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The experience of being a single mother and a student.

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THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A SINGLE MOTHER

AND A STUDENT

A Thesis Presented

by

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AND A STUDENT

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Being a mother, as most mothers might agree, provides extreme joy and happiness and at the same time dishes out the most excruciating punishments life has to offer. Adrienne Rich, in her book entitled Of Women Born (1976), wrote: "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness." This study took a look at women's experiences of being mothers and how mothers managed parenting alone. The group of women who participated in this study were single mothers. For the single mother, the resentment that Rich talks about may seem even more bitter; the tenderness especially sweet.

The resentment was aimed at many sources. Most single mothers have been solely responsible for the care and upbringing of the children. This not only has meant feeding them and giving them clean clothes to wear and a house to live in, but also spending time with them, playing with them, calming their fears, dealing with their teachers, bandaging their knees, disciplining them, helping them with their homework... The list seems endless. In general, the single mother must be always available or at least on call.
24 hours a day for her children, even when she’s tired, emotionally exhausted, or in need of being taken care of herself. More times than not she must push her own needs aside to deal with her children’s needs. She might also forego her dreams and aspirations. She most likely has to learn to live in poverty. Most never have enough money to pay the bills; many are on AFDC. The words "we can’t afford it" or "I don’t have money" are probably repeated a million times over to her children. She not only has to deal with her own feelings of inadequacy at not being able to provide for her children but she also has to deal with the disappointment in her children’s eyes. Resentment.

And yet there is nothing more wonderful than sharing in the surprise and delight of a child who has just learned to read after many tries at sounding out letters, or witnessing her first solo on a bicycle or hearing him doubled over in laughter. Sometimes, the best that a single mother can feel is relief, as she watches her child sleep for the night. Relieved that they both have survived another day. And for a single mother that is often enough. Sometimes it has to be.

There are three ways of becoming a single mother and it would make sense to think that how one becomes a single mother might affect what the experience of single mothering would be like. One becomes a single mother through divorce/separation, through the death on one’s spouse, or by
deciding to become a single mother without maintaining a relationship with the father of the child. Sometimes the latter is the woman's choice, other times it is not. What seems to be true of most single mothers is that they become primarily responsible for the children (whether by choice or default). In the last decade or so more and more women are choosing to have children even when not involved with a partner nor expecting to be (Norton & Glick, 1986). This is evident by literature written specifically about this group of women (Renvoize, 1985). This study does not discuss the issues specific to these three ways of becoming a single mother and its impact on how these women perceive themselves, but it should be acknowledged that differences may exist. For example, the woman who has lost her husband through death, especially if unexpected, might grieve more strongly than the woman who loses her husband through a divorce or separation, or for that matter, than the woman who has chosen not to have a relationship with the father of her children.

There has been much written about what the general situation of a woman who parents alone is like. Most single mothers and their families live in poverty (Brandwein, Brown, & Fox, 1974). Divorce and the death of a spouse cut off a substantial proportion of the financial support these women have to live on. Child support is rarely sufficient or regular. For some mothers who become single, this may
mean changing jobs so that they work closer to home, have more flexible hours or can bring their work home to do (Weiss, 1979). Sometimes becoming single means a change of residence. It may mean selling their homes or learning to make do with much less than what they are use to. It may also mean a change in their social network (Weiss, 1979). Social support may end when a marriage ends. At times single mothers may find it difficult to maintain friendships in the same way they did prior to becoming single mothers. This transition is a difficult and stressful time for both mothers and children.

This study focused on a particular group of single mothers who had similar obligations and responsibilities as other single mothers, but because of their uniqueness may perhaps have also acquired different sets of issues and problems to handle. Single mothers, like other women, are looking to their future and the kind of jobs or careers they could have. They are not only thinking about and seeking a better future for their children but also for themselves. Some of their aspirations may require academic training and so they may enter or return to college or graduate programs. These women chose to take on not only the stressful and time-consuming role of a single parent but they also chose to enter the temporary world of being a student. Very little is known about the experience of being a single mother and a student. Because this particular group is
invisible in the literature on single parenting, it is unclear whether or not they share similar or completely different experiences than other groups, such as women who work or students in college. This study examined the experience of these women as a way of gaining some understanding of this particular lifestyle.

A. Background

U.S. Census data for 1985 show that of all families with children under the age of 18, 19.3 percent are headed by women with no spouse. This is almost double the 1970 percentage of 10.2 (U. S. Census, 1985). Of these women, it is known that a large percentage live at or below the poverty level (see McLanahan, 1983; Brandwein, Brown, & Fox, 1974). They seem to be burdened by many economic problems. Many rely on government agencies for financial subsidy. Those who choose to work struggle with not being able to work full-time because of childcare demands or they seem to work full-time jobs that pay an insufficient income to support a family (Halem, 1982). Women are often paid much less than men (Burden, 1986). Thus for the single mother who must support herself and her children, the situation of earning a low income becomes even more distressing. Her income must stretch farther while at the same time she must try to provide adequately for her family. The single mother who is in college or graduate school must struggle with
supporting a family with a student stipend and/or, on top of her schooling, work to make ends meet.

For the woman who chooses to work, adequate and sufficient childcare can also be a major problem. This has an impact on the kind of job the single mother has and/or the amount of time she gives to her job. Demand for childcare is often greater than available resources, causing the mother to spend a large amount of time searching for childcare and if one cannot be found, she is limited in the kind of work she can apply for. She may choose to work limited hours so she can be home when her children arrive from school. Or she may opt for a job primarily for its location (i.e., near home or her child’s school). She may decide to only take a job that will allow her to bring her work home with her. She may even choose to leave their children alone while she works. In any case, her choice of work and career become restricted. A single mother, like any other parent, must not only find sufficient childcare but adequate facilities with adequate childcare providers. And this too may be difficult to find.

Work also affects and is affected by the type of housing the single mother and her family have. It is common for there to be changes in housing situations (Halem, 1982). A single mother may have to give up her home and move into an apartment where she can afford to pay the rent. Or she
might have to move from apartment unit to apartment unit when an opportunity to pay less rent presents itself.

The research on mothers who work is extensive. Women who carry on full-time jobs also have full-time jobs waiting for them at the end of the day: children and housework. Married women share some of these responsibilities with their husbands. The single mother has very few people to share this with. The single mother who has sole responsibility for raising children and maintaining a home often must balance that with the responsibilities she has toward her job. These responsibilities are often incompatible and compete with each other for the single mother’s time, devotion, and dedication (Weiss, 1979; Burden, 1986). How often do these responsibilities clash with each other? How often does the working single mother find herself caught in the middle? The literature on role conflict discusses how a woman’s role as a mother and wife vie for time, commitment, and work that her role as an employee asks as well. Not only does she juggle many responsibilities that leave her virtually exhausted, but these are responsibilities that conflict with each other (Barnett & Baruch, 1985).

As well as single mothers and women who work, students attending college or graduate programs also struggle with a lifestyle that is stressful. Ostrow, Paul, Dark, & Behrman (1986) found college life stressful for both men and women.
Specifically, they found that women, as opposed to men, and
divorced students, as opposed to married students scored
lower on a psychological adjustment scale. Sodano (1977)
spelled out the stressors for first year clinical psychology
graduate students. She found that these students were
grappling with their feelings about many different things:
their feelings about being able to meet the challenges of
graduate school, or their feelings about the negative
consequences they might encounter, or feelings about the
demands of school being greater than their abilities could
handle or the amount of preparation needed to meet those
demands. It seems that feelings about performance in
coursework, deadlines to meet, large amounts of studying to
do, little time to socialize and becoming part of a group
all added to make the students' lives stressful. Mechanic
(1962) adds another dimension to an already stressful set of
feelings. He claims that when guidelines or evaluations are
ambiguous, students look to each other to compare and
evaluate how well they are doing. The more ambiguous one's
role as a student is, the more the need for social
comparison and thus the more anxious a student feels.

For the single mother in school, she too must figure out
how she is to evaluate her performance both as a student and
as a mother. When the guidelines for evaluating her
performance are ambiguous, as is the case with motherhood,
she most likely will compare herself to others around her.
Since she has few others who are similar to her that she can compare herself to (i.e., there are few single mothers going to school), she must evaluate how she is doing based on those who do not have similar circumstances (i.e., students who do not have children or mothers who are not students). And because of this, her evaluation of herself in both of these areas, and perhaps others’ evaluations of her, may point out how she is not doing as well as those around her. Her level of anxiety may escalate as a result.

B. Focus of Study

The experience of being a single mother attending school may be similar to other experiences that have been studied which provide some understanding for what the lives of these women are like. For example, it is easy to draw parallels between single mothers who work and single mothers who go to school. Downey & Moen (1987) showed that women heading households felt a stronger sense of personal efficacy with increased earnings. In addition, other sources of income, such as child support, family assistance, and governmental aid, also affect personal efficacy as strongly as one’s employment earnings. For the single mother who is in school, she too may also experience an increase in personal efficacy based on the resources she has available to her. This could be in the form of child support, financial aid from school, or other forms of financial assistance. In Barnett & Baruch (1985), women experienced more stress in
their role as mothers than in their role as worker. This 
group of women were in their middle years. This study also 
showed that nonemployed women experienced anxiety that was 
related to role conflict and role overload, whereas women 
who worked did not. For the single mother who is in school, 
it can be implied that they experience more stress from 
being mothers than from being in school.

It can also be true that single mothers who go to school 
may share problems and stresses with other college students. 
For example, women in school experience more distress than 
men in school even when women are equal to men in competence 
based on GPA, academic standing, progress in career 
decision-making, and Personal Competency Scores (Ostrow, et al., 1986). One can extrapolate from these experiences to 
what the lives of single mothers attending college is like.

However, it could also be true that these groups have 
very little in common with each other. It could be that 
being a student and being a single mother has unique 
qualities that make it unlike any other. What is perhaps 
more the case is that being a single mother going to school 
is similar to other experiences and at the same time, it 
possesses qualities that are unmatched elsewhere. This 
study was not looking to make comparisons between single 
mothers who attend college and other single mothers or other 
college students, the intent was to investigate what it has
been like to be a single mother in school — a phenomenon that very little has been written about in the literature.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of which aspects of the lives of single mothers in school felt most salient to them and to find out what was most rewarding and demanding and difficult about their lives. In particular, the focus of this study was to find out how these women felt about their lives and themselves. While not wanting to deny the difficulties or the problems these women have experienced or to downplay the magnitude or impact on their lives, this investigator attempted to avoid presenting these women, as studies have done in the past, as possessing deficits that needed exposing. Instead, the focus was to elucidate how these women were managing, coping, and dealing with a lifestyle that seemed fraught with limited resources and limitless frustrations.

Specifically, the focus of this study was to investigate two main areas. The first was to find out how single mothers who were also students experienced their lives, how they experienced motherhood, how they experienced being a student, and how it has been to be both simultaneously. It was important to find out how salient these parts of their lives were in relation to each other and other parts of their lives and what were other salient and important aspects (e.g., love relationships). This study explored how
they saw their responsibilities and how they dealt with them.

A second focus was how these women felt about themselves and the way they were leading their lives. This study provided women an opportunity to discuss their perceptions of themselves, to discuss how they viewed their achievements or accomplishments (and/or their failures) in the area of motherhood and as a student, and to talk about the aspects of mothering that they enjoyed and found rewarding and the aspects that they found difficult and troubling. It was thought that how these women felt about themselves was in part affected by how others saw them, and so this study provided a way to explore how these women felt about themselves when they took into account how significant others saw and felt about them.
Volunteers were recruited from local college campuses through various women's groups by distributing a questionnaire. In addition, an informal network of single mothers were asked to volunteer names of single mothers who were attending college who might have been interested in participating in this study.

Eight adult women who were single, custodial parents of children under the age of 21 participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 26 to 46. These women had been single parents from 1 1/2 to 8 years. Most had been divorced, one was separated, and one never married. They had one to three children, ranging in ages from 5 to 20.

All of the participants were enrolled in a college or a graduate school. Only one had been enrolled in her program for less than one year. She had just recently begun at a university immediately following her graduation from a community college. The other participants had been in school from 1 1/2 to 5 years. All of the women were enrolled full-time, except for one who was a part-time student working a full-time job. However, at the time of the interview, she had taken a full-time course load and a full-time job. Six of the eight women were enrolled in undergraduate programs while the other two were in graduate
programs. Five of the women entered school after becoming single mothers. Among the other three women, one mentioned that she became a single mother because she wanted to return to school (See Table 1).

Initially, a questionnaire (Appendix A) was distributed to single mothers attending school. The questionnaires were given to the secretaries of various departments at local universities who could identify single mothers in their department and who were willing to hand them out. Stamped, self-addressed envelope were distributed with the questionnaires. Questionnaires were also given to programs on campuses that served women returning to school, to be handed out to any woman who identified herself as a single mother and was interested in participating in the study. This short questionnaire asked for demographics and other descriptive information about these women. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to give their names and numbers if they were interested in participating in an hour-and-a-half long interview that focused on more in-depth questions about the experience of being a student and a single mother.

Of the 15 women that volunteered to participate in the second portion of this study, a subgroup of 8 was selected. The women interviewed were selected based on their availability and their willingness to participate once contact was made to set up an interview day and time. Prior
to each interview, each woman was informed of the focus of this study and how the information received would be used. They were also informed that the information they gave would be held in confidence and that at any time during the interview, they could choose to end. Each woman gave her informed consent to participate.

B. The Interview

The interviews were semi-structured (Appendix B). They began with an open-ended question (i.e., what is the experience of being a single mother and a student like? How do you feel about your mothering or your schooling?). Specific questions were asked to clarify what was being talked about as well as to see how the participants thought about particular aspects of being a single mother and a student that they had not focused on. Each interview lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours and took place in one of three places: the university, the home of the interviewer, or the home of the interviewee; this depended on the interviewees’ preference. All the participants chose to be interviewed during times when children were in school so additional childcare was unnecessary. All interviews were tape recorded.

At the end of the interview, an explanation of the study and its purposes were given to the participants. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions about the study or to talk about their reactions
to being involved. If time permitted, the participants were asked their opinions about how and whether the study captured their experience and ways of improving the study. Unfortunately, not much time was left at the end of the interviews to pursue this very far.

C. Data Analysis

All the audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. It was from these transcripts that data analysis was done. From each transcript, a case summary was made for each woman based on the main themes she talked about in her interview. The summaries highlighted what seemed to feel most salient to the respondents about the experience of being a single mother and a student. Following the case summaries, responses to specific questions (eight in all) were analyzed. These questions addressed the main purposes of this study, though they may not have necessarily been asked during the interviews. As each transcript was reviewed, segments of each interview that addressed specific questions were compared and contrasted across interviews.

The eight questions were concerned with how they felt about their mothering, how they evaluated their mothering and to whom they compared themselves. These questions were also asked with regard to being a student. It was also thought important to ask about the significant people in their lives that might influence or affect how they viewed themselves as mothers and students.
As mentioned above, these questions were not always directly asked of each participant. In some cases, women discussed their thoughts on these questions without being directly asked. In other cases, women were asked directly. In rare instances, some questions were not asked. At those times, the questions seemed unimportant or irrelevant to what the women were talking about. When this was the case, speculations were made as to why a woman might not discuss particular questions.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The following chapter is divided into two separate parts. The first part is the case summaries of the eight interviews of single mother/students who participated in this study. Demographic information is briefly presented as well as the main issues raised by each woman to the open-ended question, "what is it like to be a single mother and a student?" These summaries are intended to give the reader a sense of who the participants were. The second part of this chapter is organized by responses to specific questions and is focused on how these women felt about specific issues.

The reader is referred back to Table 1 for a summary of demographic information of the eight interviewees.

A. Part I: Case Summaries

1. Case Summary 1

A. is in her thirties and has one child who is in elementary school. She has been divorced for more than 2 years. She has had full custody of her child. She was currently an undergraduate at a university and needs one year of studying to get her degree. She returned to school after becoming a single mother who worked full-time.

When she talked about her experience as a single mother and a student, A. expressed an enormous amount of guilt and uncertainty as a mother. She seemed to worry about whether or not she was doing the right things for her child. She
seemed to analyze both sides of an issue to figure out which way of doing something was better. However, she hasn’t felt certain about the decisions she did make no matter how thought out they seem to be:

But there are times when he wants me to pick him up early and spend more time with me. I have to say that I can’t because I have a class to go to sometimes. And that disturbs me sometimes...Well I am guilty about is not giving him more after school things like karate or whatever...One thing I’m confused about is how much do I give in to his demands for toys and things. Sometimes I feel like I give in so much; on the other hand, maybe it’s good to give in to him because he needs stimulation all the time, many stimulations. It’s a question.

Specifically, she felt guilty about taking time away from her son to go to school and to study. She has struggled to find extra time to spend with him, or to do something special with him to overcome her feelings of being neglectful. She has often wondered if she was raising her child appropriately and wished for others to tell her:

It’s hard in a sense that I don’t know how I’m doing sometimes. I don’t know. I don’t have anyone to compare...So many times I just don’t know if I’m doing things right or if I am, if I’m feeling okay compared to others.

What added to her negative feelings about herself was that she felt that being a single mother forced her to confront her "inefficiencies and faults" as a mother and as a person that she used to blame on her marriage or her husband. Now she blames herself.

Though she has found that she questions herself as a mother, she also has enjoyed being a mother and has
considered it a "nice challenge." She has experienced her mothering as a way for her to relive her youth. She has enjoyed watching her son play and listening to him when he talks to her. Often she has felt that she has used her instincts to guide her to make decisions about her mothering. This has been because she has felt that she had no models to guide her. She found the demands of taking care of a child and housework difficult but manageable.

What she has found most difficult has been being without a partner. She longed for a healthy, romantic relationship with a man. A. wished to come home and talk to her partner about how her day went. She wanted to be able to share the burden of raising a child and having a career with a husband:

Another hardship is being alone, not getting any kind of reward, any kind of reassurance. Sometimes you want to talk to an adult. Often the hardest time is the afternoon or dinner time, when I just want someone there to talk to, someone to share the burden. It is often on me, alone. That’s hard...I feel like I’m giving a lot, affection, emotional support for my child. Well he gives me some back. But it’s nice to get it from another adult. And that often I feel is missing in my life.

She often wished there was another adult around, not necessarily a husband, to talk to. She has often felt lonely and has felt that her life has been centered on studying and being a parent and nothing else. She longed for companionship other than her son.

Though A. felt there were not many people to compare herself to that were in the same situation that she is in,
she seemed to compare herself to others often. When she was at school functions for her son, she saw parents who seemed to have good jobs, nice cars, houses, and spouses. She felt lonely and isolated. She has not gotten involved in her son’s school activities as other parents have done. She felt this was due to time-constraints and a general sense that she has never been in one place long enough to invest getting too involved. To her the future seemed uncertain:

I’m new here and I’m a student and I’m poor and I don’t have time to deal with all this extracurricular stuff. And I feel bad.

She has enjoyed being a student and has found it intellectually stimulating but time-consuming. She reported that she was doing very well in school and thought that others saw her as a mature, serious student and for this she has been respected. However, she has found school very competitive and was bothered by the fact that she was much older than other students in her classroom. She felt that she struggles harder to do well in her coursework and that she has far more responsibilities than the other students and that this puts her at a disadvantage:

Intellectually, it’s very demanding. And there’s a lot of work at home plus the hours I spend at school...It’s amazing how intense these 4 months get, so nerve-wracking, anxiety...What bothers me was feeling that I’m not as smart or have half as much energy or time to put into school as they do, even mental capacity or intellectual capacity because I’m older and have a lot of responsibilities.

She found that she has gotten extremely anxious, especially when she was suffering from Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) and
at the end of semesters. When the responsibilities of being a student and a mother have conflicted, A. said she hasn’t liked herself. She has felt very negative and unaccepting of who she was and what she was doing.

At school, she has seen herself as very different to the other students around her. She found that she has felt more comfortable with other single mothers. However, she also noticed the differences between herself and the single mothers she knew. For example, they were in graduate school or had employable skills that A. didn’t have. Overall, A. seemed to feel that she didn’t quite measure up to the others around her. The feeling of being different was strong for A. making her feel overwhelmed at times;

...I see married couples or families with children. And sometimes it gets to me and I see myself as a lonely, single parent...But sometimes the feeling is so strong that you’re in an unusual situation.

A. seemed to lack self-esteem and has struggled, almost constantly, to feel good about herself and what she was doing or achieving. In her efforts to feel good about what she was doing, A. talked about her life now as having been much better than before she came to this area to begin school. Now she has financial support to help her with living and school expenses, she has a home close to school that is also in reasonable distance from other places she needs to get to, she pays reasonable rent, and has a nice neighborhood for her child and herself to live in. She also added that her parents and even her ex-in-laws were proud of
the achievements she has made thus far in school and with her son. She was admired by them. She was grateful for their admiration, but she seemed to feel that was not enough to make her feel good about what she is doing with her life or that of her son's.

2. Case Summary 2

B. is in her thirties and a single mother of two children. Both of her children are elementary school age. She has been divorced more than 3 years and felt that her return to school is what initiated her divorce. She has full custody of her children and her ex-husband is rarely involved with them. B. is currently a full-time undergraduate student in a university, works a part-time job, and is actively involved in her community.

B. presented herself as a very organized, determined, self-sufficient woman who accepts her responsibilities without reflecting very much on how she feels about her lifestyle. She defined herself as a "supermom": she was a mother, a student, an employed nurse, and an active community member:

Well, you hear the term Supermom, and I think that pretty much defines the way you have to be, everything to everybody, except yourself at times. But then there's the positive side where you really know you can do this and you're more independent than you've ever been...Like I would like to play tennis and I would like to play piano, but that has to be put off for awhile. Kids and work and school are priorities right now. Fun is not a priority, except what pleasure you get out of your children and school and work.
She prioritized the different aspects of her life and was also clear about how flexible she could be with her priorities at any given time. Her priorities seemed to go in this order: kids, school, and work were more important than her fun; exams and papers were more important than a sick, but not too sick child; a very sick child was more important than anything; spending quality time with children was sometimes more important than a good grade in a class. She felt that she is very organized and needs that rigorous schedule so much that when she has a day without any classes, job or activity, she has felt overwhelmed:

Every hour of my day is taken up, except for six hours at night when I sleep...It’s the summer when I’m lost and I don’t have any class. Things don’t get done because I’m not going at a certain pace. If I have a day to myself without things, it’s very hard to just take the day. I like that set time.

B. also talked about how important her independence was at that point in her life and her need to defend against losing it:

I know it’s not the right way to view a couple but until I get to that point where I can accept someone into my life, closely in my life, where I don’t lose my independence, and I know you can get to a point where you can be a couple and not lose your independence, than I’m not willing to let anyone into my life until that, until I can know that...I would like to be stronger because I would like to be able to handle every situation my myself. Or know that I could. I think it’s alright to know that you can ask for help. That helps in relationships. But it’s nice to know you could do it if you wanted to.

This seemed to be a reaction from a difficult marriage and possibly from a difficult divorce. She mentioned that it
took her several years to divorce after feeling that she no longer wanted to be married. For B. going to school was an active choice that she made knowing that it would lead to her becoming a single mother/student. Perhaps because she sacrificed so much to go back to school, she has been unwilling to risk her wish to get a degree for a relationship or anything else for that matter:

Most people are amazed that I’m staying above water. I don’t think it’s amazing. It’s something that I have to do...But I made the choice to get a divorce, so I have to handle what happens to me now.

B. seemed to compare herself to others at times but was very careful when she did. She looked for good role models, "survivors," and modeled herself after them. She only has compared herself to single mothers in similar situations. However, she would not allow herself to get too concerned about how they saw her because she felt that she needs to accomplish what she set out to do and that considering others’ opinions of her would only bog her down:

I don’t care what other people think as far as the choices I make. I care about what my friends think about me as a person. But I don’t, you have things you have to do and you do them. And I can’t think about what my friends think about it...You’re so busy, you don’t have time to think about what other people think.

The same was true of her children. It was important to B. that she is a positive role model for them. She hoped that by example she taught them to be independent. But it seemed that she would not allow herself to be affected by difficulties her children may have had about her being a
single mother and a student. On the other hand, B. felt that she has been a good mother. She has loved her children, they have been well clothed, and they have been happy. At times, however, she has felt that she didn’t spend enough time with them or the right type of time:

It’s not every night I can read them a story. It’s not very weekend I can take them out. Sometimes I yell at them.

B. has found it harder to be a mother than to be a student. B. felt that she was taught the skills needed to complete her course work; sometimes it was only a matter of deduction to figure things out. Solutions were available. To B., school has been opening up a book and memorizing, learning a formula, or thinking through some theory. Motherhood has not been at all as clear-cut; the right thing to do has not always been apparent, outcomes have not been predictable and B. has felt that she was never taught how to do the "right" thing as far as parenting goes.

Learning to become a single mother and a student has meant that she has had to accept certain limitations about what she can and cannot do. She has reconciled herself to the fact that she will not always get A’s in her classes. However, she also mentioned that she has received A’s in all her classes except for one. B. has also learned that being a single mother and a student can at times be frustrating and feel unmanageable. When her situation has felt overwhelming, B. has used cognitive ways of coping: she’s
yelled at her kids, she has blasted music or meditated for 10 minutes alone in her room, has said affirmations, or has gone to sleep. These have been ways for her to release anger so that she can continue on with what she needs to do. What has also helped B. to maintain her rigorous schedule has been the knowledge that her situation is temporary. She felt that she could not maintain this level of drive for more than a few years, but with an end in sight, she felt that she is able to push on.

3. Case Summary 3

C. is in her forties and a single mother of 3 children, ranging in ages from elementary school to high school. She has been divorced for more than one year. She has joint custody of her children, but feels that her ex-husband does not take care of the children as often as she does. If fact, she complains that he does not take them regularly, nor does he take all the children at the same time. She is currently a full-time undergraduate student in a university and one year from getting her degree. She became a single mother while in school. She is also actively involved in her community.

C. presented herself as self-assured, confident woman who was comfortable with herself as single mother and student. This comfortableness seemed to be in part due to C. having found something in her life that she can do for herself that was separate from her children and her involvement in her
community (i.e., school). She strongly felt that her life cannot solely revolve around her children and that her own personal growth is also extremely important:

I’m satisfied being a mother, but that’s not my whole life. If you invest your whole life in them and if they’re going to turn around and leave, which they’re going to do anyway, and they have a right to do, you turn bitter. You really have to do something for yourself.

What has affirmed her opinion about what she has been doing was that she has been teaching her children important lessons or values. They have learned to become more independent and more responsible since she has been in school:

...I felt bad about getting the divorce. You know, they lost their father and their house. But we’ve lived through that and I’ve seen the benefits of it. My kids are much more independent, they respect me. You know, they get upset when their uniforms aren’t washed but I say, "sorry. I go to school. You can put them by the washing machine and remind me. I can’t remember everything." They’ve learned to become more responsible, which is, that’s going to benefit them more in the their life than having a mother who is there for everything. I know that. So I don’t really feel, I feel guilty sometimes but it doesn’t overwhelm me anymore.

She also felt that her children are proud of her and what she has been doing in school. By having shown her children her dedication and determination to do well, she felt that she has been teaching them that if they work hard enough at something, they can achieve.

C. has found school unusually difficult this semester. She has been feeling tired and overwhelmed. However, she remembered taking a course in which to her surprise she did
very well. Because of that experience, C. has been feeling confident that she will get through this semester successfully:

If I can get through something that I knew absolutely nothing about and get an A, then I can do anything...I don’t think there is anything that I can’t do in my life. That’s my attitude. I just have to find the way to do it...So I don’t get myself all bent out of shape about things. I mean I feel pressured and I stay up late at night and study, but I don’t fall apart.

This seemed to keep her focused on her goal to finish school and get a fulfilling job.

C. also had very clear priorities. School always came first, except if her children were severely ill or when her children needed help, (i.e., her son was having trouble in school so she missed class to meet with a guidance counselor). Taking exams were more important than dealing with those kinds of crises. Although she has never had to make a choice between her children and an exam, she was feeling that she can figure out how to take care of everything. She felt that her school work was more important than theirs, not just for her sake, but for her entire family and because she felt this way, it was easier for her to prioritize. However, she sometimes felt guilty when her responsibilities to her schoolwork and her children conflicted because her children tended to come second.

Because she has dedicated herself to doing well in her program, those guilt feelings were easily put aside:
This is what I have to do and I just do it and that’s it... I make the decision and the decision is made but I still feel the conflict about it. But I know the decision is, it doesn’t matter if I feel conflict. I still have to do it. The conflict and the guilt isn’t going to make me change my mind.

Because she was focused on her goal and confident that she can attain it, C. did not feel that she compared herself to anyone else. She saw herself and her situation as unique, and thus, unnecessary to compare herself to others. Nevertheless, she enjoyed having other single mothers in school who were struggling with the same sort of things that she was struggling with. C. also added that she does compare herself now to herself prior to becoming a student. She thought she was doing far better in her own personal growth, as a mother, and as a person now. She saw that she was succeeding in many areas.

C. was currently involved in a love relationship and found that being in a relationship made her feel better about her life. Although he was not involved in helping her with childcare or raising children, her time with him was time where she felt that she could forget about school and children and everything else. Her time with him was her time to enjoy herself and this was very important to her.

Part of what made it easy for C. to accomplish what she was accomplishing was that she felt this was a temporary time for her:

You know it’s not going to be forever. You know, if I had to live like this for the rest of my life, I don’t know. I don’t think I could do it. Just knowing
that...I’m going to graduate or that after this semester, this is going to be over...If I had to live like this and never see an end to it, I don’t think I could manage at all. You know, there are going to be rewards at the end. You know you’re going to feel better, there’s going to be a better job where I don’t have to work as hard. I’ll make more money than I do now. There is an end to it. Just get through it. That’s all.

4. Case Summary

D. is in her twenties and a single mother of one child, elementary school age. She has been separated for 3 years. She shares custody of her child with the father as stated below. At the same time as the separation, D. decided to return to school. Currently, she is a full-time, undergraduate student in a university.

While D. identified herself as a single mother, she also felt that there were circumstances that disqualified her as a single mother. One of these was that she was very involved with the father of her son in raising her son. After much negotiation, she has childcare responsibilities half the week and the father has childcare responsibilities the other half. She also felt that her current partner was becoming involved in helping her raise her son, and so being a single mother occurs less and less. However, she also added:

But in terms of just the stability and the feeling of responsibility for this child, I’ve always sort of bared that by myself and thus identify with mothers who, who really don’t have that sort of in the home, constant, support of another adult...So, I guess I don’t feel like I fall into the norm for a lot of single mothers. But emotionally, I identify in that way.
She also felt that she never has enough time or energy to get everything done, and that after she puts her son to bed, she is so completely exhausted that she finds it hard to summon the energy to continue working.

One thing that was very apparent about this woman was her need to separate her life as a mother and her life as a student. For D., the two crossed very little. She has set it up in this way. Part of the reason that she has done this was because she has felt that getting into school was her own individual endeavour. She was a full-time parent for the first two years of her son’s life. She wanted to establish an identity that was not connected with being a parent:

And [I] was home with him for two years until I decided it was time to get back into school. And at that point in my life, my motivations to get back into school were very individual. It was what I needed to do. I had had this at home, full-time life with this kid and had reached a point where I realized that that was not how I wanted to spend my life. I really wanted to pursue my thing...a lot of what I felt was a need to separate from my identity as a mother and to work to find my own identity.

As a student, she has let few people know that she is a mother. She has decided not to share that with her colleagues. She has experienced sharing with others at school that she is a mother and found that these people struggled to relate to her, as though, knowing she was a mother meant that she had to be treated differently, and
because they didn’t know what that meant, they had difficulty relating at all:

Because they themselves weren’t mothers and as soon as they find out that I’m a mother, it’s almost like then they have to relate to you as a mother. And often, we think of mothers as loving to talk about being mothers all the time and you know. There was almost this awkwardness. The nonmothers...couldn’t quite relate to me and where I was at. They might have wanted to but it was sort of kind of easier to relate to people who shared common experiences.

She also felt that people her age were young enough that being a mother was too far away from their own experience that it made it difficult to connect. In school, being a parent put her in a category that was different from others, which she wanted to avoid.

D. has worked hard to separate her life with her son and her school life. She’s has noticed competition between her son and her friends, and so, she has tried to arrange her time with her friends when she was not going to have her son with her. But because of this, she has felt that she has not gotten the support or acknowledgement from her friends and other classmates that she would like. But to ask them to share in her life, she thought, would make them too uncomfortable. However, as she has continued academically, she has been feeling the split in her life happening less and less.

She has had very little contact with other single mothers or support from them. D. constantly has felt that she is in a different category from everyone else. The women who were
her age didn’t have children and didn’t think about parenting and what the experience of being a mother was all about. Nor did she feel that she fits in with the other parents of her son’s friends who are much older. As mentioned above, she has felt isolated from her friends and other classmates she goes to school with:

But I think when I first went in I was dealing with issues of needing to feel like I fit in and having this identity and experience of being a mother, made it so that I didn’t quite fit in, in a way that I needed at that point in terms of needing people to respond to me and not dealing very well when people didn’t respond to me.

She has felt supported by faculty members when she has asked for extra time to complete assignments. They have expressed a lot of compassion and support for D. But she has continued to feel isolated.

She felt that she could be doing much better in school if she were not a single mother. But she seemed to have accepted that since she is a single mother and a student, she would not always be able to get A’s in her classes. She also felt comfortable with the progress she has made in school because when she compared herself to when she first started school, she has been doing better both as a student and as a parent. She also compared herself to the other women in her family:

But I think if anything I do my comparisons are more from with my background and where I’m coming from and the way I’ve had to go through to get to the point where I can begin to feel like I’m being true to who I am as opposed to perpetuating the stuff that’s been handed down to me from the women in my family...I’m
being motivated by me and who I am and what my needs are, and not by what I was suppose to be.

Her life after leaving home at age 16 and struggling to make things work for herself has reached a point where D. has been feeling that she is doing well for herself. She was careful not to think too much about what her family thought of her because she felt that it would not be healthy. She has felt unsupported by her family, that they have not understand what she is doing or what’s important to her. Through therapy, she has been grieving that loss and accepting the limitations of her relationship with her family.

5. Case Summary 5

E. is in her mid-twenties and a single mother with one child, elementary school age. She has never been married and has had no contact with the father of her child. She was living at her parents’ house until she moved to her own apartment when she began at a university. E. is currently in her first semester as an undergraduate but had been attending a community college continuously for the past four years.

E. was experiencing a lot of difficulty this semester as a student. She was attending her first semester at a university. She has found it difficult sitting in a large classroom, has found it hard to manage the intensity of the courses she is taking, and has felt that the bureaucracy has hampered her in many areas. She described an incident where
she sought counseling for herself but was told she could not get an appointment because of a bureaucratic problem:

I loved it there (referring to the community college she attended prior to starting at the university). I could get help. And you didn’t get the run-around. And it was more personal. Most of my classes, the most was 30 people. Now, all my lectures are at least 200 people. Plus the fact that my advisor is advising me to take all these courses. I don’t really have anything that I like to do this semester. I’ve taken 43 courses already and this semester, it’s like everything is new. I have nothing to, no background and the major is hard. I feel ignorant.

She thought that she was failing some of her courses and was completely overwhelmed by the amount of work and time she had to put into each course. What made this experience more frustrating than it might have been was the fact that she was doing very well prior to coming to this university. To E. her life prior to this time felt more together and manageable. Now it was feeling to her that everything is falling apart and she was having a difficult time trying to manage alone. E. did very well while attending a local community college:

Now I feel like I’ve gone from the softball team to the baseball team. I don’t know. I never felt so totally lost and confused...It’s awful knowing I had it all together and now everything is all in shambles. And it’s depressing to get an F.

Her experience at the community college was very positive and the college community was more personal. Now she has been feeling that everything is happening faster and more of it has been happening than before and she cannot handle it.
What was also adding to the stress of attending a new university was that she was living alone, with her daughter, for the very first time. She lived with her mother most of her life until she moved into her current apartment only months before this interview:

It’s hard juggling it with my daughter and dealing with this new type of stress and freedom. I mean, I’m going through the same thing a freshman is in a way because I lived somewhat dependent on my mother on some aspects. And now I’m on my own for the first time.

She was also feeling very stuck in her situation and felt that there was no way out. She talked about feeling alone now away from her mother, who was not very supportive of what E. wanted to do in her life. What added to her loneliness was her mistrust toward others. She felt that she has been hurt in the past and now has felt less willing to allow herself to get close to others. She also has struggled with a lack of resources (i.e., no car, inadequate AFDC).

E. never finished high school but completed her GED a while after. She became a mother at age 20 and lived with her mother till she came to the university. The first three years of her daughter’s life, E. stayed at home. She felt isolated and lonely at home. After her daughter turned three, E. realized that she wanted to finish her education—not only get her GED but to go on to college. She struggled to get into school because she had to convince her social worker that she was serious about going to school and fight
pressures from relatives and friends to give up on the idea of going to school and instead get a job.

E. has been feeling that she doesn’t get any support from her family. She has been made to feel like the black sheep. No one has supported her in her schoolwork, no one has encouraged her to continue with her education, no one has acknowledged her successes, and no one has taken her seriously. Her daughter seemed to be the only one. She also compared herself to the only close friend she said she has: a single mother who was currently in graduate school. This other mother seemed to do extremely well in school, but was very critical and unsupportive of E.’s struggles. She made E. feel inadequate. E. worried a lot about how she was perceived by others. She felt that she stuck out like a sore thumb in school. She wondered how others saw her and worried about fitting in with the other students. She very much liked to find someone who was in a similar situation as she was and would be her friend and support. However, this was hampered by her worries about trusting others.

E. was clearly struggling right at the time of the interview. She questioned her ability to continue in school and to raise her daughter at the same time. She also struggled with her feelings about being a student, both wanting to continue and at the same time feeling very stuck and not wanting to be:

I’m sure things are going to work out. It’s just awkward. You have all these little obstacles coming
your way. I’m doing well. I’m still here. I’m not going to give up. I don’t have anywhere else to fall back on, so I’ll have to push on. There’s no safety net out there for me to fall back on. There’s not much I can do.

6. Case Summary 6

F. is in her thirties and a single mother with two children. Both are elementary school age. She has been divorced for 8 years and lives with one of her children. F. is currently a full-time undergraduate student at a university and is one year from graduating. She returned to school after becoming a single mother.

F. felt that her situation seemed to have gotten worse over the years that she has been in school (she currently is in her fifth year at the university). While she felt that she and her daughter were used to the daily routine of having a mother in school, she also felt that they had put up with a lot for a long time and she felt that it had put a major strain on her life and that perhaps it may have negatively affected her relationship with her daughter:

When I first started out, it was harder to get use to but it was more exciting than it is now. It’s just that it feels that it’s been for too long off-balance. I don’t feel like I can take care of other parts of my life the way I want to...I think in the last year, or the last few years, it seems harder and harder. Even though I’m used to the school part of it, it seem like it’s been too long that I have to [say], "now you have to leave me alone." So that’s hard.

F. felt badly about not spending the time with her daughter she felt she needed. She often had to redirect her daughter to do something on her own so that F. could have
the space and the quiet to study. She has to put away her studies everyday to go pick up her daughter at school and finds it very difficult to get back to her studies after her daughter is in bed. At this point, she has felt that she is too tired and that it is too hard to shift gears from cooking and spending time with her daughter to intensive, quiet studying. She often felt that her school work suffered because of the need to be with her daughter and this made her tense. She thought that her daughter picked up on the tension she felt. In addition, she felt guilty about blaming her daughter for keeping her from her school work. She also felt that her daughter deserved her attention and would at times, say to professors:

I take my work seriously. I'm a serious student and I do care about my work, but I absolutely cannot get this assignment done on time. I have a child and I'm going to give her some time. I have to give her some time.

F. has been under a lot of physical stress. She has gotten headaches very often. She has stomach problems. She suffers from Premenstrual Syndrome. She felt that at certain times of the month, she has felt more negative, more discouraged, less self-confident. She has gotten no exercise and looked pale. Because she felt under such pressure to get her work done, the laundry and the shopping were usually left undone. She felt that her personal/private life had to be put on hold. She didn't
spend the time on her love relationship that she would have liked and that was difficult. She saw her friends rarely.

When she compared herself to other people, whether they are students or parents, she looked for the people that she thought were amazing or the most bright and compared herself to them. In part she felt she did this because she wants to be the best that she can be and so it made sense that she model herself after whoever she saw as the best, but she was also aware that this also puts her in a position of always feeling not as good as others around her:

I’m always comparing myself and I’m never doing okay. There’s always someone doing it better than you. And there’s always that wonderwoman. I always pick friends that are just amazing.

With her professors and her classmates, she felt that she didn’t want to tell them that she was a single mother and/or get special treatment because of it. She very much wanted to keep up like the rest of her classmates and hated feeling like she was using being a single mother as an excuse. She also compared herself to non-parents (other students) and felt bad that they had the time and energy to work on their school work in ways that F. didn’t because she was busy taking care of a child and because she felt too tired from caring for her daughter that she couldn’t return to her work and get more done.

F. needed to feel that her daughter thought and felt that she was a good mother and was disturbed, though she joked about it, when she saw that her daughter was upset with her.
It was extremely important how her daughter saw her and her continued sense that her daughter was unhappy or neglected by F. has F. bothered at their situation:

I want her to think that I’m a wonderful mother (laughing). I want her to love me, plus I want her to think that a person could be an independent woman...I feel bad that, I think she sees me as stressed out and tired a lot too...I wish I was more playful to her.

She saw school as an endeavour that she did for herself, something which felt like a new experience. Thus she is committed to being a student and dealing with all that it means to be a student. She had few expectations about what it would be like to be a single mother and a student. To her, it felt like an unknown and that was scary but important because she wanted to do work that was meaningful. Going on to college meant sacrificing time with her children, both her daughter and her son who lives with his father. She has been constantly thinking about their relationship and how school interferes with the work that that relationship needs. However, she also felt that with the education that she is getting, she was hoping to get a fulfilling, economically-supporting job that all her family could benefit from. Because of this feeling, there was more resolve in her determination to put her energies into her school work.

Another issue F. has dealt with is being on welfare. She has found it difficult to not be independent and needing help from others. She also felt that there were times when
her daughter felt embarrassed about their living situation, which bothered F. very much:

She sees her friends having houses and whole families and big houses or nice things, and there’s a number of people, [her] friends that might have parents that have really good jobs. She doesn’t understand. She like felt so embarrassed about this place. And it really made me feel bad and I didn’t want her to feel self-conscious about being poor or different. But it kind of hurt me that she was having to explain to her friends and she felt funny about it.

7. Case Summary 7

G. is in her mid-forties and is a single mother of three children, junior high school age and older. She has been divorced for more than one year. She is currently a graduate student at a university with less than two years from graduating. She became a single mother while she was in school.

G. seemed primarily focused on her life without her husband. Being without her husband, having him leave her and her children held strong meaning for her. While feeling betrayed by him, she was also showing how she was making it on her own. She seemed to try to see herself as an independent person who was working on her degree and who also had children to care for, but she also saw herself as the wife that got left and was dealing with the consequences of that now both in her life and the life of her children. She found her life, on the one hand, requiring a lot of her energy to parent her children and get them through school,
and on the other hand, felt satisfied with what she has been able to give to them:

...in my case, my children are older. But the emotional needs that they have throughout, because of the problems of the divorce that we're all going through, my own life and my own world is taking a back seat...One is the idea that all of my children's needs: physical, emotional, psychological. Emotional meaning their need for parenting; psychological meaning their need for my presence in their everyday interactions; and physically, the nature of conflict with their father is such that he has refused to take care of them and pay child support. So a lot of my mission is to keep them together.

She has made a few career changes in the goals she has set for herself but seemed comfortable and accepting of those changes. She saw the changes benefitting her family in the long-run.

G. clearly felt good about what she was doing in school and with her children. She saw herself as a good role model for her daughters, showing them that even with the difficulties that she struggles with occasionally, in the long run, she is doing quite well:

I hope that I've been able to by continuing my education or by seeing myself as a person with a future that I have been a role model for their life. I mean I am not falling apart even though I do fall apart...Even though I have days when I do fall apart and I need help and I need some support...I feel good about that part of keeping on with my education.

She didn't seem to doubt her mothering, either what she was doing now or what she has done in the past. She realized that she has made mistakes, but has felt that she gives her children something extremely important and what she never felt she got from her mother: "respect for their voice,
their opinions, their personhood." She felt that her children are proud of her and what she has achieved in her field.

G. felt that daily living was hard. She felt that raising teenagers had its own set of difficulties separate from other parents of younger children. Primarily it had been difficult to help them understand their lives in relation to the divorce and the rejection of their father. She has to work to keep her children drug-free, alcohol-free, not pregnant, keeping everything in harmony. She has seen her children needing a great deal from her. The divorce seemed a painful experience for all and G. has worked to help her children get through it:

I’m still mother and they need so much mothering from me that it’s really hard. I’m just not able to be like some people and just say, "well this is my time and my space." I can do that but I feel that they are in crisis too.

It seemed that her change in her concentration of study was done for the better of her children.

She commented on the split she feels in her life. At home, she felt that she is seen as the spurned wife of a man who held a prominent position in his company, she has a huge house that she feels she can’t leave until the divorce gets settled, which also forces her to pay high costs for maintenance and taxes. Since the divorce, she has also come to realize that her social supports have changed. She felt that she has lost many friends that were part of her and her
husband's circle of friends now that she is no longer married to her husband.

At school, G. was "just an older student, just trying to make it along with the other students." She talked about a "lack of reality" with those she works with, meaning that they didn't understand who she is and what she deals with on a daily basis. Initially, she felt that she had to jump through the hoops to get respect, to prove that she was "more than just another woman whose got nothing else to do but go to school." Now that she has earned the respect of those she works with, she has felt that what they think of her is not as important as her children or friends:

I've won the respect of my colleagues and professors. But they are not as important to me as my children and life-long friends. Because they're going to be going. I'm moving through this. I'm not staying here. These are folks along the way.

She also sees her professors and colleagues as temporary parts of her life and so their opinions of her are less important. She felt that her children were proud of her and understood her and responded to her in very important, satisfying ways.

To G., it's the little victories that have felt good. She grieved the loss of her marriage but was coming to enjoy and cherish being a single woman who is accountable to herself only. She found that she was successful (resourceful) at "making things come out." She felt that
she had given up a lot of herself in her marriage and always felt that she wasn’t doing the right thing.

8. Case Summary 8

H. is in her mid-thirties and a single mother of 2 children, elementary school age. She has been divorced for more than 5 years and her ex-husband is minimally involved with the children. She moved to this area following her divorce because her family was here and they occasionally help with childcare. She is currently in a Master’s program at a university, as well as having a full-time job. She returned to school after becoming a single mother.

H. presented herself as having worked through many difficult stages as a single parent and that now she was at a point where she understood what she can and can’t do, how she can achieve the things that she wants and how she had set herself up to fail in the past. She found that being a single mother was still difficult for several reasons. One was that having divorced and becoming a single parent has been an incredible stage to get through. At first, she did not accept her "plight" and tried to ignore the responsibilities of being a single parent. She lived with her parents after she divorced, and would leave her children, then one and four, with her mother. She would only see them in the morning. She didn’t want to accept that she had "ended up" alone with two boys and no money. With her sons at her mother’s, she could be 19 again.
Though she spent most of her time studying, she at least could ignore that she was in a place in her life that she didn’t want to be nor had ever expected to be in.

Secondly, H. found her financial situation hard to adjust to. She saw herself as the kind of person that if she needed more money, she would go out and get another job. But with kids, she was not able to do that, because then she would have to find sitters and spend too much time away from her children. Third and seemingly most problematic for her, was the feeling that she was totally responsible for her children. She had no one else to share that with and sometimes it made her feel tied down to them. She had to make decisions about whether her son should be operated on or not without a second parent to help her with making the decisions and sharing the responsibilities for decisions made. She also felt that she could not go away for trips, recreational or work-related, because if her children were to get hurt and need a parent, she would not be available. She is solely responsible for making hard decisions about her children and she would be the one solely to blame if something goes wrong.

H. also talked about the idea of juggling all the different parts of her life. She felt that she never really juggles because it is impossible to do. Something was always neglected, whether it was her housework or her schoolwork or her children:
I feel that the sacrifice has to be done with everything. Either you don’t clean your house, you
don’t take care of your kids, or you don’t do your
schoolwork. So if I cleaned my house, my schoolwork
suffered. If I do something with my kids, maybe the
house suffered... So I think that, although it’s
like juggling, it’s like the ball always falls on the
floor. It was one or the other. So either the house
is a mess and you pick that ball up and you’re behind
on a paper. You pick that one up and something
happens with your kids.

She has learned over the years that some things need to be
let go of: getting incompletes in classes when her children
are sick, having her sons help out more in the home (her
older son makes his own breakfast, both children make their
own beds), letting the house go messy while in the middle of
writing a paper. She has accepted that things will not be
as perfect as she would like and that eventually she will
get around to doing what needs to be done.

H. also has learned that accepting other people’s
impressions of how difficult her life is has been a burden
that she has carried and no longer wants to. She felt that
people saw her as a single mother who lived in subsidized
housing with other single parents and assumed that her life
was much too hard to manage. She felt that with their
concerns and compliments or admirations that they were
actually blaming her for the difficulties that she
experienced. For example, when her son was having
difficulties in school, his teachers would call her in and
ask if there were problems at home. She felt they
automatically assumed that the problems at school had
directly to do with living in a single-parent home:

And all of a sudden, you’re taboo. And you don’t want
to be a taboo...And so everyone puts that on you. And
the load gets heavier and heavier. And you listen to
people talk to you. And all of a sudden they start
loading these bricks on your back...And you carry
that.

Now, H. will not allow "being from a single-parent home" to
be the explanation others use for her son’s difficulties.
She will not allow people to admire her for what she is
doing because with that also comes blame.

H. felt unsupported by the university system. She also
felt that to have a semester end around the time of the
holidays was unfair to her and her kids. It was important
to go out and do Christmas shopping and put up the tree and
to go to her kids’ plays at school. But it has been
incredibly stressful to do all this and keep up with her own
school work and to study and take finals at the same time.
She felt that it was unfair to be denied incompletes from
professors because her children were sick and she could not
do what she needed to do. She had come to learn that this
was a societal/systems problem and that she was not at
fault.

H. felt that she doesn’t compare herself to others except
when she has felt that she has made some kind of mistake.
She never felt the need to compare herself in school because
she always did well. With her children, it was when they
get themselves in trouble and H. was pulled in by others,
namely parents, that she started to think about how she was doing. When parents were angry because of something her children did, M. felt the need to defend her children and herself as a parent. She tried not to feel bad about herself and her children and talked to her kids rather than confront other parents.

She felt that it was important how her children see her. She wanted them to know that she works hard, works to be knowledgeable and to attain her goals. She also felt that they weren’t really noticing right now but hoped that when they were older they would see how hard she has worked as well as remembered the times when she has played with them. She has been trying to give her children good memories of their time together. It has been important that she be seen as serious, knowledgeable, sensitive, mature by her professors and other students, whereas before she just wanted to fit in. Fitting in meant taking the labels others put on you and feeling burdened by those labels. She has learned that she can do what she needs to do, and that through this process, she has come to trust herself and to know what she is capable of doing, thus not needing to listen to other’s perceptions of how she is doing.

B. Part II: Themes & Issues

The following section focused on more specific questions, issues, and themes that were discussed during the interview.
1. Question 1: How do you feel about yourself as a mother.

This small group of eight women shared similar concerns and feelings about their children and at the same time had different perspectives on how they viewed their mothering. These women all talked about their desire to provide adequately for their children. This did not only mean food, clothing, and shelter, but also a home that was nurturing and a place where the relationship between mother and children was satisfying to all.

About half of these women seemed to question their abilities to parent and felt badly for not providing for their children in ways they had wished. The other half felt confident about how they are doing as mothers. Some mothers, though they felt confident about their abilities to parent, didn’t view parenting as their top priority at this time in their lives. Their education came first. For example, B. felt that she has been providing adequately for her children. They have food, clothing, a good place to live, and they are involved in different activities. Though she sometimes has felt guilty for not spending more time with her children, she reminded herself that her education took precedence at this time in her life. It was easy for B. to put aside her feelings of guilt because she knows they are indeed adequately provided for. C. also felt that her schooling was the number one priority in her life:

If my kids need help with homework, I feel that I’m
really short with them. Like mine is more important than theirs.

However she felt that her dedication and motivation toward her schoolwork, not only were part of what made her a good mother, but have benefitted her children in many ways (see Case Summary #3).

G. felt confident about her mothering but has a different perspective than the above two mothers. She felt that mothering was the most important job she has, and as such, has made some career changes that were done for her children’s sake and may have curtailed her achieving as much success in her field as she might have otherwise. She felt that she has been a good role model for her children while she has been in school and that she has allowed open communication between her children and herself that she didn’t experience with her own mother. She felt that helping her children do well in general and to resolve their issues with the divorce in particular was what she works for everyday.

There were some mothers who were equally concerned about how well they were mothering as was G., but felt much less confident in what they were doing. These women seemed to want very much to be good parents to their children, but were either unclear about how to go about it or were pulled by their wish to be good students. A. often felt unsure about what she was doing as far as mothering was concerned. Though she felt good about her relationship with her son,
she questioned what she did for him and what limits she set. This, in turn, caused her to feel guilty about not adequately providing for her child. Another mother, F., often was torn between her wanting to give her daughter the attention she needed and asked for and wanting to do her own schoolwork. She then felt badly that she was not able to give enough time and energy to her mothering because she was involved in her work. It was at these moments that she felt resentful toward her daughter and then felt guilty. E. was finding mothering very frustrating and entrapping. She felt guilty about not providing adequately for her daughter and felt burdened and overwhelmed by the responsibility of parenting especially when she needed to devote more time to her studies.

Two mothers didn’t focus specifically on how they felt about their parenting but discussed how they saw others influencing the way they felt about mothering. D. discussed her need to keep her parenting life and her school life separate, such that very few of the students she had in her classes knew she was a mother. She felt that people treated her differently after finding out she was a mother. Since she wanted to be identified as a student, D. would not share that she was a mother with other students. However, when students didn’t know she was a mother, she felt unacknowledged for how difficult her life was. The last mother, H., felt that listening to others’ opinions of her
life caused her to feel less confident about her abilities to mother than when she stopped listening. She found that when people offered her sympathy or tried to understand how difficult her life must have been as a single parent, that they were also blaming her for the hardships she and her children may have been experiencing at the time.

2. Question 2: How do you know you are doing well as a mother.

Women had different ways of judging how they are doing as mothers. One way was to compare oneself to others, and in some cases to compare oneself at present to what one was like in the past. While most of the women interviewed were directly asked if they compared themselves to others, they also talked about other ways of judging how well they were doing. There seemed to be three basic ways women judged how well they were doing as mothers. One way was based on how well their children were doing. For example, when A. saw that her child was eating well, sleeping through the night, doing well in school, making friends, and playing cooperatively, she felt she was being a "good" mother. However, this did not allay all of her concerns about her parenting. She wondered whether she was giving in too much or whether she was depriving her son of things and experiences he needed. G. felt that she has been a "good" mother when she sees her children openly expressing themselves to her and are not quiet and passive.
Another group of women based their judgments of how they were doing as mothers on their feelings about themselves as they were mothering. For example, when E. has been under a lot of stress, whether it’s because of school or a combination of things, she has felt that she is not doing enough for and with her daughter. When the stress has lessened, she has felt that she has been doing well as a mother. Another woman, F., based her judgment of herself as a parent on how much attention she was able to give her daughter, as well as how tense and guilty she felt about the time she did and didn’t spend with her daughter.

Other women seemed to judge themselves both by the standards they set for themselves and on how they viewed their children doing. C. saw that her children were learning valuable life lessons, such as responsibility and independence as a result of C. being in school. This made her feel that doing things for herself was part of what made her a "good" mother. H., while she didn’t directly address the question of how she judged herself, felt a growing sense of confidence and trust in her abilities to mother. She also felt that she was providing adequately for her children, spending quality time with them and showing them that hard work can lead to the things that you want.

D. didn’t discuss this issue at all. B. talked about the differences between judging oneself as a mother and judging oneself as a student or an employee. She knows that if she
studies, memorizes, works through problems, she will do well in school. Mothering is much more unpredictable. B. can never be sure that what she does will bring the results she anticipates. It seemed that B. felt that she was doing an adequate job raising her children but she was unclear what she did that made it so.

3. Question 3: Whom do you compare yourself to as a mother.

The question of whether women compare themselves to others was asked specifically to most women interviewed. I was interested to see if these women in fact compared themselves and if they did, to whom. Most women could readily respond to this question. The women interviewed seemed to fall roughly into three categories (although not exclusively). One group was of women who compared themselves to friends, colleagues, and other parents. The second group was of women who compared themselves, not so much to other people, as to themselves at some point in the past. The third group didn’t compare themselves to others at all. For example, G. didn’t talk about comparing herself to others. This seemed to not be a salient issue for her.

However, the other women interviewed did respond to the question of comparison. Those that compared themselves to others chose people who held some significance to them. For example, F. compared herself to women who she thought were "wonderwomen." She also tended to compare herself to couples with families who she saw spending quality time with
their children. Because she tended to pick people who seemed to be doing very well in their lives, at least at that moment, she often felt inadequate. E. compared herself to students around her and also felt inadequate and out of place. When she did look to someone who was similar to her, she found an unsupportive and critical friend. This friend was also a single mother/student. Because E. was feeling extremely isolated, she depended very much on the feedback she got from her friend. D. chose to compare herself to other women in her family (i.e., her own mother, aunts, and grandmothers). She saw the women in her family following along tradition ways of being without giving much thought to what they wanted for themselves. When compared to these women, she saw herself faring better than her family because she was striving for what she wanted for herself and her child. B. would compare herself only to people who were: women, single mothers, and "survivors." These survivors seemed to function as a way to motivate B. to continue, push harder, and overcome obstacles and her own exhaustion. However, she added that she seldom compared herself to others because she felt that she was doing well in her life and it only served to drag her down.

There was a group of women who did not look to other people to see how they are doing. Instead, they compared themselves to what they were like at some point in the their past. Most of these women felt better about how they viewed
their lives currently when they compared it to themselves in the past. For example, one woman, H., remembered back to when she first became a single mother and she tried to ignore the reality of being poor and single with two young children. Now, she has felt she has come to grips with her fear of taking on the responsibilities of raising a family alone and has been satisfied with how she has been doing. Another woman, C., mostly felt that she did not need to compare herself to anyone because she was doing very well. However, she remembered when she was always doing things for her children and not allowing them to do for themselves. She felt that she was a much better mother because she has her own goals and aspirations, and that was part of what made her a good mother.

4. Question 4: How do you feel about yourself as a student.

For the most part, these women felt good about themselves as students. Some of them seemed to have an understanding of their limitations in their schoolwork because they must devote some of their time to parenting; others seem confused by feeling both good about what they have been able to achieve in school and feeling disappointed that, though they would like to do more, they have done all they can do. Both C. and B. were doing very well in their programs. They felt extremely confident in their abilities to continue to do well. While C. never seemed to question her abilities in what she was doing (see Case Summary #3), B. seemed to avoid
focusing on how she feels about her schooling. To focus on it seemed useless to her.

A second group of women felt they had certain limitations (i.e., the time or energy that other students might have) that prevented them from doing what they felt capable and competent to do. However, they were accepting of these limitations and felt good about the progress they were making in their schooling. D. felt that being a single mother didn’t allow her the time she needed to do well on assignments or it made her too tired to put more effort into her work. However, she was satisfied with how well she was doing and was not bothered that she didn’t get A’s in her coursework. H. also recognized in herself that she was a good, serious, hard-working student and that occasionally, she would not be able to finish coursework at the time it was due. This usually happened when her children become ill. However, she has learned to not feel bothered or panicked should this occur.

Another group of women seemed to be doing very well in school, but seemed bothered by some aspect of being a student. F. seemed to lack confidence in her abilities to do good work and was bothered by the pressure she felt over the amount of time she needed to give her studies and the little time she actually had. G. found intellectual life in general and her school environment in particular uncomfortable (though, she also talked about enjoying school
and feeling competent and respected in her program and in her field). She felt that this was due in part to school feeling contrived and isolated from her home life. A., while enjoying the intellectual stimulation and the feeling of being young when she can identify herself with the other students, found that she was also envious of the lack of responsibilities and the seriousness and commitment she saw in these students.

E. was having an extremely difficult time with her schoolwork. She felt overwhelmed, confused, and ignorant. What seemed to add to her feelings of frustration was the sense of being stuck as a student because she did not know what to do if she were to drop out. However, she was also optimistic that she would continue with her schoolwork.

5. Question 5: How do you know you are doing well as a student.

An obvious criterion for knowing how well one does is the grade one receives in a class. For most of the women interviewed, grades played a major part in how they judged how they were doing as students. Although grades were the main way of judging one’s performance in a course, some women mentioned other ways of evaluating how they were doing as well. There were two women, in particular, who seemed to judge themselves based on their grades alone. B. judged herself not only by the grades she received in her classes, but also by the solving of problems or formulas that stumped
her. C. looked at every good grade (which seemed to be most of the ones she has received thus far), and every successful completion of a course, as an indication of how well she was doing. Because she has been so successful in the past, she seemed to have the confidence to decipher difficult aspects of any problem in a course.

Two women, while grades were a primary indicator of how they were doing in a course, also seemed to feel that their grades might not always reflect their capabilities and their knowledge in a particular course. For example, H. felt that she was competent and capable of getting good grades. When she did not receive a good grade in a course, she seemed to not be bothered by it. Occasionally external circumstances (i.e., a sick child) would affect her grade, but she felt that was not adequately reflecting her abilities. However, she seemed to be more doubtful of herself when she would listen to other people’s perception of her. D. also seemed to rely on how she felt about herself than on grades to tell her she was doing well in a course. When she first returned to school after her son was two, she felt that grades reflected how well she was doing. As she has progressed through school, she has gained confidence in her ability to learn and master course material. She felt comfortable and accepting of the fact that she, at times, would not be able to give the time her studies need to get the best grade possible and that she would have to settle for a lower
grade. Feedback from a professor was also how she judged how she was doing well.

One woman, F., also used her grades as a way of judging how well she was doing. But she lacked the confidence in her own abilities, and so, she often felt that she had not earned the good grade that she received. She always felt that she could have put more time into a paper, or that she could have defended a point that she made much better. It seemed that in part she didn’t trust her own abilities and, at the same time, she seemed to be saying that if she had more time, she could accomplish what she would like.

Other women seemed to pay less attention to the grades then to other criteria. For G., being known in her field as a scholar and receiving respect from her colleagues was her way of judging that she was doing well as a student. This largely had to do with the fact that she was in graduate school where grades may not play a major role. A. felt that completing tasks or assignments was her way of judging how well she was doing. There was a certain amount of confidence that completed tasks would received good marks, and so when she didn’t receive good grades, she felt, most of the time, that it was because she didn’t have the time or energy to put into it what she could. She felt that she didn’t have the time or energy because she was a single mother. E. seemed to use internal feelings rather than external cues, like grades, to judge how well she was doing.
When she was feeling lost and frustrated, she felt that she was not doing well in school; when she was feeling lonely, she felt that she didn’t fit in with the other students at school. When she felt better about herself, she thought that she was a good student who was capable of getting good grades even when she did not get good grades.

6. **Question 6:** Who do you compare yourself to as a student.

How one judges oneself as a student has very different qualities than how one judges oneself as a mother. Grades are an obvious way of evaluating how well one is doing. When these women focused on other ways of evaluating themselves, especially in terms of who they compared themselves to, they focused on the differences in themselves now from what they were like in the past and they also compared themselves to other students and the grades that they got in the same courses. However, there were some women who do not accept that idea of comparing themselves to others. For example, B. and C., both felt that there was no one who lived a similar life to them and that their situation and struggles were unique. So they did not compare themselves to anyone. They seemed to set their own standards and seemed to work through them the best they could.

H. didn’t compare herself to others because, she too, felt that no one lived the life she did, so it would be useless to compare herself to others. However, she did
compare herself now to herself when she first became a single mother/student. When she first started going to school, she worried about getting her papers done on time and how she would do on exams. She felt more disorganized and panicked and procrastinated as deadlines approached. She also tried hard to fit in with the other students in her classes. Now she works hard to get work done. She felt more confident that she could do well in her work and felt that she managed her time better so that she got things turned in on time. On the other hand, F. felt that she compared herself to the person she thought was the best in her classes. She was very critical of herself and became angry at herself when she heard someone making an interesting comment in her classes. She felt that it ought to have been her making that statement and would push herself even harder. Though she was doing well in school, she often worried about how she was doing especially when someone seemed to "show her up." She also compared herself to the class as a whole and felt much older than the rest and because of being a single mother in school, she felt somewhat of an outcast.

Two other women talked about comparing themselves equally to what they were like some time in the past and also to those in their classes. A. remembered when she first began college in her early 20's when she did very poorly and felt that she was doing very well in her classes despite how much
work she had to do. When she compared herself to other students, she felt very old and not as smart as the other students. This bothered her very much. For E., when she compared herself to others, she worried about fitting in and not necessarily on how she was doing with her schoolwork. It was when she compared herself now to when she was attending a community college that she thought about how she was doing in her schoolwork.

Two other women, D. and G., didn’t discuss how they compared themselves to others. Both of these women seemed to be doing well in school. It seems that when a woman feels that she is doing well in school, she is less likely to compare herself to those around her. Perhaps when these women begin to lack confidence in themselves and their usual criteria for judging that they are doing well (i.e., using grades or comparing themselves now to themselves in the past), they begin to look to other criteria to strengthen or weaken their feelings about how well they are doing. It is when they start to look to other ways of judging themselves that they seem to feel that they are not as successful as they could be.

7. Question 7: How do your children see you.

Almost every mother interviewed felt that what their children saw in them or how their children felt about them was extremely important. G. not only felt that what her children thought of her was important but it was also
important that her children were happy with themselves and could express their feelings with honesty to her. It made her feel good to know that her children were proud of her and that they saw her as a woman who dealt with the problems and stresses in her life and could still manage her life well. For F., it was equally important what her daughter thought of her as it was for G. It concerned her that her daughter always seemed to see her as tired, busy, and not very playful. She wanted very much for her daughter to see her as a good mother who was also independent and to have her daughter love her and be proud of her. The difference in these two women seemed to be that the second woman felt that both her schooling and her parenting were equally important and struggled with feelings of guilt and tension when she had to put one before the other. G. also felt that both her schooling and parenting were important, but she was more willing to make sacrifices in her education if it seemed to be in the best interest of her children.

C. also felt that what her children thought of her was important. She felt that her children were proud of her successes. They would brag to others about what their mother was doing in school. But she also commented that at this point in her life, her schooling was her top priority.

The following three women talked about how important it was to them how their children felt about them. They emphasized, however, that what was important to them was
that their children felt positive about their relationship with their mother and not just that their mother was doing well in school. A. knew that her son was proud of her. But what was most important was the change in him toward her over the last couple of years. After her divorce, her son was very aggressive toward her, but that has lessened over time. She described her relationship with her son as a friendship, as well as a parent-child relationship, and that was what was fulfilling in her life. D. also felt that it was important how her son saw her, that is, as a person who was working and evolving into a better person, as someone who valued her own needs and independence, and as someone who worked on their relationship. Though she was sometimes bothered by not giving her son the attention he seemed to need or by not always making him her top priority, she felt good about the ways he viewed her and their relationship. H. felt that it was important how her children saw her but felt that her children were too young to notice what she was doing in her life and what she does to work on their relationships. She thought they will notice this as they grow older and look back on this time. Because of this, she wanted to spend quality time with them now, so that they will have good memories of times spent with their mother when they start to look back on their childhood.

B., who felt that even though her children were proud of her, would not allow herself to be overly influenced by
their feelings toward her as a mother and toward her mothering. She seemed to feel that this might get in the way of her dedication to her studies. E. did not talk much about the importance of her child’s feelings toward her. In part I think it was because she was so focused on how negatively she was doing in school and what she needed to do to finish the semester that she could only respond that her daughter was proud of her.

8. Question 8: How do others see you.

Each woman seemed to feel that there were other people in their lives whose opinion of them they were concerned about. They varied in the amount they took those opinions to heart. It seemed important to these women how they fit in with others in their world and so it was important how others saw them. Some women felt that the importance of how others saw them has lessened over time. Others didn’t feel as strongly about how others saw them, though they did give it some thought. Of the people that these women talked about these were the ones they mention: professors, other students, parents, friends, family. It was interesting to note that of the women who were involved in intimate relationships, not one mentioned their partners as the person whose opinion of them was important.

Two women, F. and H., wanted their professors to see them as serious, responsible, mature students, and they along with A., C., and D. felt that professors saw them in that
way. One woman, G. felt that it wasn't important how professors saw her because she feels that professors, and other students as well, are only temporary figures in her life. One woman, E. felt that professors were very unsupportive and felt that she had to gravel for extra time to finish assignments or to excuse her from class.

Some of these women also felt similar in regards to other students who were taking courses along with them. As mentioned earlier, E. wondered what other students think of her. H. felt that when she first began school, she very much wanted to be like and feel similar to the other students in her classes. As she progressed through school, she became less interested in "fitting in" and more interested in how professors saw her, as stated above. D. felt unsupported by other students, that they didn't understand her. In part this was because she chose to not mention that she was a single mother, and thus felt unacknowledged by them.

Half of the woman mentioned their parents as people whose opinions they cared about. B. felt that she cares about what her parents think of her but does not give it much importance. She will not listen to any negative opinion about her life, if they have any, because that would interfere with what she feels she needs to do in her life. Similarly, D. felt that she could not pay too much attention to what her parents think of how she is living her life.
She felt that it is unhealthy but acknowledged that it is important how they see her. Both A. and E. felt it was important how their parents saw them. A. felt that her parents are proud and very supportive of her lifestyle and what she was doing in school. However, E. felt that she got no support from her family and often was pressured to quit school and find employment. The other women did not mention their parents.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the experience of single mothers who are attending school. It provided a forum for these women to talk about their experiences of very demanding, often overwhelming roles. Further, this research study focused on how single mothers/students felt about themselves and how well they felt they were doing as mothers and as students. What became evident was that they were diverse in many ways, which made it nearly impossible to categorize them. It should be noted that the number of women interviewed was very small (8) and for that reason, this group may have seemed so diverse. Perhaps with a larger number of participants, subgroups might have emerged.

What was also true of this group of women was that in particular areas they shared similar qualities. These women all shared a very strong belief in the importance of family. In their conversations, there was a sense of their strong commitment to their children and to providing for them a lifestyle that was better than the ones they themselves had, either as they were growing up or before they became single mothers. There was also a strong commitment to having a meaningful relationship with their children. Their dedication and perseverance to provide for their children in the best ways they knew how was evident. They also talked about the importance of the aspirations they had for
themselves, and thus, their education had been an important step to get them there. They worked hard to do well in school, to gain mastery over their studies, and to gain competence in order to do well in the career of their choice. They showed a strong commitment both to their children and their education.

These women also shared similar experiences about their lives feeling overwhelming at times, that having sole responsibility for their children has been a heavy load to carry, and that they had struggled with feelings of inadequacy about their mothering and their ability to do well in school. What came through in all interviews was their determination to provide a good life for their children and a desire to have a career that was worthwhile. Most of them talked about their career choices as ones in which they could contribute to society in some meaningful way.

Along with these similarities, the interviewees also had many differences in style, intensity, confidence, and anxiety-level. They varied in the level of confidence they felt about their lives. At one extreme was a woman who felt that there was nothing in the world she couldn’t do; at the other extreme was one who questioned all that she did. Self-confidence seemed to also vary within each woman, not only between them. Several women talked about their confidence dwindling during the end of semesters; some felt
less confident while they were struggling with Premenstrual Syndrome; and some felt unsure of themselves when the responsibilities between parenting and their education clashed. It seemed that self-confidence also got demonstrated in whether or not these women compared themselves to others and to what extent they did that. Some felt that they did not need to compare themselves to others because they were doing very well, while others compared themselves to everyone and often wondered how they were doing in comparison to the others around them.

What was also evident was the interest these women had in the participating in this study. They showed a great willingness and enthusiasm in describing their lives to someone else. While these women had schedules that were demanding and time-consuming, they nevertheless agreed to talk with me. They seemed to welcome the opportunity to share their experience with someone, and often expressed their wish that others would learn about their lives through this study. Some described the isolation they had felt and a wish to get to know other single mother/students who shared similar experiences to them.

One major focus of the interviews was on how these women judged themselves as mothers and as students, not only the criteria they used to judge themselves, but also how they thought they were doing given the standards they had set up for themselves. It seemed that how they evaluated how they
are doing as mothers was somewhat different from how they evaluated themselves as students. When these women talked about how they evaluated themselves as students, there seemed to be very real, tangible ways of judging oneself. For the most part, the criteria women talked about the most as an indication of how well they were doing in school was grades. Grades supposedly are a standardized, accepted measure of how one is doing in a particular class or with a particular subject matter. Everyone is in agreement, at least in the United States, that when someone gets an A in a class that it means that one did very well, a C means that one did about as well as most of the people in one’s class, and that an F means that one failed a course. Because of this, one can easily compare oneself to others in the same class to see if they are doing better, worse, or about the same as their classmates. One can easily compare how one did in one class compared to another class. Grades also make it easier to chart whether one is making progress or not in their program of study over a period of time.

Though grades were the primary indicator of how they judged how they were doing in school, other ways were also discussed. Some talked about feedback from their professors as another indication of how they were doing. What a professor had to say about the work these women did was an important piece of information and perhaps was also more meaningful and less impersonal for these women than a grade.
Several mentioned that completing assignments and completing a course were other ways. Though their lives felt hectic and too overwhelming, they felt good about being able to complete an assignment and a course, regardless of what grade they received. This, to them, was a real achievement. One woman mentioned that getting recognition in her field of study was her way of judging that she was doing well (she was the only participant who was in a doctoral program).

Women also talked about subjective ways of judging themselves. Some felt that mastering a particular subject or course as one way that told them that they were or were not doing well. One woman felt that this was a better criterion than grades because she felt that she often did not earn the good grades she received, and that she would have felt much better about her grade if she had also felt that she had learned more from a course than she felt she had.

These more subjective criteria were even more typical when women judged themselves as mothers. For example, most women felt that if their children were doing well, they were doing well as mothers. Each woman defined a child doing well differently. One woman mentioned she could tell her child was doing well, because he was happy; another mentioned she could tell because her daughters were openly communicative with their feelings. But what seemed most important as far as letting them know that they were doing
well as mothers was how they felt about their relationship with their children. For example, one woman felt that she and her son were friends and that was her way of knowing that she was doing well as a mother. One woman talked about how badly she felt about being in school at this time in her life because she felt that her relationship with her daughter was deteriorating. She also felt that she couldn’t be as close to her as she had been in the past because she was too busy with her studies.

The judgments were also based on feelings about themselves as mothers and their mothering. For example, one woman talked about how her parenting was based on instincts, partly because she was not taught specific skills, and that when she felt trustful of using her instincts to guide her, she knew that she was doing well as a parent. It was when she doubted her instincts that questions about her parenting came up for her.

Several women felt that "good mothering" was based on whether they were good role models for their children. "Good mothering" was based on whether they were teaching their children the values these women had and hoped to pass on. It was based on whether their children could see how important their mother’s education was to her and at the same time that she loved and cared for them. When the mother felt that her children understood that, she felt that she was being a good mother.
One's sense of "good mothering" seemed to shift depending on confidence and anxiety level. This shift was very much tied into how they felt about how well they were doing in school. One's sense of "good mothering" seemed to decline as the end of the semesters approached and pressures to complete courses and study for exams increased. One woman expressed her concern about her mothering saying that she was feeling so badly about how she was doing in school that she had difficulty not taking her anxiety out on her child.

When women described more objective criteria for judging how well they were doing as parents, they talked about tangible ways of judging themselves. One mother talked about how her child slept well through the night, that he ate well, played cooperatively with other children, and seemed to do well in school (i.e., teachers' reports, report cards). She felt that she was doing well as a mother. Other women talked about the amount of time they spent with their children, especially when it was time requested by their children, as another way of telling them that they were good mothers. While it seemed that there were tangible ways of judging how well one was doing as a mother, as there were for judging how well one was doing as a student, good mothering seemed to be based more on their intuitive sense of themselves. How they judged themselves as students was
based more on external, tangible measures, such as grades and feedback from professors.

The interviewees seemed less likely to compare themselves as students to other students than they were to compare themselves as mothers to other mothers. This seemed to be because they had grades and feedback from professors readily available and so there seemed to be less need to compare oneself to others. For both mothering and being a student, women seemed to compare themselves to an ideal. They looked for their role models and evaluated how they are doing compared to these. They also seemed to compare themselves to what they were like in the past. When they compared themselves to their ideal, these women seemed to always fall short; when they compared themselves to what they were like in the past, they seemed to be very proud of the progress they felt they have made. Women seemed to also talk more about comparing oneself to other family members, primarily female figures, when they talked about how well they are doing as mothers. Most women seemed to feel that they are doing much better at parenting than their mothers did with them. They felt that much of their parenting has been based on trial and error, as well as the values and beliefs that they had acquired, rather than on the skills they learned from their parents or from the experiences they had growing up with their parents.
One of the main purposes of this study was to have women discuss how they defined themselves with respect to motherhood and being a student. It is thought that how one defines one’s sense of self (or one’s self-concept) in part is based on how others view one (Gergen, 1981; Tesser & Campbell, 1983). If one defines oneself in terms of how others see one, then it makes sense that it would be important to these women how their children viewed their mothering. Part of how they defined themselves as mothers depended on how their children saw them. A woman could not feel that she was a good mother if her child felt that she was not a good mother. It also seemed, but to a lesser extent, that how significant others (such as, one’s parents or close friends) saw them also influenced how they saw themselves as mothers. The same would be true for the student whose professor thought she was not a good student. It would be difficult for one to hold on to the view that one is a good student if one’s professor did not share the same view.

As stated earlier, when objective criteria were unavailable or less clear, as in the case with mothering, other’s opinions became more important. This is similar to Festinger’s social comparison theory (1954) which states that one has a need for self-evaluation and that when external or internal standards are unavailable, one compares oneself to others. Mechanic (1962) went on to say that
comparing oneself to others tends to make one feel more anxious and depressed. Some of these women felt a strong need to compare themselves to other people, while others seemed to feel that comparing oneself to others was not useful nor necessary. In this study it seemed that women compared themselves to others who were good role models. Their comparison others appeared more in command of their lives, more organized, more accomplished. One reason for comparing themselves to these types of women was to provide for themselves a good role model. How women used their role model varied. One woman felt badly because she compared herself to the best and she always fell short. No matter how hard she tried, she could never be as good as the women she compared herself to. Another woman used her role models to motivate herself to improve and seemed to not feel bad that she wasn't as good as her comparison others.

Wills (1981) takes the social comparison theory further when he talks about downward comparison, stating that "the essence of this process is that persons can enhance their own subjective well-being by comparing themselves with a less fortunate other." For these women, downward comparison theory would indicate that they would have looked to compare themselves to others that were not doing as well as they were. In fact, this was not the case. It seemed that women, when they compared themselves to others, picked others that were doing better.
It seemed that whenever a woman compared herself to another and the end result was that she did not fare as well as her comparison other, she often commented on how well she was doing now compared to how she was doing in the past. When she compared herself in this way, she always did better. Women seemed to experience real anxiety initially, but were able to relieve the anxiety of feeling like one was not a good mother (a difficult thing to admit, especially for one who is trying to be a good mother) when one looked to the past and saw that they were not as good at mothering then as they feel they are now. The same is true for being a good student. When they compared themselves to others in their classes, they often did not do as well, but when they compared themselves to how they did prior to this period in their lives, they felt good about the achievements they have made.

The need to compare oneself to a "lesser" other (in this case, themselves in the past), and thus feel good about what they are doing in their lives currently, would be especially important for the women who returned to school after becoming single mothers. These women are trying to improve their lives and that of their children. They have aspirations that they are trying to achieve through school. Some women felt that they had sacrificed a lot to go back to school. Some women felt that their desire to return to school contributed to their divorce. One woman commented on
how her relationships with her children have deteriorated since she went back to school, and some women have felt that the struggle to get accustomed to their new lifestyle has been at times overwhelming. To be able to compare oneself now to a "lesser" other (themselves in the past) would make the sacrifices worth the trouble. It would be too difficult to accept that they are faring worse then they did in the past. And in fact, for the one woman who was having the hardest time in school, she recalled with anguish how well she was doing before this period in her life.

What is the differences between women who compare themselves to others or who listen to other people’s opinions of them and those that don’t? And what causes a woman to compare herself in certain instances and not in others? As mentioned above, if there exists an external way of judging oneself, such as grades, the need to compare oneself is lessened. In some cases, some of these women compared themselves no matter what the situation was. In part this seems to be due to one’s level of self-esteem. The woman whose self-esteem was low seemed to compare herself more than the woman whose self-esteem was higher.

A. Limitations

A small proportion of women participated in this study compared to the number of questionnaires that were sent out. The number of questionnaires that were sent out was 60. Of that, only 16 women responded. All but one of the sixteen
agreed to participate in the interview. Times for the interviews often had to be rescheduled to accommodate the lives of busy, single mother/students. Interviews were rescheduled because childcare could not be arranged, a child was home sick, other appointments were made, schoolwork needed to be done first. Some women only had a shorter period of time to give to the interview than the requested one-and-a-half hours. But at the same time, they also were eager to participate and rescheduling or lack of time did not seem to deter their enthusiasm.

Because of the small number of participants who agreed to be interviewed, it may be possible that this group of eight women were very unique in comparison to the general population of single mothers who are students. It seemed that these women, though their lives were quite hectic and busy, managed to carve out some time in their schedules to participate. They seemed to be very interested in talking about their lives. Other women may have been too busy to participate or unwilling to share their experience with a stranger. One can speculate that these women agreed to participate because they needed someone to listen to their story, to understand the difficulties they have to deal with on a daily basis, perhaps to give themselves a chance to hear themselves talk about something they never talk about. Perhaps these women were looking for some acknowledgement that they had a complicated, sometimes overwhelming life and
at the same time that they had a life that was also rewarding and enjoyable.

What might also be different in these women compared to those women who chose not to participate was that they may be very strongly identified as single mother/students in ways that others are not. This may have made them more willing to discuss their lives as single mothers going to school or acknowledge in a public way that they were grappling with their identities as single mothers and as students; whereas other women may be more interested in not distinguishing that part of themselves from others. Those interviewed may be more interested in highlighting that which distinguishes them from the mainstream.

**B. Future Research**

Further research is needed on the experience of single mothers who are going to school. It would be useful to interview a larger number of women to see if groupings exist. It would also be interesting to know how these women’s sense of their mothering was influenced by the mothering they received, as well as how their sense of being students was affected by their mothers.

Future research on social comparison seems worthwhile. Some studies have shown self-evaluation (Ahrens, 1987), and thus social comparison (Furnham & Brewin, 1987), are associated with depression. There is also research that shows that self-esteem is associated with social comparison.
(Smith & Insko, 1987). But what influences what? Does self-esteem affect whether one will compare oneself to others, does it affect who one compares oneself to (assuming we all compare ourselves to others), or does social comparison influence our level of self-esteem, based on who we compare ourselves to. Can we assume that the person who refuses to compare themselves to other, even when criteria are not readily available, has a high level of self-esteem?

What also seems important is to find a way for these women to come together to be able to share their experience with each other, if only to compare oneself more realistically to others who are similar to them and who struggle with and cherish the lifestyle these women have chosen.
Table 1

Summary of demographic information of eight interviews.

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<td>Elem</td>
<td>Elem, JHS, HS</td>
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Key:
- SM - Single mother
- Div - Divorced
- Sep - Separated
- Elem - Elementary School Age
- JHS - Junior High School Age
- HS - High School Age
APPENDIX A

A. QUESTIONNAIRE

May 1, 1988

Dear Single Mother/Student:

My name is Brenda Temblador and I am a graduate student in the doctoral program in clinical psychology at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. I am requesting your participation in a study that involves single mothers attending graduate or undergraduate programs. Being a graduate student and a single mother myself, I am interested in finding out what it is like for other women to be single mothers and students. I am also interested in finding out how such women feel about the lifestyle they are living.

The first part of this study is a questionnaire seeking demographic information about single mothers/students. It is a brief list of questions that should take about 5-10 minutes to complete, asking about you, your children and your academic program. I hope you will take the time to fill it out. All names and any identifying information will be kept completely confidential. However, should you feel the need to not answer any question, please feel free to leave it blank. At the end of the questionnaire there will be a request to participate in the second part of this study. It is completely voluntary. It involves an hour-and-a-half interview which asks for more in-depth questions about your experience as a mother and as a student. Should you wish to participate in that portion of the study, there will be a place for you to sign up. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

If you are interested in being involved in the first part of this study (the questionnaire), please sign below giving your consent. Again all information is kept completely confidential. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask. Thank you for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Brenda Temblador
118 Village Park
Amherst, MA 01002
(H) 549-7822, (W) 545-4381
I agree to participate in the above mentioned Master's thesis project. I understand that I may stop at any time and that all information is completely confidential.

Signature

90
Your age:__________  Your ethnicity:__________

How did you become a single mother: (i.e., through divorce or separation, death of a spouse or partner, or never married or involved with partner)

How long have you been a single mother:

How many children do you have:

Gender and age of children:

What childcare arrangements do you have (regular, back-up, for emergencies, vacations):

Are you involved in a love relationship:

If so, does this person live with you:

Does this person help with childcare:

Legal custody status of child(ren):

Below is a list of possible financial resources. Check all those that you receive resources from now:

____ Student loans
____ Teaching or Research Assistantships
____ Other financial aid from your school
____ Employment
____ Child support from father
____ Town aid (e.g., housing subsidy, etc.)
____ Government agencies (i.e., AFDC, etc.)
____ Help from significant other
____ Help from family members (e.g., parents)
____ Help from friends
____ Other (specify)

Are you a full-time student:____. If not, how many credits are you carrying:____ If not full-time student, are you on program fee:

What program are you in:

What degree will you receive at the end of your course of study:
How long is your program:_________

How long have you been in your program:_________

What school do you attend:_________________________

Are you employed (include TA’s and RA’s): ___. If so, How many hours per week:_____. What kind of work do you do:

Did you return to school after becoming a single mother or were you in school when you became a single mother:

What were you doing before the birth of your children:

What were you doing before starting school:

What do you think could be changed to help you function better as a single mother and a student?
Thank you for your participation in this study. You have provided information that will be useful in describing single mothers who go to school.

The second half of this study will involve an hour-and-a-half long interview about what the experience is like to be both a single mother and a student. If you would be interested in participating or would like more information about the interview before consenting to participate, please fill out the bottom portion and you will be contacted. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you once again for your participation in the future.

Sincerely,

Brenda Temblador
118 Village Park
Amherst, MA 01002
(H) 549-7822,
(W) 545-4381

Name
Address
Phone
Best times to be reached:
APPENDIX B

B. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The interview will be semi-structured and will consist of two parts. The first part is asking for information about the experience of being a single mother and a student. The second part will ask about perceptions such women have about themselves. Below is a list of questions (probes) or areas that I am interested in hearing about, but I want to leave the interview as unstructured as possible to give the participant the freedom to talk about what is salient to her.

I. Description of what the experience of being a single mother and a student is like:

- what is it like to be a single mother and a student
- what is a typical day in a typical week like for you
- how do you manage being both a parent and a student
- what are the pressures that you experience in your life
- when are the moments when it’s hardest to balance your parenting responsibilities and your school responsibilities; can you describe what it is like
- do you view your life as stressful
- what do you do if there is a conflict between parenthood and being a student

II. Perceptions of self: how they feel about themselves as parents and as students:

- how do you feel about yourself as a parent
- how do you feel about yourself as a student
- given that you feel this way as a mother and as a student, how do you feel about yourself in general (looking for ways they judge themselves)
- are there differences in your views about yourself. If so, what is your understanding of why they differ or why they are the same (looking for intrapsychic as well as external explanations—do they see the differences as part of their personality or circumstances)
- when you compare yourself to others, who do you compare yourself to

- are you friendly with other single mothers who are students

- how do you think most women are doing with motherhood or with studenthood

- what were your expectations of what motherhood would be like

- what were your expectations of what being a student would be like

- why did you decide to go (back) to school (active choice, default, no choice)

- why did you decide to become a mother (active choice, default, no choice)

- how do you feel about yourself when your responsibilities conflict? How do you feel about yourself after it is resolved

- has this been the way you felt about yourself in the past

- in what way do you see yourself as being successful in your life as a parent

- what resources do you have that make you feel this way

- in what way do you see yourself as being successful in your program

- what resources do you have that make you feel this way

- in what way do you see yourself as being successful in general

- how do you think your children see you

- how do you see your children doing

- how would your child’s life differ from parents who are in a different place

- how does your family feel about what you are doing

- how do you think the people in your program see you (see how women think they are being evaluated by others)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


