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# Lived Experiences of Graduate Students who are the Mothers of Young Children

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LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WHO ARE THE MOTHERS  
OF YOUNG CHILDREN

BY

AUDREY M. HARRINGTON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master's of Education

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2013



I need to start this dedication to my son, Montgomery. You are the inspiration behind my thesis and you contributed to its contents more than you know. I have watched you grow from a baby to a little boy in the time that I have pursued this degree, and you have made my pursuit worthwhile. To my husband, Nick, you have been the support that I needed through this journey... and we finally made it! Mom and Dad, thanks for the comforting inspiration and/or the kick in the pants when needed. John and Ginger, thank you for all of your support and encouragement. Katherine, you are my person and always will be. To the rest of my family and friends, I appreciate each and every one of you more than you will ever know and I couldn't have done it without you all! Finally, to my participants... I appreciate your willingness to contribute to something that I know will give significant meaning to others who venture down our same paths!

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## ABSTRACT

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WHO ARE THE MOTHERS  
OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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In this qualitative study, the experiences of graduate students who were also the mothers of preschool children were explored through the use of narrative interviews and autoethnographic reflections on personal experience. The study examines the various self-perceived identity dimensions of three graduate student mothers (through a series of interviews) and the researcher (via autoethnographic writings). Analysis of the data identified two superordinate themes: a) the identification of systems of support and role models (including presence and absence of said supports) and b) a negotiation of gendered social expectations as the students navigated the context of graduate school. Recommendations include the need for more university-sponsored systems of support for graduate student mothers, as well as a need for further studies of this type that include women of more diverse characteristics and circumstances.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1: Overview

As I sit in graduate class after class, I am surrounded by women and men who are like me, but not like me. I make friends easily. Always have. I don't have a difficult time opening up, once I get to know someone. Yet every time the class begins with "go around the room and introduce yourself," I secretly shudder because I have to think about what to say. How can I articulate my identity in three sentences, or twenty seconds?

Do I talk about my program of study? Interests? Hobbies? Do I mention my husband? Do I dare mention my child? If I put it out there, will I be judged as less scholarly because I choose to divide my time between school and motherhood? To be frank, I know I judged non-traditional women who said they were "mothers of x,y,z" when I was a traditional student in my undergraduate program, "Yeah, yeah, I get it... you have a kid!"

But now, here I sit in class, staring at a group of mainly single (or newly-wed) women and a few men, wondering what I should say. So I venture into the unknown and say, "Hi, I'm Audrey. I am in the Student Affairs program. I love to read, but typically I don't do anything in my free time because I have a son, Monty, who just turned two and takes up any and all of my time not spent in school." And, as the words creep from my mouth, I scan the room and see several women and men doodling in their notebooks, trying not to make eye contact with me; a few others smile and nod, as a pre-programmed polite gesture; one student (who I later learn is a mother of high school children) chuckles a little under her breath. It's over, and on the table; I have revealed my secret.

I don't know why I am surprised when my classmates look at me with the same sense of boredom or annoyance. Why wouldn't I be subject to the same judgment that I gave as a single woman, when, now, I am the student who is also a mother? I do realize that it is not terribly unusual for graduate students to have children, but in my personal graduate experience, I feel very much an outsider among my peers. From the perspective of a mother, I see differently because my son literally embodies a part of my identity that I could not ignore if I tried. Despite this, every time I am asked in the classroom setting to describe myself in a brief statement, I feel torn as to whether or not to reveal that I am a mother! Why?

### **1.2: Statement of Problem**

The previous statement is one example of the issue I am addressing in this study. I began this research trying to discover if other graduate student mothers felt the way that I felt as a graduate student with a young child. I needed to know that other women had "been there; done that," and that they had survived and succeeded. I also wanted to use those experiences as a way of negotiating an understanding of the experiences of graduate student mothers. As I explored the idea of researching this topic, I realized that the fear and frustration that I was experiencing was coming from a place much deeper than I felt could really be explored by a few interviews with people in similar circumstances. That was when I decided that I needed to combine those interviews with a process of self-reflective analysis to truly learn what I was hoping to learn with my research.

The population of graduate student mothers goes generally unstudied through qualitative research. Also, by autoethnographically writing on this topic, I am extending

the existing autoethnographic research in this area by relating my experiences to the experiences of others. The intent of this project was to obtain personal insights on what it meant to be both a graduate student and a mother. A second goal was to suggest possible changes in the support services offered to this growing population of students.

### **1.3: Purpose and Research Questions**

“The literature on high achieving women, academic motherhood, and work-life balance raises awareness about some of the issues facing academic women, but does not address issues of persistence (how they do it) or motivation (why they do it)” (Pasque & Wimmer, 2011 slide 11). The present study aims to understand “how they do it” and “why they do it” (Pasque & Wimmer, 2011 slide 11) by negotiating an understanding of the lived experiences of graduate student mothers. In addition, this study uses an autoethnographic perspective to introspectively look at my own experience as a graduate student mother.

### **1.4: Statement of Potential Significance**

There are several potential uses for the research that I conducted. In recent years there has been a steadily rising rate of growth in student enrollment at degree-granting institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). What is most important to note, with regard to this increase, is the degree at which women are entering higher education, most notably post-baccalaureate programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics:

Since 1988, the number of females in postbaccalaureate programs has exceeded the number of males. Between 2000 and 2001, the number of male full-time

postbaccalaureate students increased by 38 percent, compared with a 62 percent increase in the number of females. (U.S. Department of Education, 2012)

To reiterate, this means that nearly twice as many females as males are entering the post-baccalaureate educational arena. Thus it is imperative that research further explore the challenges women face in academia, and it is necessary for the research to include the experiences of graduate student mothers.

### **1.5: Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework**

In addition to the importance of studying graduate students who are mothers, there is significance in utilizing Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). It (MMDI) is a recently-emerged model in the student development literature that offers a way to look at the intersectionality of aspects of identity. Intersectionality is defined by Deaux (2001) as, "a term introduced by critical legal theorists to refer to the specific conditions that exist when one holds two or more social statuses" (p. 4). Overall, this research used a social constructivist and interpretivist format to allow for the narratives of the participants to speak for themselves. A social constructivist format looks primarily at the individual formation of subjective meanings that participants gain as a result of their lived experiences. "[Social] constructivist researchers often address the 'processes' of interaction among individuals ... [and] also focus on the contexts in which people live and work..." (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). In combination with social constructivism, interpretivist format allows a researcher to recognize the impact of their own experiences on their interpretations and place themselves within the research to acknowledge this fact while they "... make sense [of] (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2007, p. 21).

## **1.6: Summary of Methodology**

This research project was designed using two methods of inquiry: traditional qualitative interviews with coding of transcripts, and autoethnographic reflections. In essence, this work explored personal interpretations of lived experiences of four graduate students who are also mothers (three participants and the researcher). Hermeneutic phenomenology, or as Creswell (2007) termed it, “research as oriented toward lived experience (phenomenology) and interpreting the ‘texts’ of life (hermeneutics)” (p. 59), was therefore chosen as an epistemological and methodological framework for this study. This epistemological “study of knowledge” (Steup, 2012) and methodology is represented through autoethnographic writing.

Three interviews with three participants were conducted. The first interview was designed to build rapport and gain background information from the participants; the second interview was comprised of more focused, in-depth questions regarding the participants’ personal experiences as graduate student mothers; and the final interview was focused on the participants’ identification of identity dimensions as examined through the lens of Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and inductively coded according to the researcher’s initial readings and reactions. Autoethnographic reflections were also included in the analysis of the data.

## **1.7: Definition of Terms**

The following terms were used within this text, their definitions and citations are as follows:

*Autoethnography*: “An approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, 2011).

*Epistemology*: “. . . the study of knowledge and justified belief” (Steup, 2012).

*Hermeneutic Phenomenology*: “. . . research as oriented toward lived experience (phenomenology) and interpreting the ‘texts’ of life (hermeneutics)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59).

*Identity Practices*: “. . . includes data on the personal strategies student mothers utilize as they manage their dual identities in interaction with dominant cultural ideals” (Lynch, 2008, p. 595).

*Identity Support*: “. . . details the support graduate student mothers receive from their faculty or advisors, peers, and families” (Lynch, 2008, p. 595).

*Interpretivism*: “Researchers recognize that their own background has shaped their interpretations of the research and they, in turn, position themselves within their research to acknowledge how their interpretations flow from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21)

*Intersectionality*: “The condition in which a person simultaneously belongs to two or more social categories or social statuses and the unique consequences that result from the combination” (Deaux, 2001, p. 1).

*Social Constructivism*: “A worldview which allows individuals a way to seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. A social constructivist believes that people form subjective meanings of their lived

experiences, and those meanings are formed through interaction with others” (Creswell, 2007, p. 20-21).

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **2.1: Topics, Purposes, and Methods of the Literature Review**

The scope of topics covered in this literature review was relegated to a general focus on motherhood in academia, as well as research that utilized narratives or case studies to explore identity issues among graduate student mothers. Studies that utilized an autoethnographic exploration of specific phenomenon were also explored. The purpose of utilizing such studies was to link the phenomenon of being a graduate student mother with the power of narrative and autoethnography to explore the identities of this largely unstudied and growing population of students. The method of discovering the literature was done by way of both library journal and/or literature search for any combination of the words “graduate student,” “mother,” “gender,” “higher education,” “women,” and “parent.” These terms were also entered into the library search engines LexisNexis, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. When searching these databases, I chose to search all databases within each program in order to allow for the broadest and most in-depth results possible within each search engine. Because it proved challenging to find relevant previous research, I also utilized references from within articles. Scholarly books were referenced to assist in building a historical understanding of women in higher education, designing the research study, and constructing an understanding of the model used within this study.

Methodologically, I began my literature review by considering the impacts of narrative in understanding the depth of the existing research on identity. Next, I looked at literature that explored the overall experiences of women in higher education. Although the study of women and multiple identities is not necessarily a new concept, the idea of

researching women who hold the multiple identities of graduate student and parent is only recently gaining attention. Therefore, the majority of the research located for review was relatively recent. Finally, I examined the role of autoethnographic studies on the exploration of common phenomena and how autoethnography has been used to positively influence society's understanding of the unique experiences of individuals.

## **2.2: Description and Critique of Scholarly Literature**

### **Use of narration and identity.**

According to Pasque and Wimmer (2011):

Interest in understanding multiple identities emerges from a growing awareness of the non-singular nature in which individual identities are constructed and self-perceived . . . Student affairs educators must not presume what is most central to individuals, but must instead listen for how a person sees herself. (slide 15)

This statement speaks to the need for research that includes a narrative aspect in order to give voice to the experiences that women live on a daily basis as both graduate students and mothers.

The use of narratives helps to avoid assumptions, and “. . . narratives have become the select method for exploring the lives of the ‘other’ and more importantly a way of learning about each other” (Johnson-Bailey, 2010, p. 79). Moreover, narrative accounts are used not only as a way of educating, “. . . but also they are seen as a way of bringing people together . . . [to] better understand and construct meaning for themselves (Johnson-Bailey, 2010, p. 78). In other words, narratives allow for a bridging of

differences, a creation of new knowledge and understanding, and ultimately offer opportunities to explore the ways individuals view themselves and others.

In her study of 30 female doctoral candidates, Karen Lynch (2008) allowed her participants' narratives to guide her exploration of the conflict between holding the symbolic identities of both mother and graduate student. The study “. . . centers around the question of how public and private mindsets concerning the meaning of both identities—‘graduate student’ and ‘mother’—combine to problematize women’s educational attainment . . .” (p. 585).

Akin to the present study, Lynch (2008) focused on identity development, and what she identified as either “Identity Practices” or “Identity Support”:

Identity Practices—includes data on the personal strategies student mothers utilize as they manage their dual identities in interaction with dominant cultural ideals. . .

Identity Support—details the support graduate student mothers receive from their faculty or advisors, peers, and families. (p. 595)

Thus Lynch (2008) used elements of identity to determine how her participants functioned in dual identities, and also utilized narratives to explain how the women perceived themselves with regard to both identities (mother and graduate student).

While the similarity between Lynch’s (2008) study and the present study was clearly in the use of narratives in identity exploration, Lynch tied her findings to the attrition and retention of graduate student mothers. In addition, she found that there are several universities making an attempt to accommodate the special needs of graduate student mothers, thus impacting retention, but notes that those universities are primarily Ivy League and representative of only a small number of graduate student mothers.

Somewhat similar to Lynch's (2008) study was Smith and Steck's (2006) study, which utilized narratives to convey how women were forced to, at times, mask their emotions when balancing the dual identities of both graduate student and mother. The Smith and Steck study drew on Arlie Hochschild's (1979) "emotion work" theory, which stated that an ". . . individual often works on inducing or inhibiting feelings so as to render them 'appropriate' to a situation" (p. 551). Keeping this in mind, Smith and Steck's (2006) study looked at how women present themselves to others in academia, how others respond to them, and how graduate student mothers in turn manage the emotions involved in those interactions. The use of narration in combination with emotion theory and the use of narration along with identity theory are not directly parallel processes. However, this study was deemed relevant to my study because its use of narration in exploring emotion work provided an outlet for the voices of women in a way that was similar to the present study (Smith & Steck, 2006).

The importance of Smith and Steck's work was the light that it shed on the difficult social navigation required of women who hold two very complex identities. Limitations, however, were still present. The sample of women used for this study was comprised solely of sociology graduate students. By national standards, the participants would likely be considered lower in socioeconomic status, and, as a result, could be forced to automatically endure more emotion work than if their sample had been comprised of graduate student mothers representative of all socioeconomic classes (Smith & Steck, 2006).

Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) was also influential in the present study. This model drew "on feminist

theoretical conceptualizations of multiple identities . . .” and “feminist narratives (that) demonstrate recognition of the concurrent, nonhierarchical experience of multiple identities, in other words, intersectionality” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 245). Essentially, the MMDI was founded on an understanding of identity as consisting of multiple, intersecting dimensions that become more or less salient, depending on context. More importantly, the model utilizes narratives as a way of understanding identity development, as well as determining how individuals make meaning of contextual influences. It must be noted, however, that the MMDI (2007) is relatively new and needs to be used with larger and more diverse populations. This study, while not testing the model, offers additional information on its use with a population different from that upon which it was created.

#### **Women in higher education.**

Historically, women faced barriers when entering higher education. Almost 30 years ago, Barbara Miller Solomon (1985) noted that “. . . the more education a woman had the more she determined to use it in gainful employment and in voluntary service” (Miller Solomon, 1985, p. 172). This posed a problem when in the 1930’s and 40’s women were expected to work outside of the home only if it was financially necessary, and very rarely was it acceptable for a mother to take on that role. Not surprisingly, “to facilitate the combination of roles (e.g., motherhood and worker), they (women) consciously sought jobs with flexible hours . . .” (p. 174). Not much has changed from that era to today, as many women still choose careers based on flexibility and family-centered policies. However, Miller Solomon (1985) attributed the stressors on previous generations of women as being present not during college but more likely after they were

married (p. 174). In today's society, the conflict for women who are mothers and also hold paid jobs has changed in that the combination is seen as socially acceptable, if exhausting (2003, Public Opinion). Tensions are more likely to occur once children are introduced to the dual-career family, as society is still ambiguous about the acceptability of mothers being away from very young children. Pressure is even more pronounced for women who have graduate degrees. In an online Babble blog post (2007), an Ivy-League-educated stay-at-home mom discussed how she felt about giving up her promising career as a doctor to stay at home with her children during their pre-school years. She said:

We are the generation that took pride in the fact that we could break the glass ceiling or devote our lives to our children; society would accept anything.

But it won't. It's very difficult to work overnights when you're breastfeeding.

There's always pressure to work more. So we have to give up something. And if you're an educated woman, that usually means neglecting your kids or your career, and feeling guilty either way. ("An Ivy-League," 2007)

In an earlier, related study, Louise Story (2005) distributed an email survey to 138 freshman and senior women at Yale. The results showed that 60% of the women planned to become stay-at-home mothers once they had children (Story, 2005). It is unclear as to why these women planned to stay at home, but it is important nonetheless to note that many women who are highly educated expressed the intention to postpone their careers when they became parents.

While some literature on women in higher education relates directly to graduate student mothers (Kuperberg, 2009; Miller Solomon, 1985; Story, 2005), other research focused on fertility rates and outside factors that affected the success of graduate women

(most often determined through attrition rates and grades). One example of such an investigation was Pinilla and Muñoz's (2005) quantitative study of graduate student mothers in Venezuela. They noted the obvious struggle that women had when juggling the identities of student and mother and found that academic performance (as measured by GPA, number of years at the university, and the number of approved courses per year) was impacted by being both a graduate student and mother. Compared to traditional college students, graduate student mothers in this study had lower academic achievement (Pinilla & Muñoz, 2005).

While this information is relevant to determining a difference between groups, the study was not able to clearly distinguish reasons behind the differences noted, perhaps due to the quantitative design. In addition, the research was conducted in Venezuela; therefore, a non-U.S. culture, as well in as a different educational system, which is a context that this present study aims to address (Pinilla & Muñoz, 2005).

Another example of a quantitative study representing women in higher education was Arielle Kuperberg's (2008) work examining the nature of motherhood and graduate education from 1970 to 2000. In this study, Kuperberg (2008) found that women enrolled in graduate school were increasingly likely to be mothers of small children; almost half of graduate student women gave birth while enrolled in graduate school. This article concluded that a review of maternity leave policies and childcare options needed to be conducted. This study noted that not only was there a delay in childbirth among all groups of women across the time period from 1970-2000, but that the delay was more pronounced among women with graduate degrees.

While Kuperberg (2008) looked at information that was relevant to the population of individuals within my study, her lack of a substantial population for parts of her study result in some findings that could be misleading. One example of this was that her sample of graduate women, who became parents while enrolled in graduate school, was comprised of only 20 women. It would be interesting to see this study replicated with a larger population of women who become mothers in graduate school.

In their study of graduate student parents, Springer, Parker, and Leviten-Reid (2009) “. . . describe[d] a growing population of graduate student parents and discuss[ed] the theoretical and practical tensions between society’s views of idealized mother and academia’s vision of an idealized graduate student” (p. 437). They concluded, like Kuperberg (2008), that there was a steady increase in the population of graduate student mothers, and tensions exist that need to be negotiated between the views of those involved in both academia and motherhood. This study further revealed that few policies and minimal support services exist for graduate student parents of either gender (Springer et al., 2009).

While these studies tend to reinforce each other in terms of pointing out the basic issues, there was an absence of narration to illustrate the tensions that are noted between what it means to be an ideal student and mother. Also, the study conducted by Springer et al. (2009) briefly notated the existence of informal social support systems. It would have been interesting to see whether students would have taken advantage of formal university supports, had they been available. Likewise, while support systems are desired by graduate student parents as a whole, the study conducted by Springer et al. (2009) added

a focus on fathers; however, there was no claim that men face pressures similar to what women experience when combining the identities of graduate student and parent.

In keeping with Springer et al. (2009), Danielle Estes (2011) looked at both mothers and fathers in higher education and how they managed the dual identities of both student and parent. She noted that “The student identity has incipient, adolescent, beginning, rookie, and naïve connotations—none of which are particularly consonant with what we expect of parents, who should be mature, established, and financially secure” (p. 199). Along with this, she compared the experience of a parent entering school to that of women entering the workforce in that “. . . student-parents are attempting this within institutional and cultural contexts that have not caught up to the realities of their lives” (p. 199). It was this experience to which she attributed the development of an all new, student-parent identity that was largely seen as positive in the students’ eyes. However, she suggested that “when they become student-parents, they lose valued attributes associated with the parent and student identity. As student-parents they cannot fit into either ideal” (p. 202). Despite this dilemma, Estes (2011) found that “student-parents merge their dissonant identities by interpreting their education as beneficial to their children and their children as advantageous to their education” (p. 216). In other words, she found that student-parents used their children as a bridge between their two identities in a way that made these students able to define both identities as positive and meaningful. There is significance in this finding for my study because I asked the three participants to be self-reflective regarding how they made meaning of the dual identities in ways that were affirming and also challenging to their identities within the context of graduate school.

Another notable study was one completed by Neil Gilbert (2005) entitled “What Do Women Really Want?” In this article, Gilbert attempted to make sense of current social policies and their impacts on women who earn advanced degrees. Additionally, Gilbert (2005) examined life-style trends and preferences of women across time, while placing them in sociological categories of motherhood and child raising, such as “traditional,” “neo-traditional,” “modern,” and “post-modern.” (p. 25) He not only explored feminist traditions and expectations, he also proposed some connections between policies available to women and their effects on life-style choices. In other words, he suggested that policies, such as extended maternity leave, can be designed to advance women in their careers whether they personally hold a “traditional,” “neo-traditional,” “modern,” or “post-modern” value system (Gilbert, 2005, p. 25).

Some social policies that Gilbert (2005) hoped would be instituted in the U.S. included “tax credits and home-care allowances to full-time homemakers with children under five . . . pension credits toward retirement for parents who stay home to care for children . . . tuition for academic and technical training, and preferential points on federal civil service examinations” (p. 37).

To locate literature on such social policies is challenging, yet likely to become more commonplace as researchers continue to investigate the experiences of women who are graduate students and mothers. An article by Saranna Thornton (2005), briefly discussed ways in which universities can become more parent-friendly. She suggested several policy changes, such as developing a system to delay the requirements in time that it would take to complete a thesis for graduate student parents. Thornton also opined that universities move away from informal maternity leave for students and move toward

formal paid maternity leave, and that the university should extend exceptions to guarantee that students can retain school-funded health insurance. Finally, she suggested that post-secondary institutions provide day care options to their student-parents and that the rates for such services be on an income-based scale. Thornton (2005) noted that graduate students were likely to become future colleagues in higher education and, if this was the case, investment in these students would be recouped later by the university.

Similar to Thornton's (2005) article, Veronica Mendoza (2006) explored policy changes at the university level by looking at changes that Stanford University made to its policies regarding graduate student mothers. According to the article, "under [Stanford's] policy, pregnant graduate student mothers are eligible for an academic accommodation period" (p. 12). During this time the student would, as Thornton (2005) suggested, continue to be eligible for health care services, have full-time academic status, continue to receive fellowships and financial aid, and could postpone certain academic milestones. Mendoza noted, as well, that student and faculty feedback on this policy had been mostly positive. While these articles highlighted a growing need for social policy change, they were challenging to locate and provide relatively meager examples of what could exist in the form of research on this topic.

### **Autoethnography.**

Possibly the most difficult aspect of this literature review was locating auto-ethnographic articles that were solid representations of the type of research conducted in the present study. For the most part, autoethnographic research is structurally unique to each study, so I selected articles that represented an ideal I hoped to mirror in the

autoethnographic elements of my research study, as well as a study that pertained topically.

While scouring literature to find strong examples of autoethnography related to this topic, I discovered a piece written by Lisa Tillman (2011). In her autoethnographic article, she explored her conflicted feelings of “whether to seek (or postpone or avoid) parenthood and when” (p. 1). What was of particular interest was that she explored these conflicting feelings while fighting for tenure in an assistant professor position at a large university. Topically, there is significance to this article in relation to the current study. The nature of her research explored the benefits and costs of having children while pursuing a life in higher education. The primary difference between Tillman’s study and the present study is that Tillman explored higher education from the view of a female faculty member contemplating parenthood, and the present study looks at the perspective of graduate students who are already mothers.

Barbara Jago (2006) shed light on what it means to conduct meaningful autoethnographic research:

I know I am supposed to . . . share my work with other “professionals” . . . to expand the exploration of narrative theory, to develop autoethnography as a “creative analytic practice” (Richardson, 2000), and most important, to encourage conversation and develop empathy concerning the issue . . . But as a “vulnerable observer,” I must also locate my own story within those discursive fields.

Unfortunately, the truth is that writing . . . is very frustrating. (p. 405)

With this statement, Jago (2006) illustrated the importance of striving to build conversations about the topic of graduate student mothers and their struggles and needs.

In writing an autoethnographic thesis, I, too make myself vulnerable; I am putting my experience into print, where it forever acknowledges my struggles and accomplishments. Her article laid the claim that this type of writing has a place in formal research.

In her autoethnographic piece “Autoethnographic Emotion: Studying and Living Emotional Labor in Scholarly Life,” Sherianne Shuler (2007) explored the emotional connection that human service work employees have to their daily work. In exploring the emotional connection, she volunteered to be a first responder, of sorts, at a local domestic abuse shelter. As Shuler (2007) gained personal experience in this type of human service work, she encountered several instances in which she struggled to manage the emotions she felt as a human service work employee, which made it difficult for her to completely understand how others, in the same situation, managed their emotions. In her study, she made a poignant statement that helped to guide the writing behind this present study:

And in light of a scholarly community that still values objectivity, or at least critical distance, what does it mean to admit that the emotional labor requirements from various areas of life and work bleed into each other and that I am changed by this experience? What does it mean to admit to being what Behar (1996) calls a "vulnerable observer?" And finally, what does it mean to reflect on how this data collection and analysis impacts my whole life, my teaching, my other scholarship, my feminist commitments, my relationships . . . and how these things all also impact my project? (p. 260)

This statement reflects the perspective that autoethnography can bring to the field of academic research. It also reminds researchers that there are intricacies in the act of

researching, and that there is merit in consciously inserting oneself into the research experience.

Another author who explored what it means to autoethnographically write is Christopher Poulos (2012). In his article, he reflected on what writing autoethnographically has done for him as a researcher, as he stated that this form of writing and research is “. . . a way to write through . . .” his experiences, and to come out at the end of the research understanding the true meaning behind his experiences and their contribution to the world. Poulos (2012) also contributed to the meaningful nature of autoethnography when he stated:

Writing this way has taught me that narrative has the power to evoke, to invoke, to provoke, and to stoke the fires of my consciousness . . . in ways that no other form of discourse can. Writing in this way has taught me that autoethnographic writing is, indeed, a method of inquiry . . . that I can write my way through even the most traumatic memories . . . and pick up the pieces, and examine them, and, even, eventually put them back together, rebuild, move on. Writing this way has taught me that the path to healing is a narrative path, that the power of narrative is a power of transformation . . . in, fact, [it is] a path that carries me through memory to transcendence. (p. 324-325)

Autoethnography as transcendent and transformative was a theme of many articles (Boyd, 2008; Glowacki-Dudka, Treff, & Usman, 2005; Poulos, 2012). Authors, much like Poulos, have suggested that autoethnography be used as a transformative learning tool. Boyd (2008) explored how autoethnography helped him learn about the unintentional impacts that his whiteness had on his daily life. Boyd (2008) stated:

. . . through their work, autoethnographers explore certain aspects of their experiences as a mean to gaining a broader understanding of a concept or theoretical model . . . and (autoethnography) has come to refer to a variety of qualitative research practices focusing on the influences of cultural and societal factors on one's self-understanding. (p. 215)

Boyd (2008) added emphasis in the use of autoethnography as a way of using newly acquired self-understanding as a way of transforming one's behaviors and documenting personal growth.

Glowacki-Dudka, Treff, and Usman (2005) took a perspective similar to Boyd's (2008) when they concluded that “. . . autoethnography, as a research method, and educational practice, may be a promising way to promote personal transformation which . . . may lead to cross-cultural understanding and social change” (p. 30). They suggested that the use of autoethnography will help to create more self-reflective individuals and, by simply doing that, could be used a tool to impact social change.

Not all views of autoethnography are so positive, however. It is because of this that authors such as Margot Duncan (2004) explored the negative perceptions of autoethnography as research and then created guidelines for how this type of research should be used to have the impacts that Boyd (2008) and other suggested. Duncan (2004) observed:

If the value of autoethnography is to be understood more clearly by the wider research community, those engaged in this emerging art need to assist their readers in judging its worth . . . They should look for how the account clarifies confusing issues, uncovers hidden aspects of the situation, and/or anticipates

future possibilities . . . [and] know one's own experience and sharing that knowledge. As qualitative researchers, willing to confess that reality is based on perception, why should we not examine more fully what constitutes our perceptions. (p. 12-13)

In other words, Duncan (2004) suggested that autoethnography has its place in qualitative research and should be appreciated for its ability to explore first-hand the perspectives of the researcher.

In the final piece of autoethnographic literature that was used for this review, a feminist author offered a personal account of the impacts on herself, and her friends and family, as she searched for visual representations of her role model, Wonder Woman. When asked to complete a college art project about her connection to men, Averett (2009) created a project about Wonder Woman. As a symbol of both masculine and feminine strengths, Averett (2009) assumed she would be able to locate a Wonder Woman figure or toy in any toy store. When she realized that this was not the case, she made it her personal mission to make sense of what kept Wonder Woman less visible than male comic book hero figures in popular culture. Within her article, Averett (2009) said that, "through this process of researching the self . . . writers become better researchers and more active in resisting oppressive social conditions . . ." (p. 361). It was through her search that she found ". . . the experience of sharing our narratives growing and empowering" (p. 366). In essence, Averett (2009) not only compelled others to question the absence of Wonder Woman, she challenged the reader, and future researchers, to see how autoethnographic writing can become empowering and transformative.

So, not only were authors of autoethnographic pieces (Averett, 2009; Boyd, 2008; Glowacki-Dudka et. al., 2005; Jago, 2006; Poulos, 2012; Shuler, 2007) finding that they were personally impacted and changed by their writing, they were finding it was a necessary research medium that could impact social change and transformation. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) state:

When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity . . . Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. (2. Doing autoethnography: The process).

So, not only can autoethnography be used as a form of personal expression, it is a way of connecting those who have lived experience with those that have not shared the same lived experience.

### **2.3: Inferences for Forthcoming Study**

The previous section focused on analyzing sources independent of one another. However, the true benefit of using the aforementioned sources was really in how the pieces intertwined to create unique impacts on the present study. As is noted, there is literature that speaks to the importance of studying women in higher education. However, there was particular benefit to using narratives to allow the voices of women to tell their own stories regarding their experiences. By giving women voice, the authors (Estes,

2011; Kuperberg, 2008; Lynch, 2008; Smith, & Steck, 2006; Springer et al., 2009;) were able to provide a clear picture of what is needed by way of support systems, future research, etc. Autoethnography added the voice of personal narrative to provide unique perspective on the research question and process.

As is necessary with all research, a diverse array of studies has been referenced. Merely looking at one type of study (e.g., autoethnography) would not have fully benefited this research. The quantitative studies reviewed (Kuperberg, 2009; Pinilla & Munoz, 2005; Springer et al., 2009), pointed to a clear disparity in the measurable success of graduate student mothers. The qualitative studies that were referenced (Duncan, 2004; Estes, 2011; Gilbert, 2005; Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Lynch, 2008; Thornton, 2005; Tillman, 2011), demonstrated the benefit of using narrative as a form of exploring identity, as well as understanding more complex and not-so-easily measurable factors such as what constitutes a system of support and what it means to navigate social situations. In attempting to answer the difficult questions of “how,” and “why,” qualitative, autoethnographic research was a strong and effective methodology and was employed in this project.

## Chapter 3: Methods

### 3.1: Overview of Methodology

This research was approached and designed around constructivist (or social constructionist) formats. Because this study investigated an understanding of the nature of the lived experiences of graduate student mothers, hermeneutical phenomenology was the framework around which this study was designed. An expert in the field of phenomenological research, Max van Manen (1990) asserted that phenomenological research is created not simply by following a set of rules, but by combining various research methods. The process consists of choosing a phenomenon in which the researcher is personally interested; reflecting on themes or common threads within the lived experience; writing a description of the phenomenon, while focusing strongly on the topic; and, ultimately, making an interpretation of the meaning behind the lived phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 59).

Likely the most important element of hermeneutical phenomenology as it related to this study was the use of autoethnography as a way of understanding and “interpreting the ‘texts’ of life” (Creswell, p. 59). The use of autobiographical writings, in this study, bridged both autoethnography and hermeneutic research methods by adding to the interpreted text of lived experiences. Because I had first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon of being both a graduate student and a mother, I was able to make meaning of the experiences of interviewees in a way that allowed me to not only interpret those experiences for others, but to reflect on, make meaning of, and gain insight into, my personal experiences with the phenomenon as well. This approach allowed me to

systematically integrate my personal experience with the research conducted on this phenomenon rather than purposefully (and perhaps artificially) attempt to distance myself from my topic.

Methodologically, this research project utilized a series of three interviews with three female graduate students in a student affairs professional preparation program who were also the mothers of young children. After the interviews, I analyzed and coded the data (participants' responses), adding in my own personal reflections and reactions. Excerpts from my personal journal entries, written both prior to and during the interview process, enriched and informed the autoethnographic portion of this project.

### **3.2: Exploratory Questions**

When I first decided that I wanted to complete a study on graduate student mothers, I was selfishly motivated, in a way. I was curious about whether others in my circumstances experienced the same emotions. I constantly struggled with pressures that I felt between the identities that I juggled on a daily basis. It was important to me to also combine this inquiry with my passion for my field of study: student affairs. So, I refined my initial question and set out to create a study that would explore how mothers navigate their experience in graduate school. It was my goal to better understand the experiences of other graduate student mothers and to make sense of my own experience as well. Because I realized that each individual was likely to have an experience that was unique to herself, I never intended to create a study that would catalogue, critique, or explain away participants' experiences; I have sought autoethnography as a means of representing my own unique perspective in the hope that others will benefit from reading about mine, just as I have benefitted from the stories of my peers.

### **3.3: Research Procedures**

#### **Epistemology.**

Social constructivism proposes that individuals make sense of the world in which they live by exploring social interactions and cultural norms. “In terms of practice, the questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Social constructivism invites subjective interpretations made by the researcher to be included in the research and therefore assists the researcher in being aware of his or her own meaning-making process. As a research method grounded in social context, autoethnography allowed me to make interpretations from the beginning, while constructing the meaning of my situation as both a graduate student mother and a researcher. By addressing and incorporating my interpretations into the research, I was acknowledging that I brought my own set of beliefs and assumptions with me, before I even began my study.

#### **Theoretical perspective.**

This research study was informed by the Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). This model was chosen as a framework because the MMDI provided a framework for examining multiple identities within graduate school. The MMDI also allowed me to explore the intersectionality of these multiple identities held by graduate student mothers.

The MMDI is built upon the basic tenets that 1) identity is understood as having multiple dimensions; 2) the salience of the dimensions depends on the context and

contextual influences of the situation in which the participant lives at a given moment in time; and 3) identity development is fluid and dynamic as opposed to linear and static (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). I chose to reference this model because it “. . . abandoned universal truth and recognized the positive and negative social, political, and cultural differences between and within groups” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 245). The “model is two-dimensional, depicting the interaction of context, meaning making, and identity perceptions” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 245). The MMDI is also seen “as one of the first holistic models of student development” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 247). For these reasons, I wanted to reference the MMDI in this study, as being a mother in graduate school can be a marginalized identity. It was my intent to explore the experiences of a small group of graduate student mothers and to use the MMDI to assist the participants in self-reporting intersections of their perceived identity dimensions; further, the MMDI could help participants see these intersections within the contexts of life inside and outside of the graduate school setting.

As represented in the Figure 3.1, there are three basic elements of this theory. The first element, self-perceptions of multiple identity dimensions, is represented by what looks like planets orbiting a sun. In this element, each dimension acts as its own independent entity but exists in conjunction with the other dimensions to create the identity as a whole. The center ball, or “sun,” represents the core of a person’s identity. The second element is the meaning-making filter, which looks similar to a sieve. This element works in conjunction with the third element, contextual influences. The filter acts, in a sense, to protect the identity from contextual influences that might carry negative impact (Evans et al., 2010, p. 247).

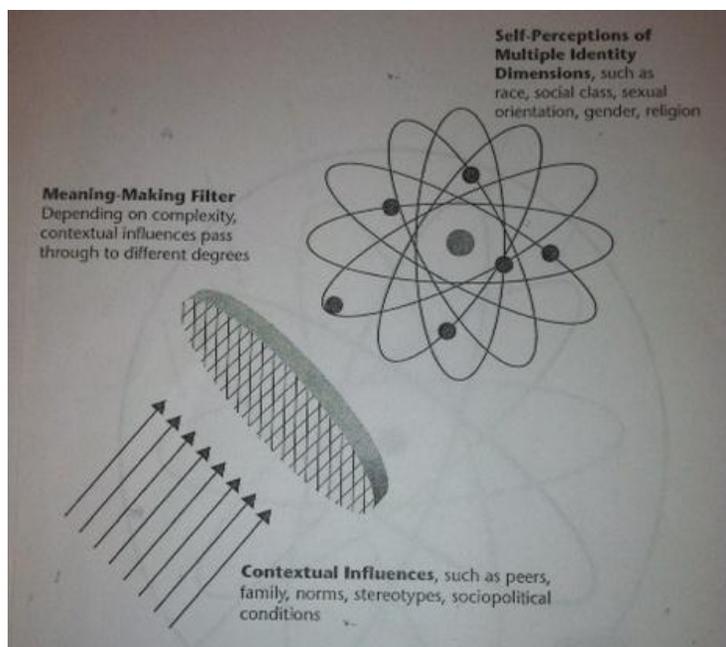


Figure 3.1. Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. From Abes, E. S., Jones, S. R., & McEwen, M. K. (2007). Reconceptualizing the model of multiple dimensions of identity: The role of meaning-making capacity in the construction of multiple identities. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(1), 7.

As described by the authors, the individual has control, in some ways, over what is allowed to shape identity. For example, if a woman's family of origin holds rigid notions about what constitutes appropriate behavior for women, and those notions do not include obtaining professional preparation for a career, that woman may elect to not allow (i.e., filter out) those expectations so that they do not unduly influence her own career and educational choices. This model acknowledges that context has an impact on identity perception and meaning making, which was very important to this study.

### **Specific methodology used.**

I developed a design that would allow me to work with a broader initial research question, and give me the opportunity to get to know my participants well. I knew that a qualitative study would also allow me to integrate autoethnographic thoughts and reflections as I researched, and would encourage me to outwardly reflect on my own

experience while making meaning of the research experience. The inclusion of all of these elements was highly useful in an effective and rich examination of my initial research question, as well as additional sub-questions. The overall research questions guiding my work were: “How can one negotiate an understanding of the lived experiences of graduate student mothers?” and "How do I experience and understand the process of performing auto-ethnographic research?"

Current students and recent graduates of a professional preparation program in student affairs at a Midwestern university who were mothers of at least one pre-school aged child were invited by email to participate in my study. Prospective participants were asked to respond directly to me via email indicating their interest. An informed consent form was then emailed to those participants who met the criteria, and three recent graduates agreed to participate in the study. Participants were given small incentives (a flash drive and coffee card) after the final interview to thank them for their participation in the study.

Table 3.1 provides a snapshot of the participants, along with self-identified relevant demographic information.

	Kerri*	Charlotte*	Hope*
Age:	Late 30's-Early 40's	Mid 30's	Early 30's
Marital status:	Married	Married	Married
# of children:	1	1	3
Degree Status:	Recent graduate; Employed full-time	Recent graduate; Employed full-time	Recent graduate; Pursuing Ed.D.

Race:	White	White	White
Religion:	Discovering	Christian	Christian
Sexual orientation:	Heterosexual	Heterosexual	Heterosexual

Table 3.1 Participants

\*Names changed to protect identity.

As Table 3.1 shows, all participants in this study were White women who had recently earned a master's degree in a professional preparation program. Each had at least one pre-school aged child and all were married. I chose to describe Kerri as "discovering" in terms of religion because she did not speak directly of a particular affiliation (although she did mention being raised as a Christian). She spoke eloquently about her faith journey and how she finds spiritual replenishment in nature. Kerri also spoke of diverse experiences with individuals from many different faith traditions, and how those experiences impacted her view of traditional religion. Demographically, these women are very similar to each other and to me. These participants were not chosen intentionally because of this; however, in retrospect, I feel that their similarities to me allowed me an opportunity to explore and examine connections among our various experiences.

Three one-hour interviews were conducted with each participant. The first participant, Kerri, was in her late 30's-early 40's, and had one child of pre-school age. The second participant, Charlotte, was in her mid-30's, and had one child of pre-school age. The third participant, Hope, was in her late 20's, and had three children of pre-school age. All three were recent graduates of a master's-level program in student affairs or college counseling, and Hope was currently enrolled in a doctoral program. All three participants are Caucasian. Kerri and Charlotte now have full-time positions in higher

education. All of the participants were married and had spouses who were engaged in demanding careers. One participant was available to interview by an internet video source (Skype); the other two participants engaged in face-to-face interviews. All interviews were audio recorded. As the researcher, I took notes during the interviews. During the final interviews, participants were asked to identify their identity dimensions on a blank copy of the MMPI (see Figure 3.2), which was kept for later use in data analysis. When taking notes during the interviews, I inductively reasoned what the participants said and noted phrases and information that fit my research question and that would later be useful in my interpretation and reflection upon the interviews.

In the initial interviews, participants were asked questions that focused on their background (see Appendix A). These questions were used to build rapport, while gaining insights into participants' current and past life situations. By doing this, I was able to build connections and notice areas where I may have needed further clarification in my questioning and in their answering.

The second interview expanded upon background information gathered in interview one and moved into questions designed to elicit participants' experiences as graduate student mothers (see Appendix B). I felt it was important to ask participants to describe the main identity dimensions they felt they possessed and asked them to reflect on these dimensions during this interview.

The MMPI provided the principle framework for the final interviews. Participants were asked to name and discuss primary aspects of personal identity dimensions as depicted in Figure 3.1. In other words, each participant self-selected what she believed to be important personal identity dimensions (e.g., race, social class, mother, wife, etc.) and

then chose where to place those dimensions in relation to her center core, as depicted in the model. Questions in this interview were minimal and were used primarily to encourage participants' reflections on and interpretations of what they experienced while completing the model (see Appendix C) (see Figure 3.2). In the third interview, I wanted to give participants plenty of time to expand upon their interpretations regarding how they viewed their identities in terms of the model, and to discuss interactions among multiple aspects of their identities. I also asked participants to reflect on the overall experience of juggling multiple identity dimensions as a graduate student mother.

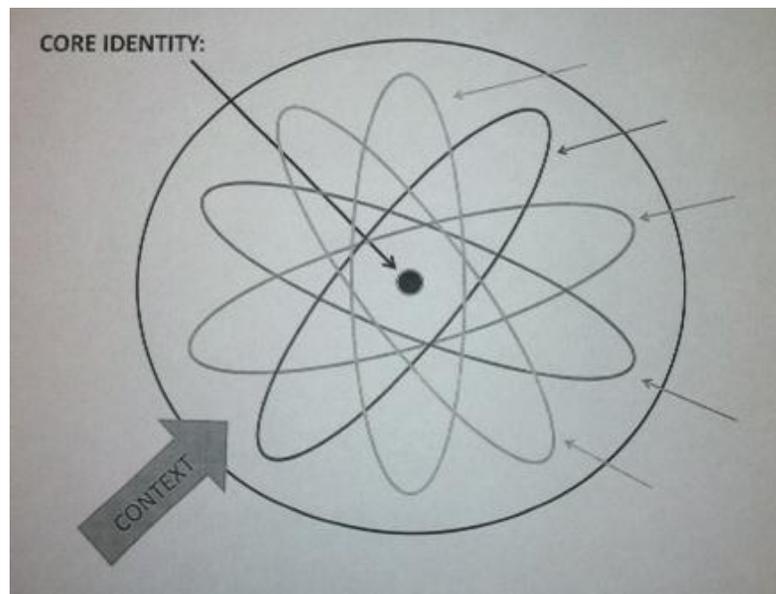


Figure 3.2. Blank Identity Dimension Model. Adapted from Abes, E. S., Jones, S. R., & McEwen, M. K. (2007). Reconceptualizing the model of multiple dimensions of identity: The role of meaning-making capacity in the construction of multiple identities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(1), 7.

While interviewing, I frequently asked participants for clarification if I felt that I did not clearly understand what they were trying to convey. I protected against bias by

using planned questions and by having open, non-leading examples ready to share if asked.

### **Method of data analysis.**

The analytic method that I used when processing narrative data from the interviews involved several steps. See Table 3.2. From the onset, I recorded my thoughts about each interview in my own reflective journal. After the interviews were completed, I transcribed the interviews, which allowed for more introspection and reflection as I listened to the interviews from a perspective somewhat removed from the original interview settings. As I transcribed, I noted phrases and ideas that were reiterated both between and within participants' interviews. See Table 3.2 for a breakdown of the steps I followed when coding. I began by reading through each transcript and writing my reactions to the conversations by means of field notes. In my second read-through, I underlined statements that reflected strongly held beliefs and opinions of the participants as they related to my research question. I noted not only my interpretations of the text, but also my reactions and feelings with regard to what was said by both my participants and myself during the interviews. Additionally, I color coded my responses as either interpretations of the text (in green pen) or my personal reactions/feelings about the issues discussed (in blue pen). The color coding helped me keep track of the nature of my own commentary on the interviews, as well as make it easier to interpret my data in subsequent readings.

	<b>Process</b>	<b>Intent</b>
<b>Step 1</b>	Interviewed participants;	Gathered data from the source first-hand to be used in analysis

	took notes in case of audio recording failure	
<b>Step 2</b>	Post-interview general journal reflections	To record my own thoughts and feelings as I reflected on my personal experience in graduate school as well as my reactions to hearing others' experiences
<b>Step 3</b>	Transcribed audio recordings	An opportunity to reflect on the interviews and data in a setting removed from the initial interview experience
<b>Step 4</b>	Initial reading/coding; document my initial reactions to transcriptions	Re-experience the interview in text; gather field notes as data
<b>Step 5</b>	Second reading/coding; underlined strongly held beliefs/opinions of interviewees	Inductively reason the value of the underlined statements as they related to my research question.
<b>Step 6</b>	Second reading/coding; documented my feelings/reactions to the text; color coded responses as interpretations (green pen) and feelings (blue pen)	Inductively reason the value of my feelings/ reactions and interpretations as they related to my research question. Color coding helped me to distinguish knowledge and understanding from feelings and emotional reactions.
<b>Step 7</b>	Subsequent readings/codings; gathering of repeated or emphasized phrases, terms, and ideas.	Inductively reason the value of repeated phrases, terms, and ideas as they related to my research question. Use the entirety of the data to help me autoethnographically navigate my own experience.

Table 3.2: Data Analyzation Methods

This close examination of and reflection upon the interviews allowed me to reduce the amount of data that I had originally transcribed and allowed me to narrow the data into themes. I gathered phrases and terms that were visible, repeated, and/or stated strongly (with emotion) among the three participants, resonated (or contrasted) with my

own notes, and then considered the entirety of the data as a whole. I concentrated on repeated terms, phrases, and ideas and was then able to distill participant commentaries into emergent and super-ordinate themes that related to the research question. Because this study has an autoethnographic element, the interview content was consistently compared and contrasted with my own experiences and reflections. All of the initial findings were then inductively reasoned and compared to the research question to determine applicability to the study.

### **3.4: Human Participants and Ethics Precautions**

All ethical considerations and standard research procedures were followed when preparing for this study. Prior to conducting interviews, I submitted and received approval (Approval #:IRB-1207002-EXM) from the Research Compliance Coordinator at South Dakota State University. The names of the participants and any otherwise identifying information were kept confidential. Transcripts and recordings were stored in a secure, locked location at all times and will be destroyed after use in this thesis. There were no identified risks for participants in this study, aside from the potential to experience an emotional reaction to interview questions. As a general precaution, participants were made aware of campus counseling services in the event that the interviews proved to be disturbing. There were no identified benefits to the participants (other than the small incentives mentioned), although I believe that participants may have been interested in discussing their experiences and also learning more about the MMIDI, given their educational and professional interests. Participants may have enjoyed the opportunity to talk with a peer about their experiences as mothers of young children and the challenges of balancing parental and educational (and often work) loads. As noted,

participants were offered the small incentives of a flash drive and a coffee card once the interviews were completed. It is likely that the incentives had minimal impact on the women choosing to participate.

As far as other ethical considerations, it is important to note that I acknowledge that I brought my own personal experiences into this research. I intentionally became a participant, and took every attempt to provide care and concern for the other participants in every aspect of the study. An autoethnographic element to my research design heightened my sensitivity to the ethical concerns of my participants because I recognized my own risk in sharing my personal experience. Along with this, I understood the nature of my research was impacted by my past personal, cultural, and historical experiences, and in being so I naturally relied on my past experiences to inform my current situation. Simply being aware of these influences armed me to minimize their effects when interviewing my participants.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **4.1: Overview of Themes**

Several themes emerged from the interviews with graduate student mothers. These themes also appeared in my personal reflections and journals. The two superordinate themes that were most prevalent related to a) systems of support/role models and b) the negotiation of gendered social expectations. Held within these two themes were several subordinate themes.

Within the theme of support systems/role models, both the absence and presence of support systems or role models were noted by participants and in my own writing. I became interested in exploring how systems of support and role models (or lack of support/role models) impacted the identity of the individual, or could possibly prove to be motivational.

The second superordinate theme, negotiation of gendered social expectations, was more difficult to explore because the related subordinate themes were more challenging to define. After careful consideration of the data, the subordinate themes were defined as 1) an exploration of gendered identity expectations; 2) an exploration of achievement orientation and perseverance; and 3) an exploration of vulnerability and the ability to filter social messages. I also examined how each of these subordinate themes impacted the intersectionality of participants' identities. See Table 4.1 for a visual representation of the breakdown of themes and subthemes.

	<b>Theme 1: Support Systems/ Role Models</b>	<b>Theme 2: Negotiation of Gendered Social Expectations</b>
<b>Subtheme 1</b>	Presence of support/role models	Exploration of gendered identity expectations
<b>Subtheme 2</b>	Absence of support/ role models	Exploration of achievement orientation/ perseverance
<b>Subtheme 3</b>		Exploration of vulnerability and the ability to filter social messages.

Table 4.1: Themes and Subthemes

## 4.2: Support Systems and Role Models

### Presence of support systems/role models.

\*\*\*\*

*Standing outside of my office, talking on the phone about an infuriating personal experience at my internship; trying to transition my thoughts from frustration to productivity. . .*

*“You know it’s because you have ovaries, right,” says the soft-spoken voice of my best friend on the other line. “A man wouldn’t be thinking twice about this. . .” she continues. I want to scream at her, “I know! I know! I know. . .” but instead I just sigh, “Why can’t this just be easy? I just wish this was easy!” She consoles me at that point because she knows I am about to break. She knows this because she is a woman; she can sense that there is no easy answer. She has not been in these exact shoes, but she senses my emotions. The only thing she can do is try to stop the train before it derails, so she starts to joke. “You know I read an interesting article today by Dr. Oz. . . it was in my Oprah magazine. He says we should have more sex with our husbands because it will*

*lower our stress and give us more restful sleep! Maybe that's what you need . . . more sex, and more sleep!" All I can reply is, "Oh God . . . of course a man would say that in a women's magazine!" At this, I realize that I have to get going, suck it up, and continue on with my writing...*

\*\*\*\*\*

My decision to enroll in graduate school was very much like my decision to have a child. I knew that in attending graduate school my life would change and, much like having a child, I was thoroughly underprepared for the significance of that change. Nothing could have prepared me for just how earth shaking it was to hold the dual identities of both a graduate student and mother. I attribute my success, thus far, to reliable systems of support and role models that were sometimes found in the strangest of places.

Support comes in many forms. It wasn't until I began this research that I realized just how important its presence or absence would be to graduate student mothers. I knew I had support and I knew that I felt it wax and wane as I navigated my way through my master's degree. I also knew that support was essential to my success, but what I didn't know was why. All three of the participants I interviewed felt supported to varying degrees, but no one expressed feeling more support than Hope:

In regard to the support systems, my parents are here so, um, that is huge. I think in regard to being a mother, my relationship with my mom has always been strong, but I think as a mom it is even more so now that I am a mom . . . [My parents] would be here in a heartbeat and so I think then those times that you are stressed out, especially with mom and dad here has been amazing . . . My in-laws

. . . they are completely supportive. They think it is awesome (that I'm in graduate school). They are always saying that they don't know how I am doing it all and, um, in regard to my support system, everybody is just so incredibly supportive of me pursuing an education.

Hope was aware of her many sources of support. She also saw support as being able to get assistance from her family if she needed babysitting help, advice, etc. Hope talked very little about her husband as a source of support, although she conveyed an understanding of his support as being visible in less tangible ways. Because he had a demanding job that required him to travel sometimes as many as 20 days a month, Hope was forced to rely on her extended family for the support that may have been given by a husband in a profession that allowed him to be home more often.

It was my belief, which Hope has also affirmed, that she was very fortunate to have such an extensive support system. Not only did she have support from extended family living the same town, she also had financial privilege, which removed a large barrier in her ability to find success in graduate school. She was also enrolled in a program geared specifically for non-traditional students, which provided support for her success by offering evening classes, and faculty members who were likely more aware of the challenges she was facing as a graduate student mother.

Charlotte also talked about the presence of strong support systems and role models in her life as a graduate student mother. Although her extended family was not close enough to provide last-minute assistance when needed, she expressed a feeling of being supported nonetheless. Throughout all three interviews, Charlotte reflected on her mother as a role model and her family as a system of support:

My mother was a woman who always had a job and so seeing her negotiate that balance, [which] took who I am and others to make that happen, was the model that I grew up with. So when I went back to grad school, I knew that I would need to rely on others to make that happen. I had some fabulous girlfriends that would take my daughter if my husband had a meeting . . . a sister and a brother who would watch my daughter if she was sick or if daycare was closed . . . they were there when I needed them. I probably couldn't have gotten through grad school without a group of strong women . . . many of whom happen to be Catholic and many who happen to have their master's degrees, which was strange but a blessing knowing that they have walked this path at some level.

Charlotte expressed gratitude at having supportive family and friends, as well as a confidence that came from the lived childhood experience of having a mother who was employed outside the home and utilized her own systems of support. Charlotte grew up believing that a working mother was the norm, and saw extended family as essential to the success of that family dynamic. Unlike Hope, Charlotte relied a lot on friends who had attended graduate school to give her a sense of security and a visual role model as she attended graduate school. This was unique to Charlotte, as Hope, Kerri, and I, did not have a network of other graduate student mothers who had forged that path and could speak from experience.

Like Charlotte, I grew up in a matriarchal family with a working mother, and it took the family unit as a whole to function well. While my mother was working her way up the corporate ladder, I watched my step-mom, Sue, make a decision that was very similar to the one I eventually made. In wanting to change careers, Sue dropped what she

had been doing for most of my childhood and went back to school to get a degree in special education. Had I not experienced these women as personal role models, and viewed their successes at an early age, I might not have had the confidence that it took to dive head-first into graduate school while having a child at home.

Along with providing support, many of the individuals who were identified by the participants also became sources of inspiration. As our interview continued, Hope's description of her support system referenced her grandparents as being inspirational for her in attaining her degree. In an earlier interview she said her children and husband were sources of inspiration as well. Hope was not alone in making these references. All three participants mentioned people who were sources of support and inspiration. It is important to note that all three participants and I stated that our children inspired and motivated us to complete our graduate degrees.

**Absence of support systems/role models.**

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*We had just turned off of Hwy 13 on to Hwy 324 when I got the call.*

*Farmhouse . . . Trees . . . Picket fence . . . Barren field . . .*

*"Audrey?" My dad sounded out of breath. Why was he calling me on my way home?*

*That's an odd time. Something's wrong. What's going on?*

*"Um . . . Hey, Dad. What's up?"*

*Another farmhouse . . . dirt road . . . grain bins . . . horses . . .*

*"Aud . . . Um . . . Susie died this morning . . ."*

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The April before I began my graduate school experience, I lost my step-mother, Sue, to cancer. Her death was one of the most earth-shattering experiences of my life. To go through graduate school without her support was difficult because she was the one person in my life who truly loved life-long learning like I do, and she would have wanted to actively support my graduate experience. This crucial personal loss helped me understand that the absence of support systems and lack of role models was an essential element to the experience of all of the participants in this study.

Every participant, including myself, talked about a way in which they felt an absence of support or role models; however, none was more vocal discussing this topic than Kerri. Her extended family was a great distance away and her spouse had a demanding career that took him away from home often and required extremely long work days even when he was in town. Kerri explained:

I don't have a real good role model of what [is] an achieving career woman. How they can manage a household, societal roles . . . my own career, let alone a husband or significant other . . . in a demanding job . . . I would prefer geographically close family with a younger child. I will tell you, I struggle with that, and I'm completely independent . . . but there is something about having a young child with supports. That, "Grandma, sis, can I study for an hour? Just take her." It is not an overrated thing of support for people . . . I would have loved to have people closer.

Kerri struggled with not having a model of what it meant to be a successful career woman and mother, and she also lacked having family members physically close enough to provide support. In essence, her statement expresses what a lack of support systems looks

like. Kerri was the participant with the least amount of support from her spouse. She relied heavily on her already established achievement orientation to keep her focused on her goals during graduate school. This orientation also helped her to maintain her commitment to meet the needs of her daughter, as she was determined to be a good mother as well as a successful graduate student, which will be addressed further in the discussion of how she negotiated gendered social expectations.

As noted, my purpose in doing this research was not only to assure myself that there were others like me trying to balance two demanding personal identities; it was also intended to lend support to those who would choose to become graduate students when they were mothers of young children. Kerri expressed a similar feeling when she offered to volunteer to be a source of support for up-and-coming graduate student mothers. This volunteerism allowed her to reaffirm her helping nature; in a sense, it would provide a means through which she could directly see the impacts of her own successes as a student and, in turn, become a role model for others.

### **4.3 Negotiation of Gendered Social Expectations**

#### **Exploration of gendered identity expectations.**

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*From my self-reflective journal: September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

*So, when I reflect on my first interview with subject one, I am realizing that I may have opened a big can of worms. I worry that I am not prepared to be able to emotionally handle how much of a connection I have to these women's experiences, or how I can handle what they are dredging up to be a part of this study. However overwhelming this feeling is, it is nothing compared to the fact that I feel now more than ever that this study*

*is necessary. It is so powerful to hear that another woman feels pressure to be everything to everyone and to hold it together all of the time when it's damn near impossible to do that. I had a seizure last week and I am pretty sure it is stress related. Just another complication in the already overly-taxed life that I lead. What weighs on me more than almost anything is not my health, or my schooling, or my future career, but my son and what he saw and if he will remember anything from the experience. I want to make sure I protect him from as much pain as I can, and knowing that I need to relax to avoid putting him through seeing me in that position puts me in a position where I feel so guilty. Am I choosing to hurt my family because I am choosing to follow my career and education? Is this worth it? Have I made the wrong decision? But, is it too late now? All of these are things I reflect on constantly, and they seem to be things I share with my peers. As comforting as that is, it is also disheartening because I know there isn't much I can do to help them or myself out.*

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This excerpt depicts a time when I struggled to see my graduate education as a positive contributor to my family situation. At that point in time I had faced some pretty scary medical issues and of course I was very concerned about my young son. Throughout my graduate experience, I have battled a guilt regarding my decision to enter graduate school with a child. This guilt can be attributed not only to an unwavering love for my child, but perhaps even more to expectations of mothering that have been socially bombarding me from the moment I became a mother. In the presence of my own social group made up primarily of stay-at-home mothers, I constantly internalized my own messages of how negatively my career choice might be impacting my son and his

development. Because I value education, I would constantly try to read up on how to best parent a pre-school child, and because such materials are typically geared toward mothers who work part-time or stay at home, they inevitably made me feel guilty. I felt this way both in the working world, as well as in graduate school. These feelings were more intense in graduate school because I felt that my job as a teacher allowed for an understanding of motherhood where graduate school didn't. For example, I felt okay asking for time off of work when I was a teacher because I felt they understood my being a mother and that coming first. However, I asked my husband to take off of work when our son was sick, and I was in graduate school. I didn't feel that I could make up a test, paper, class work, discussion, or fall behind in any way in graduate school because there was an unwritten competition among students to always be the best. This feeling exemplifies why there is an internalized struggle in being both a graduate student and mother.

Hope added to my own interpretation of society's views when she so poignantly said:

. . . when we choose to work or go to school and our kids do go to daycare . . .  
and, I am speaking from what I have seen not what I have personally experienced,  
I think those women are kind of looked at as '*oh, you are ditching your kid . . .*'  
and I think that's sad. It's a sad influence that affects a lot of women and a lot of  
women feel like they are failing if they are not staying home.

Although Hope had not personally experienced this situation in the same way as I feel I have, her articulation of this situation made me feel as though she had taken the words right out of my mouth. In the past, I have personally felt as though I am failing by not

staying home with my son to teach him and take care of his needs during his formative years. She conveyed, with her statement, the crux of my feelings of guilt. Hope was fortunate enough to be in a privileged financial situation that afforded her choices about the ability to stay at home with her children while attending school. *(And after I typed this statement, I realized my own personal biased view in my typing of the word “fortunate” because at its core I am reinforcing a gender stereotype of the desirability of being able to stay at home, with financial support, while earning a degree.)*

### **Exploration of achievement orientation/perseverance.**

As I reflected on Kerri’s lack of support and her strong sense of perseverance, I compared her outlook to that of Hope, Charlotte, and myself. I realized that we all possessed an over-arching orientation of achievement. Kerri’s approach to life was enhanced by her past achievements in athletics, but Hope, Charlotte, and I were determined to succeed at graduate school, with or without support systems. In fact, when I asked the women in this study to list a few qualities that made them both strong graduate students and good mothers, all three answered with the same word: “perseverance.” The word itself predicts a successful outcome or a commitment to achievement despite all odds.

Although the participants shared a sense of success, several of their comments pointed to ways in which an absence of support challenged their achievement orientation and impacted their experiences and identities in graduate school. Both Kerri and Hope spoke to how their identities were challenged and how these challenges made them even more determined to succeed. Hope referenced an experience with a negative co-worker and how it impacted her identity:

Some people have said, “Oh, I don’t know how you do it, and I can’t believe you are doing this, it seems like a lot.” I want to prove them wrong and show them that you know, you can . . . be a wife and a mother and student and you can be successful at all three. That’s just me being feisty and just, here let me show you how it’s done . . . and still to this day that is in the back of my head, well let me show you!

Clearly, Hope was achievement oriented and anything that questioned her ability strengthened her conviction to succeed. This quote also speaks directly to the assumptions that people have about others, in this case about professional women and mothers who are pursuing graduate degrees.

Charlotte expressed how she felt she was seen by her peers with regard to her achievement orientation:

It’s that perfectionism in me and having to let that go a little bit. I did not do a very good job in grad school in that way . . . personally I think sometimes I intimidated my classmates, not intentionally, but I always wanted to be perfect . . . I was that person who was busy enough where I have got to hand it in two weeks ahead ‘cause I can see what else is coming up . . . I’ll say that I appeared this amazing over achiever. I didn’t sleep. I generally, once a week, I would pull an all-nighter . . . sometimes two . . . and so when folks would see what I was doing it would look like I never slept, but it was the truth.

These statements reflect the sacrifices that Charlotte made to achieve success and to uphold the achievement orientation that she shared with all of the participants in this study. I can underscore this perspective by interjecting my own struggle to balance every

aspect of my identity to be a high achieving student. I did not have to choose to write a thesis, but I knew that in doing so I would achieve a task greater than I had initially anticipated and that the sacrifices would be worth the payoff.

Kerri was perhaps the most impactful person with regard to the discussion of achievement or perseverance:

It's just a role that I took on early, and the accolades that I naturally achieved athletically . . . I had some natural talent, and I worked hard to cultivate what I had naturally . . . So my point is that early on achieving meant a positive thing. Obviously, it was good for me. I mean there is no doubt, but it was good for my family, and there is a sense that . . . I could make the world be a better place by being an achiever. Good stuff was happening to me, so it's probably making you feel good. You knew me, and you're family, and that helped you out, didn't it? Not that it's this tragically dysfunctional achieving, it's just reality. People want to be associated with someone doing [well] at something. I learned really easy that it was a payoff for me.

In other words, Kerri experienced “payoff,” as she calls it, for being an achiever. This reinforced for her that achievement was important and that she needed to achieve great things in her life to continue to experience that “payoff.” This orientation followed her through graduate school and contributed to her ability to balance the identity dimensions of a graduate student mother.

#### **Exploration of vulnerability and the ability to filter social messages.**

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*Reflections that I noted while coding my transcripts:*

*I remember very vividly sitting in class while earning my second bachelor's degree and hearing women talk about being a mother (or introducing themselves as mothers the first day of class) and then proceeding to seemingly discuss only their children and not class material. I remember thinking that I wish they would talk about something else. "Okay, we all get it, you have kids." And then I remember coming to graduate school and sitting in my first class and doing the same thing in my introduction. "Hi, I am Audrey...I am getting my degree in Student Affairs and I have the most rambunctious two-year-old child ever." And it was really eye opening for me to watch the looks on the faces of the other students in class who did not have kids and just knowing at that moment that I could read their minds. It really made me hold back from sharing things about my child in class, almost as though I knew it wasn't as important to them as it was to me, and that they would never know how I felt until they were mothers/fathers themselves.*

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What is important to note about this experience is my feeling of vulnerability. I realized that combining my identities in front of my peers made me vulnerable. I took a risk in showing that there was something, as (if not more) valuable as my desire to earn a graduate degree.

Kerri expressed a feeling similar to this when she discussed her identity conflicts in the same type of situation:

. . . there is a part that makes me feel like I take a risk by being vulnerable to you because, as a professional, I feel very comfortable here with you, but in a sense I don't need people to judge me because you know we can be judged if we release some vulnerability . . . There is just something in there that is a little pissed still . .

. I am tired of this society creating the roles . . . but the reality of grad school has just been like, you know what I have chosen to balance, and juggling has not been easy, and the more I'm waking up to this damn societal role of where they feel we should be, women, and how we put ourselves there. We buy into it. And I'm not completely 100 percent feminist, I'm just saying I am strongly really attempting to redefine who I am, what I choose to do, and why, and who's involved when I make choices. And who is involved is a man, who doesn't have the same orientation, who doesn't have to make those choices!

In this excerpt, Kerri reflected on the expectations that she felt society had placed on her and how they were different from those placed on her spouse. In her experience, her spouse's career took priority and therefore he was given a lot of freedom from family obligations, whereas Kerri was not. She still felt that she was expected to care for her child, even after a challenging day as a graduate student.

Another important aspect of what Kerri said was her discussion of vulnerability. In the conversation around which this excerpt centered, Kerri spoke passionately about her conviction that it was not okay for anyone to show vulnerability in a professional setting, and that it was even more dangerous for a woman to do so. She said that expressing vulnerability can make women seem even weaker than they were already perceived to be in the workplace, and even at home.

Another aspect of negotiating gendered social expectations had to do with how the participants and I felt about social pressures experienced throughout the graduate school experience. For the most part, we all felt that higher education was largely understanding of life beyond school; however, there were also mixed, subtle messages

that we all encountered while being both a graduate student and a mother. For example, when Kerri discussed vulnerabilities, she expressed that she felt as a graduate student mother she took a risk by revealing vulnerabilities to her professors, even when she felt that they were concerned about her role-juggling situation. I, too, felt that if I revealed too much about what I was going through as both a graduate student and mother, I would be judged. In some instances, I received looks from professors and peers that convinced me that I needed to keep my experiences to myself, despite the fact that they had asked (about stress, family, etc.). In other words, I learned that there were safe and unsafe conversations in graduate school, and I frequently chose to not take risks in my revelations.

Kerri explained how she felt about needing boundaries between her intersecting identities in order to be successful as a student:

. . . it comes down to, this is what you are passionate about and when you are given a shot you want to prove that you can do it and you do those things but I don't have conversations . . . I have witnessed things in higher ed and it's mostly honestly as a student . . . that I did not have privy to advocate for myself at all, and it really came down to self-education. I don't want to put down the program, but it was some hard stuff. And sometimes you just don't feel like you can, especially a woman to a man. I'm just saying, I'm a tough girl but I'm not stupid!  
Ha-ha!

Here, Kerri was saying that she felt that she could not have conversations with certain faculty members, especially males, about her various identities because it would make

her appear to be vulnerable and weak, and risk discrediting her abilities as a student. So she elected to forgo those conversations and maintain a professional demeanor.

Hope had similar experiences that made her feel devalued or less worthy a participant in graduate education because she had children. She talked about her career goals and what she wants to achieve, and the obstacles she feels are in her way, as a woman and a mother:

. . . Dean of Students is always an option, Vice President of Student Affairs. It just depends. A lot of those positions don't value what it means to be a mom . . . and if you look at who is in, um, what type of people are in those positions, and its primarily single women or men. . . so. . . I know I interned at the (*information removed*) conference in (*city removed*) just for a day this past fall and I was shocked to see how many of the women were not married and how many were men. It just blew me away, and when I said I had three kids the look on people's faces was just so funny because they could not believe that.

Expanding on this theme, Hope said that she noticed pressures placed on women and that society has different expectations for women than for men in the work force. As an example, Hope shared that women are expected to take time off when their child is sick and that men are not, and maybe that is why mothers are not valued as much in the workforce as are men or single women who are not mothers. These messages were given to her by faculty members, supervisors, and professionals in her field of study, yet she had found a way of navigating these messages to arrive at her own conclusions regarding successes she would like to achieve. In some way, shape, or form, all of the participants in this study did just that.

In my October, 18<sup>th</sup> journal, I reflected on the final meeting with Kerri and thought about the messages graduate student mothers are given from others:

I think about the messages I have been given about my education so far. As an undergrad, I went to declare my minor in Women's Studies and I proudly told people who were close to me; I actually had someone call it "underwater basket weaving." Although I feel like I have a tough skin, and that I was able to take that message and ignore what it said about a subject which intellectually stimulated and emotionally moved me, I struggle to this day with that demeaning message. At the time, I used that statement to motivate me to become a better student and advocate. It is one thing when some idiot on the street says something like this, but it is another thing entirely when such a message is received from someone respected and loved.

This example illustrates how I struggled to filter a negative message about a topic close to my core when I was an undergraduate, yet maintained my feminist identity. I refused to allow a critical comment that mocked my desire to study and acknowledge the contributions of feminism (and my gender) to impact my identity.

The three participants and I worked to filter messages about gender identities and stereotypes connected to pursuing a graduate degree as a mother; at times, these messages made us feel vulnerable. Occasionally, messages inadvertently pass through the "meaning-making filter" that Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) described and evoke pain or self-doubt. For me, the filter has been constructed through life experiences, several of which have been challenging. The holes in my own filter have narrowed to allow fewer critical messages to pass through and impact the core of who I am. Participants in this

study also discussed their struggles with how to filter negative messages, each in her own unique way.

Kerri's filter was built primarily on her achievement orientation. Messages that she received from an early age were almost always positively associated with her success in athletics, but were also used in comparison to men:

I think that achievement came through external things . . . that reinforced, I think, a role that women carry. So, I think, it's external forces and internal role and orientation. I think we learn very easily to take care of people; that you may not be good enough; or you're compared to men. I think that it's cultivated and it's learned early on through messages that you might not be as good as men, so you better work hard.

Through this statement, Kerri noted the ubiquitous messages about men being better than women, and she chose to strengthen her filter and set (and reach) very high goals. When she found a sport in which she dominated, her filter allowed in fewer limiting messages; she was motivated and proud of her achievements. This foundation later helped her filter out challenging messages she received while being both a mother and graduate student.

Charlotte's view of her filter was impacted more by graduate school than by life prior to graduate school:

I would say that my graduate school (experiences) probably fundamentally shaped that filter in terms of who's the author, or what those rules and regulations are, versus the black and white "should's" . . . and I think that the experiences and the content helped me shape my filter to decide that less . . . needs to stay with me from the outside world. And that what I do let in needs to be the important stuff,

because there is a lot of junk out there. Negative messages about who you are and what you should be—it's that, that 'should' voice. The negative "you should be doing this . . . or you should be doing that" and knowing that probably my significant relationships are the most important thing . . .

So, for Charlotte, graduate school shaped her filter and reinforced, for her, what took priority. In some respects, all participants felt this way. They chose to filter out a lot of "should" messages, and in response defended their beliefs in their families as being their first priority; although their commitment might look different than that of others, it was no less deep. However, there were times when negative messages were able to permeate the filter.

Hope explained one very emotional time when she allowed a message to permeate her filter and threaten her commitment to her goals. She reformed her filter to exclude any similar future messages:

. . . And at one point . . . my secretary actually was an older woman and had her GED and I think it really bothered her that I was more educated than her . . . and at one point she goes, "I don't think you are ever going to finish your master's," and she knew that I wanted to get a doctorate and she goes, "I just don't ever see that happening," and to this day that is in the back of my mind. "Well, let me show you!"

In this painful anecdote, Hope was describing what I have experienced. Both Hope and I have had to actively consider which messages to filter out and which to let into our consciousness.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the present study identified two superordinate themes: support systems and role models, and the negotiation of gendered social expectations. Each theme had subordinate themes as well. It is important to understand that the findings of this study are as unique as the individual participants. As much as possible, I allowed for the voices of the women to come forward as a means of sharing their authentic experiences of being graduate students and the mothers of young children.

The first theme, support systems and role models, was reiterated throughout participants' interviews. The women reflected upon the importance of support systems with regard to their successes in graduate school; they also noted that absence of support systems required them to adapt in order to overcome this as a barrier to their success. They did this by persevering and upholding a high achievement orientation.

Negotiating gendered social expectations was also prominent in the interviews as participants discussed the pressures they felt to meet social expectations placed on them as women and mothers while in graduate school. All participants noted some degree of vulnerability and a need to filter messages; the desire to persevere and achieve; and social pressure (including from faculty, staff, and peers) as they navigated their individual graduate school experience.

## **Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **5.1: Summary of the Problem**

As stated, the intent of this research was to offer a better understanding of the lived experiences of graduate student mothers. In addition, this study used an autoethnographic perspective to introspectively look at my own experience as a graduate student mother. In analyzing the nine interviews with three graduate student mothers and integrating that information with personal reflections and journals, two superordinate themes emerged: the presence or absence of social supports and role models for graduate student mothers, and the negotiation of gendered social expectations.

### **5.2: Interpretations and Conclusions**

Many of the interpretations and conclusions that can be drawn from this study are broad, yet help to contribute to the existing literature on women in higher education. In considering the implications of this study, it is necessary to reflect on the data as a whole, the accompanying reviewed literature, and the conceptual framework that was utilized.

A clear message from all of these sources is that the presence or absence of support systems and role models weighs heavily on graduate students who are the mothers of young children. The three participants in this study were impacted greatly by the support systems and role models they either possessed or lacked. It is interesting to note that both support system/role model presence and their absence served as motivation or inspiration for these women. Study participants could easily identify areas in which they felt support or its absence and how this dynamic impacted their identity during graduate school.

While naming social supports appeared to be relatively easily accomplished, it was more challenging for each participant to describe how she negotiated gendered social expectations. Each woman held a relatively similar background with regard to race, social class, gender, and marital status. However, negotiation of gendered social expectations was unique to each woman. Further, these women succeeded in the graduate school experience through a combination of having strong role models, being achievement oriented, learning to filter out negative messages, and showing perseverance in the face of vulnerability.

Existing literature (Johnson-Bailey, 2010) suggests that narrative is an important way to understand identity development and, more importantly, to gather knowledge about the experiences of others. The present study acknowledges the relevance of this approach by allowing women to further explain, through the use of narrative, how they learned to filter out limiting gendered social expectations that could have interfered with their graduate school success. Intentionally selected pieces of narration support this statement. As noted, the literature (Kuperberg, 2009; Miller Solomon, 1985; Story, 2005), points to the need for additional studies on women's experiences in higher education. Literature on this topic is important, as the number of female students is rising; this study contributes to the literature by revealing the complexities of the lives of the women graduate students/mother who shared their stories.

In addition, this study contributes, by incorporating autoethnographic reflections, to the growing number of autoethnographic studies. As a method of qualitative inquiry, autoethnography adds a unique and personal perspective to research pieces that attempt to make sense of the world by discovering knowledge in a new way. In tackling this project,

I displayed my own agency regarding issues close to and important to me, and found my own voice as a graduate student who is a mother.

An additionally useful framework for the conceptualization of this research was Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) MMDI, which was used to explore the self-perceived identities of graduate student mothers. In particular, the notion of how individuals employ a meaning-making filter to screen out harmful messages was helpful in gaining understanding of the graduate school experiences of the women in this project. Studies that utilize the MMDI are rather few in number, as this model is relatively new. This research contributes to the literature on the MMDI by allowing a new population of individuals to explore dimensions of identity and the concept of a meaning-making filter. Using the MMDI gave these three women an opportunity to talk about an aspect of their identity (motherhood) that was often not welcome/celebrated or even tolerated at times in the graduate school context.

While all of the women agreed that this model allowed them to discuss various aspects of their personal identities in the graduate school context, they struggled a bit with separating the significant elements. These participants viewed the critical aspects of their identities as intertwined among contexts. In other words, these participants felt that, regardless of context, they were mothers.

In looking at the challenge of studying intersectionality of the identities of mother and graduate student, it is relevant to note that Deaux (2001) would propose that:

. . . proponents of intersectionality suggest that it is not possible to clearly distinguish between experience that is related to race and experience that is related to gender. Rather, the conditions are inextricably bound together in the

individual's life . . . Taken to the extreme, of course, the notion of intersectionality could be problematic if all possible intersections needed to be considered at all times. More likely, however, there are a limited number of key identity categories whose influence is sufficiently strong to combine with others and it is those intersections that investigators will want to study most closely. (p. 4)

In other words, my findings suggest that the identities of both mother and student are “inextricably bound together” in these women's lives, and to try to study them independent of one another poses a problem (Deaux, p. 4). It is my interpretation (as a proponent of intersectionality) that the identities of both mother and student are bound together strongly enough to warrant an exploration of the intersection of the two in these participants lives.

In addition to the intersectionality of identity dimensions, participants in this study struggled with providing detailed explanations regarding identity dimensions that “competed” for closeness to their core, such as wife and mother. Participants felt the need to justify placing “mother” closer to the core than “wife.” For instance, Kerri justified placing her “mother” identity as closer than wife to her core because her child could not be as self-sufficient as her spouse; therefore, her child needed her more.

The value of utilizing the MMIDI in these challenging instances was the ability to not only reference intersectionality and the existence of two identities within the context of graduate school, but the ability to utilize the meaning-making filter to understand and interpret how women were filtering social messages.

*To interject my personal feelings, I must say that these women (myself included) tended to compartmentalize their identity dimensions in different contexts. In the graduate school context, they often had to put their mom identity on the “back burner” while they tried to focus on their daily graduate school expectations. They would then place their student identity on the “back burner” when in their home/family context. This juggling caused a lot of tension, in that it required the women to live up to expectations associated with the various contexts (e.g., don’t miss class because of a sick child; you need to pull an all-nighter studying after you cook dinner, give your child a bath, and put him or her to sleep because time with your child is most important in the home context). This is where I feel that intersectionality, and studying the intersection of both the mother and student identities in one context was challenging. I would also see value in using this information to challenge societal notions of what it means to be a student.*

### **5.3 Limitations:**

This study, like any other, has limitations. While this study contributes to several areas of literature in need of more research, it is missing a diversity of participants. The participants were all married heterosexual Caucasian women who self-identified as belonging to a middle-class socioeconomic status. While the similarities of the participants allowed for ease in identification of themes, it would be valuable to obtain the narratives of more diverse individuals. The experience of single mothers, poor mothers, mothers from under-represented populations, etc., would undoubtedly contrast with the voices represented in this project. Secondly, participants in this study all come from a rural Midwestern state and do not necessarily represent geographic or cultural

diversity. Had there been a more diverse pool of participants, the study could have given voice to diverse women in the circumstances of being graduate students who are mothers.

Another possible limitation has to do with lack of expert knowledge of the MMIDI on the part of the researcher and her major advisor. Because participants in this study might be seen as privileged members of the dominant class, the MMIDI might not have been a good fit for working with them. Also, in focusing attention on two primary identities, that of mother and graduate student, the researcher may have been working somewhat in opposition to the MMIDI. The social identity dimensions of participants in this study are privileged and dominant (e.g., White, middle class, heterosexual, married, educated, etc.) and did not lend themselves to an examination of marginality or oppression. However, participants did identify that the strong, concurrent identities of mother and graduate student were experienced as a challenging intersectionality (Abes et al., 2007).

Because my initial interest in this research was to discover whether other women had the same experiences I was having in graduate school as a mother, it might have been helpful to have a focus group of graduate student mothers along with, or in place of, the individual interviews. I note this because I was aware of times when participants hesitated to share; I feel they might have been more open, had they realized that other women had similar experiences. On the other hand, I do acknowledge that a focus group might have caused the women to be even less forthcoming in the face of peer pressures, so perhaps a combination of interviews and peer group discussions may have allowed for more diverse data.

#### 5.4: Recommendations

Using the interpretations, conclusions, and limitations, it is clear that there are several recommendations that may be drawn from this study as well as suggestions for future research. One recommendation is that more studies be conducted on the existence of institutional support systems for graduate students, particularly females, and particularly mothers. Participants in this study pointed to the need for more institutional support systems, including access to female mentors (faculty and staff members) who have both careers and families. While there are more females in higher education than ever before, the system is still highly patriarchal with regard to gendered work and social expectations (Miller Solomon, 1985).

*As a narrative aside, I was told by a woman (single and childless) working in higher education that those who seek careers in higher education (and student affairs) understand that there is no such thing as a forty hour work week. She also said that if I expected to work only forty hours a week that I wouldn't last long. I see this as a perpetuated patriarchal expectation, and I refuse to believe that I won't be successful if I give 100% of myself to my job for forty hours a week. This point alone is one reason why I am recommending that there be more research and design of institutional supports for females in higher education, and (of more relevance to this study) graduate student mothers.*

Participants in this study seemed to rely on a combination of what Lynch (2008) called “identity practices” and “identity supports” (p. 595). Not only did the women create their own individual strategies for navigating dominant social expectations, but they seemed to rely on their support systems as well. While some of the participants had

clear sources of support and clear role models, others did not. Those who lacked the identity supports (or chose to rely little on those supports) defined a huge area for improvement in higher education.

Based on my reading and the interviews with these students, I believe that there need to be more institutional supports for students, including on-campus day care centers, leave for graduate student parents who give birth while currently enrolled, financial assistance considerations for graduate student mothers, and more opportunities for scholarships, grants, paid research opportunities, etc. given solely to graduate mothers (including those in both STEM non-STEM related fields). I can speak for myself, and probably others, when I say that my ability to attend graduate school as a mother was made easier because I had a spouse who was financially able to support our family while I pursued my dream. Women who are single, or have spouses with less income need these supports more than I did. However, having just one of these options for support would have been nice!

A recent study from the Pew Research Center that found that, “in 40 percent of families with children under 18, the mothers bring home most or all of the household income” (“Public Opinion,” 2013). This study concludes that there is a change in many women’s financial roles within the family, and that women are continuing to outnumber men in attainment of undergraduate and some graduate degrees. These trends indicate a need for continuing research on women’s changing identities and experiences in higher education, the world of work, and families.

*If you want my honest, unfiltered opinion of what needs to be done to assist graduate student mothers, it is as simple as this . . . We Need YOU. We need scholars*

*who are willing to go out on a limb and stand by us when we make difficult choices between being a mother and being a student. We need research done by more women, more student mothers, and less by patronizing men (and women) trying to devalue anything less than a lifetime devoted to career. We need the visual cues and body language to match the promised understanding, and sincerity behind the offers of help. We need a safe space, too . . . and not one that higher education has stretched thin enough where we feel guilty even asking for your time. We need moms groups that fit a working mom's schedule, and a diversity of role models who value both their careers in education and their families. And lastly, because we are trained to advocate for others, we need guidance in learning how to best advocate for ourselves in a variety of educational situations.*

## APPENDIX A: FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Tell me a little about yourself.
- How did you choose this program/ the counseling track?
- How did you decide to attend graduate school at this time?
- What are your professional/educational goals?
- Tell me about your current family situation.
- I want you to take a minute to consider your family of origin... and now consider the family you are creating for yourself...How are these families similar? How are they different? How is the role of wife/mother/adult woman similar or different than what you grew up with?
- How do you feel about where you are and where you are headed for you and your family?
- What are three qualities that make you a strong graduate student and a good mother?

## APPENDIX B: SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What do you find most exciting/engaging about being a graduate student?
- What do you find most challenging/least engaging?
- What do you like most about being the mother of a young child?
- What do you find most challenging?
- In what ways are you able to be the kind of parent you hope to be?
- In what ways are you challenged to be that kind of parent?
- Briefly describe your current support system. (In what ways do you feel judged by others for your life choices? In what ways do you feel affirmed in your choices?)
- Initial work with the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2004); open discussion of roles and role saliency in different settings, especially the graduate school setting

### APPENDIX C: THIRD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How do you think society (e.g., your family, community norms, gender stereotypes, student and non-student peers, and other influences) impact how you see yourself and how you interpret your current life roles and choices?
- What do you wish others better understood about you?

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Figure 3.1. Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. As published in: Evans, N. J.,

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Figure 3.2. Blank Identity Dimension Model. Harper, R. (2013).

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