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The Voices and Lived Academic Experiences of International Doctoral Student Mothers

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The Voices and Lived Academic Experiences of International Doctoral Student Mothers

A Dissertation Presented

by

MISHKA MURAD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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College of Education

The Voices and Lived Academic Experiences of International Doctoral Student Mothers

A Dissertation Presented

By

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DEDICATION

For Papa:

You always said, mediocrity feels threatened. And in saying so, you told me and taught me that as your daughter I was never going to be, nor settle for, mediocre.

For Mama:

Had I not been your daughter, and through your life and death, learned to stay resilient and passionate in the face of adversity, I may never have come this far.

For Banuma:

You taught me at a young age that excellence in one's work is always optional. And that I was always going to choose this option.

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Thank you to the participants. Without your voices, your stories and experiences, this dissertation would never have happened. You have taught me so much, and I am so inspired by your passions and your pursuits, as a researcher, as a student, as a person.

To my colleagues and friends who told me to hold my head high and to have faith in myself: I am grateful and humbled by your kindness.

Dan, thank you. For loving me, especially in all those moments when this journey made it difficult for me to love myself.

ABSTRACT

The Voices and Lived Academic Experiences of International Doctoral Student Mothers

SEPTEMBER 2021

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Given that there is no research that focuses exclusively on the experiences of international doctoral student mothers, this study chose to explore the challenges and supports that ten of these women experienced at one U.S. university. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with open ended questions, it explored the triumphs and trials of these students in their academic journeys in regard to their performances in the classroom, and their relationships with faculty and peers. It also brainstormed the ways in which faculty, advisors and peers, might consider changing their practices and behaviors in classrooms and on campus, to allow these participants to feel more valued, and for classrooms to become more inclusive as the diversity within them grows.

Keywords: international students, student parents, student mothers, international student parents, international student mothers, graduate student mothers, graduate female students, graduate parents

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CHAPTER 1

SITUATING INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENT MOTHERS

1.1 Introduction and Context

While there is some published research on the experiences of domestic doctoral student mothers, there is none that focuses solely on the experiences of *international* doctoral student mothers. However, we do know that for international students in general, leaving the comforts of home and the known can often be a trying and intense experience. They may struggle to make close connections given the linguistic, academic and cultural differences that exist between them and their domestic counterparts (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Students of color (international or otherwise) at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) might experience challenges they have not encountered before. Women students may have to work harder than their male counterparts to be viewed as equally intelligent, capable and diligent (Brown & Watson, 2010). Doctoral students may struggle with how long it takes to complete their degree programs, and how much this duration can vary depending on the college and department, and even their committee members (Brown & Watson, 2010).

And yet despite the hurdles that come with being an international student, research and news reports indicate that more students from outside the U.S. are applying to, and enrolling in, graduate schools in the U.S. (Springer et al., 2019), and that the number of international students in U.S. institutions pursuing their undergraduate and graduate degrees has multiplied four times in the last seven years (Study International, 2019). Despite this however, there continues to be concern about the obstacles that international

students face on and off U.S. campuses, such as culture shock and discrimination – discrimination which has been made worse for Asian-Americans in particular (students and otherwise) since the COVID-19 pandemic and the “China virus” rhetoric used by former President Donald Trump (Yam, 2021).

While some international students face discrimination due to nationality and race, others, especially at the graduate level, are also battling gender stereotypes and gender inequalities that often cause them to be overlooked and undervalued in academic settings (Lynch, 2008). Despite studies showing that women outnumber men when it comes to graduating and obtaining doctoral degrees (McCarthy, 2018), there is ample research that supports the idea that to be taken seriously in academia, women still must work harder than their male counterparts – whether as students or as members of the faculty (Lynch, 2008). According to a study done by the University of California (Mason, 2009), universities with graduate schools that offer part-time doctoral degree programs are more likely to draw in parents or older adults with families. While generally not an option for international students (due to immigration and visa policies), this suggests that pursuing a doctoral degree full time while parenting may be challenging. There is a belief however that all doctoral degree students should be able to commit entirely to their academic pursuits; a belief that does not consider the other roles and the responsibilities of these students (Brus, 2006). This is a concern that comes into play for student mothers, who while taking on additional responsibilities also must often monitor their bodies and behavior, since it is commonly believed that there is an “inverse relation between femininity and competence” (Mehta et al., 2013, p.30).

To understand just how serious the issue of gender imbalance in academia is and for *how long* this has been an issue, studies as far back as the 1960's, such as the work of Holmstrom and Holmstrom (1974) drew on data from the ACE-Carnegie higher education survey completed in 1969 and investigated sexual discrimination against female students and the factors behind it. They found that women felt emotional strain and distress in graduate school because they believed their faculty and advisors favored men and took the needs of their male counterparts more seriously. Perceiving the faculty to be unapproachable and therefore having little interaction with them, led these women to experience emotional stress. Two-thirds of the women in this study had considered dropping out, although the researchers found that women in more *feminized* fields such as education and library science were less likely to consider this, lending to the idea that there are assumed designated spaces for women, and that sexual discrimination and gender inequality may be more prevalent or more commonly experienced in fields that are male dominant.

It appears not much has changed. In a study on married international doctoral students conducted in 2011, Walls et al. found certain discrepancies in the experiences of men and women doctoral students. In their qualitative study using in-depth interviews, they discovered that the women doctoral students they interviewed were more concerned about life after graduation and the likelihood of securing employment, which was not a concern for the men. Additionally, while the men believed they could handle the stress that came with juggling family life and academia, the women worried about striking this balance. Based on their experiences they questioned whether they belonged in academia at all, and therefore if it was worth continuing to pursue. The men participants on the

other hand had nothing but praise to offer for their advisors and their departments. They expressed gratitude for how faculty and staff had been supportive, *especially* when they had become new parents. On the contrary, only one woman said that having a family had benefitted her and given her a fresh perspective; it taught her about balance and how not to focus solely on academia. Other women doctoral students said they felt they had sacrificed personal relationships for academics, and that they often felt the need to keep any fun personal activities private for fear of being perceived as not fully committed to their academic pursuits and programs.

Despite the 30+ years between these studies, faculty attitudes towards women students continue to be an important reason for attrition in doctoral degree programs. Recent research continues to document that women doctoral students have problems with how they are treated by faculty and advisors in graduate schools, and that this is further compounded by maternity and motherhood (Springer et al., 2009). It was estimated in 2012 that pregnant and parenting students made up 50% of the graduate school and that this number is on the rise (Brown & Nichols, 2012). While the number of doctorates awarded to women has increased in recent years, the time taken for women to complete their degrees has also increased (Maher et al., 2004). This is in no small part because campus spaces are often not sensitive to the needs of pregnant, maternal and nursing bodies, and sometimes because campus environments often have policies that are not communicated clearly when it comes to maternity leave for students (Springer et al., 2009).

Therefore, the rise in women graduate students does not necessarily reflect a campus climate that is welcoming for student mothers. Springer et al. (2009) found that graduate

student mothers often report feeling extremely isolated given their many responsibilities and the fact that both doctoral degree programs and motherhood “place harsh demands on one’s body and mind” (p. 435). Additionally, female students often receive much less support once they become mothers or if they are *also* mothers (Lynch, 2018; Parè, 2015). Unsurprisingly then, some women *opt* to stay silent about motherhood and employ what Lynch (2008) refers to as a “strategy of maternal invisibility” (p. 596). The fact that this held true for the participants in my own study conducted in 2020 highlights two things: 1) this is not an idea of the past, and 2) we must hear from these students who experience these unfair practices if anything is to change. However, given that they often stay silent about both motherhood and its challenges in academia, makes the research that much harder to pursue.

1.2 Researcher Positionality

Before the reader ventures any further, it is vital I am honest about my own positionality and interest in this study. I am both an international student and a doctoral degree candidate. Along with this, I am also a woman (of color). I bring to this study my own experiences and biases regarding the doctoral degree program, some of which are known to me, and some that may be subconscious.

My experiences as a doctoral degree student have been far from ideal. I have suffered from discriminatory practices; I have encountered racism and sexism, and I have had certain faculty members berate me and bully me, in public and behind closed doors. One such incident involved a much-respected senior faculty member telling me I should quit the program because I did not see myself as a researcher past my dissertation. I was

“wasting her time” and was better off “elsewhere, doing anything else.” Another faculty member told me she would “ruin my life” because I had complained about how unprofessional she was by not providing her students (including myself) with timely feedback (if any at all), and that I would “never be successful” and she would “see to that.” Despite having a few faculty members who listened to my needs, my struggles have (like everyone else’s) been mine alone, and led to a great deal of isolation, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Most of my experiences have left me emotionally and mentally exhausted, with my father bleeding money to support this “funded” degree, my friendships falling apart, and my romantic relationship constantly being on the rocks. I attribute this to the person I became after I embarked on this academic journey, or maybe the person others made me become – frightened, nervous, insecure, and perpetually on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Like many women before me, I have suffered from imposter syndrome most days in the program and questioned if this degree was worth all that I have lost and given up.

It is doubly sad that I have sometimes been unable to be honest and open about my struggles with others because I was afraid of the repercussions as an international student. Moreover, my own experience with most faculty members I know is that they have too much going on and are simply too busy for even the tasks they are required to do. A mental breakdown and need of positive reinforcement then, is surely not something they will ever have time for. Although, I feel like I am making excuses for faculty showing even the more basic principles of human decency.

Furthermore, being past my prime childbearing years, I knew without a doubt that I could not have a child (despite the possible future biological implications), until I

completed this degree and left my university and its experiences behind. Not only because I thought I would be taking on too much, but also because I believe I would be passing on unnecessary trauma (from my years as a doctoral degree student) to my unborn child. As my therapist once said, “it is difficult to transform a site of harm into a space of healing.” And a site of harm is exactly what my college and university has been for me.

I consider myself a feminist. Someone vocal and brave. I know that I am privileged in many ways, since I have a father who has supported me financially, and a husband who could if need be. I know that I could have made much more of a commotion, raised a bigger fuss about how I was treated. But given that most people in places of authority at my institution are white, I chose to give up knowing they would never understand what my struggles mean as a woman of color, as someone who is a guest in a country that is not my own, and as someone who has been told she was “saved from” from where she came from. Side note: where I came from being Mexico, where I lived and worked for almost 3 years, having the best job, making good money, and paying no bills; having joy and a sense of purpose. Being able to be myself.

Despite everything that has transpired, everything that I have given up and lost in the academic boxing ring, I am still here today, because above everything else, I am my father’s and mother’s daughter. My father who passed on determination and stubbornness through his genes. My mother, who was resilient in her fight against cancer and showed me that even though we might not always prosper, we can and should put up a good fight. I am still here today because if I had quit the program, I would have left with nothing but my scars.

And if I had quit, “they” would have won.

So instead, with a great deal of therapy, and a lot of journaling, I have chosen to try and turn an unnecessarily difficult academic pursuit, into a labor of love. I did not set out to explore the journeys of international doctoral student mothers with the intention of focusing on negative experiences and compiling a thesis of complaints. If anything, I looked to these women who were in class with me, at the library with me, and handing in the same amount of work I was, while *also* taking care of their children (and sometimes their partners), with great admiration and respect. I *want* to believe there is a way to do it all, to be successful as a mother and as an academic (and partner!) without having to compromise one or the other, without feeling guilt or remorse, or being overwhelmed. I *must* believe women can have it all, without losing their minds, without compromising the very essence of who they are, and without losing themselves. Because the alternative is too frightening, and much too unfair.

This study was born from a place of hope: that I might hear from these participants that they do not regret the decisions they made and that they found ways to make student motherhood work. And more importantly that they found people – faculty, staff, friends – who assisted them in their journeys, lifted them up, and supported them. This study hopes to learn from those women who struggled and how these struggles could have been eased. But also, from the women who succeeded in making it work, how they did so and what people, what factors, what resources need to be in place for others to experience this success and triumph. If this study benefits anyone at all, if anyone at all were to find it enlightening, relevant and important, it has been a successful pursuit for me – even if it has also been extremely draining.

I was told in one of my very first classes as a doctoral degree student that “the personal has no place in academia.” I knew then that there was a lot in academia I would not agree with, nor stand for. This study is personal because of what I had to go through to get to this point. It is personal to the women who have shared their stories. But it is also a source of valuable knowledge, and therefore academic.

And so yes, the personal can be academic. And academia can be very, very personal. And while a dissertation is a thorough exercise in reading and research, it can also be fueled by one’s passion and fire, and serve as a testament to the idea that while not all of us may choose to become academics and remain in the realm of academia, we can take from the things we have created and learn to be kinder and more compassionate to the different people around us. No degree necessary.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Many universities are now including a commitment to diversity, inclusion and equity, in their mission statements, and in doing so they claim to be encouraging applications from more diverse populations. However, principles of diversity must extend to beyond the application and acceptance processes and into how these students are treated once they arrive on campus, by faculty, administration and peers. To understand then how best to support *international doctoral student mothers*, it is vital to hear their academic experiences and learn about the supports and barriers they have faced in pursuit of their degrees. Conversations with these women might then allow us to understand how their various social identities affect them and come into play on campus and in the classroom, and how we, as those who are most immediately around them in these academic settings, might want to rethink our own practices and actions.

1.4 Statement of rationale

Given then that there is currently no research that focuses entirely on the experiences of international doctoral student mothers, this study attempted to contribute to this gap in the literature by *initiating* a conversation with some of these students. It did so by hearing and analyzing the lived experiences of ten members of this student population by asking them about their academic journeys - the supports and obstacles they encountered - and what impacts they believe it had on them. They were also specifically asked about how being international has complicated or enriched their academic experiences. By using a theoretical framework that was based on Moos' (1976) work of *socially constructed environments*, participants were asked how they navigated their academic journeys with regards to their experiences in the classroom and on campus, and in their relationships with faculty, advisors and peers, and they were asked to brainstorm the changes they would like to see.

The reason for specifically choosing *doctoral* student mothers is because unlike undergraduate and even masters' programs, doctoral degrees often have no definitive end – that is, based on the program, the requirements, the funding, and often the timelines of advisors and committee members, doctoral programs can and do last anywhere from three years to ten years. Add to this any major life or world event that might occur and could alter the trajectory of the student's academic path and change the planned/desired timeline (during this study that life/world event was the COVID-19 pandemic). The very nature of not having a definite date for graduation and being reliant on others might cause mental, emotional and financial stress for many students.

The reason for exploring the *international* aspect of this study is because international students studying at U.S. universities are subject to rules and regulations based on their immigration status that domestic students are not. In addition, they are visitors in a host country which might make them feel particularly vulnerable, and means they often have to find ways to adjust whether personally or academically.

Finally, the reason for this study's focus on student *mothers* (versus student parents), is because there is a plethora of research that proves that whether it is academia or household labor and parental responsibilities, women must often take on more *and* work harder than their male counterparts and partners. The *supermom* myth – where women are figures of immense beauty and constant support - only highlights how women must find a way to juggle it all – career, school, life, children and marriage, rather than men taking on more responsibilities in their home and family lives.

1.5 Significance of Study

This study set out to document and understand the lived experiences of ten international doctoral student mothers at Research University (Pseudonym) - a U.S. research university in the Northeast. It did so by interviewing participants from various colleges/departments. These 60–70-minute interviews were open-ended. Given that the current research tells us that often women students feel they must choose between academia and motherhood, it was important for me to understand how being international when added to this might affect the challenges the participants faced.

From these interviews I gleaned a great deal about how the participants perceived their campus environments. The purpose behind the research was to hear and see the

obstacles that may exist for this student population, in an effort to eventually name and address these concerns to improve their experiences. These shared insights made apparent what is being done right at Research University (and should be encouraged, praised and repeated), as well as that which needs improving and perhaps rethinking.

This dissertation hopes to serve a way to *initiate* discussion and *to start to acknowledge* the plight of this minoritized population.

1.6 Research Questions

There were two key research questions in this study that formed the basis for the interview questions posed to the participants. These two key questions were:

- 1. What do international doctoral student mothers perceive the supports and barriers to be/have been in their academic journeys?**
(See Appendix B)
- 2. What (if any) strategies can they think off that would offer support in their academic journey and advancement?**
(See Appendix B)

Both research questions were then broken down to focus on the participants' experiences in the classroom, in their relationships with faculty and advisors, and in their relationships with peers. Doing so allowed the participants to hone in on experiences that can often be inter-related and messy. The questions were also designed this way to allow for: a) more comprehensive answers given that this was a qualitative study, and b) show consistency when it comes to discussing the supports and barriers, as well as any strategies and practices they would like to see implemented in classrooms and the program.

Appendix B provides a breakdown of the questions exactly as they were asked to the participants during the interviews.

CHAPTER 2

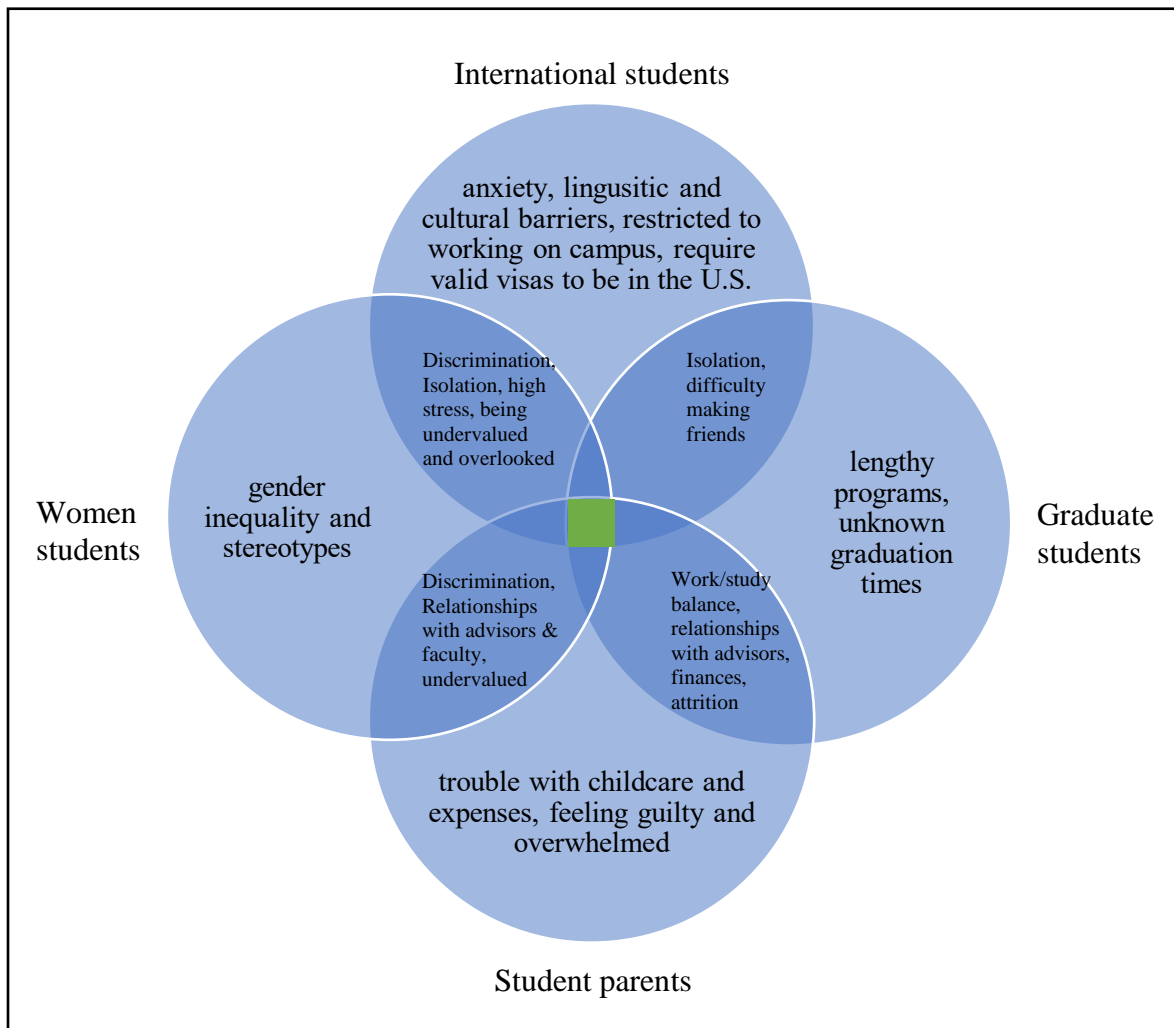
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

Given that my research questions focused on the lived experiences of international doctoral student mothers, and that currently there is no academic research on this student population specifically, I had to draw from the experiences of various student populations to create an adequate and relevant literature review for this study. This review takes from research that has been written on doctoral students, international students and international graduate students, female graduate and doctoral students, and doctoral student parents, to create a review that is comprehensive enough to use for the participants of this study.

Figure 1

Makeup of Literature Review



Note. To create a comprehensive literature review, I had to draw research from the experiences of women/female students, student parents, graduate students, graduate international students and international students.

The review presented in this chapter synthesizes the information I found on the various student populations as seen in Figure 1. Each of these strands have their own foci or reoccurring themes:

- *International Graduate students*
 - Themes: isolation and discrimination, linguistic/cultural/learning differences, interventions and supports in place

- *Female/women¹ doctoral students*
 - Themes: gender inequality, relationships with supervisors, interventions and supports in place
- *Doctoral student mothers*
 - Themes: work/motherhood inequalities, relationships with advisors/supervisors, interventions and supports in place

Each of the themes was selected for two reasons. First, because of how often it had been raised in the studies. Second, each theme represents a malleable factor, which is key idea for socially constructed environments. Malleable factors are not stagnant and can change and be changed.

Based on what was gleaned from the literature in each of these subsections, I selected a theoretical framework that provided me with a scope and lens by which to create my protocol questionnaire, and ultimately allowed me to code and analyze my findings. This theoretical framework is based on the concept of *socially constructed environments* as explored most recently about by Strange and Banning (2012), but as far back as 1976 in the work of Moos and is discussed at end of this chapter.

2.2 Review of the Literature

2.2.1 International Graduate Students

The term *international* student refers to individuals holding an F1 U.S. visa (also known as a student visa), which is sponsored by the university they attend (U.S. Department of State, 2021). These students are not citizens of the U.S. In 2016-2017 the

¹ While I am aware of the differing nuances of *female* and *woman*, please note that these terms have been used interchangeably in the research, and that both words were used while searching for academic literature/articles.

U.S. welcomed more than one million international students, making it the first choice for students who were considering studying abroad, and making international students an important source of revenue for U.S. universities and colleges, contributing \$39.4 billion to the U.S. economy in 2017 (Moon et al., 2020; Sin & Kim, 2018). Despite so many international students choosing the U.S. over their home countries and other countries, international student success is not always guaranteed and is also not entirely due to a lack of desire to do well on the part of international students, but sometimes a result of inadequate programming for these diverse groups of people, which in the case of graduate students can often result in emotional and mental stress and make them reconsider their academic pursuits (Springer et al., 2009).

Isolation and discrimination

Perhaps the first instance of not belonging stems from student visas and that they are temporary and sponsored - a reminder that international students are *guests*, despite the many years they may spend in pursuit of their degrees and the many ways in which they may contribute to the local economy, such as through consumption, travel, money spent on groceries and rent (Sin & Kim, 2018). Student visas are also a reminder that international students often have their movement, travel and work opportunities restricted (Sin & Kim, 2018), as well as other obstacles they face upon entering the U.S., and living in the U.S.

According to Waters (2018), international students are often *othered* by their peers and the people that surround them, which might prevent them from feeling a sense of belonging. One aspect of *othering* students from overseas is that they are sometimes lumped together under the term *international* which becomes their primary status and

immediately dehumanizes them by no longer seeing them as people but instead a collective mass of bodies, while also deciding for them that their being **non-American** is the single most salient characteristic they possess and thus their key identifier (Sin & Kim, 2018). They are thus reduced to a single identity when in fact they carry with them multiple identities at all times (Metro-Roland, 2018), as well as varying nationalities and languages, and races and cultures (Mori, 2000) - all lost under the term *international*. Upon arriving at their universities “they become an instant part of the social minority” (Yakaboski et al., 2018, p. 221) not only on campus, but also in the towns/cities that surround these campuses. This affects their sense of worth as they believe, above everything else, these campuses and towns often view them as not from *here* (Guentzel & Neisham, 2006).

Being othered also happens in the classroom, and faculty instead of being allies, “may be a source of acculturative stress” (Han et al., 2016, p. 113) or “a dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p.698). Therefore, because of their different cultures and psyches, international students are *othered* based on their diverse characteristics (that are uncommon in/to the host country), and thus minoritized not just racially, but also linguistically, culturally and because of their differences in social actions and interactions – interactions that can sometimes lead to undesirable *miscommunications* (Wang et al., 2008).

International students facing discrimination is not an uncommon occurrence according to Trice (2004). Some of the reasons cited by international graduate students as to why they fail at creating close friendships with domestic students is because of

ethnocentrism and preexisting prejudices (Trice, 2004). In fact, at one U.S. University, Trice (2004) found that 50% of graduate international students socialized with local students *only once a month*. These students stated a lack of opportunities and time, in addition to cultural differences as the reasons that prevented them from socializing with domestic students (Trice, 2004). The students in this study also explained feeling disconnected and lonely as one of the outcomes of the lack of these interactions and friendships (Trice, 2004).

Given that U.S. faculty, staff, and domestic students are also carriers of their own cultures, they may knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate the stereotype of international students as being underprepared and unwilling to do what it takes to succeed in academic America (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Forcing students to assimilate according to Waters (2018) is: a) tied to archaic educational ideas of the transfer of knowledge as being a one-sided process (that is the colonizers/Western forces educate the colonized/non-western students), and b) a lack of recognition of international students as “political and social actors in their own right” (p. 1463). Thus, international students can be made to *feel international* by domestic students and faculty around them, who choose not to question their own beliefs, their own cultural idiosyncrasies, nor the misinformed stereotype of the intellectually inferior international student that they may believe in. Faculty, staff and students may also assume that international students choose to pursue degrees in the U.S. because good academic institutions do not exist in their home countries, whereas international students may choose to study abroad **because they are privileged and have the means (and qualifications) to do so** (Waters, 2018).

Lovitts and Nelsons (2000) claim that U.S. universities despite wanting diverse students in the classroom and on campus, do little to account for the diversity these students bring with them. Yakaboski et al. (2018) agree with this statement, explaining that “the mere presence of international students does not equate to campus diversity. Nor does it mean that students will develop intercultural competencies without intentional interactions...” (p. 221). Unless faculty, staff and domestic students actively try to engage with international students to understand and celebrate their differences (**not deficits**), a campus culture may be created in which international student populations are nothing more than a means to colorize campuses and “enhance institutional budgets” (Yakaboski et al., 2018, p. 221).

Linguistic/cultural/learning barriers

Upon entering the U.S. some of the challenges that these students often grapple with include *culture shock*, *language shock* and *academic shock* (Carroll & Ryan, 2005).

These challenges were further explored in a mixed-method study on isolation in international graduate students by Erichsen and Bolliger (2011). This study included a survey with 54 student participants consisting of those who took classes on campus, as well as online. Ten of these students then were selected to participate in a focus group to understand their experiences on a deeper level.

In this study, Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) found that international graduate students arrive campus to a set of assumptions and expectations that have already been placed on them by universities. They argue that one of the assumptions is that as graduate students they must already be critical thinkers, come with knowledge and expertise, and possess strong writing skills. However, international graduate students much like international

undergraduate students, often experience *learning shock* (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011) since academic policies and practices at U.S. universities can be drastically different to those they are familiar with in their home countries. Doctoral students from foreign countries are also sometimes attempting to navigate the trials and challenges of being a non-traditional student (older, married, with children), and for many of them, despite their age, it may still be their first time in a new country, culture, and academic environment (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). In their own study with Masters' students, Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) found that international students said they had put their personal lives on hold because their academic journeys felt so demanding. They also said they felt out of place based on how they were treated and looked at, in town and at church. Despite this they wanted to make friends, but they were unsure of how to navigate and start this process in a new culture. The effects then of placing academia first and maintaining a restricted social life (both intentional and unintentional), led to these international graduate students experiencing high levels of isolation and stress (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011) - feelings that are prevalent amongst doctoral students as well (Wang et al., 2018).

According to Erichsen and Bolliger (2011), international graduate students also may experience *financial or power shock*: the idea that many of them were formerly professionals in their home countries but now are dependent upon their universities financially and to keep them in the U.S. legally. This may put an added stress on them academically, and on their families, emotionally and mentally (Sallee, 2015).

Additionally, international students are also often operating in situations where they may be discriminated against and treated poorly. Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) found that

Asian students felt that their contributions in class were often overlooked and that they were often ignored.² The European student participants in this same study however, felt that their contributions were valued and appreciated, indicating that even within international graduate students there may be differences and discrepancies on how students are perceived and treated based on their nationalities and countries of origin.

Another important difference in international students (especially relevant in the case of this study), is that they may experience linguistic *difficulties* and *differences*.

International students experience difficulties in communication sometimes because they are not fluent in English. But sometimes, international students experience linguistic differences in that, *how* they talk varies. Engaging in debates, critical thinking, and being too direct, for some students (such as those from East Asia), may be considered “too vigorous and hurtful” a practice to conduct with their colleagues and faculty (Durkin, 2008; Moon et al., 2020; Tan, 2017). How these students talk *to* their faculty members and *about* them, is often how they express their respect (Moon et al., 2020). East Asian students tend to “compensate for the lack of oral participation by listening attentively to lecturers” (Moon et al., 2020), which may wrongly be perceived through a Eurocentric lens as the lack of engagement and enthusiasm.

Interventions and supports in place

While most universities offer health and counseling services as well as various student groups that connect students with similar lifestyles and interests, orientation for new students is another measure that can create a sense of belonging for international students once they arrive on campus.

² This is not unlike the experiences of female students at U.S. universities, which is addressed later in this chapter.

At Western Michigan University, with the implementation of the Fulbright Scholarship program, international students and scholars of all ages and from around the world were brought to campus. Their experiences according to Metro-Roland (2018) were positive ones because from the moment that they were accepted to the program, and before they arrived on campus, they had been asked to join several student groups and organizations that focused on the different identities they possessed and hobbies they had. The scholars and students were not just *international*, but also students who were brought together based on being in the same programs and enjoying similar activities. They thus got to know others based on these shared traits and commonalities and avoided being affiliated or labeled in any *one* way. This process is an important one because if we are to focus on intercultural competency, it is first important to recognize how diverse students are, while trying to find ways to cherish and celebrate this diversity in a way that isn't bound solely to nationalities and instead highlights similarities amongst students in the classroom that transcend national borders (Metro-Roland, 2018).

As it stands now, sometimes international students are believed to be at a *deficit* when it comes to traits and skills needed for academic success and achievement (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Mori 2000). This is attributed to what are perceived by faculty as difficulties (instead of *differences*) in language, learning and communication styles (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Not being fluent in English however, is not a measure of a student's intelligence, nor is it indicative of how successful a student may be (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). If anything, international students should be acknowledged as the "bearers of alternative knowledge, perspectives and life experiences" (Carroll & Ryan, 2005, p.9), or knowledge

and experiences that faculty and staff could learn from when it comes to creating a more multicultural approach to education and educating students (Carroll & Ryan, 2005).

Carroll and Ryan (2005) also argue that being at university is often the first time *many* students will be away from their support systems - domestic students or otherwise – and will be attempting to navigate life on their own. If domestic students can feel stress because of this, and struggle with academic pressure and even academic language, we can only assume how much more complicated this may be for international students, for whom English is not always the native language. This is important because Carroll and Ryan (2005) argue that any system of support that benefits international students will then also benefit domestic students and may even benefit other minoritized populations with similar needs on campus. How international students are treated post arrival has been linked to their retention at academic institutions (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). When these students choose to leave universities midway, it is usually because of incidences and experiences that have transpired only *after* they arrive on campus, placing some of the onus on the institution and powers within, and the part they play in the creating and causing whatever that international student experience is. (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

2.2.2 Female doctoral students

Just as the U.S. continues to be a popular choice for international students choosing graduate schools, there has also been an increase in the number of women in their late 20s and 30s enrolling in U.S. doctoral degree programs (Carter et al., 2013; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018; Rigler et al., 2017). Despite the increase in enrollment in these programs, attrition rates today are over 50% (Brus, 2006; Gardner, 2009; Martinez et al.,

2013). While the lack of funding, major life changes (marriage, children), and the psychological makeup of students have been cited as a few reasons why some doctoral students may leave their programs (Carter et al., 2013; Gardner, 2008; Martinez et al., 2013; Rigler et al., 2017), some researchers have considered that these high attrition rates may speak to the oppressive social climates and cultures being created and perpetuated by those that work and operate within the universities (Ali & Kohun, 2006).

Gender inequality

A reoccurring theme in the literature on women in academia indicates that female students' experiences differ from male students (Leonard, 2001; Mehta et al., 2013). Often women must monitor their bodies and behavior since it is commonly believed that there is an "inverse relation between femininity and competence" (Mehta et al., 2013, p.30), which holds especially true in doctoral degree programs and at professional conferences (Mehta et al., 2013). Attrition rates in doctoral degree programs are higher for women, students of color, and students who are less integrated with their peers and in their programs (Brus 2006; Gardner, 2008). In addition, students who are married and have children also have higher rates of attrition (Gardner, 2009), indicating once again that managing academia with other important roles and responsibilities seems particularly challenging because the workload may not take into account these other social identities that students might possess.

According to Carter et al. (2013), few students fail their dissertations, so it is the period post-coursework and leading up to the dissertation defense when attrition is most likely. While researchers claim that these high attrition rates represent a problem and should be taken seriously by universities and faculty members, often those who drop out

are overlooked because of the nature of it being an *invisible problem* (Ali & Kohun, 2006). Since doctoral students often work in isolation and from home, their (quietly) dropping out of the program can go unnoticed, and their reasons for this action are often unknown to most (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Carter et al., 2013). This is further complicated by the notion that often universities (and advisors) claim that students *choose* to leave, which removes any responsibility universities and faculty might have had in that decision making (Ali & Kohun, 2006). Attrition rates are often not about how intelligent the students are, rather other certain cultural and academic reasons, which is why attrition rates are higher for certain student populations - such as women (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Brus 2006; Gardner, 2008). U.S. institutions for higher education were initially designed for white men and seemingly continue in many ways to reflect traditional Western (and white) masculinity (Brus, 2006; Carter et al., 2013). One such example is that women who are at the same professional level as men (based on their qualifications), are often believed to be less competent than their male colleagues (Roos & Gatta, 2009). In instances where they are successful over their male counterparts, they are often seen as less likeable (Roos & Gatta, 2009). Even before women enter the professional space they struggle, and in graduate school this struggle takes the form of lacking a sense of belonging and solid friendships (Carter et al., 2013).

Several studies have indicated that like women students, like international students, suffer from feelings of isolation, high levels of stress, and issues with self-esteem - all of which impact these women's' academic journeys and careers, as well as their personal lives and mental health (Brown & Watson, 2010; Leonard 2001).

Relationships with advisors

The stereotypical idea of intelligence and femininity being incongruent is often present in faculty hiring processes as well (Kurtz-Costes, et al., 2006), and the lack of female representation in the faculty in many departments “may create an unwelcoming atmosphere for [female] students” (Kurtz-Costes, et al., 2006, p. 138). This lack of representation may often make women students feel immediately out of place, since several studies have shown that having women mentors is vital in the success of women graduate students (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Mehta et al., 2013), especially those who “plan to balance a career with motherhood” (Mehta et al., 2014, p.139). However, given that female faculty too can sometimes be anti-family, research has indicated that simply having female faculty members is not enough for women students to feel more comfortable and connected to their programs and institutions (Carter et al., 2013). It is female faculty, and in particular female advisors, who have the time to create healthy and non-hierarchical relationships with their students that are more likely to see their students complete their doctoral degrees despite the obstacles they may encounter (Rigler et al., 2017).

Rigler et al. (2017), analyzed 87 academic articles using the keywords *doctoral attrition* and *doctoral persistence* from 2010 to 2017, and found four reoccurring themes in their analysis: 1) the relationship between candidate (student) and chair (advisor), 2) support systems and socialization for the candidate, 3) candidate preparedness and 4) financial considerations. However, according to their research the relationship between candidate and chair was seen to be most crucial, in that a positive and communicative relationship more than often results in doctoral persistence and the completion of the doctoral degree program for the candidate. Similarly, when this candidate-chair

relationship fails, the research indicates this to be the most significant and pressing reason for doctoral attrition. One of the reasons cited for a failing relationship is that some advisors and chairs may feel the stress of having to work on their own research and therefore be unable to focus on needs of their advisees (Rigler et al., 2017). This sometimes takes the form of advisors not providing timely feedback, or being largely absent for their advisees (Whitfield, 2016).

Rigler et al. (2017) also found that women students are significantly overrepresented in seeking counseling (at universities) for relationship, school and family issues, and Carter et al. (2013) suggested this may have something to do with how female doctoral degree students are treated during the dissertation process. Carter et al. (2013) suggest that often women - especially in the humanities and social sciences - are drawn to research that is personal and has affected their own lives. The very process of being criticized, sometimes not constructively and sometimes in public, can be traumatic and scarring for them. Even though supervisors and committee members are unaware of the personal nature of students dissertation work, what these women (who are also often partners and/or parents) might learn according to Carter et al. (2013), is that to be a female graduate student is often to endure years of criticism both in the classroom and at home. While some may turn to counseling services for help, in general the number of doctoral students seeking counseling is often low, which research claims is due to the (mis)perception that doctoral students have to be self-reliant—a characteristic often associated with academic success - and so even in times of emotional and mental distress, they tend to keep things to themselves (Carter et al., 2013).

While having an empathetic and understanding advisor certainly can benefit women students, this sometimes has nothing to do with the gender of the advisor, as studied by Brown and Watson (2010). In fact, some women students reported their male supervisors to be empathetic and kind, while others said that despite having a male advisor who was married with children (and should seemingly understand their plight), they still did not feel supported or cared for in their own roles as partners and parents, making evident that being a good advisor often goes beyond sex and gender, and one's own marital and parental status.

Interventions and Supports in place

There have been instances in which international graduate and doctoral students have felt supported in their programs. In a study with seven international graduate female students from various countries, Le et al. (2016) found that their participants had had positive academic experiences. These participants specifically addressed receiving positive feedback from faculty and advisors and how this had allowed them to feel more comfortable in their roles as graduate students. This confidence had allowed them to feel more comfortable when it came to interacting with others and being more social. Additionally, the participants who had been living with host families said they appreciated the immediate connections, as well as having people to help with the everyday tasks that were unfamiliar territory for them as international students (housing, setting up bank accounts). Having someone knowledgeable around them had made them feel more at ease as students and as foreigners (Le et al., 2016).

These ideas were also present in a qualitative study that included four Saudi doctoral student women. In this study, Sandekian et al. (2015) found that while these participants

faced several obstacles, each obstacle was also insight into what could be improved at universities. The participants in this study said language was a barrier for them, not just when it came to academic English, but also when it came to understanding American acronyms and idioms. Because of this they sometimes found it difficult to partake in group work in the classroom and even group discussions outside of it. To help them feel more connected, sometimes faculty would pair these Saudi women students with Saudi men students in classes. This often did not work well for them, as segregation is common in Saudi culture and sometimes even preferred. Especially when it came to them speaking up in classes, they sometimes felt judged by their male peers. For these students it was important that the faculty encourage them to partake in class conversations and that they understand the various cultures students come from and the implications of partnering them up with certain other class members. They also said that while they found faculty to be friendly and understanding, the participants would have benefitted more from having certain material - such as orientation materials - translated into various languages, so students could better understand the resources present on campus.

While for some international students American classrooms can be friendly spaces (Sandekian et al., 2015), others suggests that women still struggle to make friends. In a study by Contreras-Aguirre et al. (2017) that included interviews with six international female graduate students, they found that the participants struggled to make friends and claimed it was because domestic students are unfamiliar with foreign countries and cultures, and this often made it difficult for international students to connect with them. The participants felt that Americans knowing so little about foreigners translated into a

lack of interest on their part when it came to befriending non-Americans (Contreras-Aguirre et al., 2017).

These obstacles are problematic because as Gardner (2008) discovered, doctoral student attrition is influenced by *if* and *how well* students believe they “fit the mold.” Underrepresented students often struggle the most with this, since their diverse backgrounds often set them apart, and not necessarily in the best of ways (Gardner, 2008). Students with children often find that class schedules are not designed for those who have additional responsibilities and require flexibility (Gardner, 2008). It then becomes important that faculty are trained to work with students from different and diverse backgrounds, in ways that allow students to feel seen and like they belong (Gardner, 2008; Le et al., 2016). Training in cultural competency and diversity should allow for advisors and faculty to learn how to foster more positive relationships by them showing an interest in the various populations of doctoral students and their differing needs (Le et al., 2016). Some researchers have stated that events and opportunities that allow students to socialize by bringing women students together, could result in more camaraderie amongst these students (Le et al., 2016), and that peer-mentoring programs where new entrants are matched up students who have had similar experiences as them, can allow minoritized students to feel more included and less alone (Gardner, 2008).

2.2.3 Doctoral student mothers

While some of the obstacles faced by women students and student mothers may be faced by doctoral student mothers as well, they also have several unique obstacles of their own. It is estimated that 50% of the graduate student population is pregnant or parenting

and that this number is on the rise (Brown & Nichols, 2012). Also on the rise are the number of doctorates awarded to women in recent years (Maher et al., 2004) However, the duration of time it takes for women to complete their doctoral degrees has also increased (Maher et al., 2004). A late entry into postgraduate study and necessary breaks which can result in a late graduation, does not just impact women students' doctoral degrees completion times, but it also has impact on their future academic careers (Brown & Watson, 2010).

The research that does exist on student parents is generally qualitative in nature and tends to focus on student mothers who are *also* adjunct faculty members. While in some instances the struggles of these women may be similar to those of student mothers, I have excluded this research for women who are employed as faculty are earning more than a student stipend and often have more power at work in terms of decision making as compared to student-mothers.³

Work/motherhood inequalities

When it comes to doctoral students, those with the highest rates of attrition are women, students of color, and students with familial responsibilities. Often women doctoral students who do complete their degrees tend to do so much later in life (as compared to men), and often cite the reasons behind this to be financial or related to children and marriage (Mason & Goulden, 2004). Generally, while research has shown marriage to have positive experiences for most men, this is not necessarily true for women, who are often coping with the pressures of being both *good* students (punctual, focused and adhering to deadlines) and *good* partners (present, attentive, and willing to

³ Although I acknowledge this is not always the case.

compromise), and if there are children in the mix, add to this, *good* mothers (Carter et al., 2013). According to Parè (2015) women students are expected to be childless, and this expectation exists in the form of physical spaces not accounting for maternal bodies (with a lack of changing stations, nursing stations and seats for pregnant women); universities are spaces for growing minds it seems, and not necessarily bodies (Parè, 2015).

While it may be true that some doctoral students are not prepared for the challenges that come with graduate school, it is also not helpful that there is often no discussion of the inflexibility of graduate school life (Brus, 2006). Students who are also parents and partners, must still meet the same deadlines and show the same amount of focus and dedication as those students for whom the doctoral degree is their full-time and only jobs (Brus, 2006).

On the one hand being a doctoral student is a job, and women with children are thus seen as being less committed to this job and less dependable as workers (Parè, 2015). But on the other hand, this process (due to the varying hours and the basic stipend), is not seen as a *real* job and thus women students may find their partners and family members not being understanding, and not seeing the doctoral degree as equivalent to a job (Carter et al., 2013). For this reason, many women graduate students choose to complete their doctoral degrees first or delay motherhood because they believe being a student mother will be too trying in many ways (Carter et al., 2013).

Therefore, when women students state that they have *chosen* careers over motherhood and their academic interests over marriage, the question that faculty and administrators should be asking is whether this choice they're making, is a *choice* at all and why they felt that it was necessary in the first place.

In a study involving 30 American graduate student mothers in the U.S, Lynch (2008) concluded that the crux of the issue is not that motherhood is not compatible with academia, but the cultural expectation and norms of what motherhood entails as overwhelming. *Having* a child in many cultures is often likened to biology (although not always possible for all women), and expected of women (although not always desired by all women). *Raising* the child however, is motherhood, and often women are regarded as better suited to this role than their male partners (Lynch, 2008). Being a *good mother* however is likened to making the child the first and only priority, something a graduate student mother might struggle with, given her additional responsibilities (Springer et al., 2009).

Unsurprisingly Springer et al. (2009) found that graduate student mothers often report feeling extremely stressed and isolated, given their responsibilities and the fact that both doctoral degree programs and motherhood “place harsh demands on one’s body and mind” (p. 435). Brown and Nichols (2012) found that pregnant and parenting graduate students took much longer to finish their degrees than their non-parent counterparts. Several researchers have found in their work that the addition of childcare responsibilities becomes something that often leads to worry and uncertainty in the lives of graduate student parents (Brown & Nichols, 2012; Springer et al., 2009). The reasons behind this vary from finances, to the lack of childcare and family friendly housing on campuses (Brown & Nichols, 2012), and even to a culture within some programs that requires women to be all in, all the time, something that is just not feasible for student mothers (Springer et al., 2009). Often then, student mothers feel they need to keep motherhood outside of the classroom and off campus (Parè, 2015). The need for this *maternal*

invisibility and silence could stem from several fears: the fear of not being taken seriously, of not seen as committed enough to the degree, and the fear of losing funding (Parè, 2015), which for some international student mothers can make them extremely vulnerable due to financial concerns and visa stipulations.

However, there are also instances in which graduate parents may be offered help by faculty and staff, but where they may refuse it based on how this may make them appear (Casanova & Brown, 2013). In their work featured in *Mothers in Academia* (2013), Casanova & Brown (2013) have explained that having advisors and mentors who are sympathetic to parents and parenting cannot be guaranteed, and therefore it is the responsibility of the student mother to do what she can (along with her partner) to ensure she graduates (Casanova & Brown, 2013). While this certainly makes sense, this approach places the onus on the student mother rather than addressing the conflicting ideologies of academia and motherhood (Springer et al., 2012).

In a qualitative study focusing on the experiences of female doctoral students that consisted of in-depth in-person interviews with eight mothers in their 40s and 50s who had recently completed their PhDs at universities in the U.K., Brown and Watson (2010) found that “being a mother had profound implications for doctoral-level study” (p. 401). The women they interviewed mentioned juggling school and home life to be stressful, that they often felt split between their roles and responsibilities as student and mother/partner, and that even finding the time to study was something that had to be planned around household duties and chores. Some of these participants managed to begin their degrees only once their children were older or less *needy*. One participant said her divorce and being single made it the ideal time to pursue a doctoral degree, since

once she got home from work and tended to her child, she didn't have to take care of anyone else and had time to study. While Brown and Watson (2010) had chosen to study what the implications of gender had on women pursuing doctoral degrees, they concluded that gender did not lengthen these women's academic journeys, nor was it the reason their academic careers suffered. Instead, their conversations with these women participants concluded that it was marriage and children that suggests "women's academic careers suffer" (Brown & Watson, 2010, p. 402).⁴

Motherhood on campus

According to Parè (2015) female students receive less support once they become mothers. Because of gender stereotypes, female graduate students might find it difficult to present as intellectual and feminine all at once (Mehta et al., 2013) and this can be further complicated by their desire to become parents, which makes their womanhood more than apparent. In *Mama PhD*, a collection of autobiographical stories by academic mothers, Kuhn et al. (2006) write about how the only way to be sure of one's success is to remain on good terms with the department chair, who may (in the best case, take motherhood into account while thinking of workloads and assistantships for graduate student mothers. However, they also argue that this leads to mothers in academia being just that – *only* mothers. When student mothers are asked questions about their lives, these questions usually focus on the health and activities of the child, and few care to ask student mothers questions about their own personal academic achievements, updates or concerns (Kuhn et al., 2006). This becomes a bigger issue than just a disservice to a

⁴I find this to be a problematic conclusive statement and believe it should have been explored further to see if it is marriage and children that are obstacles or rather the unfair expectations that come with both (for women), and the unequal work/chore distribution at home, which often (and traditionally) places more of a burden on women to maintain the house and raise the children.

minoritized population, because it is occurring in an *academic* setting – a place that and produces and reproduces knowledge, and so we must consider what message academia is sending women who want to be both students and mothers (Hampson, 2017).

Unsurprisingly then, women who do choose to be student mothers often find themselves torn, struggling, and consumed with feelings of guilt (Parè, 2017).

In *Mothers in Academia* (2013), Perlow writes that there is invisibility regarding these issues because it is assumed that a university going student who is struggling, is also one who will readily compromise on many things by sharing an apartment, eating cheaply, abstaining from leisurely activities – choices that aren't necessarily available to graduate student parents, who are not just providing for themselves and their partners, but sometimes also their children. International graduate parents are also navigating the idea that many of their U.S. counterparts might believe they do not deserve to be at graduate school, and are only here because they check certain minority boxes and add superficially to the diversity on U.S. campuses (Lobnibe, 2013). For international student mothers, culture, race, nationality and class might complicate this research even further. For instance, if international students already battle isolation and loneliness, motherhood (coupled with cultural differences), and financial stresses as a parent (and partner) may “create either more privileged or more marginalized experiences” (Mehta et al., 2013, p.50). Asking women to choose between motherhood and academia perpetuates the belief that universities are not designed for student mothers and forces these students to become who they are not, or to give up what they may want, simply to have a chance at being academically successful (Nworgu & Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2018).

Interventions and supports in place

There has been some research regarding making the academic experiences of doctoral student mothers smoother. In a survey taken by 181 doctoral students at a Midwestern university, Theisen et al. (2017) found that doctoral student parent success hinged upon certain factors. They found financial resources and the availability of assistantships and scholarships to be a key determinant when it came to doctoral student parent retention and completion rates. They also found that allowing students to study part-time and take leaves of absence when necessary, allowed students to feel more in control of their degrees. Additionally, they found that having supportive faculty members who understood the challenges of graduate student life, and the many changes that came with parenthood, proved to be essential in doctoral student persistence and success.

In another study that included 10 African American doctoral student mothers, Appling et al. (2018) found that faculty and advisor support was key. The participants in this study reported that supportive faculty could serve as personal and professional role models and mentors, and that along with informing them of campus and university resources, they could offer students personal encouragement. These participants reported how feelings of pride and resilience - which came from receiving positive reinforcement from faculty and advisors - had allowed them to feel that they were valuable at their university. The researchers believe such feelings can be enhanced by hiring faculty members who are aware of the needs of minoritized populations and have been trained to on how to support these groups of students.

Some researchers have also found self-care to be an essential tool in balancing motherhood and academia. In their study on selfcare and student motherhood, Cohenmiller et al. (2019) found that often selfcare looked different for each of their

participants. While they had initially asked their participants to fill in adult coloring books as moments of selfcare, and wanted to study the effects of this, they quickly learned that some participants did not necessarily find this enjoyable. However, once participants could practice “me time” in the way *they* wanted, the participation level in their study increased. This is a key finding because often events at universities have their own versions of what selfcare looks like, and by doing so they could be limiting the students that attend, as this study points out. Furthermore, some students still struggle to find *me time*. As discovered in this study, often the participants would be interrupted by their children, or they felt guilty for taking the time to do something for themselves. However, each of the participants found that once they could relax and find the time and space to partake in their desired activity, that it was an enjoyable and calming process, and a break from both motherhood and student-hood, which they felt they needed.

However, we must remember that doctoral student mothers are not a homogenous, monolithic group, with the same needs nor the same ideas on what balance looks like and how it may be achieved (Mirick et al., 2020). Given that student mothers take their academic work home with them - where they continue to juggle their personal and family responsibilities – having family friendly policies at universities would be a helpful starting point, and certainly one that may need to become common practice and exercised with consistency (Mirick et al., 2020).

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Socially Constructed Environments

While campus environments have recently become a hot topic with universities and colleges striving to become more inclusive, the idea of environments shaping people, just as people are shaping their environments, is not a new one. In his book *Explorations in*

Personality (1938), Murray was interested in discovering what makes people interact with each other as they do. Murray also pointed out that all interactions are different because all personalities are different. It is impossible to study all people who belong to a group (or sub-group in the case of my own research), and therefore in order to gain insight into the experiences and perspectives of a group, researchers must choose appropriate sample participants. However, Murray (1938) also specifies that any study that includes participants reminiscing or recalling information is subjective, as is a participant's understanding of their environment. For one participant an environment may feel too restrictive and having too many rules, while to another the presence of all these rules can be reassuring and offer stability and predictability.

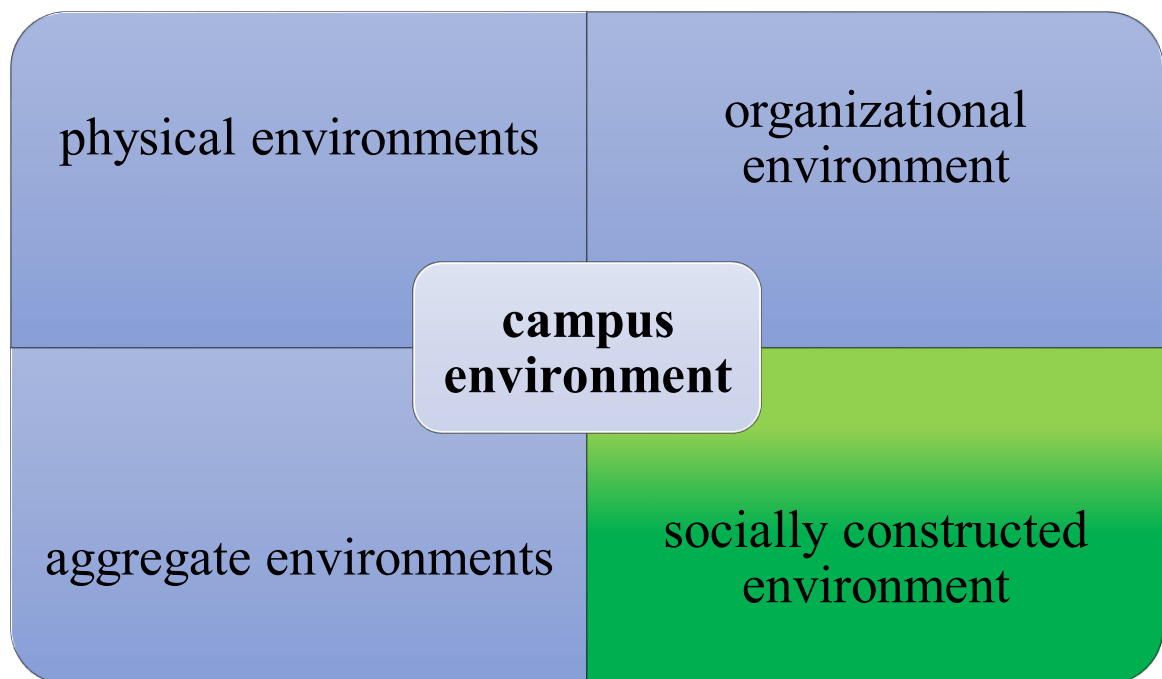
But to say that it is only the environment that affects those operating within it, is not accurate according to Stern (1970), who argues that all environments are both *personal* and *consensual*. That is, just as they are affecting people (personal), people are also affecting them and agreeing to operate within them (consensual).

In 1976, Moos in his work *The Human Context: Environmental Determinants of Behavior*, furthered the idea of environments having their own "unique personalities" (p.320). He more specifically addresses social environments, where interactions are common and necessary - such as workplaces, schools, colleges and living groups (residence halls). Like Murray (1938) and Stern (1970), Moos puts forth the idea that social environments impact the people functioning within them, in particular by directing what sort of behavior is acceptable and what is not. Most environments come with a set of desirable characteristics which are seen as necessary for the members to partake in or adopt, if they want to be successful in those settings (Moos, 1976). While other aspects of

the environment are important too - such as **physical spaces** (used by the members), **organization and structure** (the way an environment is structured in terms of decision-making power, roles and goals), and **human aggregate** (the perceived characteristics of the dominant group) - the **social environment** focuses on the inter-personal understanding of members and how they make sense of what they experience. This includes who they interact with formally and informally, and how their experiences and observations direct and influence their behaviors. Therefore, these social environments are *constructed*: created and recreated, based on the ongoing experiences, observations, interpretations, and interactions of its members. They are varying and dependent on people and places and situations, which is why experiences had in social environments are contextual.

Figure 2

The Components of a Campus Environment



Note. Adapted from “The Social ecology of University Student Residences,” by M.S. Gerst and R.H. Moos (n.d.); “The human context: environmental determinants of behavior,” by R.H. Moos (1976), Wiley; “Designing for learning: Creating campus environments for student success,” C. C. Strange and J.H. Banning (2015), Jossey-Bass.

Changes to physical spaces, a restructuring of what the dominant group looks like, and changes in policy, are all macro-level measures and often must go through certain bureaucratic processes which can be time consuming and dependent upon those at the top of the campus totem pole, who may not even have accessed the social environments in which international doctoral student mothers study and operate, much less understood them - which is why these aspects were not explored in this study. In addition, while physical spaces and the environments they create are important in determining which students feel welcome and which do not, given that we are still living and working in the time of a pandemic, COVID-19 has shut down campuses in many parts of the country, and was yet another reason I did not and could not visit physical spaces to assess them. For these reasons I selected the fourth component, *socially constructed environments* as the focus of this dissertation.

I also selected this because social environments can change and be changed. Just as the social environment is influencing behavior, the individual’s characteristics can sometimes explain their responses in these environments. An individual’s sex, race, socio-economic class, culture (amongst many others), are just some demographic characteristics that may influence how one responds to a situation, or how two people belonging to the same group, may have very distinct interpretations of the same situation (Moos, 1979).

Members often see social environments as potentially harmful, beneficial, or irrelevant (Moos, 1979). Their perceptions of their environment may alter not just how

they act but also how they cope and *react* (Moos, 1979). In order to understand if a social environment is productive and supportive, there are certain factors or *dimensions* as

Moos (1976) refers to them, which need to be assessed. These are:

- *Relationship dimensions* – measured by a member's **involvement** in the environment and the **emotional support** they receive,
- *Personal growth dimension* – measured by a member's independence, intellectuality, and competitiveness (amongst other personal characteristics),
- *System maintenance and change* – measured by how decision makers or those in power treat members of the environment, (if they are supportive and understanding)

While these dimensions - known as the social climate scale - were first used to study residence halls and the social climate for the people within them (Gerst & Moos, 1972), they have since been developed for other settings such as workplaces, classrooms and even rehabilitation centers (Moos 1976, 1979). This social climate scale is continuously being developed and adapted and is available for use by qualified and professional researchers, evaluators and consultants, so that they might uncover and understand the impact of the social environment they are studying on the people within it.

For the purposes of this study, I specifically focused on the *relationship dimension* of the social climate scale as created by Moos (1976), since this is the one that most specifically addresses international doctoral student mothers, and the interactions they have with those around them. *Personal growth* leans more on personality traits, which are too subjective to measure and may be too difficult to change; and *system maintenance and change* would involve studying faculty, staff and administration, which is far removed from the goal and the purpose of this study, which is to center the voices of students.

Focusing on *relationship dimensions* allowed me to interview international doctoral student mothers from the same social environment – Research University - about their **involvement**, which in this study included their participation in class, formal and informal meetings outside of class, and attendance at department/college events. The participants were also asked about the supports and challenges they faced regarding their interactions with faculty, advisors and colleagues. I have also focused on **emotional support**, which in this study was explained by the assistance the participants received from faculty and advisors when it comes to academic or personal problems (Moos, 1976).

Hurtado et al. (2012) write about how the interactions between students and faculty are important whether they are *formal* (campus-facilitated) or *informal* (everyday interactions outside of what is planned). They state that students who have positive *informal* interactions with their advisors and faculty are often less likely to report prejudice and discrimination. But in order to know how inclusive a social environment is for students, one must first hear from them directly (Hurtado et al., 2012). It is important then to study various populations and sub-groups according to the researchers, because much like the works of Murray (1938) and Moos (1976), Hurtado et al. (2012) agree that people experience social environments differently; for instance, white students may have a different understanding of their academic environment as compared to students of color.

Following this logic, my study attempted to understand the academic environments as experienced specifically by *international* doctoral student mothers. This is important because “institutions and individuals within them are part of the fabric of the larger social, historical and political context” (Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 42). How student mothers

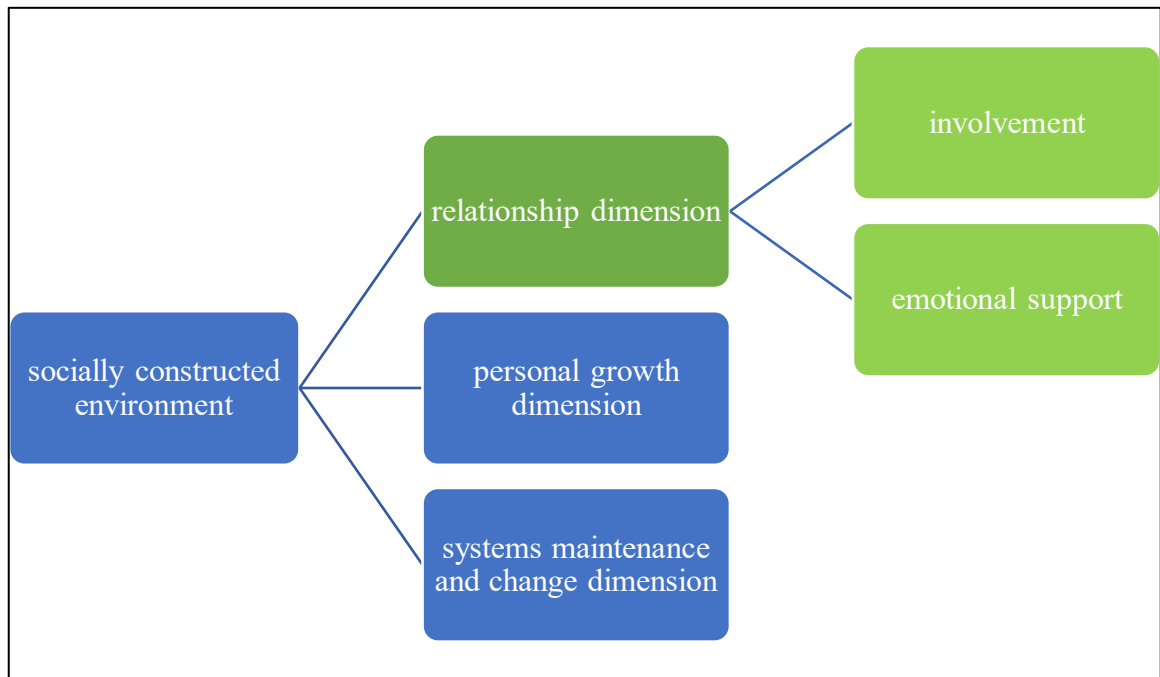
are treated in universities and the expectations they have placed on them, might also be a reflection of how mothers are treated in society in general and the gendered expectations that continue to be pushed knowingly or unknowingly.

Using the *relationship dimension* as the basis of my theoretical framework, allowed me to do two important things:

- 1) to explore the academic experiences of international doctoral student mothers at Research University, obstacles and supports, and
- 2) to focus on how these experiences may be improved by those with whom these participants interact most often (such as faculty, advisors and peers)

Figure 3

Theoretical Framework



Note. This figure shows that the theoretical framework for this study is based on the breakdown of the three dimensions of social environments, with a focus on components of the *relationship dimension*. This was adapted from “The Social ecology of University Student Residences,” by M.S. Gerst and R.H. Moos (n.d.); “The human context: environmental determinants of behavior,” by R.H Moos (1976).

The focus of this study was:

1. *International doctoral student mothers' relationships with advisors, faculty and colleagues and how these supported or hindered their **involvement** in classrooms and on campus,*
2. *International doctoral student mothers' relationships with advisors, faculty and colleagues and the **emotional support** these provided or lacked when it came to personal (motherhood/being international) and academic issues.*

These ideas are central to my study because both **involvement** and **emotional support** are *malleable* factors that can be addressed quickly and without having to wait for changes in policies. Additionally, this gave me a specific focus which allowed me to hone in the questions in my interview. It also provided me with a lens to code, analyze, and interpret the data and results. Honing in on the *socially constructed environment* and in particular the *relationship dimension* of it, allowed me to create a study that is specific, relevant and feasible for the purposes of this dissertation. The experiences of international students, women students and student mothers can be diverse and can extend to factors beyond the campus such as family concerns, marital concerns, sick family members – each of which can impact their academic and personal journeys. This theoretical framework limits the scope of these experiences and thus provides a very specific focus to this study.

In line with the works of other researchers on social climate and environments (Hurtado et al., 2012; Moos, 1976; Murray, 1938; Stern, 1970; Strange and Banning, 2012), to understand the social environment for international doctoral student mothers, it is necessary to ask them “what they see, understand and feel about the place” (Strange & Banning, 2012, p. 116). While outside observations of this social environment are also important, they must be examined hand in hand with the members experiences, to get a

more realistic picture. If we want to understand how international doctoral student mothers feel about their social environment, and why they behave as they do, we must hear their stories without judgment.

Before I settled on this as my theoretical framework, I did consider others. Intersectionality was one of these frameworks. But with a focus on power and power dynamics, and the bigger and broader systemic discriminatory practices that can present themselves in daily life, this proved to be too large a framework for this study and its goals. I also considered feminist standpoint theory that focuses on the experiences and stories of women as important and central to counter any master/dominant narratives that could potentially be harmful and untrue. But this framework was on aligned with the goal of this study either.

To focus on the socially constructed environment, is to put onus on ourselves as colleagues, faculty and staff - and this was my goal. It is also to suggest that we can destroy obstacles we may have unintentionally created for this student population, and instead focus on creating change that yields a supportive academic environment for women who are often juggling, life, motherhood, work and academics, sometimes coupled with gendered cultural and societal expectations. It also encourages each of us to question what we are doing well to serve this student population, to self-reflect and be self-critical, in an effort to better serve this population, and in general become more inclusive and truly accepting of non-traditional students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This study documents the experiences of international doctoral student mothers at Research University (pseudonym). Following the argument of empiricism, in which knowledge comes from lived experience, for this study I selected a qualitative method of data collection. The form of qualitative research that I used was interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA). While phenomenology in general assumes that there is a shared underlying experience amongst individuals, IPA chooses to focus on how experiences (despite the commonalities), can also be distinct in nature (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). To uncover these distinct experiences, I carefully constructed open-ended interview questions that were informed by the theoretical framework (please see Appendix B). Much like the literature used in this study, phenomenology too pulls from works in philosophy, psychology and education, which made it desirable and relevant for this study, while the qualitative aspect of this study, allowed me to dive deeper into the participants experiences.

3.2 Site of research

The site for this study was Research University – a research university in the Northeast. I chose this site because of my own familiarity with the geographical location (having lived in the area for over seven years), and because having certain connections at the University made recruitment somewhat less complicated - which proved to be helpful given that participant recruitment and data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. From a previous nation-wide mixed-methods pilot project I had conducted, I

learned that finding international doctoral student mothers to participate in any form of research might be challenging for two reasons: (1) they may be extremely busy with their multiple roles and responsibilities and simply not have the time; and (2) as a guest in a foreign country they may feel particularly vulnerable in having these conversations and worry about any potential consequences.

3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Research design rationale

Given that qualitative data produces descriptive responses and direct quotes about participant's personal experiences and perceptions (Johnson & Christensen, 2020), it was thus the best approach for capturing these women's' stories. It gave me - as a researcher - an insider's view of how these participants understood their experiences and/in their social environments.

Qualitative data is often considered empathetic and understanding as it focuses on knowledge as rooted in experience (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Rather than deducing any logic or reason that may come from *a priori* assumptions, the participants responses to the interview questions in this study become the data for it. The participants in this study have offered not just narratives, but a knowledge bank that can then contribute to further research in this field. My reason behind not conducting an empirical, number-centered study is because while numbers might quantify and answer questions like *how many* and *how often*, the purpose of my research was to create a knowledge base that provides us with the *why* and the *how* behind the participants' experiences. I previously used a mixed-methods approach in a similar study conducted in 2019 (on the experiences of domestic and international student mothers), which using Likert scales for responses,

provided information about the commonalities of the experiences across participants. This dissertation has learned from that past study and focused on international student mothers in particular and in depth. Moreover, given the lack of international doctoral student mother voices in the literature on higher education, this study sought to empower the participants rather than to minoritize or marginalize them further (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, a more detailed literary/qualitative study was needed to present their voices and experiences, as well as the contexts in which these issues exist (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The goal of this study was to find both what was being done well and what needed improvement, when it came to the academic experiences of the participants, and then to use this knowledge to brainstorm and suggest potential strategies for supporting international doctoral student mothers in higher education. To do so, I first had to understand what these participants had experienced in their academic journeys, how they interpreted it, and how it had affected them in the classroom and beyond.

3.3.2 Delimitations

Based on my research questions, this study was only open to *international students* (foreigners present in the U.S. on F-1 student visas) who were enrolled as full-time *doctoral students* at Research University. Their start date in their doctoral degree programs was unimportant, so long as *at the time of the interview* they were enrolled as *active* doctoral degree student, and they had been enrolled for at least *one academic year*. In addition, the participants needed to be mothers to at least one child who had been under the age of 18 years for at least part of their doctoral degree journeys. This narrowed down the participant group since it eliminated those mothers whose children were *over*

18 years old during their stint in the program; those who were just *beginning* their programs, and those who were pregnant and had no other children at the time of the interview.

While there are several foci that could have been part of this study or warranted an entire study of their own - such as the experiences of single student parents (domestic and international), same- sex couples who are students and parents (domestic and international) - I had to limit my research to make it specific. I am also aware that if I considered different factors such as race, sexuality, culture, etcetera that this study could have yielded different experiences and stories and had different themes that needed to be explored. Hence, I chose to focus on how being an *international* doctoral student *mother* enriches or complicates (or both) student-hood and motherhood for doctoral students enrolled in various programs and in various colleges at Research University.

3.3.3 Researcher Bias

In order to control any researcher bias in this study, there are a few measures I took.

1. The interview questions were based on the suggestions of my committee members and were tested on a colleague. This mock interview allowed me to (a) make sure my questions were fully developed and could be easily understood, (b) ensure my questions were not leading, (c) test my interviewing skills and (d) receive feedback. This was a run through of my study “in an abbreviated form” and allowed me to “[make] adjustments based on the performance of the method” (Chenali, 2011, p.257).
2. I also indulged in free writing/journaling after each interview, which allowed me to identify and set aside any personal feelings I had during the interviews.
3. No interviews were transcribed or analyzed the day they took place. There was a gap of at least 7-10 between the interview and the transcription.
4. There was no known selection bias, for any student who met the requirements was interviewed. There were two students who were not interviewed, and this is because both had been admitted to the University but had not started their journeys. They were set to begin in Fall 2020, and therefore did not meet the

criteria for this study (must have been full-time active students for at least one full academic year).

While researcher bias can never be eliminated entirely, I believe these methods kept me aware of it and therefore allowed me to minimize it.

3.3.4 Sampling criteria

Creswell and Poth (2018) write that while conducting an in-depth inquiry into particular human experiences, anywhere from five to ten participants is an acceptable number. To obtain in-depth responses and to minimize the variables in this research, I had initially planned to recruit ten international doctoral student mothers from the College of Education at Research University. Due to the political climate and certain world events that transpired at the time of recruitment (and beyond), this sampling criteria had to be modified to allow the study to continue.

My initial recruitment email, sent out on July 6, 2020, had specifically been addressed to:

1. **Current students**, since colleges and universities change and adapt to new circumstances with new rules and support systems, it is possible that the experiences of a student mother from five years ago may no longer apply.
2. **Students who have been enrolled in the College for at least one academic year**, so that participants have experience with/at the University and the College of Education.
3. **International students**, in the U.S. on temporary U.S. Student Visas (F-1), made possible by their status as active full-time students at Research University. Students who possess this visa can *only* seek employment at Research University (USCIS.com, 2021), which adds an element of dependency on the University. Some international students may possess other visas, but the F-1 visa denotes that a student's main purpose for entering the U.S. is in the pursuit of education.
4. **Mothers**, who during their doctoral degree journeys have had at least one child under the age of 18 who has lived with them and/or continues to live with them. While research has indicated that the difficulties and challenges of being a new mother are different from having adolescent children or college-going children, I

am not studying the challenges of raising children, but rather the participants' experiences of student-motherhood. Also, this broader age range for children increased the likelihood of being able to recruit more participants. Since doctoral degrees can take up to ten years to complete at Research University.⁵ It was not necessary that the children *still* be living with their mothers, just that the participant had had a child under 18 at any time during her doctoral program. For instance, a participant who had an 11-year-old daughter during her first year in the program may no longer be caring for this child if the participant has been enrolled in the program for over seven years. She still, however, has her experiences of time as a doctoral student mother, which is extremely valuable for this study.

3.3.4 Contextual factors that led to changes to sampling criteria

3.3.4.1 The COVID -19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic led to wide-spread lockdowns across the U.S and worldwide. It had already affected my work by the time I defended my proposal in May 2020. At that point the state of Massachusetts was in lockdown, and Research University was closed with students working remotely. Daycares and schools were also closed in the state, which meant the women I was hoping to interview were likely also involved in home schooling their children and/or spending more hours of the day taking care of them. This also meant I was unable to recruit for this study in person (flyers on campus, in buildings) and that I had to rely on people responding to and forwarding my emails, and bank on the fact that amidst this chaos, students still had time to check their emails, read them, and hope that they would choose to respond, at a time where being part of a research study might seem incredibly unimportant, given the state of the world. However, the pandemic was not the only reason that recruiting participants proved to be difficult.

⁵ Taken from the University's website. The link has not mentioned here to protect the anonymity of the University.

3.3.4.2 New Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) guidance

My first recruitment email was sent out during the height of the pandemic on July 6, 2020, at 1:33PM via the College of Education listserv. At that time, the state of Massachusetts had already been under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic for over four months. International students like domestic students, were studying and working remotely, since campuses had been closed. Many international students were still present in the U.S. because their own countries had closed their borders for non-essential travel. For student parents in the state, this also meant that their children enrolled in schools and universities returned home and had to finish off the semester remotely. That same night at 10:37PM the International Programs Office at Research University sent out an email explaining that the SEVP (Student and Exchange Visitor Program) had made suggested changes, and that due to the COVID-19 pandemic international students who were not enrolled in face-to-face courses (and therefore not considered to be enrolled as full-time students) must soon leave the U.S.⁶

As some of my participants would later tell me, receiving this email was a particularly harrowing experience for them. As an international student myself, I was filled with panic and living in uncertainty, not knowing if I would have to leave the U.S. (and when), or if I would be *allowed* to stay. Receiving this news, the day my recruitment email went out meant that I was asking an already vulnerable population (who were allowed to be in the U.S. because they were effectively sponsored by their University), to come forward and tell me about their academic journeys, in a climate where they might feel more unsafe than before. It was therefore unsurprising to me that despite offering

⁶ <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/sevp-modifies-temporary-exemptions-nonimmigrant-students-taking-online-courses-during>

generous compensation for a one-hour interview, I received no responses from this initial recruitment email.

The next week another recruitment went out, again only to the students in the College of Education. At this point I also requested that an email be sent out via the International Education listserv, since I knew this program had several international students (some of whom were mothers as well). From these two emails I received only one participant response. Given that I was still concerned about my status in the country, and after speaking with my advisor, we decided that in order to have the best chance at recruiting an adequate number of participants for this study, I would have to broaden my search given the climate created by the SEVP guidelines and chaos wreaked by the pandemic.

3.3.5 Sampling methods

Due to extenuating circumstances at the time, the parameters of this study had to be broadened to include international doctoral student mothers outside the College of Education. However, the only means for me to do so was via emails. Here I used Research University's webpage to find: (1) all the PhD programs it offered and (2) either a contact email for the administrative assistant and/or a generic contact email address for these programs. I used these email addresses to send out an initial email explaining my study, explaining the limitations and why I was approaching the program. I also sought permission to email in my flyer as well as a brief write-up explaining my study, to be forwarded to the students in these programs. Many of my emails did not receive a response.⁷ I did however hear back from staff in certain departments – two social science

⁷ This could have been because I was recruiting over summer break (July 2020).

and three STEM (names omitted to maintain participant anonymity) who forwarded my recruitment material to the students within their programs where applicable.

These communications yielded four participants from various colleges. At the same time, I also requested a final email be sent out to the College of Education listserv and I received two additional responses from that announcement. However, it just so happened that on 27 July, 2020 the International Programs Office sent out another email confirming that the SEVP guidance had been halted after Harvard University and MIT had filed a lawsuit. The six participants (now equaling seven participants in total) that I had managed to recruit came forward after this announcement, and I cannot help but wonder if that was because they felt somewhat safer to talk. Two of these seven participants told me they had friends who were interested in the study. I encouraged them to send my recruitment email and contact information to these students, and thus snowball sampling, allowed to me obtain my final three participants, securing a total of **ten international doctoral student mothers** for this qualitative study.

Once I was contacted, in my initial email response to the participants, I introduced myself as the researcher and disclosed the purpose of this research. I also asked them preliminary questions that ensured they met the criteria for this study (see Appendix A).⁸ I went on to confirm that they were aware of the structure of the interviews (one on one, open-ended questions, lasting approximately 60 minutes, conducted and recorded virtually via Zoom, and with compensation). Once I had confirmed that they were

⁸ While the details listed here were necessary to establish that participants were eligible for this research, those mentioning age, nationality, department and/or program have been kept confidential since they served as identifiers and thus needed to be masked in this study.

eligible for this study, I emailed them a link to a private folder in my (university) drive, which had the informed consent form uploaded and ready for them to read and sign.

In the body of this same email to the participants, I outlined what I believed was crucial information in the informed consent form, such as:

- i. Their names and all identifying information would be kept out of this study
- ii. The interview would be video and audio recorded and was only accessible to myself (the interviewer)
- iii. The participants would receive a copy of the diagram in Chapter 2 (figure 2) that shows my theoretical framework beforehand, so they were aware of the nature of the study
- iv. The interview was a one-time occurrence scheduled for 60 minutes.
- v. The participants would be compensated for the interview with a \$75 virtual gift card.

Details of each of these key points, along with details of the purpose of the study and how the data would be managed and secured, were all present in the informed consent form, which had been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any recruitment taking place (#1922, June 20, 2021).

3.4 Data collection and analysis

3.4.1 Techniques

Of the ten interviews conducted, only two interviews were scheduled for the same day (four hours apart). Each of the other eight interviews were scheduled for different days, and between recruiting participants and interviewing them, this process lasted

approximately eight weeks. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 lockdown being in place, all the interviews took place virtually on Zoom, and were audio and video recorded.

Before I began each interview, I introduced myself briefly by mentioning my program, college, and my nationality. I also told each of the participants that I am not a mother, and therefore to not assume I would automatically understand their plight without it being explained to me. I also encouraged them to share any stories, anecdotes or personal experiences during the interview if comfortable, that might allow me better insight into their lives as international doctoral student mothers. Participants were made aware that I might ask clarifying questions to ensure that as a researcher I abstained from making assumptions on my end, and that I understood them fully. I reinforced that they did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable, and that they could skip or terminate the interview if desired.

The interviews were dynamic and required actively listening on my part as an interviewer, and as is the nature of interviews that use IPA techniques (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). While I had created a questionnaire/protocol (please see Appendix B), I also asked several follow up questions on the spot, based on the participants' responses and their word choices. In Chapters 4 and 5, when and where (I believe) necessary and helpful, I have also chosen to indicate the participants tone and body language, as it might contribute to understanding their situation and state of mind better, especially to the reader. Additionally, while most of the participants referenced life in the time of COVID-19 at least once, at my request they focused on their lived doctoral experiences prior to COVID-19 for the purposes of this study.

Some of the important details regarding the methods of data collection and management in this study include that:

- i) every interview was video and audio recorded and that the recording was then uploaded to BOX, and on an external hard drive and then deleted from my personal computer.
- ii) during each interview I quickly jotted down my immediate observations/perceptions regarding the participant's expressions, tones, and gestures that stood out to me.
- iii) at the end of each interview, I asked each of the participants which aspects of what they had shared could serve as potential identifiers and should be left out of this study.
- iv) the notes from parts (ii) and (iii) were secured in a locked filing cabinet that only I had access to.
- v) I also kept a private journal on the side. It is here that I documented my feelings regarding the interview. My goal here was to attempt to separate thoughts/observations – data - from feelings -biases-, as best as possible, since good qualitative research is about the participants and not the researcher (Mason, 2002). My journaling was free, expressive and personal, often in the form of diagrams and mind maps, and random words and phrases. It was kept private to allow me to write honestly and without fear of reprisal or judgement. This journal too is now secure in a locked filing cabinet and does not contain the names of any of the participants.
- vi) I revisited the video recordings a week after each interview had been completed to transcribe them in full. I did this myself, and did not rely on any service, since I did not want to share this material with anyone else.
- vii) pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions instead of names.
- viii) once each interview was transcribed, it was printed three times and read and re-read it carefully, and the responses that mentioned/alluded to the following themes were identified, color-coded and collected to create a large mind map:

- *Supports in the classroom*
- *Challenges in the classroom*
- *Strategies for classrooms*
- *Supports in regards to relationships*
- *Challenges in regards to relationships*
- *Strategies in regards to relationships*

- ix) any ideas that did not fit into the above categories were marked with red and labeled as *other*.
- x) all files, all video recordings, and all typed notes, were saved both to Box, as well as a personal hard drive (to keep documents safe and prevent them from being lost/accidentally deleted). The data on Box is password protected, and the external hard drive used is in locked filing cabinet.

All the interviews went as planned, with the exception of five interviews running over the 60-minute mark by roughly five to ten minutes, only because the participants themselves wanted to share more of their experiences, and I chose not to rush them. Within an hour after the completion of each interview, the participants received their gift cards electronically, as well as a follow up email that thanked them for their time and provided them with a list of IRB approved support services available at the University that were still operating remotely.

3.5 Participant overview

Of the ten participants interviewed, nine represented countries in Asia (South Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia). They ranged in ages from 25 to over 40 years old (with two participants not wanting to disclose their precise age). The number of children ranged from one to five, and the number of years present in the doctoral degree ranged from one to over four years (with three participants not wanting to disclose exactly how long they had been enrolled in the program). All these students were in heterosexual marriages and six participants had husbands that were in the U.S. with them. For four participants, their husbands were living and working back in their home countries, and in two of these situations, the women were in the U.S. with their children and away from their husbands. So, the responsibilities that came with housework and childcare for at least two of the

women could not be shared. And in the other two cases, where the mothers -Violet and Tania - were away from their children and their husbands, they still spent hours every day talking to their children, reading to their children, and on the weekends even helping their children with homework.

When it came to where they were in their academic journeys, five of the participants were still in some stage of coursework (and therefore still required to attend classes), while the other five were either preparing for their candidacy exams, or working on various stages of their dissertations (and no longer needed to take classes).

Seven of the participants had seen my recruitment material and responded to it, while three others approached via snowball sampling, telling me that their friends (who I had interviewed) had provided them with my contact information.

To protect the identity of the participants I provided them with pseudonyms. All pseudonyms have been anglicized to protect participant anonymity/confidentiality, as well as protecting their ethnicities. The table below shows the colleges with which they are affiliated at the University as well as their continents of origin. However, I had to avoid any specifics such as the year of study, program, and nationality, since in some instances these serve as identifiers.

Table 1

Participant Overview

Pseudonym	College	From
Linda	Education	Asia
Betty	Education	Asia
Hilary	Natural Sciences	Asia
Amy	Social and Behavioral Studies	Asia
Veronica	Education	Africa
Dani	Social and Behavioral Studies	Asia

Tania	Information and Computer Sciences	Asia
Diana	Natural Sciences	Asia
Anne	Information and Computer Sciences	Asia
Violet	Fine Art and Humanities	Asia

Note. Several of the participants requested that I not mention their departments/programs, nor their countries to maintain their privacy and protect their anonymity, because in certain departments they were the only students from a particular country. They also asked that I not mention their ages, the number of children they had, nor how long they had been in the program. Some of the colleges/departments were small enough that each of these could serve as identifiers.

3.6 Ethical considerations

The research proposal for this study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (IRB# 1922, created on 1 March 2020, approved on 20 June, 2020). In compliance with the requirements from the IRB and the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), I honored my commitment to maintain ethical standards and practice ethical behaviors, and I believe I showed respect and compassion towards my participants. This includes ensuring that all participants were aware that they were free to terminate the interview at any point and to withdraw from this study even after the interview had been completed. I also made sure the participants were aware of the nature of the research, its methods and goals.

While there was minimal risk involved in this study, there are some issues I kept in mind. Firstly, for some of the participants the experiences that they shared were personal and upsetting to them. In one interview, the participant, needed time to pause and collect herself. I provided the participant with the option to continue, switch topics, or stop the interview entirely. To try and make the participants more comfortable, and to protect them from harm, all names were masked by using pseudonyms assigned by the researcher (even though the participants were free to choose their own). At least half of the

participant expressed concern that their ethnicity, their nationality, the number of years in the program and their ages, may serve as identifiers. For this reason, I have abstained from linking each of these to any of the participants, and avoided mentioning their departments and programs. I have even gone so far as to anglicize their names to prevent anyone's ethnicity/nationality from being known. Given the sample size and site, it is vital that all identifiable data such as (but not limited to) the names of children and spouses, faculty and advisors, and friends were also removed.

The other risk that exists in this study is the risk of lost/stolen data, which I have minimized by storing hardcopies of all documents (notes, informed consent forms) in a locked filing cabinet (at my residence and away from campus) and uploading all other documents to a password encrypted external hard drive that no one but myself has access to, nor knows the location of.

In addition, given that the nature of this study was a personal one, students were provided with a list of campus resources and services that would have been able to offer professional support, and that were continuing to operate remotely.

3.6.1 The IRB's concerns

The IRB asked me (1) why I was compensating these students so generously and (2) where this money came from. For a 60-minute interview each student was paid \$75, which according to the IRB seemed to be unusually high for a research study of this nature. To this I responded firstly that the money did not come out of personal funds. I had obtained a scholarship for \$1000 dollars through my own university, which after being taxed left me with approximately \$840. While this scholarship could have been used towards personal expenses, I chose instead to use it to pay my participants because I

believed that it would serve as an incentive for them to speak with me. I also expressed to the IRB committee that:

- a) I knew these participants were dealing with the pandemic, which for some students meant losing their campus jobs and perhaps being in financial need
- b) the participants were likely working/studying remotely while also having to teach/care for their children who were at home, which meant they had less time for themselves, and thus a 60-minute interview seemed to be a bigger ask than usual
- c) in general, I personally feel that my research could have been exploitive – asking for participants to rehash difficult moments and tribulations and providing little in return – and I did not want to be this researcher.

My proposal and the reasons behind its generous compensation were approved.⁹

3.7 Data management and privacy

The ten interviews with participants were conducted virtually and recorded on. I used Zoom as my platform to connect with the participants, since they had free access to it via the University. Before the interviews began, I reminded each of the participants that the interview was being recorded only for my viewing, and specifically to make transcribing easier (in the instance the participants had accents, it is often easier to understand what is being said if one can also see them). I took brief notes during these sessions, jotting down information that I wanted to follow up on (such as word choice or clarifying questions). These handwritten notes have since been secured in a locked filing cabinet at my residence. The recordings of the interviews are now saved on a personal external hard drive that no one has access to but me. All transcriptions, notes and files that contain

⁹ I found it heartwarming to learn from a few of the participants that they wanted to spend the funds on their children.

identifying material only exist with me (the researcher) and are either coded or password encrypted (in the instance of soft copies), and both also stored securely.

As per IRB protocols, all notes, recordings and any form of data collected is being kept securely for three years, after which it will be deleted/destroyed.

3.8 Data analysis and organization

After transcribing each of the interviews, I carefully read and re-read these transcriptions to see if there were any similarities (themes) across them. For an idea to be classified as a *theme* in this study, at least five women needed to have addressed it (although not necessarily using the same words). Using direct quotes from the participants, these themes were then categorized as either supports or obstacles, and have been addressed, analyzed and discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 also offers an analysis of the findings and my interpretation of the participants responses, body language and word choices, all further explaining why I used IPA as an interviewing technique.

Chapter 5 explores the ways in which the findings in this study, are similar to the those mentioned in the literature review, and how this study contributes with its own unique findings. It also explores potential strategies and practices that may be implemented by faculty and advisors, as suggested by the participants themselves. The chapter ends with a discussion of whether the theoretical framework proved to be an adequate one for this research study, and briefly touches upon the potential for future research and what this may look like.

3.9 Limitations of study

The small sample size for this study was the first obvious limitation. While the data is valuable, it is difficult to generalize if these experiences are common for international doctoral student mothers elsewhere. The potential reasons for the small sample size are also problematic. As mentioned previously this study was conducted under unique circumstances. These participants were grappling with a pandemic and its consequences, personally, mentally and emotionally. During these interviews, they had also lived through weeks of uncertainty where they did not know if they would be asked to leave the country or allowed to stay based on the SEVP guidance that had been come to light. Even though this worked out eventually in the favor of international students (and universities!), some participants were still unsure of when they would be reunited with their families, given that non-essential travel had been halted. For four of the participants this meant being reunited with their husbands, and for two of them it meant being able to see and their husbands and children again. It may be fair then to assume that these women interviewed with me in a strange and tense world that they were unfamiliar with and that may have potentially altered their perceptions on their experience in the U.S. as doctoral students.

Also, as mentioned above, each of the interviews took place virtually and on Zoom. While all the participants had their camera on for the entirety of the interview, it is certainly possible that due to the (sometimes) sensitive nature of the responses, being face to face and in person, might have created a more welcoming/comforting environment for them. There were instances in which a few of the participants were either frustrated or shed tears (four were visibly upset while recounting some of their experiences), and in

these instances, I wish there had not been a screen and distance between us, and that eye contact had been possible. If a face-to-face interview would have yielded more personal stories and experiences, I do not know. But for this sort of research – both in method and in content – I would have preferred being able to share a physical space with these participants. Although, given that five of these interviews were briefly interrupted and halted by children showing up, it could also have been likely that these women preferred to interview from home, since they clearly had other responsibilities.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present my raw data. While the nature of qualitative research is such that often participants share lived experiences in a non-linear timeline, I have organized my findings in order of the asked (from the questionnaire protocol designed in Chapter 3 – Appendix B). Additionally, I was interviewing and hearing from international students, who as research tells us have often have cultural and linguistic differences. While one of these differences can be that English may not be their native language, another challenge is also in the way in which they *deliver* information: it is not always direct and to the point (Moon et al., 2020). Research has also shown that are differing ways in which respect is expressed by international students and in particular East Asian students (five participants in this study), and this affects how students interact with their faculty and *how they talk to others about faculty and peers* and the experiences they have had with them. Therefore, while working with people of various cultures (especially a vulnerable population) who are recounting memories and lived experiences, one cannot necessarily expect direct quotes, and to require them may be an ethno/euro-centric notion of what “good” data might look like.

I have organized this chapter to first reintroduce the participants, the questions, and then present the findings with the use of direct quotes. I have also chosen to weave in an analysis of these quotes and end with a summary of the findings.

4.2 Participant sketch

Linda

Linda had completed coursework and was working on achieving candidacy, while also looking to secure an assistantship for the following year. She was interrupted twice by her child during this interview. She had thought many times about the struggles of being international and being a mother, and therefore was interested in this study.

Betty

Betty still had at least one year of coursework remaining, presently had an assistantship working in her department. She was interrupted twice by child during this interview, once because she had promised him warm milk, which she had forgotten about after starting the interview. Her husband was also a student- parent.

Hilary

Hilary was just completing coursework, had an assistantship, and was interrupted once by her child during this interview.

Amy

Amy was still completing coursework, home-schooling her children during COVID-19, while working as a teaching assistant. She signed up for this interview as she was surprised someone was talking about student motherhood since there was a silence about it in her own program.

Veronica

Veronica had completed her coursework and was working on her dissertation, while also working actively on campus and taking care of her children.

Dani

Dani had completed coursework, was working in her department, while also working on her dissertation. She was interrupted once by her child during this interview.

Tania

Tania was still completing coursework, working on her own research, and was long-distance parenting with her children back home. She was unsure of when she would see them next, with the pandemic changing her travel plans. She broke down twice during the interview.

Diana

Diana was wrapping up coursework. She also had an assistantship in her department. Her husband was also a student-parent.

Anne

Anne was working on her dissertation, home-schooling her children because of COVID-19, and had responsibilities pertaining to her assistantship. She was interrupted twice

during this interview by one of her children, who was very curious to know who she was talking to.

Violet

Violet was still completing coursework, while also serving as a teaching assistant, and was long-distance parenting with her husband and child back home.

Question 1:

Why did you choose to enroll in a doctoral degree program? What are your goals?

While there was some diversity in responses as to what had prompted these participants to begin their doctoral degree journeys, five out of ten participants stated that they believed a doctoral degree would lead to career advancement and that they believed this might lead to better future salaries:

I believe it will help me in my career in the future. -Tania

To be more successful in my career. -Violet

Out of these five participants, two had also pursued their master's degrees from the same University. **Four** participants stated they had a passion for learning and research, which is why they embarked on this degree:

I pursued my PhD to produce mind-blowing research! -Amy

Of these four, two had specifically chosen this University because of their advisors, who they believe to be the best in their respective fields. One of the other two participants wanted to create research that could be used in her home country in a constructive and tangible way. One out of the ten participants had stated funding as her reason for choosing the U.S. for her doctoral degree program, since in her home country she would not have secured funding for her particular career interest, and given that she needed financial assistance to pursue this degree, the U.S. seemed the best choice for her.

In each case the participants seemed to have a definitive response as to why they pursued this degree. Despite not knowing any of the questions ahead of time, their responses to this particular question were almost immediate, which could indicate that their initial goals for this pursuit were still fresh in their minds, despite the fact that four participants had been in the program for over three years at the time of the interview.

Of these ten participants, Diana and Betty (both from the same East Asian country), had said they had enrolled in a doctoral degree program to further their careers, at the encouragement of their husbands. In both instances their husbands too were applying to doctoral degree programs, and had encouraged their wives to follow suit:

[My husband] wanted to do a PhD. It was his dream. And he said we should get a PhD together and it will be better for our future. -Diana

While the two women did believe a PhD could lead to career advancement and higher salaries, the timing suggests their giving nature and the idea that they placed their husbands' desires before their own. It also suggested that there may be multiple reasons why some participants pursued these degrees. Two participants from (different) South Asian countries stated that they had both always wanted to pursue a PhD but at the request of their fathers had waited to get married first:

My father said had this idea that you need to get married and only then you can do your PhD. He said he won't be able to find a suitable match for me, if I had a PhD. I would be overqualified [to get married]. -Anne

It seems that before even beginning the doctoral degree program (and before becoming mothers), some women already put the needs and desires of important male figures in their lives before their own, which may be an expectation in certain cultures.

While these women faced challenges in their academic journeys, a phrase that three of them repeated to me was, *there is no good time to do a PhD / never a good time*

for graduate school, which to me inferred that they had an underlying belief that their journeys would always have been challenging ones, with or without spouses and children, given that as international students they knew that they were already leaving certain comforts and privileges behind. It is also a statement that suggests an attempt to normalize the hardships of student life, with there never being an ideal time to pursue the degree.

Question 2:
Do people in your program know that you're a mother?

Five of the ten interviewees stated that they do not share that they are mothers with faculty, staff and peers, and if someone had learned about their having children, it was *by accident*. Three of these interviewees stated that they did not want to be treated differently and thus thought it best to leave this information out. Two of the participants, Amy and Anne, said they only shared this information with a handful of people, and that it was never something they shared when they introduced themselves in class:

Unless people have seen me with [my kids], I will not tell them I am a mother. - Amy

Three of the participants however said their being mothers was common knowledge. One participant said she introduced herself as a mother at orientation before she had even enrolled in courses. And two participants stated they shared this information in each class, on the very first day, during their introductions:

In class I mention my nationality and that I am a mom. It's a big part of me, it's something that I do, and I do it well. -Veronica

I love to introduce myself as a mom, because whatever I earn – I was a lecturer in a University, I am a PhD student - I am also a mom. -Tania

Overall, it seemed that five out of ten participants either did not want to disclose that they were mothers, or at least restrict this information and share it only with those they were most comfortable with. For three of the five participants who did not introduce their roles as mothers, the reason was because they felt graduate school did not create a space for them to do so:

I didn't find any comfort zone [to talk about motherhood], so I guess I keep it to myself... I didn't have any opportunity to talk about myself... Where do you talk about that? You introduce yourself in two sentences... there is no personal touch, and there is no personal connection between faculty and students... Faculty members do not set the tone that we are a community, and we need to know more about each other. – Linda

Linda highlights an important point: that something as simple as what is asked in an introduction, might lead to some students feeling welcome, and others not so much. She also places an onus on the faculty to “set the tone” and in doing so make evident what they want students to disclose and thus what aspect of the students’ lives they value. For Linda, introductions were a moment faculty could create a “genuine desire to know more about the students” like the fact that they had children. But since this never happened in her courses, she also believed it was where faculty felt short in creating these spaces, and making students like her with other responsibilities and roles, feel out of place.

Another participant also commented on an “unspoken culture” in her department that kept students silent regarding their role as parents:

The culture I'm trying to point at is that people do not mention they have kids...they don't even have pictures of their kids on their desks...like I said I don't think it's something people talk about. -Amy

It becomes apparent that there may be a lack or void across programs when it comes to conversations about parenthood and children. The above quotes indicate that for these

women there may not be an overt hostility (which be seen and therefore addressed), but rather a silence that is easier to miss, to overlook and therefore to change. The worry of being discriminated against was mentioned by two other participants:

I never spoke about [motherhood] when I was in school, I wanted to be seen as only a student...not treated like a mother. -Hilary

I avoid letting my faculty know I have kids. Somewhere I feel there may be a bias...I do not want my ambitions being capped. - Anne

This idea of having one's ambitions capped was shared by Veronica, who did disclose that she was a mother in all her classes, and was proud of this role despite it creating academic obstacles for her:

One experience I had I felt that [the faculty] would rather give projects [paid and unpaid] to people who don't have children. They ask for volunteers, and you volunteer and [then] find out that the professor is looking for single women, or women without children. They just don't want moms to be on any committee; they are not as eager to work with you, maybe it's because they think we won't have the time... -Veronica

While Veronica believed the pride of being a mother was more important than how she was treated and the obstacles that she had to overcome, she did not appreciate faculty acting as decision makers on her behalf and assuming that as a mother she would have less time to contribute to projects and such. For her, sharing her role as mother was to awaken faculty to the notion that even students who want to contribute and work alongside them, sometimes have pressing obligations outside of the classroom which might affect their academic performance, and instead of this being held against them, it should be something they see and understand without prejudice:

I think being a mom is something we need to emphasize so the professor knows 'look these are our struggles, so you better remember I am a mom and have these responsibilities. And that maybe you're asking me to meet a deadline, but anything can happen.' -Veronica

While Veronica thought it important to educate the educators on the diverse nature of student lives, Tania mentioned how her sharing her role as a mother allowed her to set a positive example for other women:

Lots of female students who are doing a PhD or who want to do a PhD, from different countries have contacted me...they call me just to know my experience. They ask for advice. I found [I] inspired a lot of people. – Tania

Another participant mentioned that sharing her role as a mother made her peers more interested to know her thoughts and opinions on class material, especially if it was linked to understanding children or education and schooling:

Most of my classmates are interested in early education and children, so I like to share my experience as being a mother... They like to ask me questions. -Betty

Sharing the information about being a mother seems like a personal decision that may be based on the environment in which the participants find themselves, which may vary from college to college, and perhaps even within departments and programs, and something future research may want to investigate.

Question 3a:

What do you perceive the barriers have been so far in your academic journey as an international doctoral student mother regarding your experiences in the classroom?

While the challenges for these participants in the classroom were diverse, there were some recurring themes. Amongst the shared classroom experiences were:

- 1) **language as a barrier**
- 2) **academic expectations/preparedness as a barrier, and**
- 3) **work-life-school balance as a barrier**

Before addressing any barriers, it is important to address that four out of ten mothers mentioned that the challenges they have experienced have been shifting and in flux:

I feel like there are general issues and barriers... but faculty and staff have to understand it's a very dynamic process...they have to understand that students experience a variety of things...and [the] things I experienced in year one were very different than things I experienced in year three. - Linda

If you have children at different stages, I think your problems are different. Children under 5 are sick a lot. But then if you have a fifth or sixth grader, it's a completely different ballgame. So, my issues at different stages were different...how it affected my studies, and my academic life was different at different times. – Veronica

These changes in student needs must be kept in mind given that a student's needs and expectations may vary at different stages of the program, and a mother's needs may vary and at different stages of child development and age.

1) Language as a barrier

Seven out of ten international doctoral student mothers reported language barriers as affecting their ability to communicate in the classroom. Five of these seven however, stated it was academic English that they struggled with as international students, which often silenced them in classrooms and prevented them from partaking in class discussions:

...the first semester was the hardest because of the language issue, the way things are written, and the overall Western academic style is very different...and I'm a reader. I [have always] read a lot." - Amy

...first two or three semesters I was very silent in class...many times discussions just went by too quickly. – Dani

[Even though] I can make sentences in my own language, [they cannot be] directly translated. So, keeping myself to myself is one of the strategies [of] being international in the classroom. - Linda

Violet mentioned that the language barrier placed unfair expectations on international students who were being asked to perform at the level and speed of native English speakers:

You can't ask an English native speaker to finish a novel, and [someone who] speaks English as a second language to use the same time to finish that [same] novel, that is much harder for them. -Violet

Two of the participants explained that being unfamiliar with academic English meant they had to often re-read class material which was a time-consuming process. One participant also expressed her frustration at not being understood by her peers:

I found myself more silent in the groups...I found out that when I am talking people don't really understand what I mean and at some point I decided I don't want to explain myself over and over again. - Linda

While Linda was speaking about her contributions to class discussions based on class material and texts, as past literature states, a language barrier can and does affect personal relationships and friendships as well. Two of the ten participants in this study highlighted how their lack of fluency in English prevented them from understanding and engaging in social interactions that took place in the classroom:

Academic English is [easier] than personal English. Because when we present, we usually make slides, and I can prepare...but when I talk with other people, I have to talk [differently] than in a presentation. To me that is much harder. – Diana

During recess [classmates] would talk about something about their life. It was not easy for me to catch what they were saying. Sometimes I missed a lot of their humor. – Betty

It is not just academic English that international students must grapple with then, but also understanding enough English and Americanisms (and quickly), so that they might

socially engage with their peers and develop relationships that may make them feel better connected.

2) Academic Expectations/Preparedness as a barrier

Seven out of the ten participants in this study, mentioned that they were unfamiliar with what was expected from them as doctoral degree students. Three of these participants mentioned specifically that they had no knowledge of how to proceed in the program, what the requirements were, and what the faculty expected of them. However, these concerns were not unique to their identities as mother nor as international. Two women specifically addressed that they felt they were being held to the same standards as American doctoral degree students, with professors either being unaware of how the different academic and education styles outside of the U.S. or unconcerned about it:

I guess there is complete ignorance of different academic preparation or different practical experience...it's [assumed] that international students have to get the same standards [as American students]. - Linda

Me and my friends who come from my country are affected a lot by our country's education system when we come [to the U.S.]. So, we are shy. We are not willing to talk [or] ask questions. -Hilary

From Hilary and Linda's quotes we might infer the ideas of *equality* – where they believe all doctoral degree students were being held to the same requirements and standards – and *equity*, where they believe there needs to be an acknowledgment at the very least that academic preparedness and academic differences exist between domestic and international students, who have had different educational opportunities and experiences.

Three of the participants said they did not ask questions of the faculty because their experience led them to believe that there were no mechanisms for doctoral student support in place within departments and colleges:

The process [for] student support is just not there. Just to follow up, to ask you if and when you [will turn] something in...When I don't hand something in, nobody is shooting me an email and asking me what's happening [and] how I can be offered support. – Veronica

3) Work-life-school balance as a barrier

Eight out of ten women reported feeling overwhelmed in trying to juggle their roles as mothers and students – and these included the students who were long distance parenting. Seven of these eight women also held assistantships, which they said contributed to their feeling overwhelmed, since it added another responsibility and meant having to take time out for work. Seven of these women mentioned specifically that they had trouble balancing their various roles and responsibilities. Violet mentioned that the pandemic had made it much harder for her to study, since her daughter, ordinarily living in her home country, had been forced to stay in the U.S. due to the borders being closed. She also mentioned that not having access to classrooms, the library, and other campus spaces, made it difficult to study and to fulfill her assistantship duties:

[on a usual day] I stay up very late...I put my daughter to bed around 10 p.m. Sometimes I take a 20-minute nap and then I would start working till 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. that's not really good for my health, I know. But I have to do it... After the pandemic because we only have bedroom and one living room, and my husband was here too and he had to work...we would take shifts... like he would go work in the car in the morning, then I would go and work in the car in the afternoon...we would sacrifice sleep to do that. -Violet

The struggle these women faced became apparent as they either compared themselves to their classmates without children, or as they evaluated their own performance as spouse and mother:

I wanted to give up on the program, because when I compare myself with other students, it looks like they have enough time to study. But I don't have enough time. I only have limited time. -Diana

[School] affected my socio-emotion feeling and [this] affected my family and my child...I could not function as a mother [because of school, work] and I feel I failed my child's childhood. - Linda

In both of the above quotes it seems as if the participants believed that if they had more time -in Diana's case more time to work – she could perform better in school since much of her time was spent on the responsibilities of motherhood. In the second case, if Linda had more time to parent – since she was spending a lot of her time focusing on school and work – she would have (according to her own standards), better met her child's needs. The lack of time, or one aspect of their lives taking up too much time, seems to be where the difficulty in creating this balance lies.

Linda specifically mentioned that even when faculty members knew she was a mother, they did not consider how towards the beginning and end of the semesters, her life as a mother often got extremely busy given that she had to help her child wrap up classes and study for several exams, along with managing her own work:

I was not the only mom or parent, but there was no suggestion like 'ok parents you may have an extra 3 days to submit your [assignments] because it's the end of the school year for your children...there is no accommodation like that which there should be because at the end of the term there is so much happening in the school with my kid and in my [own] school. – Linda

Two of the eight women – Tania and Violet - who mentioned the difficulty in striking a balance were parenting long-distance. At the time of the interview, they were both living

in Amherst and pursuing their doctoral degree programs full time at the University, but their children (three children in one case and one in another), were living *back home* with the children's grandparents. Despite not having their children physically around them, these women too found it hard to balance their responsibilities:

If I am in the classroom and I get a call from my kids, I have to attend that call. So, I have to go out from the classroom and talk with them...sometimes they call me at night, so I have to talk with them till 4am because of the time [difference/zone]. - Tania

The juggling act that these participants perform when it comes to their duties, responsibilities and roles, affects them on campus, as well as at home, and often has an emotional and mental component to it. Anne explained how she would have to bring her child to school when he was younger since she was unable to afford childcare, and how having him at the University would sometimes shape her experiences:

I would walk in [for a group meeting] and just start talking, right to the point, because I just didn't have time. I was taking courses, I was doing research, I was TA-ing and I had my son. I remember making my son sleep on the couch in the lab...I would run to class, and before he [would wake up] I [had to be] back. - Anne

When I became a mother, I was always busy...I would always run...I would run to the library to get my books...then I would run to the parking lot to pick up my baby from daycare. - Dani

Even though she had help from her husband, the frenzy of managing both motherhood and student-hood is captured well in Dani's quote. Even the other participants who had help from their husbands expressed distress at having to juggle various responsibilities. While six of the ten participants specifically mentioned that their spouses were present and available to help them with their children, two of these six said that as mothers they were needed more by their children than their husbands were:

*It's hard to sit at my desk. My son always comes to me. He always wants **my** help. Not his father.* – Diana

I have to be there when my child wakes up. It's me he wants there. – Anne

Whether the children were with their mothers or away, the participants spoke of a guilt of not giving their children enough time. While on campus, they had a constant concern as to what their children were doing and how they were doing. Therefore, even when an advisor or faculty member may think not having a child *physically* present grants a student more time to study and work, there is nothing to suggest these women aren't occupied with thoughts of their children:

I knew it would be hard, but I didn't know it would be this hard. Though my kids are doing fine, and I am doing fine [health wise], I have an in-depth guilt always killing me. Like, I'm not with my kids and the kids are missing their mom. – Tania

Mothers may hold a valuable space and role that other family members or support services sometimes cannot fill. Furthermore, mothers may be more needed at some stages of a child's life versus others. The literature has told us that even when male partners are present, cultural factors sometimes play a role in placing mothers as the primary parent, and that the gendered division of parenting (and other household work) which might be unbalanced, can still be culturally and socially expected and accepted.

Despite these challenges, while the needs of children can be time consuming, two participants specifically mentioned that parenthood made them more focused when it came to schoolwork:

I am surprised that [students without children] don't have time and they complain about not having time. I find that odd...I think as a parent you manage your time better and that affects your productivity overall. - Amy

I feel because I had my family, I was much more focused, especially with my assignments... I would divide my work and I wouldn't waste time. – Anne

Not a single participant mentioned their childcare responsibilities as a burden. In fact, Violet, Tania and Anne specifically mentioned that their children were a source of motivation and sometimes inspiration to persevere and succeed in their degrees:

My child being away is a motivation for me...I want to work harder. I want to graduate earlier. -Violet

It's amazing having kids around you. They make you grow, and they teach and inspire you -Anne

However, despite being feeling inspired and motivated by her children, Anne still struggled with maintaining a work/life/school balance:

There is no balance. Motherhood – it's firefighting. You have a bunch of things. You figure out the area that needs the most attention and you just go and firefight that out. I don't think a woman can have it all. It's mostly firefighting. - Anne

It is interesting that Anne chose the idea of firefighting - a selfless yet dangerous profession - to describe how she feels about motherhood and its duties, which can often be noble and selfless in how they sometimes require women to put themselves last. Just as they can be dangerous in that as Linda stated, juggling these responsibilities can take a toll on women's emotional and mental well-being.

What these results tell us is that struggling with a language academically or socially can be emotionally draining, and in this study it served as a barrier for almost all the participants in their classroom experiences and outside of it. In doing so it prevented some of them from sharing their opinions in class, and others from being a part of social interactions. When it came to their experiences in the classroom, these students usually focused on language as a barrier with motherhood having a lingering presence: with reading and understanding class materials as a time-consuming process for them that

sometimes resulted in having to spend more time doing schoolwork, and therefore less time with their children.

But another reason why Linda and Violet abstained from speaking up in class was because they grappled with the idea that their troubles stemmed from their nationality. Like Violet, Linda believed her nationality had vilified her, and based on certain experiences she felt it was “more secure” for her not to disclose her nationality in classrooms or on campus:

*In one of the classes even the faculty member said people from [country] are cruel and my country is cruel and probably we should kill them. As the only person in the room from that country I just could not believe what was said. I just could not believe what I had witnessed...and I know my child experiences the same in her school, so that's how we [started using] **international**. – Linda*

Here Linda addresses an important concern: if international student mothers are facing discrimination and prejudice based on being international, or coming from certain countries, it is also possible that their children enrolled in U.S. schools may be facing similar situations. What Linda faced in her classroom, she also came home to. She had to listen to how this discrimination had been experienced by her child and had impacted her. Her child's experience impacted Linda as well, since it was Linda who had made the decision to pursue her doctoral degree in the U.S. and had had her family move with her. Being international then is not confined to being a student in the classroom, but may also become a burden that comes home with the student. Just as being a mother is not confined to the home, but also a state of mind that students take with them to the classroom and beyond.

Nationality also served as a barrier for Violet:

The political environment is making things worse for people from [country] because when you are talking about your country in the U.S. you are expected to

talk badly about it...but I just feel like that is a burden... I just feel my ethnicity is not helping me a lot but being a mother is actually helping me build up my rapport. -Violet

Violet also highlighted how she felt being an international student had negative connotations. But in her experience, once she told people she had a child, mother became her master status in a positive way,

I am forever the other to America. But when I talk about being a mother that boundary is gone. You are a mother. I am a mother. So, it is easy to connect. - Violet

While being a mother offered comfort to Violet in the classroom, another possible reading of this is that she even had to employ this social identity to feel welcome – a tradeoff that maybe her domestic peers do not need to always make.

Question 3b:

What do you perceive the supports have been so far in your academic journey as an international doctoral student mother regarding experiences in the classroom?

When it came to addressing supports in place for international doctoral student mothers in the classroom, the responses provided could be summarized up under two main categories:

- 1) **accommodations and encouragement from faculty**, and
- 2) **interest in international students**

1) Accommodations and encouragement from faculty

While they had not asked for accommodations five participants had either been offered them by faculty who knew they were struggling, or had had faculty members announce in

class that asking for extensions in deadlines, or needing to leave the class for any reason, was acceptable:

I am that kind of student, very nerd type. I always ask questions [laughs]. So, teachers know, this student is very studious...I always introduce in class that I'm a mom and my kids are back home, and so my teachers knew I needed to go out. They took it positively. -Tania

One participant reported feeling conflicted about these informal and unrequested accommodations:

[A professor] made sure I was given extra time though I didn't ask for it...It bothers me that they think I need extra time, but I also appreciate them saying that I will give you extra time because you're a parent. – Amy

While Amy appreciated the extra time because her familial and home responsibilities did sometimes make it stressful to meet deadlines, she also felt conflicted because not asking for the extra time herself means the faculty member made an assumption that she would need it, and while this may have been true, what it insinuated seemed to bother her (that she could not be successful without assistance). In one instance a faculty member reached out to a student to compliment her for her timely work, despite the fact that she had recently given birth and was learning juggling new responsibilities:

Later when my faculty knew I had a kid, one of [them] wrote an [email] to me saying...you were always the first to submit an assignment and that was not something [they] expected of me. You never asked for an extension, like other students [did] who have no other obligations and they still ask for extensions. That made me feel good. - Anne

While the participant appreciated the email that complimented her, the idea of why the faculty member was surprised by her assignment being on time, needs to be considered. However, the participants in general, were pleased when faculty reached out to them, especially when it came to providing encouragement:

They always try to encourage me. Like, 'hey we know being a mom student is very hard but that is the reason you have to make it through, not the reason you have to give up.' So that kind of encouragement was very helpful. – Dani

When it came to *requesting* accommodations from faculty members, the most common request was an extension to an assignment deadline. The four participants who mentioned these situations arising due to parental responsibilities and concerns, were quick to point out that faculty were accommodating:

The professors are very generous. If you say my kid broke my laptop or I need extra time. – Amy

I was emailing them every other week, please postpone the deadline...they never said they were disappointed. They always said just give me your assignment when you're ready. But I felt ashamed. – Dani

Professors in our department are quite nice and pretty lenient in terms of deadlines. I clearly remember I used my daughter as an excuse for asking for an extension...and that worked...[but] I feel like I shouldn't ask for extensions...I don't think it's my daughter's presence here that stopped me from finishing [my work] ...it's my own productivity - Violet

Even when accommodations are granted, some participants still struggled with accepting them due to personal feelings of guilt and shame, and a fear of that this presents them as less than able.

2) Interest in International Students

One participant out of ten reported feeling welcome in class when other classmates asked her questions in order to better understand an international perspective on certain academic topics:

In a couple of topics and classes I felt that the students wanted to know how [an] issue could be seen internationally, how it could be seen from another angle and I found these places I could speak, and I did...in a couple of classes I was supported and motivated to share... but only in some classes. - Linda

Two participants said that certain faculty members addressed them directly in class and asked for their thoughts, which they appreciated:

If the teacher or faculty didn't force [me] to talk, it [wouldn't] happen. - Hilary

Instructors they pointed at me and asked do you have any questions? Any comments? And I appreciated that. I appreciate that kind of class to talk in class.
– Dani

They suggested that being called on was encouraging to them and not seen as putting them on the spot - a difference in learning styles with future studies may want to explore.

However, five out of ten participants mentioned that if allowances were mentioned on the first day of class when the syllabus was being explained, the same policies regarding extensions and late assignments were applied across the board for all students:

Yes, faculty give accommodations. But for all students. General [accommodations]. - Dani.

Veronica said the very reason she mentioned she was a mother in class was so that the faculty were aware that schoolwork and assignments were not her sole responsibility:

I think being a mom is something we have to mention so that the professor knows too that 'look these are our struggles, so you better remember that I am a mom and have these responsibilities.' – Veronica.

It could be argued that parents or not, doctoral students must be (made) aware of what they're signing up for in their doctoral degree programs: the risk of losing funding, long hours and longer timelines, and a process of study that is often not linear. Something that at least two of the participants seemed aware of and therefore made the choice to leave

their children in their home countries. While this study had never considered the idea of long-distance parenting, it is an important one to address. Tania, the first participant who I interviewed in this situation, said she had to make the difficult decision to leave her three children in her home country with their grandparents:

I never brought my kids here because they are very small and there are 3 of them. If I bring them here, it will be impossible for me to continue my study, I will need someone else here to look after them. Now they are with my parents so at least they are looking after them, all the time. – Tania

Like Tania, Violet left her daughter with her own parents in her home country. However, despite making the difficult decision to leave her daughter, Violet mentioned that her child was the source of her drive:

My child being away is a motivation for me...I want to work harder. I want to graduate earlier. I don't want to spend 7 to 8 years here. There's the motivation part. And then there's a feeling of wanting to compensate for my absence. So, we keep in touch every day, vide chat...during the weekends I will read books to her [on video chat] ...and I also buy presents for her more often than her dad because I have this feeling of needing to compensate. -Violet

This need to compensate was not unique to the two participants who were long-distance parenting. However, in both these situations, advisors and faculty knew the participants had made these decisions, and in Violet's case, her advisor had supported the decision

I told [my advisor] my daughter will go back to [home country] in August so I can focus on my studies, and she said, 'yes I think that is better for you, right?' – Violet

Despite children not being physically present, faculty and advisors should not assume that this difficult decision is necessarily better/easier for students.

It is a fine line that faculty walk. On the one hand they can be seen as accommodating, kind and compassionate, for instance in the case of Amy:

One professor gave me clothes for my kids for the winter when I was new [to the University and to the town] ...[and] my advisor is super generous, I mean, he has kids, and he totally understands and is very accommodating. – Amy

But on the other hand, these kindnesses might reinforce the notion that women who choose to be students and mothers might be juggling too much, which results in surprise when student mothers perform at a high standard, such as in Anne's case (see quote above), where her advisor did not **expect** her to be the first student to submit an assignment and was surprised that she had never requested an extension on a deadline. In this instance while the faculty member was willing to offer her more time, but also assumed that as a mother she would need more time. The line that faculty members walk is a fine one that may separate benevolence from bias.

But this is not the only fine line that faculty members walk. Five of the participants in this study preferred being called on to share their opinions. While to some domestic students such an act might be seen as being called *on*, for at least two of the participants in this study, it was being called *in* – called in to share their different opinions, their unique perspective, their diverse thoughts. In Dani's case this calling in was necessary, since she felt unable to keep up with the conversations in class, given the pace at which they took place. An invitation from a faculty member gave her time to formulate her opinions and led to her feeling like her voice and perspective were valued in the classroom.

As per the data, while the participants sometimes required more time to get work done, it was also magnified because of the language and cultural barriers these students were navigating. But, just as these students are grappling with obstacles, so are faculty navigating unexplored waters. A few participants reported feeling that faculty members

make no allowances for the fact that some doctoral degree students may be unfamiliar with U.S. academia, its standards and expectations, nor do they recognize that reading, writing and comprehension can take longer for non-native English speakers, who might have to spend more time and exert more effort in meeting academic requirements.

This may be even more cumbersome given that these participants were also parenting, partaking in housework, and assistantship duties. While it seems that most of the participants in this study would appreciate faculty to offer accommodations versus having to ask for them, these are still murky waters for faculty to navigate. Because with offering flexibilities comes the assumption that this group of students *will need* extra time, and this may perpetuate stereotypes where international students are not seen as *as* capable as domestic students and non-parent students. The concern is not simply that these stereotypes are being reinforced, but also that perhaps with this assumption of needing extra time and assistance, comes the belief that these students may actually start to see themselves as not as capable, and therefore not as likely to be successful, as their domestic counterparts, their male counterparts, and their non-parent counterparts, supporting Cooley's theory of the looking glass self – where individuals base their self-worth on their perceptions of how others view them. A concept created in 1902 that may very well hold true over a century later, and grounds for a future study unto itself.

Question 4a:

What are some challenges that exist in your academic experience as an international doctoral student mother in your relationships and interactions with advisors and faculty?

When asked about their relationships, **all** ten participants had faced several challenges with either faculty members or advisors, or both. These challenges varied in nature and while there were a few one-of experiences, there were three recurring themes:

- 1) **faculty/advisors as unconcerned about student welfare,**
- 2) **faculty/advisor bias and**
- 3) **motherhood as master status in relationships with faculty/advisors.**

1) Faculty/Advisors as unconcerned about student welfare

Seven out of ten participants reported that they believed faculty members and/or advisors did not care about the challenges they were experiencing inside and outside of the classroom. Linda however was more surprised and disappointed that faculty showed no interest in her academic success:

They usually tell you to just do things on your own. Handle [things] on your own. Read this book. Do this practice. Do this once a week. -Linda

Veronica shared these sentiments and said she had never been approached or contacted by faculty members when she had been unable to turn in assignments (due to personal reasons):

There's a limit to how far faculty and advisors can help. Because if you're supposed to turn in your grades on a particular date then you turn it in [because they] can't change policies for you. But they can be human and ask: "how are you? What do you need? How can I support you?" - Veronica

Veronica understood that there may be policies in place that limited faculty members from granting too many exceptions, however what she desired was compassion and connection on a more personal level. She was very clear in explaining that she understood that parenthood had been her choice and she did not expect academic exceptions to be made based on this. But what she was concerned about was that even her advisor, who she believed was supposed to check in with her occasionally, never did:

*I thought a good advisor would follow up with you and be interested in you genuinely. [They] might even encourage you, you know, “let’s move at this speed, so you can graduate at this time.” But if you don’t write to your advisor in **ten years** they will **never** [write to you] and ask you, “what’s the stumbling block?”* [appears frustrated] - Veronica

Out of the seven participants who expressed the various challenges they faced, **not one** of them felt they could approach their advisors for any sort of *emotional* support. In fact, five of the ten participants specified that their relationships with their advisors centered around their work, research and dissertations:

I think I am just not comfortable talking about [personal issues] with my advisor. It’s only about work... When you say you want emotional support ...you should be able to shed a tear a two and you should not be ashamed to walk through that person’s door again. I can’t do that [with advisor]. -Anne

Anne also mentioned certain faculty members had parent-shamed her and her (student) husband, often in vulnerable moments where they had been juggling parental responsibilities with student responsibilities:

There was an incident where my husband was telling my son he should not be doing something and one of the professors in the lab who doesn’t have a family or kids, stopped in front of my son, and he told my husband “You and your son are going to have a horrible relationship when he grows up; this is not the way to raise a child.” Then he walked out of there. - Anne

While one of the reasons why participants choose to avoid approaching faculty and advisors for emotional support was that it might add to a perceived faculty bias, other participants such as Amy and Tania said that they kept their concerns to themselves because in their past experiences their advisors (and the staff in their departments), had told them to seek help elsewhere, and in both instances to sign up for the counseling services offered by the University:

Our department just sends out emails recommending that you seek out mental services to talk about your academic journeys...for international students especially, because they don’t want you committing suicide. - Amy

While Tania too had been told to seek out counseling (which she later told me had helped her tremendously), she initially had not been pleased that she could not rely on her advisor for emotional support. She had had the opportunity of visiting campus and meeting her advisor prior to enrolling in her program:

To be honest, I chose my advisor because she was female, she also had kids, and before accepting my offer, I actually came personally from [home country] here to personally meet her. And to tell her my scenario. Because I needed the assurance that Okay, I have these concerns, still I am trying for my PhD. – Tania

Despite this Tania reported that the last few months had been tumultuous for her, and that her relationship with her advisor had quickly changed:

For the last couple of months, it's getting challenging. I understand that my advisor needs someone who will give 100% of their concentration. Recently I have quit working with her... I will not be able to work with her...I need to find someone who understands my situation...She made some comments that I often felt unsafe. -Tania

Tania's situation is unique because not only was she able to meet with her advisor prior to moving to the U.S., she also is one of two participants who was long-distance parenting. Furthermore, unlike her counterpart, she had *had* to leave their children at home due to financial restraints. She repeatedly used the words *stress* and *guilt* in the interview, and it was clear that while she thought initially her advisor would understand her situation (based on the fact that she had shared this information prior to enrolling at the University), her advisor quickly became someone she no longer wanted to work with:

*You know what my advisor said when I told her my grandfather passed away from COVID? 'If you have so many problems, why don't you quit your PhD? Everyone else can do it.' You know these two sentences can ruin my life. These two sentences can **ruin my career**. -Tania*

Even though Tania's situation was different from all the other participants in several ways, her fragile relationship with her advisor was not. Linda did not want to talk about

her advisor in this interview at all, claiming, “there’s no point,” and Veronica verbalized her shock when her (international) advisor claimed to not realize that she was an international student, despite having worked with him for over a year and mentioning her home country on several occasions (*and* having a noticeable accent and doing research linked to her home country, which was outside the U.S. and research which the advisor was overseeing):

Recently a lot of people were seeing their advisors reach out to them because of the ICE trouble. To see how they were feeling and things. And my advisor said “I didn’t think of you. Are you an international student?” Am I an international student? [asks loudly and laughs sarcastically]. -Veronica

While most of the participants were able to mention at least one support that they had experienced by faculty/advisors, Veronica was the only participant who openly stated that her being successful as a mother, a (student) employee and an international student, was by “the grace of God,” and not because of anything the University had helped her with, or any kindness the faculty had extended to her.

2) Faculty/advisor bias

Six out of ten of the participants specifically referred to faculty bias as a *perceived* and/or *lived* reason as to why they refrained from speaking about their roles as mothers. For these participants, faculty bias presented itself in various ways: feelings of being undervalued and unseen, being told the project/research they were taking on was too much work for *them*, and not having opportunities presented to them in the same way they were to their non-parent colleagues.

Veronica was one of the six participants who believed she had not been granted the same opportunities as her colleagues who didn’t have children. She believed it was her

role as a mother, which she shared openly and with pride, that prevented her from being given access to projects and research that might get her work published:

Give mothers a chance. Some of these faculty members also have children and families, but they are quick not to want to work with moms. They're quick to say no to moms... So, if you want a position or project, the faculty won't recommend you, because they don't know your ability, they haven't worked with you. So, what can they write about? So, it definitely affects you as a student... it starts to feel like they don't value you. -Veronica

The above quote highlights the tension between needing and wanting a supportive atmosphere, while also wanting to have her strengths and skills recognized and utilized. And while Veronica was a mother before enrolling in the program and open about it from the start, Diana had gotten pregnant after enrolling in her program and had had to inform her supervisor and the faculty with whom she was working on a research project that she would need to take maternity leave:

I shared that I was pregnant and could not work for some time... I saw their expression was surprised and it looked like they didn't like my pregnancy, because I have to stop working. – Diana

She believed the reason for this disappointment was because of certain biases:

I think some [faculty] may not like mothers because their productivity might be slower than [other students].

Diana was not alone in voicing her concerns about how faculty members perceived student mothers. Dani referred to her third and fourth semesters in the doctoral degree program as “a nightmare.” She explained that at this time she had a one-year-old child and was also pregnant with her second child. Her one-year-old was also sick while she was pregnant and having to manage this with a pregnancy made ask for deadline extensions, because things were “too out of control.” She referred to this time as “the most challenging” time in her life:

I personally describe that period as destroying my reputation as a hardworking, diligent, smart student... It took a lot of time and many years to make my colleagues and faculty believe that I am their equal. Almost 5 or 6 years.

While Dani said her advisor never “pushed” her during this time, and the faculty never outwardly said they were disappointed in her, she felt “very ashamed” at being the student who needed to ask for extensions and could not focus entirely on her schoolwork. Anne too believed that even when faculty did not *verbalize* their disapproval, it was made known in other ways:

While most of the faculty say, “I am perfectly fine with you taking time off”, they look at students and see the number of papers they can publish... for them it’s [this] work that matters more. They might say “you can take time off [and] I understand you will be a bit slow,” but then the moment they figure out things will be a bit slow, they will find someone else.

It is almost as if Anne was made to feel disposable and like she could easily be replaced as a researcher.

3) Mother as a master status:

Those participants who chose to share that they were mothers, or if it became known through pregnancy, said their identity as a mother became their *master status*. That is, being a mother came first and foremost, and it affected the way faculty interacted with these students and the kinds of conversation they would have with them:

When I would enter any room where it was a research talk or something, people [faculty and peers] would just be talking about their research. If I joined the table it would switch to, ‘how’s your kid doing?’ Or ‘do you have any latest photos of him?’ I mean, I’m not offended by that, but what happened was people stopped asking me about my research and my research progress... I want to talk about him, but I want to talk about my work as well. My work is equally important to me. – Anne

In Anne's situation, being a mother meant her colleagues and faculty often asked her about her family versus the work she was doing or the academic/professional progress she might have been making. She mentioned in her interview that she had recently had an academic paper accepted and published and yet had not had the opportunity to talk about it, because at most events the questions posed to her were about her children. Like Anne, Dani too believed that her status as a mother changed the way her peers and the faculty saw her:

*Sometimes they make me feel like [a] mom-student. **Mom-student.** Not their colleague in research... they always initiate their talk about my kids or my family: 'how's your family? How's your kid?' Sometimes I didn't really like that. - Dani*

Dani admitted that she felt conflicted about being seen as a student mother. On the one hand she wanted to feel and be seen as their peer and equal but, on the other:

Maybe asking about my child that kind of gesture or talk, that's the way for them to express their encouragement... and their support to me... like 'we know you're in a hard situation, but we all know that you're going to make it through.' - Dani

Being seen primarily as a mother can stand in the way of academic success and even stunt social interactions for some women. But conversely it might serve as a means to bridge a gap with other students, and also with faculty who have families and who understand the struggles of juggling various responsibilities. There seems to be tension then between when faculty do ask students about their family lives, which could be out of concern for student welfare and an acknowledgement of the lives they live outside of the classroom, but may be interpreted as minimizing their status as researchers.

There were some important discoveries when it came to the responses to this particular question. Firstly, when it came to the experiences of international doctoral student mothers and their relationships with faculty and advisors, most of the participants

cited motherhood as the primary challenge in these relationships. This came in the form of being unable to share that they were mothers (because of perceived biases) or being treated differently sometimes if they had shared this information. In these instances, the gender of the advisor was irrelevant. While some may assume having a female advisor might have made it easier for these participants, this was certainly not the case for Linda - who did not want to talk about her advisor at all, because she did not believe she had helped her much academically or otherwise - nor Tania, who felt unsafe around hers and therefore was searching for a new advisor. While four of the ten participants had male advisors, the two who had male advisors with children reported that they felt their advisors were compassionate and understanding. In one instance however, a male advisor with children proved to be an absent and uninterested advisor. In the instances of these ten participants then, neither the sex of the advisor, nor the fact that the advisor was a parent, had much bearing on how they treated their advisees. However, no conclusions can be drawn on the small sample size in this study. Diana perhaps reported having the best experience with her female advisor, but also said:

My advisor was also a mom... She was also international. So, she is more understanding. My advisor is also marginalized so it makes sense that she supported me. - Diana

Diana also called herself “lucky” for having an advisor whom she could confide in. However, perhaps they bonded not only because they were both international mothers, but also because Diana’s advisor felt marginalized and did not want the same for her advisee. It also suggests that the bonding was over feeling oppressed, and that international faculty like international students may be struggling with acceptance at the University - another avenue worth exploring. Furthermore, being “lucky” suggests that

Diana knew that having an advisor who was understanding is not the average experience – another problematic notion because past and current research clearly indicates that doctoral degree success often lies in having positive and fulfilling relationships between advisees and advisors.

However, such relationships weren't always possible. Amy, Veronica and Linda said they would not ask their advisors for emotional support, or approach them with personal concerns they had. While Amy said she wished she could speak to her advisor about personal issues that worried her, she did not feel like anything but work talk was appropriate or desired. Maybe then advisor roles need to be made more explicit: whether they serve as mentors and guides solely in the academic process, or if they are available to listen to other concerns – emotional and mental - the students may experience that could affect their personal and academic lives.

There were other reasons that a couple of participants mentioned as impeding their relationships with faculty and advisors. Both Hilary and Diana stated that language and cultural differences made it unlikely that they would attend office hours or meet one-on-one with faculty members for any reason. Hilary said when it came to faculty members, she also did not enjoy approaching them even for academic reasons because:

I think I keep a little distance between me and the faculty... Most of the time they look very busy, and I don't want to disturb them... We [people from home country] do not have this tradition where we can talk to teachers... to some degree I am a little afraid of the teacher. We try not to talk to them and learn by ourselves. - Hilary

Despite being in the program for over a year, Hilary, Violet, Tania and Veronica all reported that they were uncomfortable asking for help from their advisors, faculty members and the staff in their departments. They reported that if they needed advice or

help, they were likely to search online to find the answers rather than to approach anyone.

Hilary had to go online to locate the nursing rooms on campus because:

When I had my second kid, I had to nurse him for over a year, but our department didn't provide a nursing room. They didn't give me more information [about the location of nursing rooms] ... it was very inconvenient, but I searched the internet myself... -Hilary

Tania needed help with finances and obtaining I20 forms for her children so that she might be able to bring them to the U.S., but she too struggled with finding the appropriate contact person and was usually directed to the department coordinator (by faculty and colleagues) who then went on to refer her to various offices:

The first semester I had problems getting accustomed to the U.S. academic system, like finding out the resources...in the beginning there were some problems... Where do I get medical insurance? Who will do my taxes? I wanted to get I20 for my kids... What should I do? Whom to contact? I always asked people, but they said go to the department coordinator. I always asked the questions to the department coordinator and then she would tell me what office I should go to... It was my first time in the U.S. and I had to find all these resources. [sighs and looks dejected] -Tania

Despite sometimes needing assistance and having questions, it was not always easy for participants to approach faculty, and/or know the appropriate person to contact. Maybe faculty and advisors should keep on their radar that just because international students do not approach them, or schedule meetings with them, it is not indicative that they do not have questions and concerns. But rather because of language and cultural barriers, participants were sometimes unable to express themselves with ease, and that made it difficult for them to approach faculty. Add to this the nature of faculty-student relationships in other countries which can be more hierarchal and therefore make it difficult for international students to reach out for assistance. Once again, international

students cannot always be held to American expectations when it comes to the kind of how they interact with faculty members and advisors.

However, six of the ten participants did not expect the faculty members to make their lives easier in any way - even academically. Veronica and Linda did not have these expectations because they felt down by faculty and were coming from a place of hopelessness in regards to things changing. Amy said that it made no sense for faculty to lessen the workload solely based on the fact that she was a mother, because it was a choice that she had made. Tania did not expect anything from faculty members, but said she would still appreciate them considering her plight as a long distance parent. The tension between being seen as equals by the faculty and also needing acknowledgment of their busy and sometimes overwhelming lives as parents, was evident in that even though not expecting allowances from faculty, the participants appreciated it when received:

Being a parent is something I think faculty don't care for; they think we just have to do it. It's not [their] problem. And that's what I feel – I agree. I have to do it. I want to graduate. But [they] can ask me how I am. Then can ask me if I am okay and how I am doing. – Veronica

Betty believed her being in a program where childhood education was a regular topic, “allowed” her role as a mother to be seen as positive trait. She believed having the perspective of a mother, a student, and a former teacher, allowed her to enrichen classroom conversation for others, and that this is something faculty had even verbally expressed their gratitude for. Other students like Veronica, Linda, Dani and Anne, said while they did not expect any academic allowances from faculty (minus what was offered to all students), they did expect encouragement and positive reinforcement. However, this is also something they believe they rarely received, altering how they felt about faculty and advisors:

They usually tell you to just do things on your own. Handle [things] on your own. Read this book. Do this practice. Do this once a week. Why can't they say, 'let me be your coach, and we will work together in your problem areas?' ... I had to do things based on what I thought was right, but it didn't fly here, and I couldn't find out why until I failed again and again. -Linda

It shouldn't be surprising then that some participants wanted "warm words" or "encouragement" from faculty members and advisors. For some of them this meant:

[Faculty] should open the line of communication... [and] say they are willing to offer support in anyway. I will be happy if I know someone wants to help me progress and move forward. -Veronica

Faculty and advisors need to be more emphatic, and know how to encourage students, not to demotivate them, no matter what the scenario is... You are a faculty member. You are a scholar. Does not mean you are not human. [laughs sarcastically]— Tania

Along with Veronica and Tania, four other participants spoke to the importance of being encouraged and praised as a driving force to keep their spirits high, when it was not always easy to do so. For some students such as Linda, Veronica and Tania, the overcoming of hurdles in the classroom, and the lack of faculty support in doing so, often resulted in stress at home. Linda was very vocal in explaining that being an international doctoral student and having to work on her writing and comprehension skills often took up time that she didn't have. She found that faculty was unwilling to help her with reading drafts her assignments, which sometimes led to lower grades than she wanted. She felt she had "failed" as a student, a feeling she brought home with her:

I could not function as a mother, and I feel I failed my child's childhood... Sometimes I had to make a decision [that] I am okay with the grades because I need this time for my child. For my husband... there are a lot of responsibilities on all ends... I could have given [my daughter] so much more during those years if I wouldn't have been bumping this [academic] road. - Linda

Linda was not the only participant who brought these feelings of being overwhelmed and under supported back home with her:

When my eldest son was three years old, he [saw] me cry every day after I would come back from school... I uprooted my family from [home country] to come here... I felt extremely guilty... my son would come and say 'we'll get through this mom'... There are times I should probably be playing with my son, and if I have something to do, I will tell him 'Why don't you watch a show?' And he will be happy. But internally I am guilty. - Anne

Anne was able to sometimes confide in a professor who served as her academic mentor.

While he was able to encourage and support her as a student mother, he could not and did not understand the complexities of what it meant to relocate an entire family to a new country. It is rare that faculty members or advisors can ever truly understand all the challenges that come with being an international student parent. And yet it seems as if this level of empathy and having faculty who exhibit compassion may be what international doctoral student mothers need to feel valued in academic spaces and to excel in their programs.

Question 4b:

What are some supports that exist in your academic experience as an international doctoral student mother in regards to your relationships and interactions with advisors and faculty?

Supports these participants experienced from faculty and advisors included:

- 1) **receiving formal support and assistance** (which included helping students with school-related concerns)
- 2) **positive personal** encounters (which were more informal), and
- 3) **motherhood as a connection** (between students and faculty)

1) Formal support/assistance

Formal support here referred to the ways in which faculty members assisted students in a professional capacity, such as by offering advice and assistance on matters

of student life. Eight out of ten participants specifically mentioned at least one person (faculty member or staff), who they believed had been supportive in their academic journeys. But these supportive figures were not necessarily their advisors: in four of the cases they were faculty members with whom they had taken a class, and in two they were the Graduate Program Directors (GPDs) - highlighting that members in any administrative role, have the ability to show compassion and empathy, which is appreciated by these students. To some women having a supportive figure in their academic journeys meant getting assistance on time-consuming and potentially stress-inducing processes such as finding housing:

When I came in the family housing at the University was closed down, and they only told us once we were here. I didn't have a place to stay... I was stranded. My classes were ongoing, and I didn't know what to do. So, I went to my GPD, and he was very, very helpful... [the department] reimbursed me a little for my financial loss. I was not expecting that kind of support from him... I was humbled.
– Amy

For Betty, it was having an advisor who would not only allow her to leave meetings early to pick up her child, but also then reach out and follow up with her, letting her know what she missed at the meeting. For Tania, it was having administrators in her department back her up, when she wanted to switch advisors, and a GPD who wanted her to feel valued and safe in her program, different from her advisor who had made her feel the opposite:

When I shared [the advisor's] comments with the GPD and other [administrative staff], they were very supportive. They said, 'the department will give you everything – assistantship and everything – you just feel comfortable to do your coursework...whatever help you need we are here.' Even the chair of the department said, 'if you need six months leave or anything, we will grant you leave to go and have some time with your kids, anything you need.' – Tania

Both Hilary and Betty also stated that being international and being mothers meant they often had limited time to be social, and faculty were the reason they had made friends.

Faculty members who had made it part of their courses to have students engage in small group discussions, or have teamwork, allowed for students like Hilary and Betty, to get to know the students in their class, and to feel more involved:

We have a lot of time talking with each other in class in small groups... during the talks we shared our experience as being a mom, being a teacher, being international. The whole semester we talked a lot and we got to know each other well... the atmosphere was so good. So, the following semesters, whenever I select courses, first of all I will see who the professor is, and how they will organize the classroom... because if I interact with others, I will feel more involved. If it is lecture based, it's hard for me to belong. -Betty

How faculty arranged the classroom experience influenced Betty's relationships with her peers and faculty members in a positive way.

2) Positive personal encounters

A few of the participants reported several instances in which faculty had shown kindness to either themselves or their children in a more informal way:

When I bumped into faculty off campus, we had really lovely conversations and really nice moments, especially with my child. So, I guess my child made the day during those meetings. -Linda

One professor gave me clothes for my kids for the winter, just when I came in... that was really cool. – Amy

[A] professor offered me to make extra money by doing house sitting at her place, and she offered that my daughter could [come] with me to pet [her] cat... So, sometimes I feel life is easier with a daughter. -Violet

Betty said that one faculty member in particular had noticed how quiet some of the students in class were and organized monthly meetings, where he invited students -his own and others - to come in and spend time together by discussing their personal highs and lows of the month:

In those meetings, in those moments, when I talked, I saw everyone listen[ed]. - Betty

For Hilary having a supportive figure in her academic journey meant having someone to share her joys with:

My advisor never gives me any stress. After he knew I was pregnant he looked very happy and he congratulated me a lot. I can feel the warmth from my advisor. -Hilary

These participants appreciated informal and personal kindnesses perhaps because they went beyond the scope of what is expected of faculty members.

3) Motherhood as a connection

While some participants mentioned that being a mother overshadowed their roles as students, other participants mentioned that the trials and joys of motherhood is what allowed them to connect with faculty, advisors and even other colleagues. Betty said that her advisor was a mother and previously an international student, and thus would often stop in the hallway to specifically ask Betty how she and her family were doing – something Betty appreciated. Tania too said that the faculty and staff who knew she had had to leave her children behind in her home country, were understanding when she left in the middle of class to attend phone calls from her children. Dani too believed that when faculty inquired about her child and family, it was in a positive manner. To her these were acknowledgements of the life she led, and that someone else was noticing the challenges she faced. Violet said motherhood was the reason she was close to most of the female faculty members (but none of the male professors), and felt strongly that these faculty members altered not just how she felt inside of the classroom (which was welcomed and valued), but also how she was able to socialize outside of it:

[The female professors] have many kids... and some of the [faculty] are my age. I remember I spoke to three faculty members who are female and have daughters. One of them offered me some links to socialize with other local parents... I know [city where University is] through a mother's angle... I think that kind of supports me and saves my time. – Violet

There seemed to be some discrepancy in terms of the expectations regarding the roles of advisors and faculty members. For Amy, an advisor is someone with whom you have conversations about work, research and academic progress. She was quick to explain that she would not turn to her advisor for any sort of personal or emotional support, because this was “not their job.” Other participants like Veronica and Tania, wished their advisors would care about their personal lives and ask how big events in the world (recent changes by ICE, the pandemic) had affected them and their families on a personal level. One strategy for the Universities to consider is to make clear the role of advisor: whether their job is purely to provide academic advice, or if personal and emotional support is included in their job descriptions.

Perhaps then ambiguity in advisors' roles contributes to students feeling “lucky,” when faculty and advisors are “being super supportive” and showing “extreme generosity.” Even if these actions weren't expected by the participants, the lack of them was noticed. For instance, in the experiences of Linda and Veronica, they were both unable to mention a single faculty member in their programs, departments and the college, who had proven themselves to be a person who provided academic support or personal support. Both women reported that their academic journeys had been difficult and the effects of this were something that had affected their home lives as well.

When faculty members have gone out of their way, such as for Violet, where she was given the opportunity to house sit to make extra money, it denotes a great trust between

student and faculty. Working off campus isn't legal for international students. It could jeopardize an international student's visa and stay in the U.S., and it could be frowned upon by the University as giving a student preferential treatment. As Violet herself suggested in the quote above, maybe being a mother is why this particular professor wanted to help her out, which once again serves as a reminder that faculty walk a fine line, in this case the line being compassion or charity, kindness or a crime.

However, three out of the ten participants were unable to mention any support they had received from faculty. Despite pausing and appearing to think hard, Linda could come up with no support she had received from faculty, advisors (she had had more than one) and staff. Amy was only able to come up with "[the faculty] are nice?" which was delivered as a question. And Veronica, who did not want to disclose how long she had been enrolled in her program, thought long and hard before saying:

I can't remember any time a faculty member ever helped me out. – Veronica

As Veronica had mentioned several times in her interview, even if faculty were not required to ask students how they were doing as per their job descriptions, she wishes there was a "human element" towards students, where faculty might want to ask how another is doing:

Why is it so hard for them to see that we are people? Are they not human? Are we not? [appears visibly upset]. - Veronica

While I asked about the supports that the participants had experienced in their relationships with faculty and advisors, five of them chose to explicitly mention how their needs as international mothers were different from their non-parent counterparts, in a way that sounded disparaging. Amy was very vocal in stating that she did not understand why students who weren't parents could not meet deadlines. Veronica mentioned repeatedly

that “nonparents and single women” were given more opportunities in her opinion, including ones they might not always deserve. I appreciated that these women were making evident the ways in which international students mothers needed more help, and different kinds of help, but sometimes this came across in an *us* (mothers) versus *them* (non-mothers) divide. I became concerned that my work might reinforce the idea, even though I hold steadfast to the belief that international women without children and domestic mothers, have their own sets of challenges.

When these women mentioned the supports they had received, it did not sound like the supports were enough. For instance, the participants appreciated faculty who allowed flexibility in deadlines, but then quickly followed up with “but this is something on the syllabus for all” (Linda) or “this is a policy for everyone who takes the course” (Anne).

The University should then consider that a one size fits all approach may not apply to all students, and as like Linda and Anne had needed, there may be instances in which applying principles of equality (the same practices for all students with general guidelines, deadlines and such), or equity (being open as faculty and advisors to different practices based on the student profile and their needs), may be necessary for classrooms and campuses that want to truly be inclusive of their diverse student populations.

Question 5a:

What are some challenges that exist, in your academic experience as an international doctoral student mother, regarding your interactions with peers?

When it came to the challenges these women faced in their interactions with their peers, there were some obvious similarities which included:

- 1) **lack of time**
- 2) **language and cultural differences** as getting in the way of forming relationships,

- 3) **a lack of child-friendly/appropriate events**, and
- 4) **an inability to connect with colleagues** who weren't parents themselves.

1) Lack of time

All ten participants cited a lack of time as a challenge when it came to being social.

Between classes and responsibilities at home, socializing and mingling was not one of their priorities:

Those bonding activities where [peers] come together and invite each other, I cannot attend for the most part. It could be timing. It could be [that] I have more on my plate. Maybe it's also because I have assignments. But I'm always reluctant to go out and mainly it's because I'm a mom... so that does add distance between me and [my peers] – Veronica

Amy described one of her days in detail, to explain why she could not and did not mingle with her peers:

Drop the kids to school, go TA my classes, then pick kids up from school, bring them home, then go back [to] attend my class, be ten minutes late. On the bus route [to and from school and home] you study and get your TA stuff ready. Then you put your kids to bed, and you nap for two hours. Then you get up and do your readings for the next day and you sleep around 4 A.M. Then you wake up at 7 A.M. Repeat. -Amy

Amy was quick to point out this was a “normal” day for her, citing that the COVID-19 pandemic had made things more challenging, with her now having her children at home (since they had switched to remote learning), and being responsible for their education now, as well as her own.

Unsurprisingly then, some students reported being “social” only in classrooms or on campus. Their main interactions with peers had to be on campus, since eight out of ten of them had to either be home to help their children with schoolwork (right after their own classes were over), or had to pick their children up from school:

At the end of the semester, students would usually go to bars or go for lunch. I could never join because it was evening or it was a workday, because I had to pick up my daughter and take her somewhere because she was waiting for me... because she always waits for me. -Linda

Even Tania, who was long distance parenting and did not have to pick up or drop her children anywhere, still found it hard to socialize:

I love to make friends, but there is no time. So only in the dining halls. Even when the department has events, first I went to one or two. But later I found during that time I can just nap at my desk. Sometimes if there is food, I go get the food and come back to nap at my desk. -Tania

Parental responsibilities stood in the way of mingling and socializing whether the children were home or away. However, it was not only the lack of time that posed an issue when it came to these participants interacting with their peers.

2) Language and cultural barriers

When some participants did have an opportunity to socialize, usually within the classroom during class breaks, they reported staying silent because of language barriers between themselves and the other students in class. Betty and Diana sometimes found it difficult to follow spontaneous conversations, and Linda reported struggling with getting people to understand her:

I found that when I'm talking people don't understand what I mean, and I have to explain myself again and again. -Linda

But there were also some concerns about cultural differences when it came to the participants interactions with peers. Amy reported not feeling comfortable attending campus-wide social events because she felt out of place as a mother:

Most of the students there are undergrads, so most of them would say 'oh look an [translation: old lady] has shown up with her two kids.' So, I just don't go. – Amy

But she also mentioned that her colleagues tend to meet up for happy hour:

I don't drink so happy hour is wasted on me. I do not say no, but it does make a difference... I don't think it makes a difference for me, but for them it does. I think if everyone's [drinking] and you're not, it affects the whole dynamic. -Amy

Amy was not the only participant who cited cultural differences as an obstacle:

I don't like the party culture in the U.S. In my culture we usually invite just a couple of very close friends to the house or to the pub and have a talk about ourselves. But in the U.S., they invite everyone, and I have to say hello to too many people there, and sometimes I don't know what's the point of [such] a party? I didn't find myself enjoying [it]. – Dani

This *party culture*, as Dani called it was a problem for another reason too. It usually entailed activities at places that weren't always child-friendly and making it harder for these women to attend.

3) Lack of child-friendly/appropriate activities

Even when these participants did find the time to interact with their peers off campus, sometimes it was only possible if they could bring their children with them. In these instances, whether peers were choosing to go to bars or events hosted by the department claiming to be child-friendly, the participants did not feel their children were always welcome:

They ask us to bring our children, but do not necessarily create events for our children. They don't remember to include child friendly activities. So, if the child goes with you, [they] are sitting alone and you want to talk to your colleague, but you don't want your child being lonely. In the first instance your child agreed and said I will go with you. [but] the next time the child will not want to come - Veronica

Department events should be more welcome to kids... I went to some and there was nothing so I would play with my kids... I would be attending the event just to play with my kids and then it might be hard to socialize with other people, for which reason I hesitate to attend many events hosted by the department. -Diana

Veronica and Diana were not alone in feeling this way. Three other participants also expressed how despite being open to families, department events were not ideal spaces for their children:

Events in the department were not really child friendly... for instance there would be academic talks. Our department does have a beginning of the semester and end of the semester parties. The first time I took my son, he was 1 year old, and it was very hard to find a place to change his diaper. -Dani.

The issue I had [during events] was there was not a single diaper changing station... I raised my concern and was told they needed approval [to get one] ... We also had zero nursing station and I had to come back home 3 -4 times a day to feed my son. I think I lost all my pregnancy weight just because of all those walks [laughs] -Anne

Six participants mentioned the lack of changing and nursing facilities as a concern for them not just during social events, but on a daily basis. These unconsidered needs also contributed to a feeling of disconnect between these participants and their peers.

4) Inability to connect with non-parent students

Six out of the ten participants stated that they had a difficult time connecting with their peers who were not parents. Anne referenced a “generation gap” between herself and her non-parent peers, even though “some may have been the same age.” Dani believed that her emotional needs were different compared to her peers who did not have children:

Mom graduate students have a lot of things to share. They really need emotional support from other mom students [because] only they can understand. But

unfortunately, too much workload makes obstacles [and] we cannot connect. – Dani

While Amy and Anne both mentioned that being a mother made them manage their time better, they also acknowledged that being so organized affected their interactions with their peers:

Most of the time [during group activities] I would enter the room, I would say OK, so these are the tasks that we need to complete. I think most of the time people would freeze and think, 'what, no socializing talk?' -Anne

Veronica believed this disconnect worked both ways and that being busy with her children impacted how her peers interacted with her:

In the department, other than taking classes, no one was talking to me or inviting me, or asking me to do things [with them]. So, I felt like I didn't need to be there. I felt like no one cared about me. -Veronica

While six of the participants felt this disconnect, only one said that she had had her peers make comments outwardly:

There were times when I had to take my son with me to my lab... and I would be working... and people would say, 'how do you get any work done with him around?' and he would be right there. Right next to me. And he would ask me, 'why are they saying this?' ... I made a conscious decision to not talk about my family in college, and I don't do it anymore. -Anne

Whether the disconnect was a perceived or lived experience, it clearly shaped the interactions these women had with their peers and affected potential relationships.

With housework, homework, classwork and assistantship work to get done, for these participants it was often me-time, or the time to socialize and mingle with peers that needed to be sacrificed to make sure all these responsibilities and duties could be completed. Out of the ten participants, only one mentioned that she expressed the desire to be part of more social events:

As a mother, I still want you to invite me to go to a club. As a mother I still want to go for a drink. – Violet

Violet emphasizes not just that she wants to be a part of more social events, but also that motherhood does not necessarily mean that her interests are dissimilar to those of her non-parent peers. This is a unique situation because Violet is one of two participants whose children lives in their home country with their grandparents, which seemed to allow her to have (slightly) more time to be social.

Veronica felt that once she told people that she was a mother, they would no longer invited to events. Linda was familiar with this experience as well. On the other hand, since some participants mentioned having to say no to social events because they had to pick up their children from school, or because they wanted to be home to have dinner with their families, it is plausible that they were no longer invited to events because their peers felt they were likely to say no anyway. What is important is that the reasons behind not being invited, or feeling abandoned, are unknown to these participants, because not one of them had verbalized to friends nor peers how they felt excluded, and thus what I was told in these interviews is based on their assumptions. Whatever the reason, it is apparent that this increases the disconnect felt between these mothers and their non-parent peers. Betty, Violet and Dani were specifically looking for other student mothers to befriend. In Dani's case, the other parents in her program were male students, and did she not believe they could understand what she was experiencing:

The graduate students here in my program they are all male students. They are all fathers. So, they all have housewives, and they don't really care about the childcare issue. Just like single students, they leave their homes in the morning, they go back in the evenings and during that time their housewives will take care of everything. – Dani

Dani hits on two important points, the first being the very obvious gendered division of labor in the home even though in four of these participants lives, their husbands were at home and unable to work (due to visa restrictions), and yet the gendered division of child-care and housework persisted. Even when the husband did work (in four instances), the participants still reported responsibilities pertaining to housework and childcare that they alone had to handle:

Sometimes I feel focusing on the childcare issue as a women's issues [that] is the problem. Being a good mom is the expectation we always get from society. I think that kind of burden should be divided and spread to the men. – Dani

At the same time, they believe there are instances where mothers are needed over fathers:

Sometimes, based on my experience, fathers cannot catch the point. As a mom you have more intuition. -Betty

Betty's comment made sense to me because five of the ten interviews were interrupted by children. In three of these five instances, the child approached their mother, looked into the laptop screen and asked what she was doing. While I was interviewing Betty, her son pointed out to her that she had promised to make him a glass of warm milk. During Linda's interview, her daughter had a question about dinner. Anne's interview was interrupted by her son who wanted to know what she was doing on two separate occasions. It was apparent to me that these women were both needed and wanted by their children, despite the fact that in four instances, their significant others were at home at the time of the interview. The gendered division of work is not within the scope of this paper, however while it is necessary to question it, we also cannot ignore that sometimes children want their mothers.

If you don't have a child, you don't know what it's like having a child... Why don't I mingle with other people in my cohort? It's not just cultural and religious. It's also because I feel like we don't have a lot in common outside of our graduate

classroom. My life is very different from theirs. The life they are living now is something I was probably living before I had kids. It's not the same. -Amy

What I find curious about some of the statements made by the participants about how being a mother defines the kind of people they want to socialize with, is that while on the one hand they do not necessarily appreciate mother as a master status from others, they use it as a defining trait for other women in terms of whether they wish to befriend them or not. While a language barrier sometimes prevents these participants from socializing in and outside of the classroom, whether a student is also a parent, seems to be what either draws them to a student in the first place:

For the [non-parent students] or the younger ones, I just don't think I have too many connections with them... my relationship with them is only limited to work. I just think they don't understand the situation. You have to go through everything, giving birth, feeding [babies], then you will be able to understand that this is really difficult. -Violet

While I can fully appreciate Violet's sentiment, it may be a little unfair to assume that all female doctoral students are childless by choice. Given that three different participants mentioned their non-parent peers as *young* or as of *another generation*, I also question if the lack of children alone accounts for this belief, or if the participants are particularly tough on their childless peers.

Despite all of this, the need for more opportunities to interact was desired and necessary:

I am an international student and a mom, so usually outside the classroom I am alone – Betty

Betty told me that even though she had an understanding advisor, and she enjoyed the program she was in, she also felt like she did not belong sometimes. The *so* in her quote above is troubling; it sounds like an acceptance of the way things are for her, as well as the belief that for an international student and for a mother, being alone outside of the

classroom is normal and to be expected. Although students are interacting with their peers in the classroom setting, it does not necessarily mean relationships and friendships (both of which have been linked to feelings of involvement and belonging), are being made.

And forming friendships and relationships with peers is challenging when these participants are mostly looking for women who are also parents and who understand their struggles. This is especially challenging in departments where there is a silence regarding motherhood:

The culture I'm trying to point out is that people do not mention they have kids. And those that I know about is because a faculty member pointed them out and said, "that person is also a parent and is an international student, you should reach out to them." They don't even have pictures on their desks of their kids. – Amy

However, nor does Amy. She also has never brought her children to school and told me the one time she did show them her work space and where she takes classes was during the COVID-19 pandemic when she *knew* she wouldn't bump into anyone else. Both her quote, and the idea of only bringing her children to campus when they couldn't be seen by others, makes one wonder if more students were open about motherhood, if more of them had their pictures on their desk, if all of that would make finding other mothers easier.

This was a common theme for these participants: they wanted to meet other *mothers* more than they wanted to meet other international students. When asked about whether they knew of any student groups on campus for student parents, Veronica shared with me that the Graduate Student Association (GSA) would sometimes host events for families where children were welcome, and where activities were set up for them, as well as having other students help monitor and look after these children. But these events were only twice a year, and she wished colleges and departments did the same at their events.

I was able to understand how pervasive the problem is of being unable to find other mothers in participants' departments and programs, because when I interviewed these women, who came from various colleges, departments and programs, four of ten believed themselves to be the only international mother in their departments. As it turns out, these four students were two pairs that were in the same college, and the same department. **Even in the same program!** But they did not know about each other. This made sense on one level because one student of each pair was only in the second year of their programs and therefore still taking coursework. While their partners in the same program had completed coursework and so were mostly working from home, and present on campus seldomly. In one of the pairs, both women even came from neighboring countries.

Even though I had interviewed someone else from the same department, Tania was one of the participants who believed she was the only mother in her department. Given what Tania told me about having to parent long-distance, the late nights, the naps in her office on the desk, I am not surprised that she did not meet the other mother in her program. She told me despite being an extrovert and eager to make friends, the only time she met people was in the dining halls when she and peers would sit together to eat and grade student papers. While she had been able to visit the University prior to enrolling, she told me she hadn't met any mothers then or even later in the program, and she said this was primarily because her orientation package did not include any such information. But at the same time, she told me she could not be sure she hadn't received any such information because:

I was getting hundreds of emails a day [regarding orientation], and I couldn't open all the emails. After coming to the U.S., I found out I missed a lot of things.

There 3-4 orientation meetings going on, but I missed them and attended only one. Because I didn't get time to look at the emails, because there were lots of them, 5-6 every day. I didn't get a chance. [appears flustered and upset] – Tania

The participants were seeking other mothers that they could befriend and confide in, and sometimes made evident their inability to connect with their non-parent peers:

Once in the classroom I realized that many of my peers are very young people and not parents. And native speakers. So, there is an age gap and a culture gap... that was an awkward experience for me. – Betty

I sense that in my PhD colleagues who do not have babies, they have this kind of anxiety, of what to do next. I feel like I am more spearheaded than them because I [am a mother]. -Violet

Overall, I felt the participants in this study did not take too kindly towards women who did not have children. These childless women, despite also being academics and enrolled in a doctoral degree program, were somehow not seen as *as* focused, *as* hardworking and *as* driven. At one point, Amy referred to students without children who asked for extensions as *slackers* – again this notion that having children *allows* a student to need an extension, but without children, there seems to be no other valid reasons to not complete your work on time. Being an international mother to Amy just meant that she would have to sacrifice time to engage with her peers so she could get her work done – which is why she was here, as she told me with conviction in her voice. Not being social, was a “grad school thing” not necessarily a *mother thing* or an *international thing* for her. In choosing to not be social, she seldom had to make excuses to be home, and seldom had to mention her children who waited for her at home. In doing so, Amy perpetuated the problem she so heatedly talked about despite being so critical and so hyperaware of the silence of motherhood, she complied with it and continued it.

Question 5b:

What are some supports that exist in your academic experience as an international doctoral student mother in your interactions with peers?

While five out of the ten participants mentioned that they either did not have time to interact with their peers, nor did they confide in their peers about being mothers to be offered any support, the other five said their **peers had been supportive**.

Two out of the five participants who received support did mention that their male colleagues had been more supportive than their female ones. In fact, these two participants came from the same department which is male dominated. In Anne's case her male colleague had been willing to watch her son while he slept, and Anne was in class:

I remember making my son sleep on the couch of my lab, and I would ask my male colleague to sit right next to him. I would run to class and before he wakes up, I would be back. -Anne

In Tania's case the fact that her male colleagues didn't understand the complexities of motherhood and long-distance parenting is what made them respect her:

They cannot connect with me on what it feels like to be a mom and what are the challenges of being a mom. So, I get immense respect and support from them. – Tania

Because Tania's peers saw her struggle, they often also chose to help her:

There are days when I am so upset, I can't concentrate. These days my lab mate or my classmate came up to me and said, sister let's study together, let's read together, let's go to the library together. I have gotten help from them. I have not found [the gender imbalance in the program] as negative. I have gotten tremendous respect. – Tania

Violet, who specifically mentioned not having close relationships with her male peers or male professors, said that she had met another (domestic) mother in the program. Since this woman – her now friend - was a native English speaker:

She would read stories to my daughter, so my daughter can hear English, and it can be helpful to her to hear from a native speaker. -Violet

Linda and Dani specifically addressed that it was not their peers from classes that they were closest too, but those international parents they saw and lived with in the University's family housing. They both also mentioned how the University was closing down this housing, and they were concerned about how they would meet student parents:

How do I know where they are? For me it's important because there are children [in the University family housing]. And I want my daughter to meet people as well. It's easy here. What happens now? - Linda

Other participants too remarked that they were concerned about family housing closing down. While not within the scope of this study, it is important for me to address that the closing down of this residence hall (that housed mainly international graduate student parents at a subsidized cost) was brought up by six out of ten of the participants. Two participants had signed up for family housing only to arrive at the University to have to find alternative housing, since the University had made plans to close this residence building. These women were set back financially and had to scramble to find accommodation for themselves and their families while classes and assistantships had already started. Amy seemed quite frustrated about this turn of events:

*I knew it was going to be hard but the housing situation in the beginning, it set me back immensely. You know how the exchange rate is – it's **insane**. So, all my savings went into the first month of living... I don't think people should come to [this university] for a PhD if they're parents. Honestly. Because you will end up paying \$1200-\$1300 dollars at least for a trashy place with your kids, without exhaust and not including heating. You end up having \$300 [from stipend] for your food a month. So, if you don't have outside support, don't come. -Amy*

Amy was not alone in voicing her financial frustrations. This had been brought up by Tania and Linda as well, who both mentioned not socializing with peers outside of school because it usually involved spending money. Given that international students cannot work off campus and can only work 20 hours on campus during the semester, stipends

from assistantships are what five participants were living off (four having husbands who worked from their home countries and supported their wives). Linda was looking for an assistantship at the time of this interview, having recently just found out she would not be rehired for her current position. “I **need** to find one,” she said with concern on her face. For Tania, living off a stipend had much more serious implications than not socializing with peers:

I need an I20 for my kids’ visas. Every stress for international moms like me, starts with money. If I had more money, I could bring my kids here. If they were here, things would be different. – Tania

Tania again referenced (like several other participants) that finances were a concern for her. And while eight out of the nine other participants had mentioned that the stipend was often not enough for them and their families (with Violet, who was long-distance parenting not mentioning any financial issues, although also not saying she didn’t have them), for Tania the inadequate funding – and therefore lack of savings – meant she could not bring her children to the U.S. with her.¹⁰ Tania was also one of three participants who chose to share with me that she had started seeing a therapist to help her cope with her situation:

I have started seeing one of the University psychologists. I have an appointment with her bi-weekly, and I tell her everything and she gives me lots of support. She says, ‘you’re doing good, you’re fine.’ Imagine if my advisor can say these things. But instead, she told me to quit my PhD because I have many problems. -Tania

Tania told me that since she could not have her children with her in the U.S., she wanted to buy them toys with the compensation she received from this study. Her need to do so

¹⁰ Although some students also mentioned that having their children here was costly because they had to pay for schooling, daycare and more.

stemmed from guilt, as she told me, an emotion which was not unique to her situation and became one of the emerging themes of this study.

4.3 Emerging themes

There were a few unexpected findings that emerged in this study, and while they have been alluded to in the responses above, they have been analyzed in more detail in this section. These findings include:

- 1) **long-distance parenting,**
- 2) **guilt and the need to compensate, and**
- 3) **the doctoral degree program as a battleground**

4.3.1 Long-distance parenting

One of the unexpected findings of this study was that **two** of the ten participants were parenting long-distance. In both these situations, the children and spouses of the participants were in their respective home countries. In Violet's case, her daughter was being raised and taken care off by her parents and her husband. In Tania's case, her three children were being tended to by her parents, and with the assistance of hired help.

While there is literature on the lives of transnational families – where an adult family member leaves their home country and family to attempt to make a better living elsewhere - this literature tends to focus on the lives and jobs of low wage earners. The situations in which the student mothers have left their families behind are slightly different, since there is an expectation of gaining knowledge, and ultimately a degree that may advance them in their careers as well as financially when they return to the workforce full-time. And while in some cultures there may still be an expectation of sending money back home, there is little possibility of this given how the University

stipend seems enough to barely keep these students afloat (and one could argue that it is not meant to sustain entire families). Furthermore, while this was an unexpected finding, the two participants who did long-distance parent, had very different approaches to it. Violet saw herself as having more time to study since her daughter and husband were away, and she found herself more focused. While she did spend some time talking to her daughter every day, the longer video chat sessions were generally reserved for the weekends, “during the weekends I will read books to her and talk to her,” she told me. She also told me that she is comfortable with her daughter being raised by her parents, since this allows them to have an important role in their granddaughter’s life, something that is important and common in her home country, whether or not the mother is away. She also explained:

[Her] being away is my biggest motivation. I want to work harder. I want to graduate earlier. I don’t want to spend 7 -8 years here.

Sacrificing time with her daughter now only motivated Violet to finish up her degree sooner, so she could eventually be reunited with her daughter, a fire that perhaps wouldn’t burn as fiercely had her family been in the U.S. with her. While Violet did have what she described as a “feeling of wanting to compensate” for her absence, she also said:

I have to tell you something. I drove my family to the airport one day before my new semester. And we cried a lot. And I held and kissed my daughter. But the moment they were gone. I felt relief. [laughs]-Violet

Violet’s interview was the final one in the study, and therefore her final words struck me because the only other participant who was long-distance parenting was Tania, and her interview had been very different. Tania had had to stop on a few occasions to compose herself, and at two moments she apologized for crying. For Tania, her being away from

her children was proving to be “too challenging.” She told me she often compared her situation now to how it had been when she was living in her home country:

When I was in the office in [home country], I knew my kids were at home, and I knew that after the whole day, that at night I can go to them and talk to them. But now that I am thousands of miles away, I am stressed. If something happened, if they got hurt, if they have eaten, if everything is okay or not... [appears concerned] -Tania

Tania also mentioned on more than one occasion that she was split not just between two places (the U.S. and her home country), but also two time zones that impacted her as a student, a person and a parent:

After 2-3 hours of sleep, I go to class and after class I have headaches and I take painkillers. Painkillers are an everyday thing now. Then I take a small nap. Sometimes I feel so sick I sleep at 3 – 4 PM and then wake up at 8-9 PM and start working... Sometimes I play games over the internet with my kids to keep them connected with me. Sometimes I teach them over the phone. That actually takes a lot of time. So, my eating, my sleeping, those are a complete disaster. -Tania

She had not left her children behind out of choice. She had had to leave them because she could not show sufficient funds to apply for the paperwork needed for their U.S. visas; the sadness and weight of which was evident in the tears she shed during this interview.

4.3.2 Guilt and the need to compensate

While Violet and Tania may have been the only two participants in this study to be long-distance parenting, they were not the only ones who mentioned feelings of guilt and the need to compensate with their children. This emerging theme was brought to my attention because four of the ten participants had voluntarily chosen to tell me what they would do with the compensation they received from these interviews. Tania wanted to buy toys for her children that she would then show them the next time they video chatted. Betty had promised her son an overdue birthday present (which she said he had been

reminding her about); Diana wanted to take her child out for dinner and Anne said she had told her children, she was “making money” for them by participating in this interview.

Six of the ten participants wanted to check in (at the beginning of the interview or the end of the interview) the details on when they would be receiving the compensation promised. To me this signaled that the gift card had been an incentive to partake in this study, and this was not surprising, given that the participants had also been open about their financial difficulties.

I interviewed these women during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of the interview, the participants as well as their children were studying remotely. While this meant that the participants had more with their children, they were quick to tell me they were not being as productive as students. Violet had to study in her car, since she lived in a one-bedroom apartment with her husband and daughter who would otherwise be in their home country, but were stuck in the U.S. because of the pandemic and the borders being closed. Anne said because of her child being home in order to get work done she would often ask him to play by himself or watch something on television. But it was not just that Anne felt she did not have enough time for her child. Her guilt also stemmed from “uprooting the entire family” in pursuit of *her* dreams. And Anne was not alone in her feelings of guilt. Linda told me her academic trials and tribulations as a doctoral degree student had affected her as a mother and a wife:

I could not function as a mother. And I feel I failed as a mother, and I failed my child's childhood. I could have given her so much more during these years if I wouldn't be bumping this road... that's why sometimes I have to make a decision that I am okay with some grades because I need this time for my child and my husband. I have a lot of responsibilities. -Linda

Betty too said that not being able to focus on her child made her feel guilty. Like Linda, she said the issue was not that she was only a mother, but that as an international student she struggled with understanding academic English, and that meant having to spend more time reading and making sense of the class material:

Being an international student is even harder because of the language barrier. So, I have less time to focus on my child and I feel so guilty. -Betty

Even the mothers who were long-distance parenting, Violet and Tania, reported feeling a need to compensate. Both often bought gifts for their children. Violet would mail these gifts to her daughter. Tania would show them to her children when they video chatted, to give them something to be excited about for when she returned, and to let them know she had been thinking of them. But even so, Tania spoke of an “in depth guilt” and through tears said:

Sometimes I cannot sleep at night. Sometimes I cry [starts crying]. I ask why am I here? What am I doing here? [pauses to breathe and compose herself]. Sorry. I just want to make sure I have some money so that someday I can bring my kids here. – Tania

Tania highlights another unique aspect of being an international student mother, which is needing to show that you can afford to bring your children to the U.S. in order to secure official documents needed to apply for their visas – something domestic mothers do not have to worry about.

And while feelings of guilt were mentioned by seven out of ten of the participants, four of the seven mentioned that the guilt they felt was specifically because of the struggles that this academic experience brought with it. Not only did they not have enough time for their families (which was common for each of the seven participants), it was in particular their mental and emotional states because of the trials and tribulations

they faced at the University that affected their ability to perform the role of mother as they would have liked.

4.3.3 The doctoral degree program as a battleground

Four participants used the words: *battle*, *battleground*, *war*, *firefighting*, and *bloody*, to talk about and explain what their experiences in the program had been so far.

Linda was the first participant I interviewed, and I was struck by how often she used the word *fail* (*failing/failed*) in her one-hour interview with me (11 times). She also referred to the doctoral degree as “a very bloody process” and then later in the interview as “a bloody process of failures.” She explained how struggling with academic English, unsure of faculty expectations, and the challenges that came with balancing work, school and home, took a toll on her as a person, a wife and a mother. She explained how she believed that she had “failed as a wife, failed as a mother,” and that she believed she had “failed [her] daughter’s childhood.” She was the only participant to use the word *failed* so often and outside of the realm of academia – that is, she only *once* used the word failed to refer to her grade on an assignment. All other times it was in reference to her roles and responsibilities as a parent and wife. But she made it apparent that her perceived failings were because she kept “bumping the road” in this doctoral degree program, suggesting that the obstacles she encountered in the program had affected her life at home, despite telling me on two occasions that she “made separate being a mother and a student.” Despite her belief that she was compartmentalizing her roles, her words expressed her frustrations and her belief that she had not done enough for her family and made evident that the separation of student and parent, isn’t always possible.

Dani and Tania too had their own analogies for what they had experienced. To Dani, the doctoral degree was a *battle*, and campus was the *battleground*. And while Tania was long-distance parenting, she too shared similar sentiments:

A PhD is like battling war. Everyday. With everyone.

While Dani's reference to battle was in the obstacles she faced in juggling her multiple roles, Tania's was specifically regarding her advisor, speaking about whom had made her cry during the interview. Like Linda, Tania tended to repeat certain words and phrases, such as: *I cannot do this* and *maybe I should just quit*. She referenced quitting on three different occasions - because of how difficult it was to be away from her children, and because of how tired she was operating in different time zones. Perhaps most telling about her quote referenced above is her use of the word *everyone*, suggesting that she may be receiving inadequate support in her program.

While Anne did not specifically refer to the PhD as a battle, she did refer to her responsibilities as an international doctoral student mother as similar to that of a firefighter's. For Anne, there is no such thing as balance. Instead, she saw herself as assessing situations, figuring out the areas that "need the most attention" and then "going and fighting that out." While one analysis of such an idea could allude to her bravery, her ability to handle stressful and high-pressure situations, a less optimistic reading suggests that she is always on-call, that she must always be ready for the next fire and the next disaster. Firefighting comes with a risk to oneself, and even when a fire is successfully put out, there is always the feeling of impending doom that another fire is sparking, and that this work of extinguishing them is therefore endless—quite similar to being a good parent.

4.4 Summary of the findings and analyses

While generalizing from ten participant responses is not possible, the experiences these women shared did offer insight into the lives of this understudied student population.

In Question 1, which asked these women why they had chosen to pursue doctoral degrees, I learned that these participants had varied reasons as to why they embarked on these academic journeys. I also learned three of them embarked on this journey with their husbands, who chose to pursue their degrees and encouraged their wives to come with them.

In Question 2, where participants were asked if being a mother was something they shared with people in their programs, the responses were mixed. Half of the participants did not share this information. While the other half were split between those who offered the information willingly, and those who waited to see who they wanted to share this information with. It was in the responses to this question that I first heard about the lived and perceived discrimination this group of students felt they had received because of being mothers. This in turn had shaped whether they introduced themselves as mothers, as well as when they shared it, and with whom.

Questions 3a and 3b asked these participants about the barriers and supports they had faced in their academic journeys, specifically when it came to their classroom experiences. When it came to the barriers, there were certain shared challenges that the participants experienced that pertained to being international (language and cultural barriers) and to being a mother and having additional roles and responsibilities (balancing work, school and life). For some women being unfamiliar with U.S. standards, as well as

doctoral degree requirements proved to be a challenge, which spoke both to their being international, as well as doctoral students who did not believe they had a clear picture of what the program looked like and how it progressed over the years. For two of the participants, it was all of these challenges plus the fact that sharing their nationality in class had led them to experience discrimination.

But these same women also experienced supports, such as certain faculty members being compassionate and empathetic, and offering them accommodations even when not requested (and especially when requested).

Questions 4a and 4b, asked more specifically about the barriers and supports that these participants had experienced when it came to their relationships and interactions with faculty and advisors. Here, all the participants shared at least one experience in their relationship with faculty members/advisors that had impacted them negatively. The challenges that affected these participants' relationships included feeling that faculty did not care for the personal welfare - or were ignorant to it - as well as faculty/advisor bias that favored women who were not mothers, and motherhood as a master status that often overshadowed their academic and research achievements.

However, for several of participants motherhood also was what allowed them to connect with certain members of the faculty, who sometimes went out of their way to look out for these women. The participants stated that positive personal and informal interactions with faculty and advisors were the ones they valued the most.

For questions 5a and 5b, these participants were asked what challenges and supports they had experienced when it came to their interactions with peers. Here they mentioned that they often lacked the time to socialize with peers outside of class, or that a

language barrier kept them from being comfortable enough to do so. They also cited certain cultural barriers as a reason they did not interact with their peers off campus, and mentioned any on campus event that did not have child centered activities was also difficult for some of the participants to attend because it meant having to keep a watchful eye on their children while attempting to also mingle and be attentive to conversations with colleagues and faculty.

These interviews also had certain unplanned findings such as the fact that two of the participants were long-distance parenting, having left their spouses and children in their home countries. Several participants also mentioned feelings of guilt when it came to motherhood since they believed their academic work took time away from their children. Four participants spoke to the doctoral degree program as a violent one that left them *bloody* from waging war.

While by no means are the experiences of international doctoral student mothers ideal, there are instances in which faculty, advisors and peers offer these women support and kindness that is recognized and appreciated. These gestures practices that more faculty members and peers can engage in on a daily basis, without having to wait for policy changes. Just as the participants were open to sharing their experiences, they also chose to share strategies (based on their lived experiences) that they would like to see practiced by faculty and peers, explored in Chapter 5. The ideas speak not only to benefit international doctoral student mothers, but are strategies that could benefit parents, international students, and doctoral students in general. We cannot assume that women will simply continue to battle the difficulties and obstacles in academia. After all, seven out of the ten participants alluded to having regrets and wanting to drop out of the

doctoral degree program at some point. Conversely not a single participant regretted being a mother. In fact, Linda, Betty, Anne, Violet, Dani, Veronica and Amy all said their children motivated them, and even inspired them to continue and persevere:

You can't give up your job as a mom ever. You can postpone deadlines, and get maternity leave, but you're always a mom... Making a balance is not a good term for a mom student, because when one job is in conflict with another, when we are pushed to choose one, it will always be the mom job. -Dani

When my eldest son was three, he saw me cry every day after I would come back [from school] ... My son would come to me and he would say, 'we'll get through this mom' ... It's amazing having kids around... you see them grow and they teach you more than what anyone else teaches you. I wouldn't change anything [about being a mother]. -Anne

While the participants wouldn't change anything about motherhood, most of them did wish there were things that could be changed in their academic journeys as *students*. In the next chapter, I focus on what faculty, advisors and peers might be able to implement in daily practice and interactions, so that perhaps these women who are juggling so much might at least feel like their academic journeys at this University are not merely a series of challenges to be overcome alone:

I mean [the University] is OK. It's not the best for sure. But I guess it's not the worst. I come from [home country] so I am used to doing things by myself for myself. So, I know how to overcome everything by myself. So, I don't expect much from [University]. -Hilary.

CHAPTER 5

STRATEGIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Even though this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic changing the course of life for these participants as mothers, as students and as people, it is still a study that generated data and strategies that that might allow students in this population to have smoother academic journeys in the future. Even though this study took place at the height of the pandemic and the crises that came with it, the international doctoral student mothers that I interviewed were speaking to experiences that they have had in their programs prior to COVID-19 (although there were certainly moments where they mentioned the pandemic and the impact this had had on their academic and personal lives). If anything, the pandemic made more than apparent just how many responsibilities mothers have, and that student mothers are no different in this regard. It brought to light the harsh realities of the unequal and gendered division of household labor and parenting and the many reasons why some mothers reached their breaking points during the pandemic. Since the pandemic, the plight of mothers has been written about and explored by various media sources from the New York Times to the Chicago Tribune to National Public Radio (NPR). So, while my study took place in a less than ideal environment, it also took place at a time when it was extremely necessary. Also necessary to consider are the strategies proposed in this chapter that were proposed by the participants. In Chapter 5, I analyze the likelihood of these strategies, revisit the theoretical framework I used to drive this study, and finally conclude what I have learned from this study, and where I think it could go next.

5.1 Recap: Perceived supports and barriers in participants' academic journeys

I had Embarked on this study to find responses to **two** key research questions, the first of which was:

What do international doctoral student mothers perceive as the supports and barriers in their academic journeys?

Responses to this question included themes found in previous literature for international students, graduate students, women students and student parents, since the literature on international doctoral student mothers is currently lacking. The findings demonstrated that international doctoral student mothers - who are at the intersections of multiple identities coming together - face many of the challenges from each of these groups, and often combined, placing them in a unique situation. This study showed how the themes from literature on women students, graduate students and international students, all came together and met at the intersection of these participants' identities. Much of what international doctoral student mothers experienced was in the literature already, but is sometimes also exacerbated due to their conflating identities. For example, the literature tells us that graduate female students are less likely to be taken seriously (Mehta et al., 2013), and that international students struggle with making friends (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011), and both were present among the international doctoral student mothers, alongside the hardships that came with motherhood. As is the essence of intersectionality, the participants did not get to choose which of their identities affected them at which times.

Their hardships therefore were sometimes doubly felt. For instance, they had difficulty expressing themselves in English sometimes because they were non-native speakers and international students, which also meant that academic work sometimes

took longer since they were grappling with a language barrier. As students they also felt overwhelmed sometimes by the amount of schoolwork they had, and as mothers, they had other responsibilities such as child-care and household chores that took up additional time. So, when these participants said they did not have *enough time*, it is difficult to separate and determine which of these roles took up the most time, because in general they were being experienced and lived all at once, as is the case with intersectional identities. It also meant that when attempting to overcome these obstacles, there were often as Anne had said “several fires in need of putting out,” and the need to put out the one that was raging hardest and fastest first, before attempting to tend to the others.

Some of the themes that emerged from this study, and that are present in previous research, include:

- 1) **language as a barrier** (from the literature on international students)
- 2) **striking a balance** (from the literature on student parents and graduate students)
- 3) **difficulty making friends** (from the literature on international students and graduate students)
- 4) **relationships with faculty/advisors** (from the literature on graduate students and women students and student parents)

5.1.1 Language as a barrier

Much like the literature states, most participants in this study reported struggling with English personally and academically, and this preventing them from easily making friends, forming close connections, and sometimes contributing in class.

In some instances it was a barrier in terms of understanding academic English and therefore requiring them to spend more time reading or re-reading some of the texts.

Amy, who identified herself as being “extremely fluent in English” also explained that she had struggled in her first year with understanding research articles and the language

used in them. For some the participants, the lack of fluency in English also interfered in their ability able to verbalize their thoughts in the classroom and partake in class discussions, making these experiences stressful, a finding documented previously in the experiences of international graduate students in the U.S. (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). The language barrier has also affected student interactions on personal and social levels (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Contreras-Aguirre et al., 2017; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011), and this study showed similar results with students stating that they could not always follow along when domestic students chatted during class breaks, or that speaking in English required more thought and thus made students hesitant to approach other students (and faculty members). Most participants in this study remarked that they struggled to make friends in their programs and while there were several factors at play here, language was one.

5.1.2 Striking a balance

In past research both graduate students and student mothers have often cited difficulties while trying to balance their various responsibilities. For graduate students, the literature suggests a juggling act between academic work and being social/making friends (Trice, 2004). According to literature on student mothers however, the juggling act often involves an attempt to balance parenthood *and* student-hood *and* often partner-hood (Mason & Goulden, 2004). Student mothers are also attempting to make friends and have a social life, but given all the responsibilities they shoulder, and with the pressures of being a *good mother*, me-time and having a social life is more than often unlikely (Lynch, 2008). The lack of being able to indulge in activities for their own pleasure can in turn can lead to feelings of stress and isolation (Springer et al., 2009).

In my own work, nine out of the ten international doctoral student mothers told me they did not have time to be social and mingle with their peers, with three of them pointing out that their interactions with other students *in class* were the extent of their social life. What was unique in my own study, was that Violet suggested that being a mother often meant people would not invite her to certain events that involved nights out, when in fact these were events she wanted to attend, but her status as a mother (mis)communicated to her peers that she may not be interested in. Two other students Amy and Hilary said even when they could attend events, it was cultural differences like not drinking (for religious reasons), or the unfamiliarity with larger parties and American small talk that made them uncomfortable and thus that led them to avoid these events. This shows that cultural differences can and do sometimes get in the way of international students making friends (Contreras-Aguirre et al., 2017; Sandekian et al., 2015). But as four of the participants explained to me, they expected and accepted not being invited to events at this point, and generally kept their feelings on such matters to themselves; another characteristic of graduate students in general - to internalize and remain silent in moments of stress (Carter et al., 2013).

5.1.3 Difficulty making friends

The students in this study reported that often communication with colleagues was limited to interactions in the classroom and other spaces on campus. The reasons for this however varied: for most of the students in the study having to balance and juggle various roles and responsibilities meant that their own social life was put on the back burner. All the participants alluded to having limited time. Even the two participants who said having children forced them to be more productive in the limited quiet/alone time

they had, still repeated that their time was limited, and what little time they had was spent on working for courses or working for their student jobs, or housework. There was no mention of any *me time* for even one of these participants which past research has shown is common amongst student mothers (Cohenmiller et al., 2019). Past research also suggests that female students generally have a harder time making friends (Carter et al., 2013), as do international graduate students (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011). Student mothers too have a hard time making friends (Lynch, 2008) and rates of attrition for student mothers in doctoral degree programs is also higher (Gardner, 2009). The findings from this study simply added to the literature already present on these student groups, although indicating that for international doctoral student mothers, it may be trebly hard to make friends, given the conflation of their identities and the varying and various obstacles in their way.

5.1.4 Relationships with advisors/faculty

According to the literature, positive interactions with faculty and advisors result in feelings of pride in doctoral students, and resilience when it comes to sticking with their programs and completing their degrees (Appling et al., 2018). In my own study participants reported enjoying meeting their faculty on and off campus and engaging in positive encounters with them. Almost all the participants expressed a desire to be closer to their advisors, as well as an uncertainty of how to do so. For at least three of the participants in this study who had absent advisors, it seemed to take a toll on the progression of their degrees and their self-esteem, which has previously been studied and explored by Springer et al. (2009). Having a female advisor (who was also a mother) did not necessarily provide comfort in at least two of the cases, proving that demographic

similarity does not always equal empathy (Carter et al., 2013). As Hilary suggested, the doctoral degree program needs to be more family friendly, and as per the literature this should start with advisors with whom students have the longest continuing relationships (Rigler et al., 2017).

5.2 Findings from study that did not appear in the existing data

The findings listed here do not constitute themes in my study because they were experienced by fewer than five participants. However, it is important that they are mentioned, as are the implications that they carry. These findings included:

- 1) **Nationality as a barrier**
- 2) **motherhood as a connection to others**
- 3) **difficulties of long-distance parenting** and
- 4) **the doctoral degree program as a battle(ground)**

5.2.1 Nationality as barrier

While not a theme - because it was mentioned by Linda and Violet only - this study found that these two participants felt discriminated against because of their nationalities. Linda mentioned a professor who had been vocal in class about how much they disliked her country. Violet felt she often had to apologize on behalf of her country, or engage in slandering it, because that was expected of her in a U.S. classroom. While we know that international students from Europe in the U.S. may be more valued than students from other parts of the world (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011) and that not all international students have the same experiences, students being expected to apologize on behalf of their home countries, or listen to them being vilified in an academic setting (a site of the *production and dissemination of knowledge*) indicates that there may be a hierarchy of countries where some are considered more respectable than others by faculty, and perhaps a

hierarchy of students too then, some of whom are more likely to be appreciated versus others.

5.2.2 Motherhood as a connection to others

Even though all the participants were able to explain the ways in which motherhood complicated their academic journeys, Linda, Tania and Violet, also mentioned that it allowed them to form an instant connection with other mothers. Additionally, while never asked in the interview, four of the participants vocalized that they enjoyed their children immensely and wouldn't have changed anything because being mothers were the best part of their lives.

5.2.3 Long distance parenting

An unexpected finding in this study was that two of the participants, Tania and Violet, were long distance parenting. While there is literature on transnational families - usually domestic workers who travel to countries for work and leave their children behind - there is no literature on the experiences of students who do the same. The reason I chose the term *long distance parenting* and not *long-distance parents*, is because these women were/are still engaged in parenting behaviors, such as helping their children with homework, reading stories to their children, listening to their complaints and concerns about school and life, except in both instances this was being done online, over the phone, and via video calls. Although there is literature on using telecommunications to parent (Peng & Wong, 2013), it is in regard to domestic workers and not student parents. Even though it was only two participants in this study for whom this was a reality, it

altered their lives significantly, in that they were perpetually thinking and operating in two very different time zones, with both students being in the U.S. on the East Coast and both families being in different countries in Asia (with an 8–10-hour time difference). The complications of this were evident in that they often stayed up late to speak to their children (or awoke very early), and they both mentioned feeling guilt, and the need to compensate for being away from their children. Future research might want to consider whether international student long-distance mothers who receive more support from faculty, advisors and peers feel less burdened by this challenge.

5.2.4 Doctoral degree program as a battle(ground)

Another interesting finding from my study was related to the language participants used to describe their doctoral experience. While never explicitly asked, four students used the words *battle*, *battleground*, *war* and *firefighting* to explain what the doctoral student program had been like for them. It was uncanny that four of them chose similar vocabulary without being prompted. In an article published by Dr. Harold Whitfield, *The Academic Hazing of Doctoral Candidates* (2016), the doctoral degree process has been referred to as academic hazing in two ways, by “(a) not providing timely feedback and (b) requiring revisions that went unnoticed or unmentioned at the appropriate times (Whitfield, 2016). For three (of four) of these participants, their issues with their advisors fell into these categories, demonstrating then that even when the onus should be on an advisor to do better and sometimes to do more, it is the students who bear the brunt of this, academically, mentally and often emotionally. And while four of ten participants used this language to describe their programs, one other participant (Veronica) referenced

not having her work read by her advisor and finding this extremely upsetting. Even when a problem or concern is not named, it can still exist for students, and affect them. Only once heard and acknowledged can practices be put in place by advisors that prevent such challenges from being exacerbated.

5.3 Suggested strategies for universities and faculty/advisors to reduce barriers and increase supports

In this section, I will summarize the key ideas and strategies that participants suggested for diminishing the challenges they experienced in regard to their responses to the question:

What (if any) strategies can they think off that would offer support in their academic journey and advancement?

I selected the strategies listed below for two specific reasons: 1) they have been mentioned by at least three participants in this study (in some capacity), and 2) they can be implemented by that faculty and advisors quickly as they do not require changes in university/college policies.

5.3.1 Strategies for faculty members

The three strategies for faculty include:

- 1) creating feelings of warmth and inclusion in the classroom**
- 2) offering accommodations/being flexible and**
- 3) serving as mentors**

5.3.1.1 Creating feelings of warmth and inclusion in the classroom

Six student mothers specifically mentioned that warm words and having a space to introduce themselves on a more personal level, such as, “why you are here, what you want to achieve, who you really are,” (Linda) versus the traditional “I come from [x] country,” is a simple and effective place to start:

... there is no personal touch and no personal connection between faculty and students... I have no idea who [the faculty] are. The faculty members do not set this tone that we are a community and we need to know more about each other, to care about each other a little bit more. – Linda

The first week I will go to every class and see who the professor and classmates are...the professor's personality should be curious and interested. Interested to know more about the student and to really listen to you. – Betty

Making mother feel welcome, might also make other students feel more comfortable. Because something [faculty] can do is open lines of communication... allow international student mothers to say the challenges they are facing, and then maybe they can offer support to them. If I know someone wants to help me, I will be closer to them and work [harder] for them. -Veronica

These students also reported a need to be reassured by faculty that motherhood would not impact their professional futures and careers. Veronica had been vocal in mentioning how she believed being a mother kept her from certain opportunities because she was not seen as diligent and committed as students without children:

What is really important, and I would like to stress this, is the aspect of inclusion. Just give mothers [academic] responsibilities, projects and tasks to help them professionally. – Veronica

She was not alone in these sentiments, as Anne too wanted reassurance that when faculty members said they understood maternity leave and the responsibilities of motherhood, they were being honest:

Most of the faculty say, 'I am fine with you taking time off,' but they look at students and see the number of papers they can publish... for them it's [this] work

that matters more... they may say 'it's okay, I understand things will be slow,' but when the moment comes, they will find someone else. – Anne

For both Veronica and Anne, the positive reinforcement and encouragement of students were on-going processes and could be achieved by offering positive and appreciative words as Linda and Betty had mentioned, and also through actions that demonstrated that the faculty saw these students as driven and competent.

Another way that students believed faculty could show their support was by fostering classroom interactions amongst students. Three participants alluded to the fact that since they became mothers, interacting in classrooms with other students and engaging small group discussions has become even more important to them. For Hilary small class sizes and discussions amongst even smaller groups (within classes) were important not just because they helped her learn, but also because they allowed her to get to know her classmates:

[Sometimes] in class I cannot recognize all the students and I don't get to talk... even in a small group if they only lecture, we will not know each other... If they let us discuss and talk more, we will know more about each other. It's important. – Hilary

Betty too shared these feelings and said the classroom was also her only time to be social:

For me as an international and mom student, usually outside of the classroom, I am alone. So, in the classroom if I have more time to interact with [other students] I will feel more involved. – Betty

Organizing classes so that students can partake in small group discussions are one way that faculty could allow students to connect with each other. And for students who spend much of their personal time invested in other roles and responsibilities, this seems like one way of potentially helping them form more meaningful connections with their colleagues. One participant even remarked that she appreciated being called on by

faculty, which indicated to her that her contributions were important, something that Sandekian et al. (2015) also found to be true in their study with four Saudi doctoral student women. Overall, class participation and small group interactions were examples of experiences that went well for some students and that they would like to see continue.

5.3.1.2 Offering accommodations/being flexible

Another issue raised by three of the participants was that missing out on the readings or being unable to hand in assignments on time, was a source of stress for these students because they felt their commitment to the program would not be taken seriously. To this Hilary mentioned that it would be helpful if faculty members were more flexible with deadlines:

“[Faculty members] should make clear at the beginning of class [that] you can ask [for accommodations] if you need it. If they don’t say that and as a mother you have to leave earlier, and you have to ask them, I think it is stressful. Hard to open your mouth to ask that. But if they say international mothers just ask for assistance, I think that would be helpful.” - Hilary

Like the literature, this participants in this study said that it is often not easy for female students to approach faculty members in general, much less when they need to request a favor or an accommodation (Kurtz-Costes, et al., 2006). Given that female doctoral students (again both in this study and in the literature) want to be seen as dedicated and committed to their academic pursuits (Brus, 2006) according to the participants of this study this was why they choose not to approach faculty members to ask for extensions or help in general (for fear after being looked down on). Hilary, Dani, Amy and Violet, wanted to make it clear that they did not expect for the faculty to alter the workload or coursework because they were mothers, but rather that they would like to know there was some flexibility when it came to deadlines because of life events that might come up:

...Obviously [faculty] don't need to reduce the workload just because they have some moms in class. However, I hope they can show some flexibility with deadlines in assignments for mom students. – Dani

The PhD is obviously a tough thing. So, if we have some flexibilities with courses that would be helpful... if the course workload [submission timeline] and deadline is a little bit flexible that would be very helpful. – Tania

This flexibility also extended to when faculty members served as students' supervisors.

Amy commented that while the COVID-19 pandemic had made it particularly difficult for her to work from home (since she was also home-schooling her children), being able to take courses and work from home during a normal year would have been extremely helpful to her as a student parent, since not having to commute and be on campus each day allowed her to use her time to get more work and studying done:

I think the semesters are hard... mother or no mother... but as a mother there are more responsibilities, and then there is taking the bus...walking two miles to get anywhere... If there was no COVID and everything was online, it would have been perfect. [says with a big smile on her face] -Amy

Not all faculty are independently able to make decisions regarding student employment and duties, and Diana experienced this firsthand. While she had been offered a teaching assistantship that allowed her to grade undergraduate exams and assignments *from home*, had therefore spend more time with her child and not have to hire help, she knew this was not usual and that she had gotten *lucky*:

After I had a baby I was lucky, and I got only grading TA work. But I know my colleague, she was also a mother and she had to teach a discussion section, even though she has 3 kids. It might be helpful if [supervisors] give grading work to mothers or even just ask [mothers] about their preference... that would be so helpful! – Diana

While some doctoral students could potentially benefit from flexibility in deadlines (given all sorts of extenuating circumstances), one reason why these participants may

have been explicit in their desire for faculty members who were upfront when it came to offering accommodations, may be because of the cultural aspect of a) approaching a faculty member and b) making such a request:

Because of my language barrier, I am not very comfortable speaking with faculty. It makes me shy and makes me stay at home. -Diana

I think I keep a little distance between me and the faculty...And most of the time I think the faculty are very busy. I don't want to disturb them and talk a lot with them. We just say hello. – Hilary

We already know that language and cultural differences might prevent these students from approaching faculty (Carroll & Ryan, 2005) even in the instances where they require assistance, add to this wanting to be taken seriously as female students (Sandekian et al., 2015), which is why being welcoming, opening up a space for student mothers to talk about their needs and challenges and acknowledging the various and varying roles of students, might better support international doctoral student mothers.

5.3.1.3 Serve as mentors

Linda and Veronica believed that faculty members should help doctoral students in being successful in the classrooms and professionally. To Linda it was crucial that she be able to learn from faculty members not just within the classroom, but also outside of it, and learn how to develop her skills as a researcher and presenter:

They should teach us how to present in conferences and write literature reviews. There should be some practical sessions, formal or informal, where we can do something together and get feedback. – Linda

Hilary too felt that faculty members should serve as mentors, not just professionally:

Faculty can help us with advice about how we can succeed in our academic area... and maybe they can share experiences as mothers... and if there are some benefits or [amenities] in the department for people like us. We can learn a lot - Hilary

Four of the participants said they wished for closer relationships with their faculty members:

Faculty are very diverse, and this could be our common ground, but instead this is a separating ground for us. [Acknowledging] that faculty and students all have different challenges and come from different places could be a uniting point, but it somehow separates us so much. - Linda

During the social events, international students are shy... there is distance between them and faculty. The faculty will be in a group and the international students will be in a different group. – Hilary

Some students want more open relationships with faculty members, but are not always sure how to create them and might struggle with feeling like this desire is one-sided:

Faculty [are] supportive. But [this supportive is] not them trying to help us, but you finding them and seeking help from them. - Violet

Additionally, while offering accommodations would be a kind act, and past research has suggested that there should be allowances when it comes to deadlines since student mothers are often struggling to balance their responsibilities (Mirick et al., 2020), this might then need to be extended to other students who may be ill, or taking care of sick family members, and so on. Also, faculty are often bound by certain deadlines themselves that are given to them by programs and departments, and there could be limitations on just how flexible they can be. It is also possible that some faculty can and want to serve as mentors, while others often find themselves bogged down with their own responsibilities without time or energy for mentoring. But it seems plausible that some faculty members might want to do this by offering (informal) workshops or talks that might benefit doctoral degree students professionally and in the future, especially since past research has demonstrated that having supportive faculty members who understand

both the challenges of graduate student life and motherhood can lead to doctoral student retention and success (Theisen et al., 2017). Understanding that student mothers take their schoolwork home, where they also must meet additional responsibilities, should highlight the need for more family friendly practices within universities (Mirick et al., 2020). Furthermore, research has already shown that supportive faculty who serve as personal and professional mentors by who sharing life experiences as well as information regarding campus/university resources, help student mothers to better connect to the university and feel like valuable members of it (Appling et al., 2018).

5.4 Strategies for advisors

While there was some overlap here with the above-mentioned strategies since advisors too are faculty members, the participants in this study also highlighted what they specifically from their advisors. The two recommendations suggested that the:

- 1. Advisors should clearly define their roles and that**
- 2. Advisors could benefit from training in and practicing empathy**

5.4.1 Advisors should clearly define their roles

Seven of the participants in this study were unsure if their advisors were only there to provide academic advice and support with research and the dissertation process, or if they could also approach their advisors when it came to difficult personal situations that adversely affected their academic progress:

I don't know what to expect [of advisors]. Maybe it's because I'm old I feel like maybe you should be responsible for your own life. Like, nobody can help you to be responsible to the difficulties in your own life. But if [advisors] can listen to

you that would be very supportive. Because you would feel like you're not alone.
– Betty

Participants in this study desired a clear expectation of their advisors' roles. Even when it came to academics, students like Linda and Veronica were still unsure of what to expect of their advisors and what they could from them:

Well, my advisor never read anything, so maybe I am still unclear about academic expectations [from me] and from them... – Linda

I think that [advisors] have their own issues. I can't remember when my advisor reached out to me... But they should... there should be some follow up. – Veronica

For Veronica and Linda, the recommendation here was in advisors being clear about their roles, but also in being open to realizing that international doctoral student parents may have different needs as compared to their non-parent/domestic peers:

I think they just don't know that students have different issues and students need help... There are general issues and barriers... but [with student parents] it's a very dynamic process... the things I experienced in year one were very different than the things I experienced in year three. – Linda

And the solution to this was two-fold: 1) training and practicing empathy (which will be addressed below), and 2):

Gathering information via surveys is a start, but then this is a continuous conversation and [in regard to student parents] there has to be continuous research and continuous support. – Linda

Veronica too suggested that that follow ups to any strategies being implemented were necessary:

Follow up is important. Acknowledgment is important. Evaluation is important...
–Veronica.

5.4.2 Training in empathy and practicing empathy (advisors and faculty members)

In this study, Linda and Veronica referenced a lack of understanding regarding the challenges student parents face. Tania and Anne specifically addressed this as a lack of empathy. Amy mentioned that in general the onus was always on the student to find the encouragement and motivation and to problem solve. Each of these participants spoke to a lack of knowledge surrounding the needs of student mothers, and how if advisors took the time to learn more about their needs, these participants may be better served.

Amy believed that recommendations that benefitted student parents might also benefit advisors and faculty members who are parents as well:

*In my program classes start at 4PM and end at 7PM... I think the faculty themselves suffer from this because there are parents on [my] faculty and they take turns with their spouses. I don't know why this hasn't been addressed by them because they too are suffering from it, because they have classes in the evening, and they have to leave early... the whole grad program isn't designed for **people** [emphasis added] with kids... Maybe [organize] a support program where graduate parents could volunteer to watch the kids [when classes are in the evening] ... faculty would even benefit from this. – Amy*

I understand my advisor needs students who can produce papers in six months... but it's not so easy... maybe policies should apply to them too because they have families, so things could be a little bit easier for them too. Because the University is being hard to them, they are being hard with their students. – Tania

Tania was explicit in mentioning that advisors needing training in empathy, but must also live up to practicing it:

[The advisor's] job is to encourage students, not to demotivate students, no matter what the scenario is. If your advisor says, 'no you can do it, I know you can do it,' whatever the situation is, the student [will have] the courage to do it. So that kind of training, the department can give to [the faculty and advisors] ... You are a faculty member and advisor, you are a scholar, does not mean you are not human" [laughs cynically] – Tania

Veronica and Linda too mentioned a need for more positive reinforcement from faculty members, and Anne too spoke of the need for training in empathy:

I [have] had a chat with [the faculty members and advisors], making them aware that when you see a student parent trying to get things done, say, I really admire the way you handle things, I have no clue how you do multitasking and I would love to learn that skill from you. Maybe the faculty don't know that what they are saying is sharp and has a negative vibe to it. -Anne

And to Tania this was exactly the problem. There was a focus on bringing diversity to the classrooms, but no follow-up in terms of how to handle that diversity and those student groups,

On the one hand the University is trying to bring more females, more women into STEM and into academia [as faculty and students] on the other side you say, 'okay if you have family just quit.' This is quite contradictory [laughs]. – Tania

Two participants – Violet and Hilary - explained they had wonderful advisors because they had *gotten lucky*, highlighting that they did not think having an accommodating advisor was the norm. Even so, Hilary only spoke to her advisor about work believing it to be in her best interest. Tania had heard from her peers that their advisors were more understanding than her own was and explained it as follows:

To be frank, some faculty think 'OK I had to go through these challenges, so my students also need to go through these challenges.' Or some faculty say, 'OK I had this problem so I will make sure my students don't have this challenge.' These are two different type of mentalities. There should be some certification of empathy [laughs] before entering into academia on how to value people. And [there should be] more emphasis, more courses, more training on empathy for advisors and faculty. I think that might help. – Tania

Understanding an advisor's role **and** the boundaries may prove helpful in determining when and for what students can turn to their advisors, and having these clear expectations might allow them to explore the appropriate avenues for their various struggles and concerns. Ensuring that advisors make these international students feel respected and a part of the community beyond their first few weeks is also important, because how they are treated after they arrive is indicative of how valuable the University believes them to

be (Carroll & Ryan, 2005), and because student drop out has been linked to experiences that have transpired after the student is on campus and has been in the classrooms (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). However, when it comes to implementing training for faculty and advisors where they might learn these skills, while there is evidence to suggest that straining in cultural competency can be beneficial for international students and faculty like (Le et al., 2016), departments and universities may want to think about how this would be implemented and if it would be mandated or voluntary, and if voluntary how faculty members who may already be busy and feeling overworked might be encouraged to attend.

There is research that has indicated that training in cultural competency and diversity in student backgrounds is necessary for student success (Gardner, 2008; Le et al., 2016), since it positively affects the relationship between faculty/advisor and student. And a positive candidate-chair relationship is vital for student success, because difficult candidate-chair relationships are the most cited reason for doctoral student attrition (Rigler et al., 2017).

5.5 Strategies for the department and university

Three participants suggested the creation of parent support groups on campus and within colleges at the University. Since some participants also mentioned that they believed their struggles as student mothers were vastly different to their single and/or non-parent peers, Amy suggested that it may be helpful to have a parent support group *within* the college where these students could meet, socialize and even turn to each other for support:

If we actually had a graduate student parent support association we would be mingling. Because then you would meet other parents in the University going through the same stuff. Because if you don't have a child, you don't know what it's like having a child. Honestly. -Amy

I think if there are community wide events, or college wide gatherings for student parents that would be good and helpful for student parents. - Dani

These participants suggested that the department host meetings and continue to have on-going conversations about what this student population needs at various stages of the program, of motherhood (or parenthood), and the various stages of child development. Five participants in this study said having a support group for parents in each college (and then connecting these students across colleges) might assist in helping this student population feel less invisible and less isolated:

Everything I experienced in the College orientation and University orientation is everything I already knew and read before coming here. There was nothing that was super helpful. They didn't organize sessions to help parents. They didn't organize sessions to help international students. And definitely they didn't organize sessions to help international parents. They need to do this. – Linda

While some participants felt that they often did not have time off campus to mingle, they also said they made more of an effort to attend department/college events. These participants suggested that these events be more child friendly. Veronica and Diana were explicit in stating that simply stating that families were welcome is not sufficient, but rather that departments should ensure child-friendly activities, and perhaps even offer that there be student chaperones for student parents at events, so that the mothers are more comfortable mingling, and do not have to keep a constant and vigilant eye on their children:

Department events should be more [welcoming] to kids and many kids can show up. I would bring my kid to events [and] I would [be] attending the event just to play with my kids. So, then it would be hard to socialize with other people. For

which reason, I hesitate to attend many events hosted by [the] department. – Diana

If the department has events, maybe they can have a space where the children have activities. They can always ask, are you coming with children? How old are they? Or assign someone to take care of the child. - Veronica

Overall, it seems that these participants did want to partake in activities and mingle with students, but often that lacked the time, or had to take care of their children. Being able to bring their children to events was often the simplest way they could interact with peers and faculty outside of the classroom. For this to happen successfully, they needed assistance in the form of activities and maybe chaperones who could oversee the children, while the participants got some social time. Often departments and colleges can overlook non-traditional students because it is not uncommon for them to be expected to *fit the mold* of how graduate students should be and adapt to the environment, versus the other way round (Gardner, 2008).

5.6 Other factors

Participants also mentioned policy changes beyond the interpersonal, including allowing international doctoral student mothers to work more hours, changing class schedules (since graduate school classes often took place in the evenings when children were home from school and needed to be taken care off, although some students may conversely desire later classes so a partner/family member who works the day shift can help with the children), more diaper/nursing stations (and with easier access), and a better planned orientation for student parents, and in particular, international student parents.

5.7 Findings and theoretical framework

The theoretical framework upon which this study was based centered on the idea of socially constructed environments (SCE's). In this study I focused on the **relationship dimensions** (Moos, 1976), which is measured by the participant's *involvement* in their environment, as well as the *emotional support* they receive.

SCEs are both *personal* but also *consensual* (Stern, 1970), and this means that just as our environments are shaping us, so are we shaping our environments or accepting them (Moos, 1976). We play a part in the experiences of others, and in shaping the atmosphere in which we are studying and working and forming relationships. Our behaviors and decisions are malleable factors; they are not stagnant but in flux, and have the power to influence, alter, and recreate our environments. Thus, this study builds on hearing and analyzing the experiences of international doctoral student mothers, and attempting to put forth strategies and suggested practices faculty and peers may adopt to support this student population.

Using this theoretical framework's categories of assessing the relationship dimensions as "harmful, beneficial or irrelevant" (Moos, 1976), I crafted my interview questions to understand how the academic environment in which these participants were functioning (their classrooms, departments and colleges) shaped their behavior, and how their lived experiences affected their relationships with faculty, advisors and peers. This allowed me to analyze how participants perceived their environment, suggest reasons for the challenges and supports they reported, compile participants' own strategies for improving their socially constructed environment, and consider hypotheses for future

research that can lead to improvements in the academic environment for international doctoral student mothers.

This theoretical framework was effective in allowing me to understand the challenges and supports these students reported about their social environments. However, parts of their experiences often did not necessarily and neatly fit into only one of the “harmful, beneficial or irrelevant” categories, but sometimes overlapped into one or more. The same environment – a classroom – in which perhaps something harmful had transpired, such as a student having their nationality insulted, could also be a space that was beneficial to them, because of the way the class was conducted with smaller groups, with allowed them to interact with their peers and be social (something which was hard for them to do outside of the classroom). In this regard, while the framework was effective to understand the environments, most of the participants found it difficult to understand and label their environments as only one or the other.

One recommendation is that future researchers should consider the messiness of social environments, and how spaces of learning can also be places of harm, and how harmful encounters might also happen in spaces where beneficial encounters take place. It is not enough to ask a diverse and understudied group of students how involved they are (or feel) and how much emotional support they receive or ask for. But rather to explore the *why(s)* behind this, and the *how come*. Future research should take a holistic stance that considers the many and varied responsibilities and challenges of this student population. Such research should also empower them to realize that as members of a

socially constructed environment, they are not just receivers of what transpires, but can also be agents of change.¹¹

5.8 Implications for future research

While this study focused on international doctoral student mothers, future research might inquire into the experiences of other subpopulations such as long-distance student mothers, single mothers, or even pregnant and nursing mothers. Based on the findings from this study, future research might ask:

- 1) What are the ways in which the challenges for international doctoral student mothers vary, based on where they are in their doctoral degree journeys?
- 2) What are the ways in which the challenges for international doctoral student mothers vary, based on the different development stages and needs of their children?
- 3) To what extent and in what ways do partners/spouses provide in their parental roles and in supporting these women in their academic pursuits?
- 4) What are the implications and impacts of a spouse staying back in their home country, while the mother and children stay together as she pursues her doctoral degree?
- 5) What are some of the challenges of long-distance parenting when it comes to international doctoral student mothers?

Since domestic doctoral student mothers, like international student mothers, are not monolithic and offer diversity in various ways, a comparison between the academic experiences of domestic and international doctoral student mothers might inform us if and how the experiences of these students overlap or differ.

¹¹ Although as a vulnerable population and guests in a host country and at a host institution, they may be limited in their ability to create change.

Any future research that studies women students should address the fact that as Dani mentioned, there is “systemic oppression and fixed gender roles,” in academia today. While this study addresses how those within universities can offer support, it does not encompass the broader consequences of sexism and the gendered division of labor that are upheld by policies and practices beyond the socially constructed experiences of women in academia, and the sometimes unrealistic expectations they continue to be burdened with (Hurtado et al., 2012). However, the study sees a problem, names the problem, and brainstorms better practices. It also achieves its goal in initiating a conversation about the trials and triumphs of the academic lived experiences of international doctoral student mothers.

5.9 Conclusion

As students’ expectations change as they move progress in doctoral programs, so do the needs of mothers change, based on the developmental stages of their children. According to two of the participants, the institutions in their (developing) home countries where they completed their Masters Degrees, offered a better environment and many more amenities for them as student mothers. For Hilary life at Research University was “okay.” She explained:

I can feel there is some warmth and support [from the University] ... they provide us apartments and sometimes give us free food. -Hilary

Apartments that have since been taken away - with subsidized university family housing being renovated and all students who had been residing in them being asked to leave with their families and pay higher rents in non-campus housing all while still receiving the same stipend - and the free food available at occasional department events that has

disappeared in the last two semesters because of the pandemic and the University being mostly closed.

As Hilary said in her closing statement:

*At [the University] as a mother and international student, life is not **too** bad.*

The question is: are we going to assess the needs of these students and raise the standard of what can and should be done to better their academic experiences? Or is *not too bad* as good we'll allow it to be for them?

Appendices

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Demographic Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Country of origin• Number of years enrolled in the program• Number of children and ages (age/s when you started the program)• College/Department• Are you able to speak with the researcher virtually for up to 60 minutes?
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APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Focus	Questions	Notes for interviewer
Warm up questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you identify? • What were your goals when you chose to pursue a doctoral degree? • Age (approximate is acceptable) • Assistantship or self-financed (or both?) • Were you a student mother before you entered the program? • Do people in the College know you are a mother? Why/why not? 	<p>Wife/mother/partner/person of color etcetera</p> <p><i>Keep this portion brief.</i></p>
Question 1	<p>When you think back to your academic journey as an international doctoral student mother, what are some experiences you have had regarding...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences in the classroom (working with others, participation) • Relationships/Experiences with Faculty/advisor/staff (accommodations, <i>informal/formal</i> interactions, emotional support) • Relationships/Experiences with peers (interactions, emotional support)

Question 2	What do you perceive the supports and barriers have been so far in your academic journey as an international doctoral student mother, regarding...	<p><i>Probe about [Themes]:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences in the classroom (working with others, participation) • Relationships/Experiences with Faculty/advisor/staff (accommodations, <i>informal/formal</i> interactions, emotional support) • Relationships/Experiences with peers (interactions, emotional support)
Question 3	What strategies would you like to see implemented that would positively affect the academic journeys of international doctoral student mothers regarding...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences in the classroom • Relationships/Experiences with Faculty/advisor/staff (accommodations, <i>informal/formal</i> interactions, emotional support) • Relationships/Experiences with peers
Wrap up questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything else you would like to share? • Do you have any questions for me? 	

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT MATERIAL/FLYER



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