will take her children on Saturdays. She is struggling to meet the academic standards of the college. She did not feel her identity influenced how anyone at the college interacted with her. Mentioned her mother had some college credits completed.

Fiona discussed being an undocumented student, and struggling with mental health, economic stress, and identity conflict (parent vs. student). Has sought support from tutoring and TRIO, so is a first-generation college student. Wants to take a break as she feels mentally exhausted. Has support from a non-profit organization, did not mention family support. Dropped out of high school twice, was a teen mom. Identified as Hispanic.

Gabriella mentioned her race (African-American), has extended foster care status, and felt professors make assumptions, but did not articulate why. Feels she is held to a higher standard than other students due to race. She inferred housing instability, experienced recent death of a cousin, and feels guilty about not giving her daughter more of her time. Did not mention outside support; signed up for school on her own. Struggling with academic progress. Has a name that likely incites implicit bias.

Heather mentioned being in recovery and dealing with situational depression and anxiety. Has support from a non-profit organization and some family support, parents are married to each other but live further away. Works part-time, and identified as White when asked.

Ingrid mentioned her age, and since moving to online classes, felt “nobody sees her so identity doesn’t impact how they interact with her”. Mother and grandmother went to college later in life. She has support from a non-profit organization, did not mention family support.

Identified as biracial, and has a traditional “Euro-American” name. Works part-time.

Jessica discussed her privilege as a White woman with a stable income and access to health care. Identified successfully navigating her mental health diagnoses, has strong family support; parents are married to each other and are middle-class. Seeks out opportunities at work and at school, taking on leadership positions, and getting good grades. Works full-time.

Kristine identified her race as Black, and ethnicity as Somali when asked. She had a strong accent. Mentioned her cover (hijab), and being Muslim. She has experienced economic stress, and felt fear as immigrant during the summer 2020 civil unrest. Felt “as long as she does her job” nobody bothers her, but also described a racist incident with an instructor. Did not mention any outside support. Has a completed post-secondary credential; switched to nursing as she felt she can get a job with a two-year degree, but is out of financial aid.

Laila, discussed her physical disabilities, had to withdraw from a previous semester due to health issues. Not from Minnesota, and mentioned father in different state. She feels respected by people at the college; she does not feel identities affect her experience. Identified as Asian when asked. She thought her challenges to degree attainment were health issues and number of children.

Nadia discussed being supported by her employer, experienced temporary economic stress when COVID-19 initially hit, and identified strong family support. Does not feel her identity affects how people treat her. Identified as a working mom, and as Somali when asked.

Examining the intersecting identities held by the women of this study was the first level of intersectional analysis directed by use of the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (Núñez, 2014). How do the multiple identities expressed by the participants in this study intersect with the organizational, representational, intersubjective, and experiential “domains of power” (Dill &

Zambrana, 2009 as cited in Núñez, 2014) “that contribute to inequality across social categories” (p. 88)? How do these intersections influence the answers given in response to the interview questions that guided this study, and how do the answers provided by participants compare to existing literature on this population of college students?

Level 2 (Meso-level)

Organizational. The author (2014) described this arena as “positions in structures of society such as work, family, and education” (p. 88). This level allowed for a deeper reflection of themes related to the first research question, “What are the perceptions of institutional barriers?” According to existing research, for most single mother college students, attending college required the need to rely on financial aid, including loans, to pay for educational and living expenses (IWPR, 2018a; Katz, 2013; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Schumacher, 2013; Thomas, 2001), yet the financial aid process was often mentioned by the participants in this study as a significant barrier.

An example of this position within education would be Fiona’s experience of not qualifying for financial aid as an undocumented student. While the DREAM Act was passed by the House of Representatives at the time this was written (Sprunt & Grisales, 2021), it had not yet been passed by the Senate. This means students like Fiona still do not have a clear path to citizenship despite growing up in the United States and making contributions to the fabric of our collective society. She talked about how exhausting it was for her to find resources to be able to attend school.

Kristine had run out of financial aid eligibility due to having a previous associate’s degree. She discussed difficulties with processes around scholarship and the child care grant application, neither of which she qualified for, and did not understand why. For Kristine who

was an English language learner, the reality of a monolingual education system likely impacted her understanding of grant and scholarship processes.

This domain also examines “positions in structures of society such as... family” (p. 88), in relation to research question one. Strong family support was acknowledged by Jessica, Nadia, and Daphne. While most women in the study identified childcare as a barrier to getting started as a degree-seeking student, Daphne, Jessica, and Nadia did not. Perhaps because they had family to care for their children when completing placement testing and other admissions processes. Research with student mothers suggested that having emotional support from family and friends could be instrumental in the transition to college (Cerven, 2013; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002).

Yet, some research noted that many single parents lack a personal support system (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Schumacher, 2013), and therefore had to rely on mentors or formal networks for support. Fiona, Ingrid, and Heather, who mentioned little or no family support, all sought support from a local non-profit organization while pursuing a degree program. While Fiona and Ingrid still mentioned barriers such as childcare, placement tests, or paying for college in response to research question one, their seeking of outside support showed a level of self-efficacy not shown by every woman in the study.

The Organizational level also allows for a deeper reflection of the answers to research question two, “What are the perceptions of institutional support services?” Chapter two discussed the role of the community college in supporting students outside of academics, often expanding services to include those addressing basic needs such as food, clothing, or emergency financial support. The conversations that took place during this research identified the research site as facilitating many supports which were acknowledged as holistic and valuable by the

women and their families, even when they had not accessed them. As described in existing research, studies have revealed that women of color and single parents were the most food insecure students, and receipt of the Pell Grant was a predictor of food insecurity for female students (Spaid & Gillet-Karam, 2018). While the research site did have a food pantry and meals available to students, the students who identified as living at the lowest socio-economic spectrum of the participants had not accessed many of the basic needs supports that the institution had. Both Gabriella and Erika appeared to be in survival mode, too busy to seek out resources from the college. Brooke had just moved to a rural area which prevented her from accessing resources.

While rarely acknowledged as such, childcare is a basic need and one the institution was not equipped to provide. Chapter two outlined literature which revealed that lack of childcare was detrimental to single mother college students' persistence rates (Beeler, 2016; Cerven, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; IWPR, 2018b; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Yakaboski, 2010). While in one study, access to safe, affordable childcare was a significant predictor of success for single mother community college students (IWPR, 2018b). As was acknowledged above, and in chapter four, lack of childcare was a barrier to matriculating at the college for some of the study participants, particularly for the participants without family support.

This level also allows for a deeper reflection of the answers to research question four, "How do single mothers experience higher education?" Role conflict and time demands were described by all participants in this study and was a focus of existing research as described in chapter two. Competing priorities was shown in literature as impeding persistence (Beeler, 2016; IWPR, 2018b; Katz, 2013; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Thomas, 2001; Yakaboski, 2010), and was supported during the interviews with participants in this study. All of the women noted they felt there was not enough time in the day to take care of everything that

needed to be done. Having to prioritize tasks was common, and Heather and Jessica mentioned household duties (laundry specifically) was particularly overwhelming, but yet at the bottom of the list. Gabriella and Jessica both expressed wanting to spend more time with their children, illustrating feelings of guilt due to role conflict as supported by Haleman (2004), and Lashley and Ollivierre (2014) in the literature review. The position of these women in their families, as head of households, in a country that has defined historical expectations for mothers, likely increased the pressure these women felt to “do it all”.

Another example of the Organizational domain intersecting with a participant’s identity as a single mother would be Heather’s experience taking a call from an administrator at her son’s school:

I had gotten a call from the head of the special ed department - she was very rude and very brazen on the phone; [she] was just like, “I understand you're a single parent and I understand that must be very difficult. I know you work and go to school, but you know he (Heather’s son) is falling behind. And, you just need to support him more.” I'm just kind of like, excuse me? I was just really taken aback by the way that she came across.

The stress of having to homeschool her son, who struggles with ADHD, resulted in Heather having to withdraw from a class, delaying her degree progress. This was identified as a negative result of the global pandemic, and relates to how she experienced her education in the past year. Yet, she also acknowledged a strong support network, and that she is getting “straight A’s.”

For Erika and Fiona who experienced being teen mothers, the Organizational domain recognizes how the experience of feeling marginalized as teen mothers in high school might intersect with their current experiences as single mother college students. Erika stated that starting college as a PSEO student while having a baby and trying to finish her high school

diploma was too much for her. She stated it was the first time she dropped out of college. She described her lack of direction as costing her time and money, and that she had been on “on academic suspension and on probation a million times.” Fiona mentioned dropping out of high school twice as a teenager, and not being able to mentally transition from high school to college due to having a child.

Laila talked about never planning to go to college, and initially did not finish high school, “but as I got older and after having children, it changed my mind because I didn't want my kids to do what I did.” She ended up getting her “adult diploma,” and by getting help from a county worker was able to figure out financial aid, and get registered for college. Her experience as a post-traditional college student with children provided motivation to navigate the unfamiliar structure of higher education in hopes of providing an example to her children. As noted in chapter two, single mothers throughout various studies indicated their motivation for degree attainment being intertwined with their desire for a better life for themselves and children and often viewed themselves as role models for their children and community (Beeler, 2016; Butler, Deprez, & Smith, 2004; Cerven, 2013; Coker, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Hinton-Smith, 2015; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013; Thomas, 2001; Van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016).

Representational. Núñez (2014) gave the example of “discursive processes” (p. 89) to describe this segment of the model. Another way to consider this is how power relationships are developed through language in society (Fawad, 2015). At the time this was written, the U.S. was just on the other side of experiencing a Presidency that thrived on using divisive language to stoke fears in some and marginalize others. One can imagine that for Fiona, Alena, Kristine, and perhaps Nadia, discourse around perceived “immigrant threats” by government leaders provided

a constant reminder of where the dominant culture placed them on the power continuum. In addition, this discourse likely influenced students, faculty, and staff to internalize stereotypes about students they assumed to be immigrants, which potentially had an impact on how they interacted with these women.

For Laila, the increase in hate crimes against Asian people after COVID-19 was continually referred to as the “China Virus” by the former president, in addition to his mocking of a person with disabilities likely impacted her feeling of security. Kristine mentioned when discussing the civil unrest that took place in her community in there summer of 2020, “when you are immigrant, you live under fear.” As mentioned in chapter four, Kristine also felt underrepresented by her college; perceiving a lack of Muslim student representation on the website and in marketing materials for the institution.

Fiona felt a lack of representation in her program in which most of the students were White men. She also spoke at length about not wanting to be “judged” as a single mother. How might long-standing stereotypes about single mothers, in addition to the national (negative) dialog about “illegal aliens” impact her interactions in the classroom, even if she was unable to identify it as such? Research found that single mother students, regardless of race, experienced spokesperson pressure, prejudice, and lack of understanding from faculty, staff, and students who were not parents (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Yakaboski, 2010). Fiona perceived spokesperson pressure, prejudice, and lack of understanding from faculty and classmates. She described feeling “drained” and “checked out” and was considering taking a break from school to tend to her mental health. Likely, how her multiple marginalized identities intersected with the Organizational and Representational domains described above, contributed to that exhaustion, and in turn, her degree progress.

Intersubjective. Núñez (2014) describes this section as “relationships between individuals and members of groups” (p. 88), or “The intersubjective arena concerns how people and groups relate to one another and influence educational opportunities” (p. 89). Much of what was discussed in answer to research question three, “What are the perceptions of interactions with faculty?” can be examined within this domain. The researcher was surprised at the significant number of participants that stated they did not feel marginalized during their interactions with faculty, yet, most of them recounted a time when they were marginalized by an instructor. Perhaps the lack of acknowledgement stemmed from not wanting any part of their identity to be an excuse for any negative interactions; many participants hinted at this desire. The stereotypes, racism, and sexism, that was apparent in some literature outlined in chapter two seemed incongruent with most of what the participants in this study expressed. The apathy of faculty as described by women in other studies (Coker, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Yakaboski, 2010) was only mentioned by a few of the women in this study.

Gabriella was one of those women. Her experience outlined in chapter 4 reflects how she perceived her instructors make assumptions about her: “I think they just feel like I would probably be loud and obnoxious, just ready to be angry at them when they approach me for certain things,” is an example of this relationship. While she did not give an explicit reason why she believes that is, her name is one that is not found in White, dominant culture. Research is clear about the regularity in which implicit bias forms around names. Her experience and perception that she could discover this bias in her interactions with her professors likely made her less willing to reach out to them for support. For the women in the study with accents, instructors may make assumptions about their academic ability which could negatively impact

the level of interaction with these students, or expectations they hold for these students. Higher education has long made assumptions of academic ability based on race and ethnicity.

The idea of an Intersubjective situation was illuminated when Erika described a Black instructor bringing his child to class despite not allowing students to, “It kind of made me also feel some type of way because he was a Black man like you know, just support your people out of everybody.” The perceived lack of support from someone she identified as a member of her community made Erika feel particularly unsupported.

Fiona described that when she returned to class a few days after reaching out to an instructor to explain her child was sick, the instructor asked about her child in front of the whole class. She described wanting to advocate for herself by telling him she would have preferred he didn’t do that, but chose not to because she knew the professor didn’t have any ill intent. Fiona did not like the idea of her classmates knowing about her parenting status as she thought it would impact how they interacted with her or how they thought about her capabilities. This experience will likely influence Fiona’s willingness to reach out to instructors when her child is sick in the future.

On the other hand, Heather described being able to relate to faculty in her program as many of them had identified as being in recovery as well. She felt that by being open and outgoing instructors interacted with her more than those who didn’t speak up in class. Likely, her desire to build relationships with her instructors can be attributed to the narratives she grew up with as a member of the dominant culture as described by the Experiential domain below.

Research noted that strong relationships with faculty who respected the demands single parents faced were instrumental in the women’s ability to be successful (Carpenter, Kaka, Tygret, & Cathcart, 2018; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). This was supported by Laila’s

retelling of an understanding instructor being flexible with her due to family obligations. While Laila's physical disabilities have been a challenge, and have forced her to withdraw from classes, she felt supported by the institution's accessibility services department, and some of her instructors. This likely had a positive impact on her motivation to continue her schooling after withdrawing.

Sense of belonging would fit under this Intersubjective domain as many of the women indicated, their sense of belonging was directly related to their relationships with people at the college. While chapter two provided a very brief discussion on sense of belonging and identified the dearth of literature on this concept as related to single mother college students, it was something that was mentioned directly, or indirectly during many of the interviews. For example, Laila felt isolated and missed connecting with peers at school. Clara also mentioned feeling a lack of connection due to being away from campus. Heather mentioned feeling like she belonged in her program because "a big chunk of people are in recovery." Erika mentioned feeling like she belonged in her program as well: "Like, that group, that's *my* group" she stated, referring to the students in her program. Jessica mentioned being involved in student government and the enjoyment of connecting with her peers. Nadia mentioned feeling a sense of belonging at her job, where many of her colleagues are mothers. Much of existing literature focused on the importance of sense of belonging in student persistence is based on traditional student populations (Deil-Amen, 2011). Therefore, there is little to compare these findings with existing literature.

Experiential. Núñez (2014) gives the example of "narrative sensemaking" (p. 88) to explain this domain of the model. Indications of this were found throughout the interview transcripts. Many of the women constructed narratives about what they needed to do to finish school. The idea of narrative sensemaking as a coping mechanism employed by single mother

college students was also supported in a study by Katz (2013) as described in chapter two. This was evidenced by Erika stating, “I always go back to this: I think of like, it's not just me struggling right now, it's everybody, like whether they have kids or not.” Fiona talked about having “mind over matter” to do what she needed to do to get enrolled. Nadia discussed needing to “just push through it” when discussing the challenges of being a full-time college student, full-time working mom, and being responsible for her son’s schooling.

The system of higher education in the U.S. has traditionally espoused the American/middle- upper-class narrative of individualism - the idea that if you work hard, you’ll have everything you need. Martínez Alemán (2006) noted,

This view of merit as solely located in the individual can influence students to believe that their limited educational opportunities are primarily due to their innate academic (in)abilities, rather than educational and economic systems that do not invest in or recognize their educational potential (as cited in Núñez, 2014, p. 89).

Many of the women of this study seemed to internalize that message as well. Jessica declared, “It's always important to do your best and to study hard.” Fiona mentioned, “You know, I just want to be that student that comes in, that does what I do, the best that I do.”

Research has described differences in narratives between class groups in the U.S., narratives which have a direct influence on educational achievement. Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012) noted that working-class people (and those raised in poverty) “are likely socialized with different rules of the game” including language focused on interdependence and interconnection (p. 1179). On the other hand, people from middle- and upper-class backgrounds “tend to understand themselves as independent” which is congruent with the value of individualism that higher education holds dear. According to the authors, this

difference results in a cultural mismatch between first-generation/working-class students and higher education's middle- upper-class norms. This cultural mismatch has been shown to result in "academic disadvantage" for those students (p. 1192). Along these lines, Erika shared,

I don't want to make what I have going on seem like an excuse for why I'm falling behind right now. I mean it's definitely why, but I don't know, I can't compare my story to other people's because when I see everybody else succeeding in the class and then I'm behind, I know I'm probably one of the only ones. I was thinking, how are they able to stay this focused?

Erika struggles with maintaining satisfactory academic progress, and as outlined above, is at an intersection of risk factors for not completing a degree program. She inferred the influence of "not knowing" the language of college when starting out and acknowledged that lack of understanding was a barrier and believes it is a main reason she has been at the college so long with no degree to show for it.

One example of this in relation to research question four would be Jessica's story. Her experience of being involved in social movements to combat the increasing numbers of homeless people in the city was a motivator for going back to college. Giving back to communities was a motivator for returning to college in existing research (Butler et al., 2004; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Van Rhijn et al., 2016), Jessica felt she could do more for her community by getting a degree. Likely, her identity as a White woman, who grew up in a middle-class family influenced her perception of her ability to get a degree and make a difference in society.

Level 3 (Macro-level): Historicity

According to Núñez (2014), this level "Focuses on broader interlocking systems of economic, legal, political, media, and social power and classification that evolve over time in

specific places, as well as social movements to challenge these systems” (p. 89). As mentioned in chapter two, COVID-19 served to highlight the largely nonexistent social safety net in the United States, disproportionately affecting women like those in this study. While U.S. economic systems have historically excluded people of color and women from equal opportunity in employment, the sheer number of job losses that occurred in women-dominated fields due to the pandemic has compounded this impact. Two participants described economic stress due to COVID-19. Nadia temporarily lost her position which led her to applying for emergency financial assistance through her institution. Erika ended up quitting her job because her son’s school wouldn’t allow him to stay because his asthma symptoms were suggestive of COVID; her and her children are now living on unemployment benefits and student loans.

Housing is a macro-level system that has traditionally been used to keep people of color and people in poverty disenfranchised in the United States. The two women that mentioned experiencing housing instability were not employed, and also were not maintaining satisfactory academic progress. Brooke mentioned she was currently seeking social security for her disability, so was not working. She had dropped some of her classes due to moving, and would be suspended the following semester. Gabriella mentioned being on academic warning.

The interviews revealed few direct examples of this macro-level intersectional arena in the participants’ stories. Existing literature focused on single mother college students also failed to address macro-level structures. Yet the researcher acknowledges that the breadth and depth of historical wrongs, and the effect of those wrongs on the educational attainment of non-traditional college students impacted each one of their educational experiences, and provided some insight to research question four “How do single mothers experience higher education at an urban 2-year college?”

By using the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (Núñez, 2014), the researcher was able to facilitate a deeper examination into the social identities represented by the women in this study, and better examine how those identities interact with the micro-, meso-, and macro-level structures in society and higher education. This allowed for a better understanding of the educational experiences of these women. In addition, this allowed the researcher to contrast these deeper findings to existing literature on single mother college students. To build on a conclusion shared by health researcher, Gómez (2018):

The U.S. has a long and shameful history of building institutions rooted in racism, sexism, and classism, among other deadly ideologies, which has intentionally limited our opportunities to [access high quality education]. When we apply a lens of intersectionality to our [education research], we broaden our definition of [education equity] and seek solutions that better address [our students'] needs.

Implications for Social Change

This phenomenological qualitative study set out to highlight the experiences and perceptions of college students living at an intersection of multiple marginalized identities in order to learn ways institutions can better support them as they pursue a degree program. The research described above will contribute to existing literature focused on single mother college students navigating a global pandemic. Scholar and author Max van Manen (1997) described the researcher's hope for this study:

And while phenomenology as a form of inquiry does not prescribe any particular political agenda suited for the social historical circumstances of a particular group or social class, the thoughtfulness phenomenology sponsors is more likely to lead to an indignation, concern, or commitment that, if appropriate, may prompt us to turn to such political

agenda (p. 154).

As mentioned in chapter one and supported by empirical literature in chapter two, the returns on investment when a single mother graduates with a post-secondary credential are wide reaching. As COVID-19 and the racial awakening of 2020 highlighted, women, single-mothers, and particularly single-mothers of color are situated to uniquely influence the trajectory of our society when and if they are supported to do so. The pandemic highlighted the disparities in the U.S. around housing, healthcare, food, and education and many single mothers will come out on the other side of this pandemic further behind they were when it started if we do not prioritize the well-being and success of our country's families.

Recommendations for Action

Those of us who envision a society in which each person has the tools and resources they need to contribute to their fullest ability must focus on support resources which improve the quality of life for the families in our communities. Education has the potential to open many doors for women and their children, yet access to high quality education is far from assured for every person living in this country. Many of the women spoke to financial strain and debt when discussing their continued education, in addition to barriers which prevented them from being successful in higher education.

Ideally policy makers will prioritize families, women, and children, when implementing economic growth strategies, especially as we emerge from the pandemic that took over our lives in 2020-2021. Investing in national organizations that are already doing the work to support the economic and educational attainment of mothers and their children, such as Jeremiah Program, the Institute for Women's Policy Research, or the National Women's Law Center should be prioritized.

Too often, those in positions of power attempt to develop solutions for groups of people they do not represent. It was important that the women in this study were given an opportunity to share recommendations for action which are shared here:

- Utilize students studying child development or elementary education to staff short term daycare sites on campus (in exchange for credit) so parenting students can take care of what needs to be done to get enrolled (Daphne).
- Offer nighttime daycare as many single mothers must work during the day to provide for their families which leaves them scrambling to find nighttime daycare to attend classes (Erika).
- Create institutional guidelines for consistency around use of online learning platforms (such as using the calendar function) and defining common language for what day a week starts and ends (Alena and Jessica).
- Develop assignments in which family members can be included (Brooke).
- Self-directed learning, where students have more input on due dates (Gabriella).
- Longer office hours and faster response times to email (Laila).
- Have parenting resources all in one place (Jessica), including resources specifically for single moms (Nadia), and ensure that parenting students are aware of all of the resources when they first get registered (Erika).
- It would be helpful if they had counselors or [programs] geared towards working moms that helped address things such as time management and study skills, or other recourses for working moms (Nadia).
- Forgive student loan debt (Erika, Laila).
- Allow the MN Child Care grants to be used for alternative childcare situations

due to the expense and long wait-lists at licensed care facilities (Jessica).

Multiple participants simply wanted faculty and staff to be understanding of the fact that while college is a priority, it can't be *the* priority while they are caring for others.

COVID-19 forced higher education institutions to institute changes in processes and course delivery. Some of which offer a flexibility that better allows those caring for children to accomplish tasks required of them to become enrolled students, such as online placement testing or multiple methods of placement. This researcher hopes that institutions won't return to doing things the way they had "always been done" prior to 2020. Keeping the changes that were instituted in response to COVID-19, in addition to adding back in original in-person processes which will allow for more options for diverse students.

Recommendations for Further Study

There are a number of ideas for future research that were sparked as a result of this process. How has socialization shaped the expectations women have for themselves, and what expectations do others hold for single mothers, especially in higher education? While this study discussed salient identities that emerged during the interviews, it also begged the question of how those identities were developed in the first place. As perspective and attitude were mentioned throughout, how does a woman's locus of control determine her success in college? How do the institutional structures at play in our society influence the development of self-efficacy, purpose, or goal orientation among single mothers of color? What role does sense of belonging play in degree attainment for highly non-traditional college students such as single mothers?

Additional research should focus on solutions to increase timely degree completion for parenting students, recognizing that their success does not end with them, but is felt for

generations. Financial stability supports the physical and emotional needs of the student and their families and is more easily accomplished with a post-secondary credential.

Conclusion

This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to examine the perceptions of single mother college students attending an urban community college. Specifically, the perceptions of institutional barriers, support services, and interactions with faculty were addressed by the very diverse group of women involved in this study. The results of this study identified similarities in how participants experienced college, and also identified differences. Individual perceptions and experiences varied based on identity and previous life experiences.

This study used an intersectional theoretical lens in which to examine the findings. While most of the participants were unable to articulate how their intersecting identities within the context of structural and relational forces influenced their current place within their educational journey, the surface-level analysis earlier in this chapter identified how those intersecting identities and experiences do influence their experiences, opportunities, and academic success.

The findings in this study illustrate just how diverse college students are, even when they share a salient identity such as single motherhood. Data on the significant return on investment for communities, colleges, and families when a mother completes a degree program outlined the importance of supporting these students in equitable ways, and was discussed in chapter two. As one-quarter of all college students have dependent children, it is imperative that we discuss how being head of household intersects with being a college student and its effect on degree completion. As institutions continue to supplement students' basic needs, it is important for leaders to consider what that means for students with children. Especially if we want all to recover from the economic destruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researcher's Reflection

This research project was the greatest scholarly undertaking of my life thus far. I was told, and finally came to believe, that this is just the beginning. Dissertation research is a learning process which for me, will lay the foundation for future research. I will be the first to suggest the preceding pages are not perfect; I could change and revise for years to come. Instead, I will close this chapter of my life, with a resolution to learn more and continue advocating for access to education for those who have been kept from that opportunity.

The multiple identities which I bring to the table, and how I experience the world has created a bias that declares single mothers are strong, resilient, tenacious, and deserve to have access to the resources they need to provide a beautiful life for themselves and their children. For too long, blame and shame have fueled our perception of single mothers, and the dominant norm of individualism has served to disguise the influences of systems which prevent these women from opportunity and advancement.

This energy I carry within likely was felt by the participants and likely impacted the answers I received during the interview process. I enjoyed every conversation I had with each woman I met through this process, and their stories will provide motivation for years to come. While I mentioned the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice, and how those events impacted the experience of education for the women of my study, I too was a college student during this time. I found that the physical proximity to the murder of George Floyd, and the civil unrest that followed impacted my life in a way that I have never experienced. The trauma of seeing the buildings in my community burn, in addition to feeling unsafe in my home during that time, had a perceived detrimental effect on my own academic progress. If those events would have happened prior to this journey, I would have taken the opportunity to ask the participants

other questions: How do they ensure their mental health is priority? How did the idea of *community* change for them? What did the experience of the summer of 2020 convey to them about themselves and their families?

I believe the ability to facilitate interviews in the women's homes, via Zoom, was an advantage. Two women spoke of feeling nervous, but I believe the situating of themselves in a place that was known and comfortable to them, allowed richer conversation to unfold. The participants were not removed from the lives in which they were fully immersed. I got to see and hear their children in some cases - I got a glimpse into their lives. It was a very rewarding and humbling experience.

While I adopted the theoretical framework of intersectionality relatively late in the research design process, it felt like the right thing to do. I did not realize how little I knew about intersectional analysis; this dissertation is an example of one who is self-taught and has so much to learn. I am thankful to modern intersectional scholars such as Abes (2012), Bowleg (2008, 2012), Duran and Jones (2019), Museus and Griffen (2011), Núñez (2014), Strayhorn (2017), and Theriault and Daniel (2014), who detailed their research experiences with this framework which allowed me to formalize my thinking around what it could look like here. With this undertaking, I was reminded once again, to let go. My desire to support single mothers as they pursue a degree program has not changed, and I am inspired to develop creative ways I can do more of just that. While significantly changed by this experience, I am still a reflection of all that I was before it started.

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APPENDIX A

Implied Consent and Student Parent Recruitment Survey

Dear Student, You are invited to participate in a study about how public colleges can better support students who are parents. We hope to learn how student parents feel the college they attend can better support them to positively impact timely degree completion. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because the institution has identified you as potentially having children. If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. It will take less than 10 minutes to complete the survey. No benefits accrue to you for answering this survey, but your responses will be used to establish the demographic profile of students using the student parent center. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relationship with the college you attend or the researchers. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time. Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You may contact me later if you have additional questions at Dr. Boyd Bradbury, bradbury@mnstate.edu, 218-477-2471, School of Teaching & Learning, Minnesota State University, Moorhead (MSUM). Any questions about your rights may be directed to Dr. Lisa I. Karch, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board at 218-477-2699 or by e-mail at: irb@mnstate.edu. Thank you for your time. Sincerely, Dr. Boyd Bradbury, principal investigator, 218-477-2471, bradbury@mnstate.edu Jamaica DelMar, MA, co-investigator, 612-414-3276, delmarja@mnstate.edu

Q1: Are you a parent?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No (Branched to survey end)

Q2: Gender:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Transgender or Gender non-conforming

Q3: What is your ethnicity? (choose all that apply)

- ☐ Native American or Alaskan Native
- ☐ White
- ☐ Black
- ☐ LatinX
- ☐ Two or more races
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Unknown
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Other

Q4: Employment Status: (Please choose one)

- ☐ Not employed
- ☐ Employed part time
- ☐ Employed full time
- ☐ Other

Q5: School enrollment status:

- ☐ Full time
- ☐ Part time
- ☐ Non-degree seeking
- ☐ I do not know

Q6: Previous education (before starting the program you are in now): (Please choose one)

- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Certificate or diploma
- ☐ Associates
- ☐ Bachelors
- ☐ Masters

Q7: Relationship Status:

- ☐ Married
- ☐ In a relationship, not living with partner
- ☐ In a relationship, living with partner
- ☐ Single

Q8: How many children do you have? (Please choose one)

- ☐ I am currently pregnant or expecting
- ☐ One
- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three
- ☐ Four
- ☐ More than four

Q9: What is your current living arrangement? (Please choose all that apply)

- ☐ Live alone
- ☐ Live with child(ren)
- ☐ Live with spouse/partner
- ☐ Live with other related adults
- ☐ Live with other unrelated adults
- ☐ No permanent residence currently
- ☐ Other

Q10: What is your approximate yearly income? (Please choose one)

- ☐ Under \$20K per year
- ☐ \$20K – 30K per year
- ☐ \$30K – 40K per year
- ☐ \$40K – 50K per year
- ☐ \$50K – 60K per year
- ☐ More than \$60K per year

Q11: While working on your current degree, have you ever had to skip a spring or fall semester?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If answered Yes branched to: What were the reasons you didn't register for the semester(s) you had to skip? (choose all that apply) - Selected Choice

- Financial
- Family
- Health
- Personal
- Registration Holds
- Other (text box)

Do you identify as a single parent?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you answered yes to the previous question and would like to participate further in this study, please provide your name and contact information:

Text box

Edited in 2021 to read: If you identify as a single parent, attended college in 2020, and would like to participate further in this study, please provide your name, email address and/or telephone number. Further participation will include a 30-minute interview via Zoom; all interview participants will receive a \$25 gift card.

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

Consent Form

Please read this consent agreement carefully before agreeing to participate in this study.

Title of Study: How Public Institutions Can Better Support Single Mother College Students

Purpose of the study: To understand how colleges can better support single mothers to increase timely degree completion.

What you will do in this study: The phenomenological qualitative research design will include a demographic survey and one-on-one interviews collected throughout the summer and fall of 2020.

Time required: 30-45 minutes for interview.

Risks: There are no known risks if you decide to participate in this research study.

Benefits: The information you share about your experiences may increase awareness of challenges student mothers face while pursuing a degree, and may impact college processes to better support student parents, particularly single mothers.

Confidentiality: Interviews will be facilitated and recorded via Zoom. Your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the researcher will know your identity as a participant. To help protect your confidentiality, the storage of data, audio files, and notes will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the researcher, and all personally identifiable information from transcripts and research reports will be purged. All stored data will be destroyed within 30 days of successful dissertation defense, expected spring 2021.

Participation and withdrawal: Your participation in this study is voluntary; you are free to decide not to participate at any time.

Contact:

Dr. Boyd Bradbury, principal investigator, 218-477-2471, bradbury@mnstate.edu

Jamaica DelMar, MA, co-investigator, 612-414-3276, delmarja@mnstate.edu

Whom to contact about your rights in this study:

Dr. Boyd Bradbury, bradbury@mnstate.edu, 218-477-2471, School of Teaching & Learning, or else you may contact Dr. Lisa I. Karch, Chair of MSUM Institutional Research Board, at irb@mnstate.edu, or 218-477-2699.

Agreement:

The purpose and nature of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time and my withdrawal will not affect any future relationship with the researchers, the college I attend, or Minnesota State University Moorhead.

In signing this agreement, I also affirm that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

I. Introduction

Hello, my name is Jamaica DelMar, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Leadership program at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. I am currently working on my dissertation focused on how institutions of higher education can best support single mother college students. This interview is a key part of my dissertation work. I am interested in this topic because I was a single mother while pursuing my two-year degree at, and while pursuing my Bachelor's and Master's degrees. I recognize the challenges that being a parenting student brings and I'd like to bring the experiences of students who are moms to the forefront of academic and students affairs planning.

I appreciate your participation and honesty while we talk today. This session will take approximately 30 minutes. I will be asking questions that will focus on your experiences with support services, faculty interactions, and barriers to degree completion. Please know there are no right or wrong answers and your identity will remain confidential. I will be recording this session to assist me with future data analysis.

To get started, I want you to consider the identities you bring to the college as a student. What identities impact your educational experience? Likely being a parent is an identity that might impact your college experience, and by extension, your gender. What about your economic status? Does your financial situation impact the experiences we'll talk about? What about your race or ethnicity? Sexual orientation, physical ability, age or mental health? Whatever identities make up who you are, I would like you to consider those aspects of yourself thorough out our discussion. Some of these questions may take some thought, so feel free to take a couple of minutes to think about them, there is no rush in answering these questions. Do you have any questions before we begin?

II. Discussion Questions

a. Reflecting on your experience as a college student, can you think of any institutional processes (applying to the college, financial aid, registration, etc.) you had to navigate that proved difficult – particularly because of your parenting status?

i. Have you experienced institutional processes that proved difficult due to other aspects of your identity?

ii. Are there processes that you believe have been a barrier to completing your degree program?

b. As you likely know, your college offers several support services for their students: counseling, a food pantry, career center, etc. For parenting students, they have a Student Parent Center and financial resources via the MN Child Care grant and the CCAMPIS grant. Have you found the resources available to you as a parenting student to be enough?

i. If you have not accessed the student parent center or other support services, why not?

ii. Are there aspects of your identity other than your parenting status that you feel are underserved by the college?

iii. What support services are lacking?

iv. How has COVID-19 impacted your ability to seek support services from

the college?

- c. Thinking about your experiences in the classroom, have you ever had a particularly positive experience with an instructor due to your responsibilities as a mom?

- i. Have you ever had a negative experience with an instructor due to your responsibilities as a mom?
- ii. Do you think your identity influences how instructors interact with you?
- iii. What are ways your teachers could better support you in the classroom as a student caring for children?

Provide an example if necessary

- d. How have the events of 2020 (COVID, racial awakening/civil unrest, political unrest) impacted your college experience?

- e. Do you feel you have enough time in the day to be a mom, a student, etc.?

- f. Demographic Qs that were not answered during interview:

Race

Age

School PT/FT

Work

Children (number of and ages)

- g. Do you have any additional thoughts about your experiences as a college student with children that you think would be useful for the purposes of this study?

III. Closing

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. If you think of anything later that you think I should know, please reach out to me. And, can I follow up with you if something we discussed needs clarification – is that ok?

What is your home address? Would you prefer a Visa gift card or a Target gift card?

APPENDIX D

SUMMARY AND DESCRIPTION OF THEMES		
Themes	Emergent Codes	Evidence
RQ1: What are the perceptions of institutional barriers?		
Theme 1: Getting Started Was the Hardest Part	Past Experience Academic Standing/Grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's been what, almost seven years since I've been in college before. It was very difficult because I didn't even know where to start. There was still academic probation on my record from 10 years prior.
Subtheme: Childcare	Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We're struggling to find babysitters. I struggled to have childcare or available babysitter.
Subtheme: Placement Testing	Past experiences College barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I wasn't at where I should have been, to go straight into college courses. It wasn't that convenient for the Accuplacer testing.
Subtheme: Financial Aid/Paying for classes	Financial Aid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My scholarship isn't secure. It was hard trying to navigate and learn how to do the whole Financial aid piece on my own. Financial aid was difficult.
RQ2: What are the perceptions of institutional support services?		
Theme 2: I feel pretty holistically served	Institutional support Accessing resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They have all the help and support for anyone. I've utilized a number of those [services]. I've utilized other resources that [the] college offers.
Subtheme: They don't keep it a secret	Institutional communication Knowing about resources COVID	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school did a really good job with you know, making sure people know that they have those [resources]. They have the resources and they tell you, they tell everyone. You can definitely see because of COVID now everyone's trying to be more supportive.
RQ3: What are the perceptions of interactions with faculty?		
Theme 3: Teachers do a pretty good job	Instructor support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She was just flexible with everyone. Teachers are always wanting to willing to help you.
Subtheme: Communication goes both ways	Instructor/Student communication Consistency with classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He really understood and he was supportive. I haven't took it upon myself to explain that to my teacher. She waited for three and a half weeks to give us the syllabus.
Subtheme: I've had a bad experience with maybe one or two	Lack of Instructor support Instructor/Student communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yeah, he was just awful. This one particular teacher didn't really care. I was just kind of blown off.
Subtheme: Not wanting to take advantage	Identities Perspective/attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't want to use it as an excuse because it's not. We're all going through something and at least we're here, we're trying to show up to class.
RQ4: How do single mothers experience higher education at an urban 2-year college?		

Theme 4: It's a slow bleed	Past experiences Finances/Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MCTC is now my third college I've gone to. • I wasted a lot of time. • I wasn't interested in taking on any more debt.
Theme 5: I wish there were two of me	Role Conflict Time management Kids distance learning Perspective/attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There's a lot of conflict as I'm working full time. • My house is a mess and I have tons of stuff I need to get done there. • Just finding the time to actually sit down and do it. • My son's home right now because of COVID. • I'm pushing through those things - you know as challenging as they are.
Theme 6: The pros and cons of a global pandemic		
Subtheme: It's kind of better	COVID Zoom classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think [COVID] has, if anything, improved everything. • Everything is zoom nowadays, and I love it.
Subtheme: I'm struggling so hard	Mental health Kids distance learning Role conflict Academic Standing/Grades Zoom classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anyone can go crazy right now. • I'm doing eLearning with my son. • I have a million other things to do outside of school. • I did just fail one of my courses. • It makes it a lot more difficult to kind of stay on track with a lot of those things.
Subtheme: The significance of support	Outside supports Family support Peer support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We're all women that work there. Most of us are moms so everyone understands. • I have a lot of family support. • Students that are in the program with me, they're my supports.
<i>RQ5: How are these perceptions and experiences similar or different within the context of identity?</i>		
Theme 7: Experiences in Context of Identity		
Subtheme 1. Language	Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English is my second language. • I don't have the barrier of English being a second language.
Subtheme 2. Socioeconomics	Finances/Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financially, it was really hard for me to even drive out there for my classes. • I can't afford it, you know, rent for me and my son like anywhere. • The loans, I've taken them out every semester. Because that's only way I can survive and that now I'm in debt.
Subtheme 3. Mental health	Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do have really bad anxiety. • I've just been in this weird funk.
Subtheme 4. Race/ethnicity	Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My race is black, ethnicity, Somali. • My racial identity, which I'm White. • I'm not a citizen and I'm not a resident.
Subtheme 5. Lack of representation	Sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm in a program that is mainly men. • I don't feel that welcome environment.

Subtheme 6. Interactions	Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some people, it's just you can tell they don't even want to look at you.• Well, she does have a husband at home. I shouldn't judge like that but I still do.• I don't feel like I've ever had a racist or you know, judging moment at the school.• I have a progressive disease.• I am disabled.
	Judgements	
	Physical	
Does not answer research questions:		
Theme 8: The Stress of Civil Unrest	Civil Unrest	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Then to see my son get scared by all these police and all these... he knows what a gunshot is now - the sound of one and [he's] not even five years old.• The people that are supposed to be protecting people but they're constantly hurting and killing people.• It did really inspire me to want to get into more of these activism and organizational spaces.• It opened up my awareness as a student to do more evidence-based research into systemic oppression of many people.• When George Floyd got murdered my dad's like you need to leave Minnesota.• There was a lot of people who were like, well, Minneapolis is just this unsafe haven.
	Activism and Social Justice	
	Outside perceptions of Minneapolis	
Addressed in chapter five:	Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If they had a night daycare, that would be amazing.• Incorporating some sort of drop off care.• Colleges really don't know as much about their students as they should.
8 themes, 16 subthemes	32 unique codes	