

DISSERTATION

THE PERILS OF PARENTING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE
UNPARTNERED MOTHER SCHOLAR EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

THE PERILS OF PARENTING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE UNPARTNERED MOTHER SCHOLAR EXPERIENCE

As recent attacks on the rights of women and gender minorities exemplify, sexism and gender privilege are structural forces ingrained in the fabric of U.S. society. Unfortunately, higher education is not immune to such structural forces and can reinforce the power associated with gender privilege. This phenomenological research study, in concert with my own recollections and anecdotes, critically examines how structures within higher education support the empowerment of privilege through the stigma of unpartnered motherhood and the feminization of caregiving. The study explores the experiences of nine unpartnered student parents who directly encounter significant structural barriers related to sexism and gender privilege. Through narrative-storytelling and poetic analysis, this study documents the lived experiences of nine diverse unpartnered mothers living with extreme precarity, facing incredible uphill struggles to make a new and better life for themselves and their children. The research findings uncover a high level of mental health challenge for unpartnered mothers and their children but also a high level of motivation and desire to succeed within their selected programs. The study also uncovers how capitalist influenced ideals of motherhood conflict with standards of ideal scholarship to create an identity crisis whereby one is forced to choose between being a good scholar or a good mother. Practical recommendations are provided for service providers including administrators, faculty, and student service units.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On September 1, 2021, Texas passed Senate Bill 8, which prohibited abortion beyond 6 weeks after conception. The bill effectively eliminated abortion in the state and subverted the rights of women to have safe and legal abortions. More recently, on June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court stripped away federal protection for abortion, and predictions indicate this will lead to abortion bans in nearly half of the United States. Additionally, Justice Thomas urged colleagues to overturn other court rulings protecting same sex marriage and use of contraceptives (Sherman, 2022). In 2022, a record 238 anti-LGBTQ bills, nearly half of which targeted trans people, were filed in state houses across the U.S. These bills ranged from restricting LGBTQ issues in school curriculums to limiting trans people's abilities to participate in sports and use bathrooms corresponding with their gender (Laviertes & Ramos, 2022).

Additionally, U.S. women's economic and political gains have been slowing or declining over the past decade. In 2022, women earned 78.3 cents for every dollar a man earned and at this rate women will not receive equal pay until the year 2058 (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2022). Research on the effects of COVID-19 indicated the pandemic has and will continue to worsen women's physical, economic, and mental health and that women of color were, and remain, the most heavily impacted (Gault et al., 2020).

As the previous statistics illuminate, the attack on women and gender minorities has accelerated. In the book, *90s Bitch: Media, Culture, and Failed Promise of Gender Equality*, Yarrow (2018) described how women who challenged power, held power, spoke out, or challenged gender norms became a target for gender policing while at the same time, media promoted a version of "girl power" as a commodified feminism. In a nefarious sleight of hand,

pop culture conveyed girls were empowered while publicly skewering many women who dared to challenge male power and privilege. These stories are examples of how sexism and gender privilege are part of the fabric of U.S. society, embedded within the loom of white supremacy and capitalism. Unfortunately, higher education plays a role in this story. Academic theories, such as critical race theory, which is also under siege in the United States, have in part resisted the power and forces that keep control in the hands of the few. However, higher education also has served to reinforce an unequal distribution of power in how it continues to serve the most privileged. This project critically examined how structures within higher education support the empowerment of privilege using a phenomenological framework that explored the experiences of unpartnered mothers struggling inside these institutions.

Research Focus

My research sought to explore the higher education experiences of an often overlooked and unsupported group of students who encounter significant barriers to success. A deep exploration of students who experience disenfranchisement within both higher education and society at large provided another way to better understand resource allocation and the impact of academic service delivery and practice on vulnerable students.

Although data on unpartnered women with children in higher education can be difficult to parse, the data that exists revealed that unpartnered women with children have a very low graduation rate (Hensly et al., 2021). Despite low degree attainment rates, colleges and universities often do not have robust support services to engage and retain this community of students (Lynch, 2008; Yang, 2015); this lack of services has exacerbated the impact of the sex and gender discrimination these students face. Although parenting and becoming a mother is a

life-altering event and overwhelmingly salient to one's sense of self, higher education has not adequately addressed how to support the growing numbers of parents in our midst.

Understanding this group of students is critically important because educators can expect an increase in the number of unpartnered parents in college. The number of unpartnered mothers in college has more than doubled in the past 20 years (Kruvelis et al., 2017). About 8% of male and 17% of female undergraduates were unmarried parents (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010). Due to recent COVID-related changes in the labor market, we may expect to see more parents entering higher education. Among parents ages 18 to 54, young mothers suffered the most significant decline in employment between February and April 2020 (Sun, 2021). Moreover, Sun (2021) found, compared to cohabiting parents, unpartnered parents experienced the sharpest increase in being out of work and school during the pandemic. Those forced from the workplace during COVID may turn to higher education for career training or retraining. So, it is critically important that educators are ready to positively engage this group of students.

I chose a phenomenological approach to the study. The goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of the lived experience of a phenomenon, or something that is observable. In other words, phenomenology in the social sciences seeks to examine the lived experience of a phenomenon of interest (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). As I am interested in the lived experience of unpartnered mother scholars navigating higher education, a phenomenological approach provided the structure for this project and the questions that guided it.

My ecofeminist framing of the study (described below) placed me in the hermeneutic tradition of phenomenology, which goes beyond merely describing phenomena and seeks to examine the meanings embedded within experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004). In Heidegger's (1962) hermeneutic tradition, phenomenology expands beyond bracketing oneself outside the

narrative. The process of data analysis and reporting becomes an interpretive exercise. The practice of an interpretive phenomenology focuses on how subjective experiences are linked with social, cultural, and political contexts. Additionally, in the hermeneutic tradition, personal knowledge is a valuable part of the research design. My study design was also embedded in the critical hermeneutic tradition, which goes one step further to acknowledge that socially accepted worldviews reflect the values of privileged individuals and that their views are most often the ones represented in academic scholarship (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

This critical phenomenological study aimed to better understand how unpartnered mothers navigated higher education and how they made meaning of their experiences. I explored what variables contributed to their success and what barriers they encountered along the way. I applied my experience and understanding of healing (drawn from ecofeminism) as I worked with study participants to coconstruct potential resistances to oppressive structures and norms encountered in higher education settings. I also engaged poststructuralist feminism and queer phenomenology to frame my understanding of the nature of gender and reproductive identity repression in society at large and its replication inside higher education.

Research Community

My study focused on unpartnered mothers,¹ who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) or any person who identifies with the label “woman/mother,” at two western regional community colleges. Coming up with precise and inclusive language was a struggle because of the

¹ Although most of the literature has used the term “single mother” to denote a unpartnered woman parenting without a partner, I use the term “unpartnered mother.” The term “single” is a specific category defined in opposition to marriage. Although not as inclusive as I would like, the term “unpartnered” makes more space for mothers who have never been married and does not treat marriage as the ideal state for women with children. It also makes more space for those in relationships not recognized by the state, including polyamorous partnerships or LGBTQ+ relationships outside the United States.

problematic conflation of sex and gender in English usage. I use the term “assigned female at birth” to acknowledge how English-speaking cultures socially define “mother/motherhood” as connected to the biological category of female. However, although someone may be assigned the designation “female” due to their biological characteristics, they may not identify with that term. Conversely, some people assigned male at birth (AMAB) may identify as women/mothers. My epistemological orientation does not tie motherhood exclusively to biological reality; therefore, I have chosen to use the term “woman/mother” rather than “female” to refer to my participants. I included AFAB people and those who identified as mothers because AFAB people might not identify as female but others might socially define them as female. Therefore, they will be subjected to sex and gender linked notions of caregiving and parenthood. Although I have tried to be mindful of not using terms like “male” and “female,” some literature I cited used binary language. I attempted to eliminate such language from my usage whenever possible.

My focus on AFAB and feminine identifying people is that, despite a gradual generational shift in parenting obligations for men in heterosexual relationships, social norms place different caregiving expectations on women/mothers and those who are perceived as female. Additionally, gendered and problematic workplace expectations placed on women and men are often in direct conflict with caregiving values. This conflict creates an identity dissonance that reverberates to the very heart of one’s parenting/caregiving identity. In addition to examining lived experience, I explored healing practices and what those might look like in a higher education setting for my co-contributors (undergraduate unpartnered motherscholars).²

² I use the term “mother scholar,” which I derived from a fellow teacher/mentor/scholar, Vega (2019), who used the term “motherscholar” to denote the parenting graduate students with whom she worked during her dissertation research. Although scholars have been defined as someone who is well educated and has expertise in a particular field, I used “scholar” to disrupt the traditional academic usage that privileges a very narrow and limiting way of knowing and that only credits academically credentialled knowledge as scholarship. This word traditionally arranges the acquisition of knowledge as a hierarchical transmission from teacher to student. My work seeks to disrupt such

Deviant Motherhood

An important but often overlooked concept that I have linked with student success for unpartnered mothers centered on the ideology of deviant motherhood. Being labeled “deviant” creates additional hardship for unpartnered women, in addition to the sexism encountered by all women in higher education. A brief historical look at how unpartnered parenthood is linked to deviancy is helpful in understanding how these stigmas persist and are felt today.

With echoes of a deeply problematic past, the forced sterilization of women in the U.S. provides evidence that remnants of the eugenics movement (that links criminality and mental health challenges to racial and genetic traits) remain part of our social fabric. Women who gave birth out of wedlock were considered sexually deviant and were assumed to produce more deviants making them unfit for reproduction. These ideas gained increasing popularity in the late 1800s and early 1900s when many city governments were seeing an influx in immigration while also experiencing increases in crime and poverty. By embracing a eugenics ideology that provided “evidence” that such factors are the result of individual genetic traits (rather than systemic social factors), government officials were able to blame social and economic problems on the victims (Norrgard, 2008). During this time, debates around the possibility of the forced sterilization of society’s “undesirables” occurred, culminating in the horrific ideology of the Nazi Regime. While eugenics found its most extreme application in Nazi Germany, the U.S. had many advocates of the practice. In 1927, the Supreme Court confirmed the role of the state to sterilize the “feeble-minded” during the Buck vs Bell case (Fair, n.d).

hierarchies and presumes that “students” can also be experts, that their knowledge is valuable, and that they have important contributions to make in academic contexts.

The primary figure in the case was Carrie Buck, a foster child who was abandoned by her family after being raped and becoming pregnant at age 17. She was subsequently recommended for sterilization by her doctors who subscribed to the idea that a pregnancy out of wedlock by a poor person or a disabled person was a symptom of inherent immorality (Fair, n.d.). Buck went to court to fight a forced sterilization, but Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes stated that “three generations of imbeciles is enough” referring to her mother and grandmother who were both presented as not being mentally competent and contributing to generational deviancy (Fair, n.d.). In an act erasing all civil rights and personal agency, Carrie Buck was forcibly sterilized by doctors in collusion with the state on October 19, 1927. In addition to this horrific action, Buck was forced to live as a ward to her employers as an in-house domestic worker. She was given \$5 a month for her “employment.” She was only freed from her incarceration upon her marriage in 1932 which moved her social status from a perceived deviant (unmarried mother) to a respectably married person, thus moving her into a socially acceptable category of motherhood. After Carrie Buck’s sterilization, the number of states with legal provisions allowing such surgeries grew significantly and women were targeted far more than men for these procedures, even though they are much more medically costly and invasive for women (Fair, n.d.).

Unfortunately, this subjugation of women, and laws that allow the state to sterilize individuals at its own discretion, are still on the books in many states. In fact, as of 2021, 31 states and Washington D.C. allow forced sterilization (National Women’s Law Center). Between 2006-2010, doctors sterilized almost 150 imprisoned women in California. Until 2020, women held at an immigration detention center in Georgia were pressured into getting hysterectomies, several being forced to sign papers of agreement in a language they could not read (Hall, 2020). Forced sterilization appears to happen almost exclusively to women adding a layer of sexism to

the issue. In the National Women's Law Center report (2021), they were only able to find three cases that discussed the sterilization of men or boys. In two of the cases, the judge ruled that the boy should not be sterilized. The top medical manager at Valley State Prison from 2005-2008, characterized forced surgeries as "empowerment" for female inmates because they could have more options without more children (Johnson, 2013). Such commentary implies that men in control know what is best for women and should be the ultimate authority of their reproductive choices. On top of such patriarchal sexism, racist and anti-immigrant beliefs create additional precarity for women of color. By December of 2020 more than 40 Latina women had come forward with testimonies stating they had received unnecessary surgeries at a California detention center (Medosch, 2021).

Patriarchal assumptions that poor women, teen women, unwed mothers, disabled women, and women of color are unable to properly care for children and are therefore subject to state sterilization is not a historical fact but one that remains with us today. In Chapter Four, Misty describes her experience of being denied the ability to make her own choice to have another child and having to subvert her doctor to get pregnant who told her she was irresponsible for taking on a high risk pregnancy. In line with Duquaine-Watson's 2017 study of unpartnered women with children in college, I also define deviant motherhood as all women who give birth or attempt to give birth outside of a narrow heteropatriarchal and capitalist ideal. Being labeled and often treated as deviant, creates additional stress and makes these women doubly vulnerable to macro and microaggressions both inside and outside of higher education spaces.

Purpose

In addition to the eugenics movement in the U.S., the continuous and ongoing forced sterilization of women labeled "unfit to parent" by the state (which does not have an equivalent

standard for men), and a downward trend in women’s wellbeing are indicators that a focus on gender is imperative. Additionally, the focus needs to be on those who are most vulnerable within the category of women/nonbinary/genderqueer people. Although gender equity has been mentioned often as one of the goals of higher education, there does not seem to be robust strategic planning in place to address the economic gap between men and women. In 2021, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported all women in all racial categories for which data were pulled trailed men, with gaps for white and Asian women being greatest (see Figure 1; BLS Report, 2023).

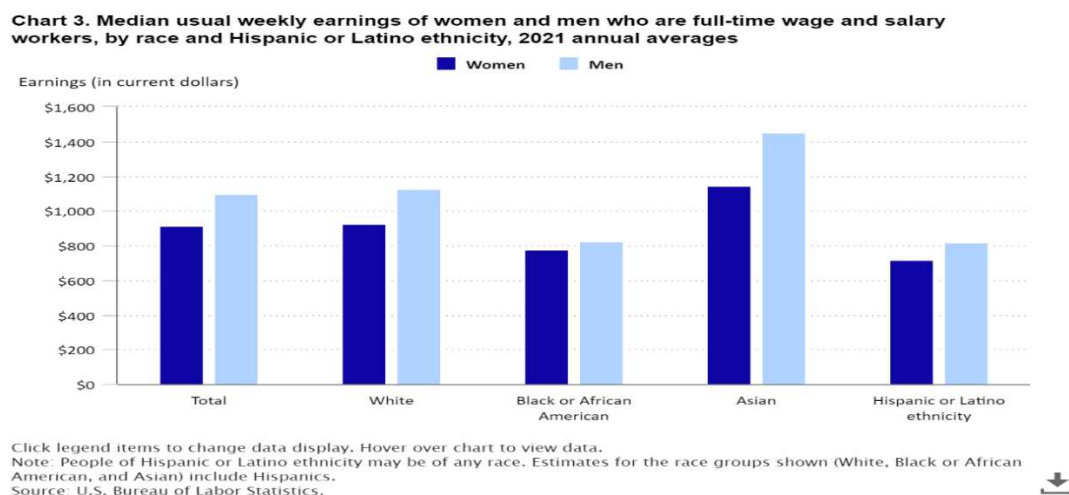


Figure 1

Comparison of Women and Men’s Weekly Earnings by Race

Note. From “BLS Reports, March 2023,” by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (<https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-earnings/2021/home.htm#table-7>). Copyright 2023 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Although unemployed unpartnered mothers have always far exceeded all other categories of mothers and all mothers suffered huge spikes in unemployment during the COVID-19

pandemic, unpartnered mothers are recovering at the slowest pace, followed by women of color (see Figure 2). White mothers are closer to pre-pandemic rates and are recovering more quickly.

The unemployment crisis in the United States has been particularly acute for single mothers and mothers of color.

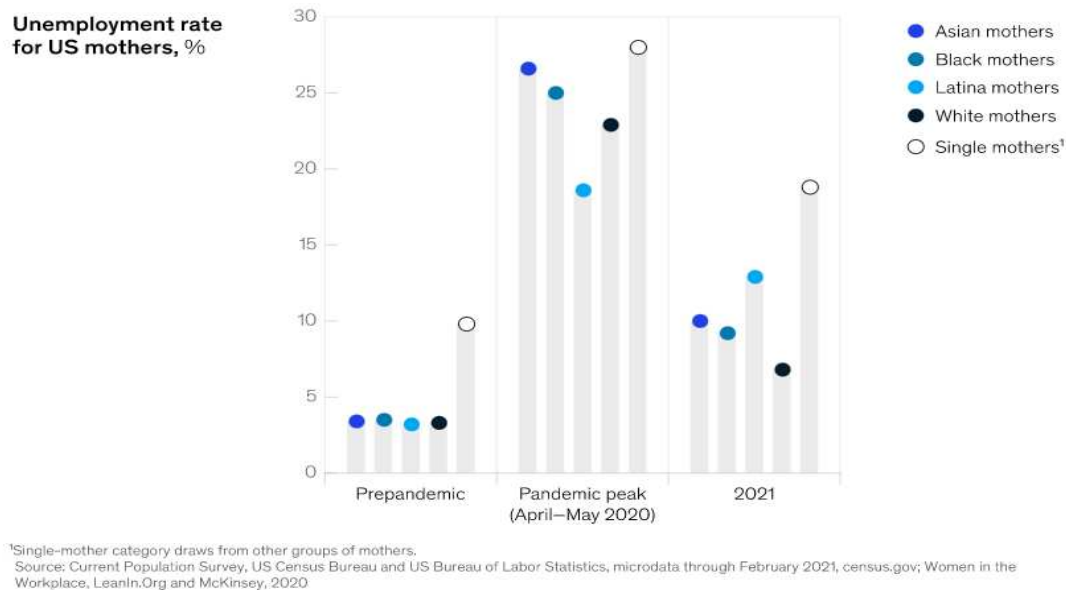


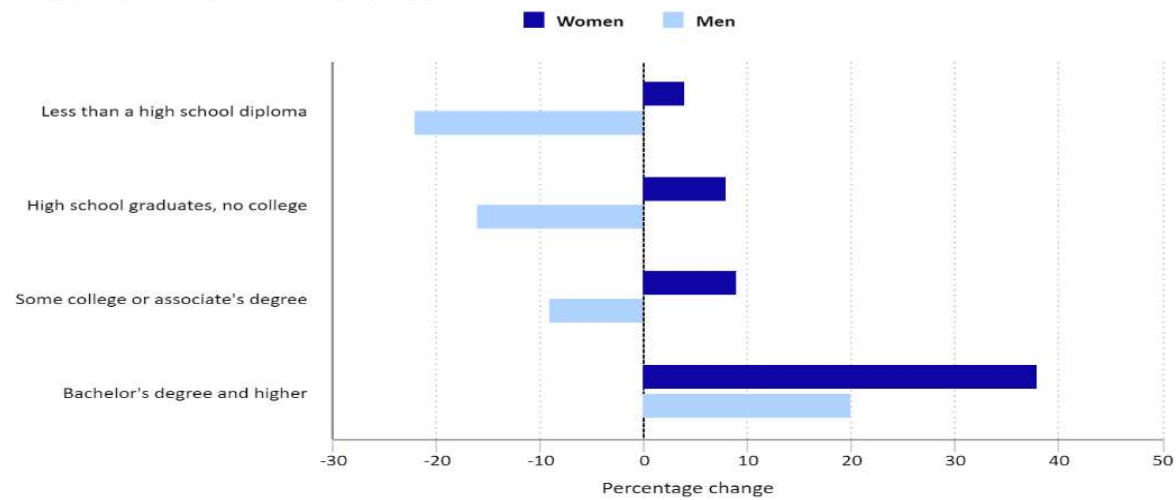
Figure 2

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on U.S. Mothers' Employment

Note. From “For Mothers in the Workplace a Year (and Counting) Like No Other,” by X. Huang et al., 2023 (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/for-mothers-in-the-workplace-a-year-and-counting-like-no-other>). Copyright 2020 by McKinsey and Company.

The same data, however, indicates that educational attainment has a significant impact on women's earning potential. Such data (see Figure 3) indicates higher education can have a positive impact on closing the economic gender gap. However, it is still failing to provide robust support for the most vulnerable women and AFAB people.

Chart 4. Percentage change in inflation-adjusted median usual weekly earnings of women and men, by educational attainment, 1979–2021



Hover over chart to view data.
 Note: Data relate to earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, age 25 and older.
 Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



Figure 3

Comparison of Women and Men’s Earnings by Educational Attainment

Note. From “BLS Reports, March 2023” by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (<https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-earnings/2021/home.htm#table-7>). Copyright 2023 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

This study focused on unpartnered mothers because they have much to gain economically from attaining a higher education. To address the equity gap between men and women, this study aimed to better understand why unpartnered mothers find it challenging to complete degrees and graduate from higher education institutions. I explored how structural barriers within institutions impacted the experiences of unpartnered mothers and their children. Because only 37% of this group of students graduate with a certificate or degree within 6 years, while nearly 60% of students without children do (Gault et al., 2020), it is clear higher education is failing to earn a passing grade when it comes to supporting this group. Despite the large and growing numbers of college students with children, few campuses, national, or state data systems have tracked the success and achievement of students with children (Gault et al., 2020). More data on this

vulnerable population are needed to help higher education administrators and policymakers better assess and address the needs of the student–parent community.

In examining identity intersections and the equity gap, targeting this community of students also addresses gender, income, first-generation, and race gaps because many parenting students have multiple minoritized identities (Gault et al., 2020). Most student parents are unpartnered women who face the double whammy of parenting alone and a gender wage gap requiring women to earn more education than men to attain family-sustaining wages. Also, students of color are more likely to be raising children while in college (Gault et al., 2020). For higher education leaders advocating for equity and student success, the role of parenthood must become better evaluated and understood.

To address the data gap and lack of attention to student parents in higher education, the following research questions and subquestions guided this study:

1. How do institutional structures in the community college shape the experiences of unpartnered mother scholars?
 - a. Where do mother scholars encounter resistances or barriers related to their identity as mothers across the sites of motherhood, gender, and scholarship?
 - b. What healing strategies do unpartnered mother scholars employ to address academic or gender violence encountered inside community college spaces?
2. How do biological and social concepts such as matrescence, gender-based caregiving, and reproductive identity development, shape the student experience? That is, how do students make meaning of these experiences?

Positionality

My stake in this topic is personal. I went to college for the first time as a barely turned 18-year-old unpartnered mother with an infant. It was not my choice to get pregnant, and my child's father was not someone I wanted to be with. He was a former friend who betrayed my trust and left me shattered just when I should have been moving into one of the most critical phases of my life as a young adult. The recent Supreme Court decision is particularly painful for me. Because I was a minor in the early 1990s, I needed my parents' permission to obtain an abortion. Coming from a very conservative and religious family, it was insinuated that what had happened to me was my fault because I was not careful enough, was rebellious, and spent time with the "wrong people." Years later, when I tried to have a conversation with my mother about what happened, she refused to discuss it with me, which reinforced the message that I should be silent and ashamed. I understand firsthand what it means to endure an unplanned pregnancy and the complete despair accompanying a lack of options.

Instead of entering higher education with youthful optimism and hope, I entered college as a desperate lifeline to try and rebuild a semblance of my life. I had to learn to parent an infant I had no idea what to do with. As a first-generation college student from a lower income household, I was excited and terrified to attend a large public university. I was also alone. My friends were young women from working or lower- to middle-class families, and there was little expectation of going to college. Like me, some of them were teen mothers. My high school counselor told me to enroll in community college to have a better chance of success and to encounter others "like me"—teen moms. Although I ignored that advice and went to a 4-year school, at the end of the day, my school counselor was right. I never met anyone like me at my public university. Or if I did, like me, they were hiding it. Thirty years have passed since those

days of struggle, and I am dismayed there are still very few services specifically for unpartnered parents.

Although difficult, telling my story is also a way out of silence and shame and a way to address my own personal healing from traumas received both inside and outside of academia. Anishinaabe writer Kimberly Blaeser (1997) described storytelling as a way to ground her work in truth larger than her own small vision: “Whatever mystery we are exploring, we tell our way, and in the telling find our way. That search called writing leads us home” (p. 113). I have a similar impetus for this work in that through the telling of these stories, I have begun to reclaim my own story and have started that journey for the mother scholars who have shared their stories as well.

Through the framing of these stories, I adopted a critical lens because I am white, straight, cisgender, could appear middle class, and therefore leverage privileges others without those identities could not. I know those privileges allowed me to beat long odds and attend graduate school despite a mediocre GPA. My struggle to discuss my own story and teen pregnancy demonstrates the silence and shame surrounding the topic. Teen pregnancy is only seen or mentioned positively in public discourse when rates fall, which reinforces the shame surrounding the identity.

That I have heard such statements my entire adult life diminishes my experiences and places blame on me as an individual for being “a negative societal statistic.” Both micro and macroaggressions permeate social life for those of us who occupy the status of teenage parent. As one such small example, when I married my current partner with my 7-year-old son as part of this new partnership, my father-in-law commented (and still to this day makes similar comments) that I made him a grandpa too early, stating: “Hey I’m too young to be a grandpa!” The “joke”

was that the label “grandfather” made him seem older than he was. However, the implication behind the statements was that I, as an unacceptably young parent, reflected a similar discomfort and social status onto him. The underlying assumptions of these kinds of comments essentially blame the victim for the social stigma attached to them. My story complicates the negative social statistics, implicates the lack of quality and meaningful sex education (most acute for queer youth) in this country, and problematizes the utter lack of acknowledgment of the incredible burden placed on young mothers, some of whom did not choose that path and are likely wholly unprepared for the transition to parenthood.

In fact, I have learned from my research that most women of all ages and circumstances are unprepared for the transition to parenthood because they are neither taught about nor given much control over such a significant experience. The removal of pregnancy and birthing from its traditional context within families and managed by midwives has taken the experience from the control of women to the control of the medical-industrial complex (Simonds et al., 2007). In an act of gender colonization, supported by higher education institutions that profited from new credentialing requirements, the last exclusive domain of women’s knowledge and expertise was wrested from them and placed into the hands of male doctors. Although we have a much greater number of women obstetricians today, the practice is very much grounded in modern medicine and its patriarchally derived epistemologies (Simonds et al., 2007). A pregnant woman likely has very little knowledge of her body, and decisions about her medical care throughout this transition are primarily out of her control. As a result, many women suffer from obstetric trauma, a failure to achieve a successful lactation practice, and depression that can last long after a few weeks following birth.

In the literature review, I discuss in more detail how the shift from midwifery as a uniquely woman controlled and administered medical model to a capitalist medical model has been detrimental to women. As one particularly horrific example, it was revealed recently that Robert Hadden, a former OB-GYN at Columbia University, was convicted of sexually assaulting his patients, some of whom were pregnant, during their gynecological exams (Neumeister, 2023). Although I do not presume to imply this is a regular occurrence in medical practice, the power and prestige associated with his practice inside an elite university protected him over almost 2 decades and an accumulation of over 200 women identified currently as victims of his abuse. As is often the case with powerful men and institutions, despite being alerted as early as 1994, he was allowed to practice (and assault women) for another 18 years before being arrested and charged with illegal sexual activity (Neumeister, 2023).

The subsequent lawsuit brought against Columbia accused them of granting access to vulnerable patients in part to protect its status among other Ivy League institutions and the university's own financial interests (Black et al., 2020). Hadden was arrested in both 2012 and 2014 for accusations of sexual misconduct but was allowed to continue his practice, and more women reported being abused during this time frame. Hadden was given a plea deal in 2016 that removed his license to practice, but he was spared prison time. His only penalty for abusing dozens of women, including minors, was to be barred from his previously easy access to vulnerable women and girls.

I bring this extreme example into the discussion as a warning of the dangers of the continued entanglement between capitalism and higher education for vulnerable people. So many women were traumatized by a system that protected power and refused to hear the voices of those without it and that privileged reputation and revenue above the lives of the people it

purported to serve. Such abuse should not be allowed to continue but is inevitable in our current institutional model.

In addition to more direct attention on systemic power imbalances, I believe that a better understanding of the context of birthing as a significant spiritual and biological transition is important and missing from conversations in society more broadly, but also within the study of higher education. It is critically important that women are afforded more education and opportunity to experience this transition fully and in a meaningful way that does not place the child at the center of the experience (as demonstrated by problematic gender reveal parties during pregnancy). More attention and education needs to be given to all young people regarding their sexual and reproductive health.

I also bring this example into conversation because I believe healing and reconciliation between higher education and many vulnerable people needs to be addressed more frequently and directly. The work of many scholars cited in my literature review have called attention to these systemic and historic abuses and have inspired my thinking and the ways I have connected my individual experiences and the experiences of the women in this study to dysfunctional systems within higher education. They have inspired my need to call out these abuses. I hope that, by understanding and disrupting the dynamics and abuse of power that enforce shame, silence, and struggle, we can finally, as an institution, begin to address how to shift power and create safety for those who do not have access to it. I hope healing, especially after the pandemic and its ongoing aftermath, will enter all functional unit discussions. Finally, I intend for this work to affirm and support all mothers and most particularly those who mother alone.

Theoretical Framework

My approach to the research and the questions I was interested in pursuing, best aligned with a critical phenomenological approach. Although I believe my study has overlap with narrative inquiry, I was and am, most interested in understanding how various phenomena appear to particular subjects and to deeply explore the significance of lived experiences advocated by a phenomenological approach. This study aligns with the hermeneutic tradition that includes historical, cultural, and social contexts as important to the until of analysis (Wrenn, n.d). Ultimately, I wanted to understand what it feels like and what it means to experience higher education as an unpartnered mother.

To refine my questions and my methods, my theoretical framework developed with ideas grounded in ecofeminism and also drew upon poststructural feminism and queer phenomenology. My theoretical framework centered ecofeminism (as resistance to academic capitalism) both to explore the concepts I mentioned previously and to develop a fuller understanding of the unique situatedness of unpartnered mother scholars. Unpartnered mother scholars are an incredibly diverse group with significant cross-cutting identities affecting how motherhood inside of academia is experienced. In a hermeneutic study, theory is used to “focus the inquiry where research is needed and is used to make decisions about sample, subjects, and research questions to be addressed” (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 730).

As a theoretical framework, ecofeminism addresses the structural and political realities that unpartnered mother scholars experience and provides ideas and practices for healing. Ecofeminism is consistent with the strand of critical hermeneutic traditions which seeks to amplify marginalized voices (Shiva, 2004). Ecofeminism draws upon feminist theory for its historical and structural underpinnings and also directly addresses power differentials across all

forms of life, which feminist theory alone does not. Both critical hermeneutics and ecofeminist approaches draw from Marxism, feminism, and other critical scholarship that proposes as marginalized groups become critically aware of power differentials, they begin the process of liberating themselves (Merchant, 1990). An awareness of one's own subordination is the first step toward healing.

Ecofeminism addresses the structural and political realities that unpartnered mother scholars experience and provides ideas and practices for healing. I first discuss ecofeminist theory, which describes the development of the connections between femininity and Nature,³ and how these connections are politicized to subordinate both. I also discuss how ecofeminism provides a model for reorganizing subordinated relationships into more egalitarian ones.

An Overview of Ecofeminist Theory

I drew on Salleh's (1997) work on ecofeminism as politics for my understanding and grounding in ecofeminism. She posited ecological crisis "is the inevitable effect of a Eurocentric capitalist patriarchal culture built on the domination of nature and domination of Woman" (Salleh, 1997, pp. 12–13). Or, put another way, "it is the inevitable effect of a culture constructed on the domination of Women, and the domination of Nature as feminine" (Salleh, 1997, p. 13). My approach also was inspired by Shiva (2004), who proposed an Earth democracy that advocates for a relocation of our minds, production systems, and consumption patterns, toward sustainability and sharing. She discussed how culture can shift values, locating wealth in biodiversity, creativity, and relationships based on love and mutuality.

³ I capitalize "Nature" in accordance with ecofeminist usage, which considers Nature in this context as an embodied entity with its own identity, agency, and spirit. The term "nature" typically refers to a material or physical place, often in conjunction with the idea that nature is a pristine place set aside for human recreation away from "modern" life.

Salleh (1997) described a paradigm shift in relationships between humans themselves and between humans and Nature. Ecofeminism seeks solutions that address the gender and ecological dimensions of power and seeks to end the violence enacted by settler–colonial, capitalist, and corporate interests (Estévez-Saá & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018). Evaluation of criteria includes reflexive and multivoiced texts grounded in experiences of oppression (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Ecofeminists advocate a reordering of one's relationship between self and the world. Such reordering transcends older orders about one's place in the world. It allows one to be part of an interconnected web of being and part of an institution not organized hierarchically around consumption, title, status, and hierarchy. A complete overhaul of the relationship between people and Nature is required to transform society and the structures hierarchically organizing humanity by class, race, religion, ability, gender, and so forth:

Ecofeminism is more than an identity politics; it reaches for an earth democracy across cultures and species. It reframes environment and peace, gender, socialist, and postcolonial concerns beyond the single-issue approach fostered by bourgeois right and its institutions. (Salleh, 1997, p. x)

Making connections to Nature and to our fellow beings (both human and nonhuman) reframes one's relationship to power. A conscious reorganization of power from a top-down, tower approach to a dispersed, web model is ecofeminism's approach for healing from the inevitable trauma the traditional western/colonial/capitalist tower model has done to social organization.

Some of the strategies critical ecofeminism outlines for liberation and healing include (a) re-mything nature as a bodied subject; (b) blurring the boundaries between inner and outer states, between emotional, psychological, and personal states and geographic landscapes, as well as

blurring boundaries between the self and other and between human and nonhuman; (c) expressing an ethic of caring in relationships with nature rather than an ethic of conquest; and (d) removing the mind as the primary center of knowledge production and elevating knowledge from the body (Estévez-Saá & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018).

Ecofeminism describes the connections between women and nature by using cultural, historical, psychological, spiritual, and political perspectives (Errington & Pasque, 2011). Ecofeminism seeks to dismantle the forces that degrade and exploit women, nature, nonhuman animals, and minoritized communities. An ecofeminist approach provides a theoretical perspective to activate change at the organizational level to dismantle the barriers keeping women from accessing and transforming higher education. Ecofeminism has been defined as both a theory and a movement, so it is an instrumental theory useful for illuminating structures that keep unpartnered mother scholars from traversing higher education spaces successfully.

An ecofeminist movement is based on collaboration, caring, and the interconnectedness of all beings. It values plurality in thought and meaning construction and prioritizes alternative ontologies (Salleh, 1997). Salleh (1997) described a paradigm shift in relationships between humans themselves and between humans and Nature. Brown (2017) also used the metaphor of a web to describe an ecofeminist vision of future possibilities. She wrote:

Emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more on critical, deep, and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience—the quality of the connection between the nodes in the patterns. Dare I say love. (p. 14)

Brown (2017) described a way to cross hierarchical borders and thus a way to begin the process of breaking them down. Breaking down borders means that different bodies are crossing into higher education spaces. As more diverse folx transgress these borders, more structures will

change. Change is an iterative process. However, inserting more women into spaces dominated by men is not enough. A complete overhaul of the relationship between people and Nature is required to transform society and the structures that hierarchically organize humanity by class, race, religion, ability, gender, and so forth.

Ecofeminism and Healing Paradigms

Errington and Pasque (2011) described ecofeminism as a perspective that correlates the destruction of the planet with the exploitation of women by patriarchy. Framing the structure of the gendered and heteronormative construction of higher education within an ecofeminist perspective allowed me to explore concepts at the intersection of gender and academic violence and how these forces are directed in specific ways against unpartnered mother scholars.

In her dissertation on graduate motherscholars of color, Vega (2019) discussed what she coined “maternal microaggressions,” describing them as acts of racism and/or sexism perpetrated against those who are parenting, pregnant, or embody maternal status. They are verbal and nonverbal forms of discrimination embedded in everyday conversations and spaces. Segato (2018) expanded on this perspective to explain that patriarchal violence is based on a process of foreclosing the feminine element, concealing women’s knowledge, and refusing to recognize its ontological existence.

To explore healing concepts with my co-contributors, I referred to Segato and Monque (2021) as inspiration. They developed a feminist ethnography situated in opposition to settler/colonial/capitalist research methods. They acknowledged fieldwork is about co-constructing knowledge and joining the “subject” in solidarity and is about sharing stories and experiences not as researchers but as fellow community members. Ecofeminism as practice speaks to the pursuit of healing, which provides space to synthesize and integrate experiences

related to gender, obstetric, reproductive, and academic violence, and thus generates a healing process through reflection.

Ecofeminism and Academic Capitalism

To begin the process of healing, ecofeminist theory calls attention to imbalanced power dynamics and advocates a radical reordering of the power and privileges embedded inside a globalized capitalist system (Errington & Pasque, 2011). As part of this system, a highly hierarchical and sexist state, such as the United States, is an inevitable outcome of centuries of organizing around values that prioritizes economic growth at all costs. Its current capitalist system was founded on a settler-colonial model, which was created to strip the land of its indigenous resources (including its people) and harness the labor of Black and Brown bodies (Wilder, 2014). Over time, the university system is becoming increasingly corporatized, a natural outgrowth of settler colonialism mirrored by U.S. society (Wilder, 2014).

Chatterjee and Maira (2014) discussed practices now common in U.S. institutions that exemplify the insertion of U.S. corporate culture within higher education. They pointed to how institutions encourage revenue-generating corporate startups, recruit international students for revenue, provide corporate-style executive compensation packages, and erode tenure and academic freedom. Oparah (2014) also wrote that the modern university is not only a model of settler-colonial corporatization but also embedded within larger systems and produces products for the military, industrial, and capitalist state. She called this integration the “academic-military-prison-industrial complex” (Oparah, 2014, p. 99). She wrote about how the consolidation of this complex creates a context in which “corporate priorities and cultures, including the intellectual needs of the military-industrial complex, increasingly shape the face of academia” (Oparah, 2014, p. 101).

Oparah (2014) also described how an epistemology of othering emerged inside of higher education as a tool of the state to exert control and systematically constructed whiteness to entrench racial ideologies and ensure a continuous upward stream of capital. Oparah (2014) noted universities (i.e., knowledge industries) are peopled by experts positioned as legitimate producers of knowledge contrasted with the “human subjects which serve as the raw material for knowledge production” (p. 111) and how these relationships are:

embedded in imperial global inequities and domestic patterns of subordination; the social relations of knowledge production position those without economic or political power, or racial, national, and gender privilege, as objects of investigation and raw materials for knowledge industries. (p. 111)

Such examples demonstrate how the modern university is both a product and tool of the history of settler colonialism and its current iteration, the global capitalist machine. Ecofeminism interrogates the academic capitalist model and allows for an analysis that critiques the model and examines its influence on the various forms of identity violence perpetrated on unpartnered mother scholars.

Although exploring the biology of motherhood is essential and central to discussions of the patriarchal oppression experienced by mothers, it is also important to examine how motherhood is more than just biology and that many mothers have never given birth or experienced the physical changes associated with doing so. Although I do not believe I can do full justice to the exploration of motherhood in the student experience, I hope using ecofeminist principles provides some additional insight into what this experience can be and how to better support unpartnered mother scholars.

Although ecofeminism is my theoretical grounding from which I explored why things are the way they are, the next section discusses my conceptual framework, which is rooted in poststructural feminism and queer phenomenology. These two theories lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomenological experience of living with an unpartnered parent identity in higher education today. I review poststructural feminism, my ontological approach, and queer theory, my epistemological one. Poststructural feminism lays the groundwork for the structural construction of gender and an explanation of how power is distributed as a result. Queer phenomenology conceptualizes those who exist outside of normative gender constructions and in opposition to value-laden judgments about whose gender identities are acceptable and whose are not.

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework draws on two theories (poststructural feminism and queer phenomenology) to address my research questions above. Poststructural feminism informs my ontological approach (Butler, 2004; Foucault, 1990; Jones & Stewart, 2016). A close examination of the history of gender construction is necessary for understanding why things are the way they appear and why bodies are orientated in particular ways. Poststructural feminism provides a framework for exploring power, hierarchy, agency, and identity, particularly regarding gender roles. It provides defining features for the structural boundaries of unpartnered mothers in terms of history, culture, social expectations, and norms that relate to motherhood/motherwork. A poststructural feminist approach acknowledges the hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality and focuses its analysis on how structural and systematic oppression and privilege impact the student experience (De Santis & Serafini, 2015).

Using poststructural feminism as a way of knowing and queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006; Simms & Stawarska, 2013; Vitry, 2021) as a way of being will provide a fuller understanding of the unique situatedness of unpartnered student mothers. Such incredibly diverse identities with significant cross-cutting identity variables affect how motherhood inside academia is experienced. Using the dual lenses of poststructural feminism and queer phenomenology, I explore a variety of concepts because they are essential for understanding the everyday experiences and social grounding of motherhood and the political and economic structures that shape these experiences. I also examine how differences in economic, racial, and gender identity, shape experiences. Although the biology of motherhood is important and central to discussions of the patriarchal oppression experienced by mothers, it is also essential to interrogate how motherhood is more than just biology and that many mothers have never given birth or experienced the physical changes associated with doing so. Both the emotional/spiritual experiences and the biological realities of motherhood need to be more thoroughly researched and theorized coherently in relation to the student experience.

Poststructural Feminism

I situated my use of poststructural feminism within the foundation work of Foucault (1990), who theorized that power constrains the choices of individuals and that technologies of power come from outside of the individual. Foucault discussed how power is used to normalize a heterosexual ideology that requires conformity. He described how sexuality is a historical, social construction that has evolved. Butler (2004) expanded on these ideas in her discussions of gender. Butler (2004) wrote, “Moreover the category of women has been used differentially and with exclusionary aims, and not all women have been included within its terms; women have not been fully incorporated into the human” (p. 37). Butler demonstrated “woman” is a category in

development as scholars resist the power dynamic that relegates women to a narrowly defined category of being. She also described how an exclusive discourse of gender (i.e., binary terminology restricted to the male/female continuum) performs a regulatory operation of power. Finally, poststructuralism offers the idea that there is no objective and knowable reality and that all research is affected by the researcher and their biases (Crotty, 1998).

My poststructural feminism is further situated within the third wave perspective of student development theory (Jones & Stewart, 2016), which adopts a critical and poststructural approach. I use poststructural and third wave theory because they reject binary oppositions as “natural” cultural and linguistic artifacts. Poststructural approaches argue knowledge is not based on the study of pure phenomenology or systems alone but that both factors influence experience.

A third-wave perspective asserts that unequal power structures create boundaries around the student experience and informs how students function within them (Jones & Stewart, 2016). Intersectionality, which influenced the third wave perspective, addressed the impact of power on those with multiple minoritized identities. The concept of intersectionality emerged within and against feminist theories, which historically focused on white, cisgender, middle-class concerns (Crenshaw, 2012). This vital addition demonstrates that although power is wielded to uphold certain norms, this power also is wielded differentially within and across minoritized identities. It also reveals how having multiple minoritized identities, such as being a Black woman, can significantly impact an individual’s agency and access to power. Although they attended to the dynamics of power, earlier works (Butler, 1990, 2004; Foucault, 1972, 1990) did not name or examine power in relation to nondominant identities. Including this perspective is an essential addition to current and future scholarship.

Queer Phenomenology

My epistemological approach centers queer phenomenology as my model for the reality of the inner world, which examines how one conceives of one's sense of self and how one orients oneself within a given environment. Queer phenomenology decenters a normative way of knowing. It derives from the philosophic discipline of phenomenology, which is the study of lived experience or, as Ahmed (2006) described it, "an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon" (p. 2). Understanding how individuals experience their environment's phenomena and the forces that move phenomena through space and time is crucial to my approach.

Queer phenomenology adds a layer to critical phenomenology in that in addition to decentering a normative way of knowing, it includes sexuality and gender in the analysis, which is an important component of this study. Queering the practice of phenomenology is necessary for an analysis of and resistance to heteronormative practice and conceptions of motherwork and scholarship. Queer phenomenology, as Ahmed (2006) outlined, involves putting queer studies in closer dialogue with the philosophy of phenomenology. Methods in queer theory are used to understand and promote resistance to dominant structural forces.

Phenomenology regards experience as embodied and woven into personal and cultural webs of signification (Simms & Stawarska, 2013). My perspective is that the very forces that constrain sexual expression, as Ahmed (2006) described, also constrain and limit gender expression and performance within family dynamics. Thus, anyone who is outside heterosexual parenting norms, such as unpartnered parents and queer parents, are also outside the model of "acceptable" parenthood.

Queer phenomenology locates its roots in queer theory. As Renn (2010) noted, queer theoretical approaches can move beyond fixed definitions of gender and sexuality and therefore can disrupt normative constructions of binary identities, such as male/female, teacher/learner, leader/follower, and so forth. In higher education, queer theory refers to a body of theories that “critically analyzes the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender” (Abes & Kasch, 2007, p. 620). To extend this idea beyond queer or straight orientations, heteronormativity can erase other identities, including nontraditional/nonbiological parenting roles.

For example, regarding adoptive mothers, Park (2013) wrote all maternal bodies are “discursively mediated and socially regulated” (p. 202) and based on assumptions about heteronormativity and their concurrent biological family relationships. Her discussion of adopting a child points to another view of queer motherhood, a view allowing for a more radical feminist conception of the practice of motherwork that exists outside of the received notions of acceptable (i.e., biological or natural) motherhood. Adoptive maternal bodies are distinct from adoptive paternal bodies in that maternal bodies are mediated by cultural expectations and caregiving norms (Park, 2006). I could extend her example into queer theory to include those who are assigned female at birth but who do not identify as female and queer mothers who are perceived as occupying a woman gender role. Parents who are part of lesbian couples, polyamorous families, foster and chosen family configurations, and other relationships do not find their kinship accurately defined through normative labels. To extend the example further, one can begin to understand how vague, restrictive, and exclusive the term “mother” is given that the term signifies cisgender and heteronormative ideals. Butler (2004) critiqued the naturalization of social categories:

Thus, a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption.

(p. 43)

Heteronormativity reinforces binary and categorical thinking and traps mothers of all kinds into categories of belonging (i.e., if they fit into the category) or unbelonging (i.e., if they deviate somehow). Such categorical thinking is detrimental to everyone because it creates an “ideal” most individuals cannot live up to.

Queering the practice of phenomenology is necessary for an analysis of and resistance to heteronormative practice and conceptions of motherwork and scholarship. Queer phenomenology, as Ahmed (2006) outlined, involves putting queer studies in closer dialogue with the philosophy of phenomenology. Methods in queer theory are used to understand and promote resistance to dominant structural forces.

Queer phenomenology added the dimension of disorientation in space or time to the unit of analysis. A focus on the queer phenomena of lived experience lent a greater depth of knowing what it means to occupy a particular identity, specifically one that is not valued or does not fit well within one’s current environment. It provided a way to understand inner structures inside the body and mind that mediate lived experience and how one experiences larger social structures. Attention to the experiences of bodies in space was essential to my framework because it drew attention to the historical conditions of how an object (or subject) arrives at a particular time and space. Understanding the historical conditions of women/mothers is a critical element of my analysis.

According to Vitry (2021), queer phenomenology invites us to look at how objects produce heterosexuality because of how they are arranged. In her research with queer organizers, Vitry explicitly brought bodily experience into the conversation by having her research participants name/identify how they understand their own bodies; she drew connections between how bodily perceptions (both internal and external) of characteristics, such as fatness, ethnicity, gender, and queerness, shape how those bodies extend into space.

For me, this experiential approach is necessary for understanding the construction of gender as it relates to motherhood, particularly the invisible motherhood I experienced as a student parent in higher education spaces. If I believe I am a good mother, but society tells me I am not, how do I make sense of this dissonance internally? Which objects are in my bodily horizon, and which are not? How do I resist messages that create disorientation within my social space?

Lane (2021) referred to the notion of “heteronormative worldliness” in her analysis of how the 2SLGBTQ population has been stigmatized in institutional settings such as hospitals. Her study took a phenomenological approach to deconstruct how heteronormativity creates “the closet” to hold nonconforming individuals outside or at the fringe of hetero-normed spaces and that these rules are immersive and intended to keep all bodies in line. Lane (2021) described how queer phenomenology offers “a framework for understanding how patients who exist in relation to the heteronorm and experience stigma-related stress” (p. 2184). She further noted a function of stigma associated with being outside the norms of heterosexuality causes a person to “experience harm by way of self-stigmatization” (Lane, 2021, p. 2177). Similarly, a queer phenomenological view provided a frame for understanding how unpartnered mothers outside the heteronormative view experienced stigma and shame.

As Lane (2021) noted, queer phenomenology adds a dimension of *disorientation* in space or time to the unit of analysis. Although my participants may or may not be part of the queer community, they are stigmatized in similar ways by the same structures which enforce binary heteronormativity on all bodies.

Important Concepts

In addition to investigating how reproductive identity sits at the intersection of gender and academic violence, I define important concepts of matrescence and reproductive identity development and explore how these biological and social realities shape and impact the student experience for unpartnered mother scholars.

Matrescence

The first concept is matrescence, initially defined by anthropologist Raphael (1975) as the biological process of becoming a mother. It is a significant life transition akin to a “coming of age” rite of passage. As with other life stages, matrescence involves hormonal, identity, and role shifts as well as other physical, bodily changes. Although these biological and emotional shifts start to lessen after 6 months or so, many aspects of the birth experience, including obstetric violence that can accompany birth and postpartum dysphoria, can linger for years (Riecher-Rossler & Hofecker, 2003). According to Gaynes et al. (2005), 13%–20% of women experienced major depression after giving birth.

Reproductive Identity Theory

This relatively new concept in psychology is closely coupled with and expanding the biological stage of matrescence into a biological and social phenomenon. Though not well theorized in critical identity development literature, Athan (2020) described reproductive identity as “analogous to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation” (p. 445). Even though critical

theories regarding race, gender, sexuality, and disability question power hierarchies and challenge normative assumptions, there is much less research on reproductive identity development. Although reproduction has been studied extensively in some fields, such as psychology, Athan (2020) found scholars did not commonly cite “reproductive identity” as a distinctive stage of development. Athan (2020) described reproductive identity as “conventional categories of parenthood/nonparenthood, related reproductive experiences, and how people make sense of their feelings in the sphere of reproduction more generally” (p. 446).

Although this project focused only on students who were parents, it was also important to consider the effects of not reproducing, particularly on women. Women who choose to be childless are often viewed as not doing their duty as women or seen as “less than” for not experiencing “the joy of motherhood.” They are perceived as selfish for not sharing their wealth and resources with a child. Women who desire to but cannot conceive often experience the medical-industrial complex as traumatizing and inhumane. After many years of biological and emotional pain, many give up and reconcile themselves to a child(less) existence. Others will make difficult choices about how to experience parenthood outside of giving birth to a biological child (Park, 2013).

Linking reproduction to one woman and her biological child (as so frequently happens in heteronormative contexts) is called “monomaternalism” and it erases many women’s reproductive experiences, such as those who have had an abortion, miscarriage, given up a child for adoption, have adopted, fostered, or are part of polyamorous or multiple-mother queer partnerships (Park, 2013). Such narrow conceptions of reproduction (the experiences most represented in reproductive and identity literature) renders these mothers objects of scorn or pity and invisible in social and academic spaces.

Reproductive Identity Development

Unfortunately, a thorough exploration of an inclusive and critical reproductive identity is beyond the scope of this project. However, reproductive choice (or lack thereof) is described as a “life transition marked by disequilibrium and adaptation along with an opportunity for greater psychological integration and self-awareness akin to posttraumatic growth” (Athan, 2020, p. 448) and deserves more scrutiny in education and identity development research. Athan (2020) argued older identity frameworks of reproduction are often heteronormative and culturally biased. She advocated for a new, more inclusive identity framework. She also noted women are differentially affected by reproduction given they are subjected to a “motherhood mandate” (for married women), must confront maternal mortality rates (especially acute for Black women), must bear the brunt of career–family conflicts, and are at risk for trauma, anxiety, and mood disorders related to pregnancy and childbirth, none of which have been well integrated into identity development theory.

Summary

A phenomenological exploration anchored in ecofeminism informed my approach to the student–parent experience so I could better explore the silent spaces. The first step toward healing involves both resisting labels associated with “ideal” motherhood and derived from patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist contexts as well as analyzing potential traumas derived from such labels. Reorganizing these hierarchies and claiming new language based on an ecofeminist ethic of deep caring would bring us closer to developing a praxis of healing that may better support those who are unpartnered students.

In this chapter, I discussed my positionality, research population, and orientation to the research. I also described my theoretical and conceptual frameworks that have informed my

approach. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand how unpartnered mother scholars navigate higher education and how they make meaning from their experiences. My theoretical framework centered on resistance to capitalism and on healing derived from ecofeminist theory.

My conceptual framework drew from two primary theories: poststructural feminism and queer phenomenology. Poststructural feminism informed my ontological approach. My epistemological approach centered queer phenomenology as my model for the reality of the inner world, which examines how one conceives of a sense of self and how one orients oneself within a given environment. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of my theoretical framework. I use the concept of the nesting doll to illustrate how my conceptual frameworks are nested together and both nest inside my overarching theoretical framework. The goal of such framing is to work in community with participants to coconstruct potential resistance to oppressive structures and norms encountered in higher education settings.

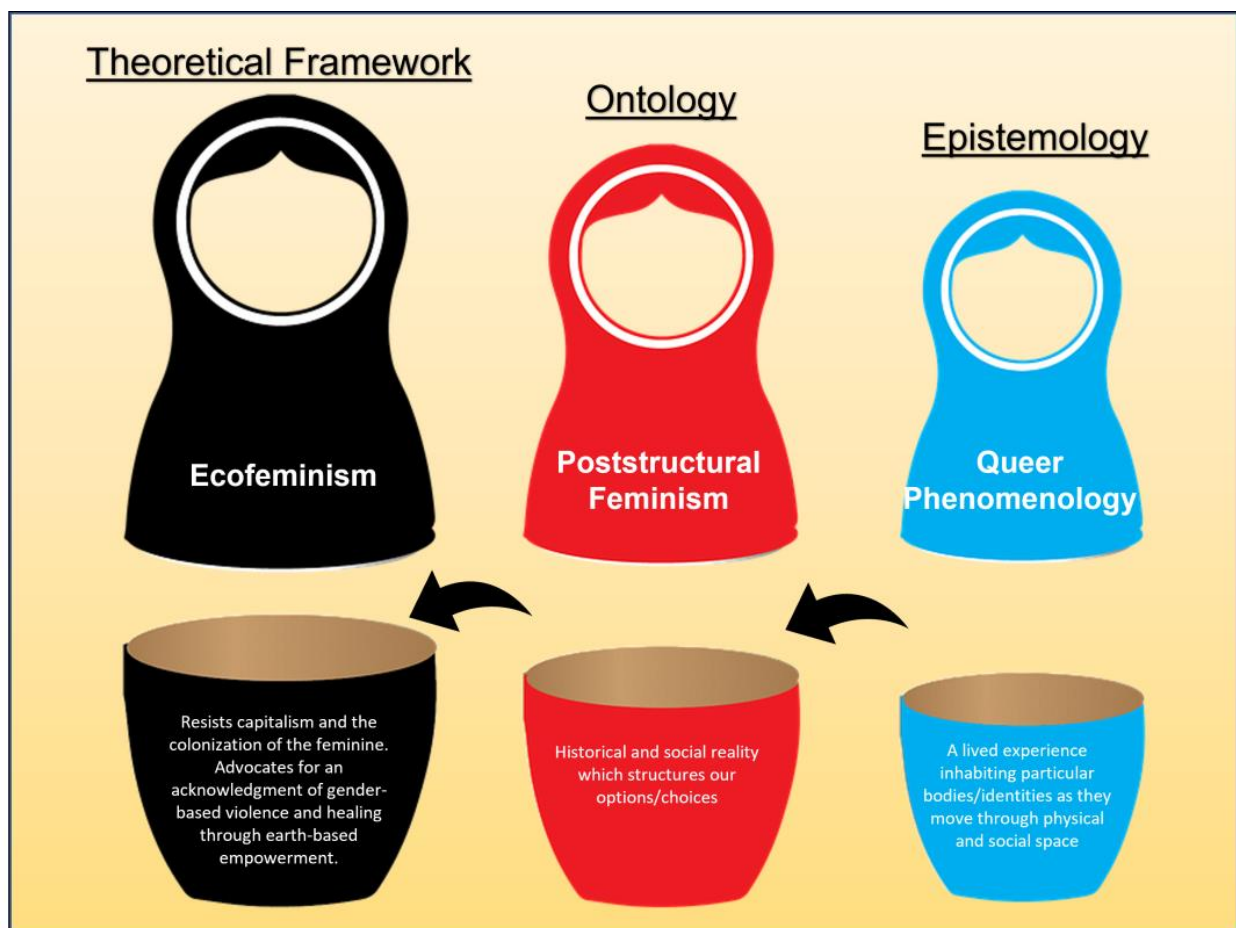


Figure 4

Theoretical Framework Model

Although imperfect, I remained mindful of adopting an intersectional (Crenshaw, 2012) perspective as I explored these concepts with participants. Intersectionality helped me to address the impact of power on those with multiple minoritized identities, particularly regarding race. I am aware that this concept deserves critical attention, especially because I am identified as a white scholar and I hold privileges associated with whiteness.

In Chapter 2, I provide an in-depth overview of the literature informing my theoretical and conceptual frameworks. I provide an analysis of recent quantitative and qualitative literature on the student–parent experience and examine programmatic approaches to student–parent

support and its efficacy. Finally, I examined what questions remain unanswered in the literature about the student–parent community.

In Chapter 3, I outline my qualitative methodological design, which is grounded in queer phenomenology and ecofeminism. I describe how the use of ecofeminist practice focuses my methods on relationship building, reducing power differentials, and identifying trauma and violence due to unpartnered mother identity statuses. Chapter 3 also includes the blueprint for my recruitment, data collection, and analysis plan.

In Chapter 4, I review my findings, my theoretical framing, and how this frame impacted the findings and my interpretations of the data collected. I also review my methodological approach and how it was applied in the research setting and I include some discussion around how the methods impacted the data and my relationship with participants. I discuss the data, the interviews, and finally present my analysis of the study including emerging themes and recommendations for making higher education better for this group of students and others who share their identity as unpartnered mothers. In this chapter, I introduce both stories and poems that help describe the experience of being an unpartnered mother in higher education settings.

Chapter 5 summarizes the study and reflects on the methods and theories selected. I also review suggestions for making education better and suggest some specific practices for implementation. I discuss study limitations and make suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In discussing those historically erased by capitalism, Fine (2018) asked us to consider which kinds of people are similarly erased today. I would argue unpartnered mothers in higher education, are a group of students who migrate unseen, unacknowledged, and largely unsupported through higher education institutions.

Understanding this group of students is critically important because we can expect an increase in the number of unpartnered parents in college. Although the number of unpartnered mothers in college has more than doubled over the past 20 years, the number of student parents actually declined by 15% between 2011 and 2016 (Cruse et al., 2019). Although there was a decrease in college enrollment among all groups of students, the enrollment of student parents declined more sharply in part because of rising tuition costs, childcare costs, and the closure of more than 100 for-profit colleges in that time frame (Cruse et al., 2019).

Despite the decline, more than 1 in 5 college students is a parent. Of the 3.8 million student parents, 70% are mothers, and 62% of them are unpartnered mothers. Most fathers in college are married (61%; Cruse et al., 2019). I did not find data on queer parents or parents in other types of family arrangements.

In this literature review chapter, I examine the higher education literature to better understand the current research on and support models for unpartnered mothers in higher education. Such research is critically important because most colleges and universities neither collect data about student parents uniformly nor track their success rates. For example, nearly 3 in 10 community colleges surveyed for Achieving the Dream reported that, as part of their enrollment application processes, they had never considered asking students whether they had children (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020).

Additionally, after surveying the identity development literature, I did not find a model for helping student parents foster a positive sense of self as both parents and students. Inadequate developmental and material resources are a cause for concern when institutions attempt to retain unpartnered parent students. My research interest was born from my experience as a first-generation unpartnered mother and scholar, trying to make sense of my personal history and to understand why other unpartnered parents like me found it so difficult to succeed in higher education. I also am interested in understanding why institutions seem to ignore the high rates of attrition of unpartnered mother scholars and why institutions generally lack cultural or affinity centers devoted to this group of students. I am motivated to understand better how unpartnered mother scholars can navigate higher education and what their lived experiences are like, particularly with regard to oppressive gender norms related to expectations of feminine caregiving and biases associated with being an unpartnered parent in a higher education setting.

Poststructural Feminist Analysis

I have located my poststructural feminist analysis within third and fourth wave feminism (Jones & Stewart, 2016), which focuses on unequal power structures (Foucault, 1990) and engages with intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1988). Although Foucault has been well known for interrogating power dynamics in social relationships, Crenshaw added an intersectional lens to examine power dynamics and to decenter white, cisgender, and middle-class concerns. Her work expanded the conversation to include diversity within women's experiences and brought attention to power imbalances within academic feminism.

Although identity dissonance impacts all working parents, this is especially true for women and those who experience giving birth because they are subjected to the gendered norms and expectations of "motherhood" within a heteronormative, capitalist, neoliberal work

environment (Low & Martin, 2019). This work environment is the reality within which higher education institutions have adopted and developed their own norms around notions of “work.”

These social facts become even more impactful for those who are marginalized (unpartnered) mothers. Marginalized mothers experience the stigma of being outside of what is normatively considered “good” motherhood. If one examines who has their motherhood questioned, or even forcibly erased, through actions of state violence (Dwyer, 2020; Johnson, 2014), other intersections appear; such as class (e.g., poor women), age (e.g., very young women), able-bodied (e.g., those who are deemed not physically or mentally fit), that exist in addition to the gender binary. Young, poor, unpartnered women of color are more likely to be viewed as “bad mothers,” and others may measure themselves or their partners as “good mothers” against mothers in this group (Maldonado, 2019). Poor women and women of color have been affected disproportionately by social stigma, which compounds negative characteristics associated with their identity (Bowleg, 2008).

In their book, *Academic Motherhood: How Faculty Manage Work and Family*, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) discussed the “ideal worker” paradigm, which has migrated from the larger culture into higher education. They stated this paradigm was based on the original masculinist structure of higher education faculty modeled on a traditional gender model in which men had wives at home who cared for the family full time so they were free to devote their lives to academic research and teaching. Ward and Wolf-Wendel discussed experiences of shame surrounding nonnormative motherhood status, insofar as it does not conform to the patriarchal ideal of mothers who are devoted exclusively to caregiving for children. Although this reality impacts all working women, unpartnered mothers are doubly impacted because they do not have

a partner with whom to share caregiving duties and are criticized for not being present fully for their children (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013).

Although all mothers are subjected to these social pressures, unpartnered mothers are more so. Additionally, women of color, poor women, disabled women, and women at the intersections of these multiple marginalized identities are almost entirely absent in the literature and are often missing in feminist and queer analyses. As Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) pointed out, the parenting literature has been applicable mainly to educated white women and men from middle-class backgrounds who have the luxury and agency to demand attention to the conflict between their public and private lives and to point out the discrimination toward and lack of balance for those engaged in caregiving. Although gender disparity, discrimination, and gender role expectations impact people in all positions within higher education, scholars have paid little to no attention to the concerns about work and family life that those from historically disenfranchised racial and ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities, and lower socioeconomic groups express. As there has been little developmental theory regarding student parents in the literature, adopting a poststructural feminist lens to help highlight differences in how student parents navigate higher education spaces will potentially address this gap.

This is not to say everyone has similar mothering experiences. Regardless of whether one has physically given birth, motherhood experiences are rooted in gender norms that conflict with work (and education) norms and render invisible the physical and emotional burdens of motherhood. A poststructural feminist approach highlighting gendered power differentials as they are experienced in higher education contexts is necessary to understand the construction of gender as related to motherhood, particularly the invisible forms of motherhood I examined.

Analysis of Literature

The literature review is divided into two sections. In each, I explored a particular literature regarding mothers. Each literature is critical for understanding the complexity of unpartnered mother scholars' experiences in higher education. The first section reviewed motherhood theory, and the second reviewed data on unpartnered mothers. I divided the research into two main sections because both are critical for understanding the complexity of unpartnered parents' experiences in higher education. The unpartnered parenting literature has tended to focus on data collection and praxis, so the respective section is divided further into subsections of quantitative and qualitative approaches. In contrast, the motherhood literature has tended to focus on applying theory to the shared, lived experiences of motherhood. In the motherhood section, I also discussed obstetric violence as an element of biological motherhood. Understanding the context of trauma some mothers carry with them provides context for the healing practices for which my ecofeminist theoretical framework advocates.

Because both literatures have offered essential contributions for understanding the context as well as the lived experience of both motherhood and unpartnered motherhood, I have included both. I also have personal reasons for broadening this review to include mothering/motherwork theory. The unpartnered parent literature did not seem to describe fully my experience as an unpartnered mother scholar. It did not help me understand the complexities of mothering while also a student or of navigating class and work schedules while also raising, feeding, caring for, and supporting another small human. That literature did not help me understand the difficulties I had disclosing my identity to professors or why I was constantly wracked by guilt no matter who or what I chose to prioritize at any given moment.

Although the unpartnered parent literature addresses many of the immediately present material concerns, it does not theorize about the lived experiences of unpartnered parents. And while it does identify the many identity stigmas that unpartnered parents (specifically mothers) face, the literature does not satisfactorily explain these stigmas or identify ways to support students in developing a healthy parenting identity. This data is important for providing background for any phenomenology study.

Within the motherhood theory literature, I found information more directly addressing both the intersectional aspects of a motherhood identity and the sociopolitical and historical influences aligned with my ecofeminist frame. This chapter critiqued the current literature and identified gaps for future research.

The next section discusses my application of a poststructural feminist analysis on the mothering literature. This section highlights examples of how mothering is gendered and how gendered norms uphold the values of capitalist and patriarchal scholarship norms in higher education.

Mothering/Motherwork Literature

Mercado-López's (2013) notion of "gender colonization" accurately depicts the cultural norming mothers in higher education spaces experience. This term encapsulates how forces of colonization (and its concurrent patriarchy) have silenced women as mothers in higher education by requiring them to devalue caretaking identities while simultaneously forcing a specific view of the ideal (i.e., white, middle class, full-time, and solitary) motherhood upon us. An ideal that is also at odds with the traditional view of the ideal academic, which is entirely devoted to study and research (Low & Martin, 2019; Segato & Monque, 2021). This section examined how the historical and political forces of capitalism have shaped and constrained women's choices.

Gender Colonization and Capitalism

Obstetric and academic violence are the products of a settler colonial-capitalist construct that values life as capital. In a system designed for profit, life (and the act of bringing life into the world) is organized into hierarchies of control (Simonds et al., 2007; Wagner, 2006). Patriarchy and its attendant sexism are control mechanisms that inevitably damage women. This damage is acute in the medical-industrial complex in which the control of reproduction, labor, and birth was taken from midwives who were responsible for birthing assistance until the early 20th century. As the last vestiges of women's control over their own bodies were placed into the hands of "medically trained professionals" and structured around a fear of liability and the profits of insurance companies, outcomes for women and babies worsened.

In *Laboring On*, Simonds et al. (2007) noted, as the number of births by midwives shrank through the early 1900s, infant mortality in the 1st day, 1st week, and 1st month of life all increased. In Newark, New Jersey, a midwifery program (1914–1916) achieved maternal mortality rates as low as 1.7 per 1,000 births, while in Boston, where midwives were banned, the rate was 6.5 per 1,000 births. The mortality for infants was even worse with 8.5 per 1000 births in Newark compared to 36.4 per 1000 births in Boston. Wagner (2006), a former doctor with the World Health Organization, described how the capitalist medical model has led to violence against women:

By embracing a medical model of birth and allowing obstetricians control of our maternity care, we Americans have accepted health care for women and babies that are not only below standard for wealthy countries but often amounts to abuse and neglect. (p.

5)

The number of women who have died in childbirth or related to complications from it has increased in the past 25 years. “Twenty-eight countries have lower maternal mortality rates than the United States, and 41 countries have lower infant mortality rates” (p. 9).

However, Wagner (2006) noted the medical community continues to insist pregnancy and birth are high-risk procedures requiring frequent hospital intervention and constant fetal monitoring. Fear is used to keep women firmly under medical control and to silence data that tell a different story. For example, in countries in the global north that use midwives more commonly, infant and maternal mortality outcomes are better than they are in the United States, where babies are delivered in hospitals under the care of a medical doctor.

Gender and Academic Violence

In addition to medical capitalism, which perpetrates violence against women’s bodies, academic capitalism is responsible for emotional violence against women who are caregivers. The cultural notion of “ideal” motherhood comes from a capitalist model in which motherhood is portrayed as a personal choice and thus must be a burden that is shouldered alone (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013). This model keeps women isolated from their communities, upholds extreme individualism, and forces women to provide free labor in the form of childcare to support economic growth.

Unpartnered mothers are penalized further because their “choice” to parent without a partner violates heterosexual marriage norms, which include a two parent home with a mother and father, and a legal marriage contract recognized by the state. Lewis (2013) related stories of pressures to hide her unpartnered motherhood status while job hunting at age 42 with three children. One trusted colleague advised her that her children made her appear like a “second-class” worker; no one in her social circle advised her to disclose during interviews that she was a

mother of three. Regardless of whether being a unpartnered mother would harm her job chances, the fact that everyone around her felt it would reduce her success sent a clear message that, although being a mother in academia is bad, being a unpartnered mother in academia is worse and something one should hide. An unpartnered father of three children would likely be given the opposite advice and lauded for his dedication to his children.

Capitalist ideas about productivity permeate decisions made by caregivers both inside and outside of higher education. The “career mystique” is the idea that showing up is often more important than actual productivity (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). The notion that hard work leads to success and failure results from a lack of work ethic is a myth that very much influences the norms established in administration and professional staff work environments. Low and Martin (2019) discussed the challenges of mothering for early career researchers in the United Kingdom. Both within and outside of the United States, researchers who study the experience of motherhood in higher education write about the larger social structures that confine caregivers to traditional gender roles (i.e., women = mother and full-time caregivers, while men = breadwinners and supplementary caregivers).

Low and Martin (2019) also discussed how neoliberal capitalist structures underlie all contemporary academic institutions and how these structures prioritize particular forms of work and recognize only certain commitment conditions as valid. They wrote, “The lived experience of motherhood is dissonant with how the neoliberal university measures and values progress” (Low & Martin, 2019, p. 427). Lewis (2013) illustrated this point well with another anecdote about the challenge of pumping during overnight trips for interviews. She related how she had to hide that she needed to pump every 3–4 hours during the day-long interviews. She described the difficulty of trying to hide a breast pump in a black storage case and finding an accessible place

to store the milk. She concluded she could not find a workable solution and had to pour all the milk down a drain. The paradoxical experience of the physical stress on the body from giving birth and nursing coupled with the emotional need to provide sustenance for your children but having to dump your effort down the drain is psychologically traumatizing and spiritually damaging.

Furthermore, the act of giving birth and rearing children has historically been a communal activity. Western colonial norms of the solitary mother go against the historical reality. Although white feminists have clearly delineated the problems associated with Western colonization and its subsequent white supremacy cultural model as the basis for gender colonization, they have only recently come to terms with and connected it to gendered motherhood constructs.

As a result of ongoing violence toward women/mothers, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) documented that women tend to be older than men when they receive their doctoral degree and enter faculty positions at a lower rate than men. They are more likely than men are to subordinate their professional ambitions to be the “trailing” spouse in job search situations. Despite their attempts to paint a rosier picture of academic faculty life, Ward and Wolf-Wendel mainly provided stories of struggle and discrimination, much of which centers on the physical and emotional demands of motherhood and giving birth.

In addition to social pressures that treat caregiving as the primary responsibility of mothers, Castañeda and Isgro (2013) discussed how motherhood is portrayed as a personal choice and thus must be a burden that one shoulders alone. In the introductory chapter of the edited volume, *Mothers in Academia*, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) discussed how these norms are held externally but internalized by women and men. For example, women believe themselves

to be “bad mothers” rather than “good workers” when they prioritize work above mothering. They tend to hide mothering duties that interfere with work duties. Another example of this paradigm is that men are praised for leaving work early to pick up children from daycare, but a woman who leaves early is seen by herself and others as not being committed to her work or career advancement.

Resistance to Capitalist Norms

Additionally, mothers of color have explored how mothering has been a site of contestation between white women and women of color because the former have often benefitted from a capitalist system that has institutionalized racism. In contrast, the system has used mothers of color to support itself (Collins, 1994). Feminist mothers of color have expanded notions of what motherhood is. They have questioned not just male domination and privilege but also how this very domination works to privilege middle- and upper-class white mothers. Glenn (1994) called on “feminist analysis to examine the reciprocal relationship between mother ideology and other prevailing ideologies and to consider how conceptions of mothering help maintain ideologies that justify race, class, and gender hierarchy” (p. 12). In writing about the ideal models of motherhood from which social norms derive, Glenn (1994) stated, “Indeed, for most of the twentieth century an idealized model of motherhood, derived from the situation of the white, American, middle class, has been projected as universal” (p. 3). Her study of the labor histories of women of color demonstrated how these mothers were not expected or allowed to be full-time mothers. The boundaries of mothering for women of color also extended beyond the private and nuclear family, which defies the dominant norm.

Collins (1994) explored the racial–historical context in which ideas about motherhood and “ideal” motherhood have arisen and how those ideals are not, in fact, universal but particular to the communities in which they arise:

Motherhood occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender, whereas the sons and daughters of white mothers have “every opportunity and protection,” and the “colored” daughters and sons of racial ethnic mothers “know not their fate.” Racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context, not only for racial and ethnic women in the United States, but for all women. (p. 45)

All women as well as those outside the gender binary have experienced caregiving oppression related to patriarchal control. However, women of color have experienced that oppression differently, which has led to expanded conceptions and ideas of mothering that are often contrary to mainstream motherhood ideals (Caballero et al., 2019; Glenn 1994). By resisting further gender colonization through the breakdown of the communal work of caregiving, mothers of color continue to oppose both colonial and racial domination. Segato and Monque (2021) located the source of gender colonization in what Segato (2018) called “patriarchal-colonial modernity”:

The state offers with one hand what it has already stolen with the other on its way to the colonial-modern regime of individual citizenship. That is, the state provides a law that protects women from violence, but these forms of violence would not have been possible had the traditional institutions and communal ties that protected women not been destroyed in the first place. In other words, modernity tries to develop and administer the antidote for the venom it injects. (p. 783)

The burden of resistance to oppression continues to lie most heavily on the backs of women of color and they carry this burden with them through higher education systems.

Summary of the Motherwork Literature

The motherwork literature has indicated women who are unpartnered parents face multiple levels of oppression in higher education spaces. As women, they face gender barriers, particularly in STEM spaces (see data in the Women in STEM section). As parents, they face obstacles related to caregiving as well as competing identities between ideal parenting and ideal scholarship. Finally, unpartnered mothers face additional stigma from being outside the “ideal” mother category as colonial/capitalist culture define it. For those whose lived reality involves being the primary caretaker for children, they are immediately rendered invisible because there is no space for their children in academia. Their children become erased because they do not fit into this ordered space of scholarly work. In a classroom, one must be a student, not a mother.

The following section examines the literature on unpartnered parents in higher education. It describes both quantitative and qualitative data studies that have illustrated how unpartnered mother scholars navigated higher education.

Unpartnered Parent Literature in Higher Education

I have subdivided the single-parent literature into quantitative and qualitative approaches. Most of the literature focuses on either a quantitative approach describing who unpartnered parents are and what percentage of the larger student body they occupy or a qualitative approach examining the experience of unpartnered parenting in college and how campus life supports or hinders their educational journey. In each section, I look at broad trends in the literature and end each section with a representative study. The quantitative section concludes with a study that highlights “Flying Solo,” a successful parenting support program in Colorado (Carpenter et al.,

2018). The qualitative section concludes with a study from Pearson's (2019) *Back in School: How Student Parents Are Transforming College and Family*, which used data from interviews of 40 student parents over 4 years to understand their experiences in higher education. Even though this study was not about unpartnered mothers, given the demographics of the student parent population, many parents in the study were unpartnered mothers, and their unique challenges were mentioned frequently in their narratives.

Quantitative Data

Although issues of motherhood/motherwork impact all mothers, unpartnered mothers are particularly sensitive to social forces insofar as they are typically parenting alone and lack the material or emotional support women who are mothering with partners have. Despite the challenges, however, unpartnered women who parent alone often believe achieving an education is a pathway to economic self-sufficiency (Pearson, 2019). This section first reviews literature that has used a quantitative approach to study unpartnered parenting and provides an overview of the demographics and structural challenges parents in higher education face. The second section highlights some of the qualitative literature describing how unpartnered student parents experience the climate and environment of higher education.

Unpartnered Mothers. The Institute of Women's Policy Report described how women are disproportionately more likely to balance college and parenthood than are men and constitute the vast majority (79.4%) of student parents (Cruse et al., 2019). Most of these are unpartnered mothers. The research on unpartnered parenting often has focused on unpartnered mothers because most unpartnered parents in college are mothers rather than fathers.

Even though unpartnered mothers represent a higher percentage of mothers in college, they are underrepresented in higher education. Sixty-eight percent of unpartnered mothers only

have a high school degree, whereas only 36% of their married counterparts do (Ajayi et al., 2021). These facts are likely attributable to the biological reality that if they choose to go through pregnancy, give birth, and breastfeed, mothers face considerable physical and emotional challenges that unpartnered fathers do not. Finally, mothers are subjected to much greater scrutiny regarding how they prioritize their time and their children's needs than are fathers. Moreover, mothers are burdened more with social programming, which devalues caregiving and relegates its function to predominately female bodies. Taken together, these social facts create a parenting experience unique to mothers. Further, without a shared income, unpartnered mothers are more likely to be of a lower socioeconomic class and face religious stigmas and heteronormative stereotypes about unmarried motherhood.

Parents and Types of Institutions. Because of their open access and more flexible scheduling, the largest share of student parents are enrolled in community colleges; 42% of the community college student body is comprised of parents, and 17% of public and 18% of for-profit 4-year institutions are student parents (Cruse et al., 2019).

Parents and Finances. The median debt of student parents is more than 2.5 times higher than the debt of students without children. Unpartnered mothers tend to carry the most debt (Cruse et al., 2019). Facing more significant financial and time constraints than their nonparenting cohorts, parenting students are at higher risk for basic needs insecurity. Unpartnered mothers, who are the most vulnerable of this group, are more likely to live in poverty than other women, and, of those in college, 88% have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020).

Social support may work against student parents. For example, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families requires unpartnered mothers with children older than 6 to work 30 hours a

week to qualify for federal aid (Ajayi et al., 2021). The Child Care Access Means Parents in School Act was created to target the needs of student parents. However, this competitive grant, which supports on-campus childcare services for low-income students, only serves about 1% of its target population. Other structural barriers to education include lack of on-campus daycare at most institutions, lack of family-friendly policies at most schools, and feelings of isolation (Ajayi et al., 2021).

Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Age. According to Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020), female-identified students were nearly twice as likely as male-identified students to parent during college (24% vs. 12% at community colleges). In their study, 7% of student parents identified as nonbinary or third gender. Latinx and white females had similar parenting rates at community colleges (20% and 18%). Black female-identified students parented at slightly higher rates (29% at 2-year colleges), and 11% of students 25 or younger were parents.

Risk Factors. According to a report on Denver metropolitan-based colleges (The Hope Center, 2019), compared with their male peers, more female respondents experienced food and housing insecurity, although they experienced slightly smaller levels of homelessness. Transgender students experienced the highest rates of all three metrics: 71% of respondents experienced housing insecurity, and 35% experienced homelessness. LGBTQI students also reported higher levels of risk than did straight respondents. Unfortunately, I could not find data on multiple variables for gender identity, parenting, and risk. Students with children had higher rates of housing insecurity and food insecurity but roughly the same level of homelessness (18%) as students without children (The Hope Center, 2019). However, the respondent population sizes were not similar: 439 respondents had children, and 2,203 did not. Divorced people were more

likely to experience all three metrics, particularly housing insecurity at 86%, but the data did not track gender, unfortunately.

Impacts of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic became a new concern for college campuses as they recalibrated how they offered services to students. Recent reports documented that COVID-19 accelerated stress and basic needs insecurity rates across all student demographics (Hope Center for College Community, 2021). Additionally, it created more pressure on students to become caregivers, whether of their own children or another family member. These pressures indicate an urgent need to consider how higher education can continue to be accessible for students with caregiving responsibilities. According to a survey of 13 Colorado community colleges in the fall of 2020, 45% of respondents reported they had caregiving duties while attending class, 37% reported they helped children in their home with schooling while attending class, 49% reported missing work or class because of a lack of childcare, and 76% reported they had children at home when they attended class (Hope Center for College Community, 2021).

Sun (2021) found, compared to married and cohabiting parents, unpartnered parents experienced the sharpest increase in being out of work or school during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Hensly et al. (2021), the Institute of Women's Policy Research examined data collected by the American survey during the COVID-19 pandemic and found 1 in 5 adults ages 25 to 64 (34.8 million people) held some college credit but no degree. More than one third (35%) of respondents were parents. This statistic speaks to the desire to go to college and the difficulties many U.S. parents encounter when attempting to complete a degree.

Degree Completion. Although all parents struggle to balance college and family life, the challenges unpartnered parents face are particularly acute. Unpartnered parents are more likely

(26%) to hold some college credit but not a degree than are married parents (18%) and adults without children under 18 (21%) (Hensly et al, 2021). Structural barriers to educational attainment for particular parents have been demonstrated through data indicating parents of color, and mothers specifically, are the least likely demographic categories to either begin a degree or begin and then complete their degree. When analyzing the data trends, the Institute for Women's Policy Research stated:

In alignment with existing research on the experiences of unpartnered parents in college and the lack of support for their needs, these data underscore that, despite a desire for a degree and earning some credit toward it, unpartnered parents persistently face obstacles to college enrollment and persistence can derail their educational goals. (Hensly et al., p. 18)

Multiple structural barriers for student parents lead to greater risk and lower attainment outcomes.

Finally, the pandemic created more significant stress and increased isolation for many students, including parents who shouldered the additional burdens of educating their children while they worked and attended classes. The pandemic accelerated the caregiving gap between men and women and created disproportionate stress and hardship for women. McKinsey and Company (2021) reported 1 in 4 women considered leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers because of the pandemic. The numbers for women with children under 10 are stark; for instance, the percentage of women in this category was 10 points higher than men. Women across all categories reported feeling more stressed and exhausted than men reported. Finally, women's jobs were nearly twice as vulnerable during the pandemic than men's.

Women and STEM. Although I did not find studies focused on undergraduate unpartnered mothers in STEM fields, it is important to include some brief information on the state of women in STEM. Gendered caregiving activities tend to be penalized further in STEM disciplines, so women who are parents in STEM disciplines find additional challenges to their success. For example, a study of women academics in STEM fields reported 70% of women rated time as one of the significant obstacles facing them when attempting to form or nurture network relationships with colleagues, which was significantly higher than the men in the study (Xu & Martin, 2011). Most of the women discussed how their responsibilities for family came at the expense of career networking. Although the men who were interviewed all had children, no one mentioned this as an issue. So, researchers concluded significant familial responsibilities still rest with women, a result consistent with similar research done more than 20 years ago.

Outcomes for Unpartnered Mothers. One of the most alarming statistics the Institute of Women's Policy Research study cited is the difficulty unpartnered mothers have succeeding in higher education (Hensly et al, 2021). Over 70% of unpartnered parents who attempt but do not complete college are unpartnered mothers. Interestingly, when they examined current trends and extrapolated forward, Hensly et al. (2021) estimated student parents would reach a 60% degree attainment threshold faster than their counterparts without children, and mothers would reach it more quickly than fathers. However, when analyzing data within the category of mother, unpartnered mothers lagged significantly behind mothers with partners: Mothers with partners would reach the threshold by 2030, whereas unpartnered mothers would reach it by 2048.

Although this data set was not broken down by ethnicity, other data have suggested white mothers who chose to parent independently or with a partner and who have some economic support are much more likely to attain a credential (Hensly et al, 2021). Unfortunately, the

literature has not addressed race and class simultaneously nor has it indicated differences in those who have chosen to get pregnant versus those who have not. Despite a general lack of intersectional data, it is clear structural and institutional racism impacts the academic success of unpartnered mothers.

Interventions. Several studies quantitatively examined different kinds of program interventions that target unpartnered parents. One study, which collected data on a community college-based program called “Flying Solo,” reported positive results from a multipronged approach that provided four types of social and financial support (Carpenter et al., 2018). Flying Solo scholars, on average, saw greater success as measured by the study’s three dependent variables. They were almost twice as likely to complete their degrees and, relatedly, accumulated more credits than unpartnered parent students who were not in Flying Solo. They also earned higher GPAs than did single-parent students who were not in the program, although the GPAs of the latter were still a respectable B average. Their results indicated students benefit from programs that holistically address students’ social, economic, and academic needs.

Qualitative Data

In addition to the demographic and material concerns highlighted previously, cultural stigmas follow unpartnered mothers as they enter higher education because unpartnered mothers are often portrayed in the academic literature as “problems” to be solved (Cherlin, 2006). Descriptions of their lives revolve around the tensions and deficits they experience. The campus climate presents additional barriers for parents, specifically unpartnered mothers.

Campus Climates. Current research has indicated unpartnered mothers find their campus climate unfriendly (Lynch, 2008; Vega, 2019; Yang, 2015). Some reported female faculty, particularly among those who were childless, were sometimes more hostile than were their male

counterparts (Low & Martin, 2019). Participants reported they felt their universities sent the message that “they don’t belong here.” Those messages included hostile exchanges with faculty, lack of childcare support, and a lack of physical space to roll a stroller through campus (Caballero et al., 2019; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

In a study on community based participatory research for low-income students, Yang (2015) found, in discussions about why students dropped out, participants were least sympathetic to young female student parents. Participants suggested these students were not ready for college or might be out partying instead of completing schoolwork. This social stigma came from the peers of the young mothers in the study, some of whom were mothers themselves, which suggests the stigma is both internal and external as well as pervasive among both women and men.

Hook (2015) found unpartnered mothers in graduate school felt how classes were scheduled made managing their multiple work and childcare responsibilities very difficult. These students had a greater risk for experiencing educational disadvantage because of their limited capacity to attend class. She stated the timetabling of classes is a regulatory practice that determines how students can access on campus experiences equitably and that universities short-change unpartnered parents by not accounting for their unique scheduling challenges. This is particularly true for extracurricular events, such as presentations, workshops, and mental health services:

In the Australian context, solo parents are largely understood as pejorative and deficit.

The participants in this study shared their sense that problematic social discourses relating to sole parents influenced how they were able to be recognised in the academy. (Hook, 2015, p. 117)

Most students did not mention their unpartnered parent status to faculty supervisors because they feared being seen as less capable intellectually. They also noted a lack of reference to and a lack of services for unpartnered parents led to a silencing effect. One participant explicitly stated the lack of reference to her identity made her question it: “And then it puts a sense of doubt or shame over it. It’s like, why don’t people talk about it, should I be ashamed about it?” (p. 117). This lack of communication and silencing leads unpartnered mothers to fail to connect to faculty advisors in a meaningful way (Hook, 2015). Moreover, the lack of communication severely disadvantages unpartnered parents who are coconstructing an identity in a relationship whose power dynamic is already skewed toward faculty.

Family Values Versus College Values. In addition to the identity crises mother scholars experience, unpartnered parent students often report experiencing a conflict between their family and caregiving obligations and their student obligations. In her contribution to the book *Mothers in Academia*, Adel (2013) argued the erasure of mothering on campus affects the high dropout rate of graduate student parents: “In the context of higher education, graduate student mothers experience high rates of attrition because of the conflict between embracing intensive motherhood and navigating universities and colleges that implicitly regard the family as a private, largely female endeavor” (p. 84). Goldrick-Rab and Sorenson (2010) found unmarried parents find their time with their children constrained and often struggle to balance school, work, and childcare. Duquaine-Watson (2017) examined the various ways, throughout U.S. history, in which women have been vilified for their unpartnered motherhood status:

Teen mothers, for example, were labeled bad on the basis of their age, African American mothers were targeted based on racial identity, and lesbian mothers were deemed bad on the basis of their sexual identity. Married mothers were regarded as the

norm, while those who gave birth outside the institution of marriage or who became unpartnered mothers through divorce were deemed deviant. (p. 24)

The fear of being labeled a deviant mother proceeds from a dark history of controlling women's bodies, particularly those women who were deemed not societally fit to be "good" mothers, including those who refused to "play by the rules" of capitalist society.

Deviant Motherhood. The often unknown and unacknowledged dark history of the U.S. eugenics movement in the early 20th century and its current iteration (both supported by white supremacist ideology) provides an example of the extreme measures undertaken by those within the movement to control reproduction by unpartnered mothers who were/are predominantly poor and/or women of color (Chavez-Garcia, 2012). Further, women identified as disabled, criminal, sexually deviant, or mentally ill were/are targeted for forced sterilization:

Doctors under contract with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation sterilized nearly 150 female inmates from 2006 to 2010 without required state approvals, The Center for Investigative Reporting has found. At least 148 women received tubal ligations in violation of prison rules during those five years—and there are perhaps 100 more dating back to the late 1990s, according to state documents and interviews.

(Johnson, 2014, p. 1)

Unfortunately, this form of state reproductive abuse and control is still ongoing. In 2020, more than 40 women signed a petition to report they had been abused or sterilized without consent during gynecological procedures at an ICE detention facility in Georgia (Dwyer, 2020).

Although unpartnered mother students may be unaware of the history of brutality against women who give birth under conditions deemed "unsuitable" by society, they still face the

legacy of a system that historically has tried to erase their existence in both extreme and subtle ways.

Providing Support. Recently, some of the literature has shifted from focusing on what parents need to succeed academically to what colleges must do to provide adequate support for unpartnered parents. Green (2021) outlined semester's economic and energetic phases, from the initial "dead broke" stage before the first financial aid payment through the "burnout time" that follows post-midterms to the final "bomb-dropping" stretch of the semester's end. Green also outlined how material and emotional coaching support during each phase could provide better retention and outcomes for student parents.

Although most academic literature problematizes unpartnered parenthood, Ricco et al. (2009) examined the potential benefits that derive from parenting while in college. They found college mothers with an intrinsic sense of motivation tended to pass along a sense of mastery and self-efficacy to their school-age children. Although research into the potential positive impacts of unpartnered motherhood and college on children is preliminary, this example defies the deficit model typically orienting research on this community of students.

In an example of how parenting and student identities may be positively integrated, Pearson (2019) explored the influence of history, culture, and various social institutions on 40 student parents who she interviewed between 2007 and 2014. She examined how student parents embrace, reject, or modify competing cultural logics by referencing good mother constructs and other social forces impacting the student-parent experience in higher education. She found cultural logics and institutional resources either facilitated or hindered student parents' ability to weave together student and parent identities. She also demonstrated that parenting identities were tied closely to the cultural logics of gender and that students often turn to the logic of gendered

spheres and a division of labor to legitimate their actions or beliefs. Through their academic career, these students often “reject or modify cultural logics in a way that allows them to enact strategies of being that bolster their sense of essential well-being and worth” (Pearson, 2019, p. 98).

Pearson (2019) illustrated how student parents both produce and resist gender-based cultural ideals of femininity and masculinity in navigating home life, family, work, and school. Rather than purely problematizing student parenting, Pearson (2019) examined “how the flexibility of academic schedules allows parents to conceive of and redistribute household and caregiving labor” (p. 99). Pearson’s study was also unique because it drew on ideas from sociology and motherhood theory to analyze deeply how students form their identities and choices as they move through higher education.

In a phenomenological study of 14 unpartnered mothers, Buteau (2007) also challenged the deficit model and examined factors leading to successful outcomes. Most qualities she uncovered were intrinsic to the student. Those qualities include a high value on education, being a positive role model for one’s children, faith in a higher being, fear of failure and disappointing others, patience, finding external support (whether financial, emotional, or both), being creativity with scheduling, and being willing to sacrifice personal time, money, sleep, and time with children for a long-term goal.

Although personal factors were indicated in educational success, Buteau (2007) addressed institutional barriers students identified as barriers for achieving success. These barriers included (a) faculty berating them for missing class or arriving late, (b) lack of flexibility in scheduling, (c) lack of access to professors outside of class time, and (d) lack of knowledge about financial aid. Most of Buteau’s respondents indicated they relied on friends to help them

navigate complicated college financial aid applications and planning. Students also spoke about the importance of receiving both verbal and written affirmations from professors. Most also spoke to the need for more online, weekend, or compressed class formats to make scheduling more accessible to them.

Summary of Qualitative Data. Although some literature has begun to examine student parents from a more positive perspective, only a few studies have interrogated institutional, cultural, gender, race, or capitalist structures as barriers to students' success. Although much of the mothering/motherwork literature also has interrogated these larger structures, the unpartnered parent literature mostly has examined faculty or graduate-level contexts. Most of the literature reviewed here indicated, although barriers and challenges are almost entirely external to the student, those in the rare minority who achieve academic success do so because they possess several significant internal resources and can leverage external resources using their creativity and networking skills.

Gaps in the Literature

Addressing the complexities of an unpartnered mother identity from an intersectional and critical lens is essential for research. It is crucial that educators and policymakers understand the myriad factors influencing student parents in developing a positive and integrated identity while in college. Although feminist approaches often have used a critical lens to examine gender constructions and oppression, feminist scholars have not always appealed to intersectionality to examine the interlocking forces of colonization and race, including how white mothers, particularly those who are partnered, benefit from economic and social privileges. Furthermore, an examination of how women of color often provide caregiving responsibilities for white children at the expense of their own warrants more attention.

Additionally, class often has been examined as a variable in quantitative work. Still, it has not been interrogated from a structural perspective and rarely interrogated in terms of its impact on identity formation and development. Most research using a critical and intersectional lens has been in motherhood/motherwork theory by motherscholars of color.

Although a few studies have examined the benefits of parenting while attending college, the academic literature has tended to presume a deficit model of parenthood that is particularly acute in regard to unpartnered motherhood. For example, Goldrick-Rab and Sorenson (2010) wrote, “Unmarried parents were much more likely to depart college early, without a timely return to school” (p. 182). Although framed from a deficit approach, Goldrick-Rab and Sorenson (2010) did critique some of the data they analyzed. They argued, given that unpartnered parents often take longer to complete their degrees, if the tracking time frames were extended, higher rates of completion would be evident. Although they drew attention to the limitations of the quantitative data, their study still framed the data as a problem from the student point of view rather than an institutional one insofar as institutions create too many barriers to degree completion.

Another gap is the lack of discussion about the costs of these programs and the overall percentage of students they can serve. For example, the Flying Solo program is representative of the kinds of support found in higher education spaces, although the program is more robust and multifaceted than most. Although they demonstrated many positive outcomes for student parents, Carpenter et al. (2018) did not address the likelihood of scaling the program so it might serve a greater number of students. The study did not include a thorough method of selection criteria to address potential selection bias in the program admittance process. Although the program benefitted a significant percentage of participants, the number of overall participants was small.

Another unanswered question is: Do the requirements of maintaining a full-time credit load and a certain GPA only benefit the students most likely to succeed within a typical college environment or do they help those who are most vulnerable? Although the program is clearly a positive move toward institutional support, particularly additional social support, these interventions are so costly that relatively few students can take advantage of them. Finally, these studies did not interrogate how larger structural barriers might be examined and deconstructed to create greater success for unpartnered parents (as opposed to providing very costly support given the systems that exist).

Although there has been more work from a critical lens in qualitative research, some of the work is still positioned within a white middle class frame. For example, Goldrick-Rab and Sorenson (2010) drew on Lareau's (2003) qualitative study of children from upper-middle-class and lower-class backgrounds and parenting techniques that privilege both class and white-based norms. Lareau credited upper class families with giving their children little leisure time so they could fully develop cognitive and social skills through a myriad of extracurricular activities. She also discussed how speaking to children as if they were adults and encouraging them to make eye contact resulted in children gaining confidence in interactions with other adults and institutions. Working class children had more leisure or independent time and interacted more with extended family. These children did not learn behaviors that educators reward; therefore, the children had a lower likelihood of long term educational success.

Although Lareau (2003) explained why class based cultural differences resulted in differential learning outcomes (a point we both agree on), her observations are of the norms of whiteness *and* class embedded into the public education system. Lareau described these attributes as "social capital." These behaviors include, acting entitled to individual treatment and

exceptions, an expectation of privilege in adult and educational spaces, and the appearance of confidence when speaking to authority figures. Lareau attributed these behaviors to class-based practices (and not race), but I would argue that she simplified the relationship between class and race and therefore missed an opportunity to interrogate how class privilege reinforces whiteness. I would argue these kinds of either/or analyses also fail to implicate capitalism in that ascendance to the middle class is more attainable within a two-parent household.

An example of work that employed a critical and intersectional lens is Caballero et al.'s (2019), *The Chicana Motherwork Anthology*, which addressed the “ideal motherhood” model to disrupt its pervasive hold on our consciousness. This volume is a collection of essays by women of color who offered a praxis of motherwork from a critical feminist lens and used Chicana feminist theory to inform their work. In their chapter, Cisneros et al. (2019) discussed the idea of “fierce mothering”: “We define ‘fierce mothering’ as a response to the forceful forms of institutional violence that mothers must address, such as lack of access to childcare, inadequate lactation spaces, or invisibility on campus” (p. 289). They described several ways their actions as mothers disrupt western colonial notions of “ideal” motherhood by breastfeeding in the library; bringing young children to celebratory events; and demanding better, more affordable, and accessible childcare. They discussed resisting spatial entitlement and creating alternative spaces of belonging by bringing their children with them to campus events. They unsettled deficit perspectives of mothers of color in the academy. Such confrontation forces a re-examination of the notions of motherhood as a solitary, middle-class, and private endeavor.

As also noted in *The Chicana Motherwork Anthology*, more work needs to decenter white middle-class voices and bridge the gap from theory to practice. Low and Martin (2019) explored the gendered politics of care and how queer caregivers are excluded from wider parenting

discourses. They wrote, “Thus motherhood also become a work of alliance that is desperately required in academia. Motherhood as a feminist strategy has to work in alliance with other experiences of parenting and care, and across marginalized communities” (Low & Martin, 2019, p. 430). As Collins (1994) warned, research excluding race or class from feminist theorizing distorts and omits large ranges of human experience. Future research ought to consider how the positionality of motherhood, although universally oppressive in some ways, may also be a vehicle of privilege for others.

The literature also lacks theoretical frames that question gender privilege and binary gender models. Data are typically collected and analyzed from a male/female (i.e., from a sex) perspective or from a heteronormative one—regardless of whether the heteroparents are married. Data should be disaggregated by multiple variables, including gender identity.

Summary

A review of motherhood literature in higher education reveals the gaps from critical and intersectional perspectives. For example, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) spoke primarily to white, middle-class faculty about motherhood. Although motherhood identity and status concerns related to an overarching gender disparity in higher education are well documented, specific categories of mothers, particularly undergraduate mothers and administrative staff, are less well explored. Feminist theory in higher education tends to focus on “ideal” motherhood: white, middle class, and educated. Although this lens clearly problematizes the model, it neither engages the larger structures that create it nor articulates how this mode oppresses *and* privileges the women who come closest to attaining that ideal.

The next section examines some directions for future research based on the current limitations in higher education student–parent literature.

Directions for Future Research

Goldrick-Rab and Sorenson (2010) maintained there is little evidence for how postsecondary education affects family well-being. It is not clear how parenting while in college influences other outcomes for children. Additionally, research needs to address more directly how terms such as “single parent” and “single mother” replicate heteropatriarchal constructs. In most literature, marriage is the basis of family definitions, including how “single mother” and “partnered mother” are defined. “Mother” is the default term and is understood as a partnered individual, who is likely partnered with a man (i.e., the father). This definition is narrow and makes it difficult to understand differences between queer couples or partnered couples and women who choose to partner (or are forced) to partner alone. I found no discussion of the traumas that women who had children because of sexual assault or whose partners abandoned them experienced. There may be another body of literature in psychology or elsewhere that addresses this dimension.

The literature also should begin to wrestle with queer identities, particularly with understanding how trans and nonbinary parents fit within definitions of “motherhood” and its subsequent gender colonization. Including trans and nonbinary parents within the scope of research provides new opportunities to destabilize heteronormative family ideals. Collin’s (1994) notion of motherwork would be an important expansion of the concept. As mentioned previously, exploring how certain categories of mothers benefit from race and class privilege ought to be interrogated more thoroughly. Finally, the connections between capitalism, the neoliberal economy, and gender ought to be interrogated more thoroughly in terms of how the intersections of these structures work together to create barriers for unpartnered mothers in higher education contexts.

My dissertation research centered patriarchal colonial modernism within my epistemological framework to understand better the impact of this structure on unpartnered mothers in higher education spaces. Additionally, my project employed an intersectional lens that I used to explore the phenomenological experience of motherhood and scholarship as well as the differential impacts of patriarchal colonial modernism on diverse mothers. I also attempted to create and use more inclusive language that challenges binary and heteronormative conceptions of parenthood and caregiving.

Conclusion

This literature review examined mothers' experiences to understand better the data on how unpartnered mothers navigate higher education and what institutions currently do (or do not do) to support them. I examined unpartnered parent research from both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to understand better the demographics and lived realities of this group of students. I divided the literature into two sections. The first section highlighted motherhood theory, and the second section reviewed work on unpartnered mothers in higher education. I briefly presented critiques of the literature, which lacks engagement with critical feminist and race theories; lacks engagement with intersectionality, especially in understanding how the forces of oppression affect students who have multiple marginalized identities; and sometimes offers a deficit approach to unpartnered parenthood. Finally, a heteronormative definition of parenting (and unpartnered motherhood) excludes queer parents, which prevents an understanding of the full range of parenting experiences. I also suggested some areas for future research, including more studies centering trans/queer/nonbinary parents' experiences and attending to the larger structural forces of colonial-capitalism and patriarchy on unpartnered student mothers.

The next chapter, Chapter 3: Methodology, I discuss the participants and recruitment, my methodological and theoretical framing, and the methods I employed in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of unpartnered mother scholars in a community college setting. I am interested in understanding their experiences to better inform higher education administrators and policymakers about the unique needs of this community of students. This chapter described my critical qualitative approach and methodology grounded in ecofeminism. I described how queer phenomenology and poststructural feminism has informed my thinking about the social webs of significance in which student parents are entwined and how their bodies, as well as those of their children, navigate higher education spaces. I also discussed some additional scholarship from feminist Chicana and indigenous decolonial literature that has influenced and inspired me.

In this chapter, I have acknowledged the research's risks and benefits to me as a researcher and to my participants, particularly in light of the ethnographic and human subjects research that has supported colonial projects in the United States. As I acknowledged my own participation in this research endeavor, I aimed to nurture a form of methodology that aligns with ecofeminist scholarship, decenters me as primary authority, and works to reorganize the power relationships typical between academic researcher and subject.

Finally, I shared how I recruited mother scholar participants, collected and analyzed data, and disclosed the limitations of the study. My research questions and subquestions are:

1. How do institutional structures in the community college shape the experiences of unpartnered mother scholars?
 - a. Where do mother scholars encounter resistances or barriers related to their identity as mothers across the sites of motherhood, gender, and scholarship?

- b. What healing strategies do unpartnered mother scholars employ to address academic or gender violence encountered inside community college spaces?
2. How do biological and social concepts such as matrescence, gender-based caregiving, and reproductive identity development, shape the student experience? That is, how do students make meaning of these experiences?

Acknowledgment and Rationale

Regarding identity, Patel (2015) described colonial projects as categorizing rather than “generating spaces beyond” (p. 3). This study was my attempt to move the research of motherhood and scholarship into spaces beyond. I also acknowledge that I continue to support settler colonialism and academic capitalism, as well as the privileges I hold, in many of my decisions as I navigate my world and research experiences. For example, I am the sole author of this dissertation even though the dissertation would not exist without participants who have contributed their time and physical and emotional energy to the project. Consequently, my authorship and the credentials I will receive create continued imbalances of power between myself as a PhD recipient and my participants, who are community college students. However, my wish, my aim, and my dream is to decolonize my thinking, my way of moving through the world, and my research project. I look to indigenous scholarship as a guide for action. Though I do not claim it as my own, I desire to be informed by indigenous scholarship and recognized that, as a colonized scholar, I will always have gaps in my understanding. White passing women have benefitted in many ways from the labor of their sisters of color and have been complicit in their subjugation for far too long.

While acknowledging the continued harm white women in the settler-colonial project perpetrate, I argue white women have also been colonized and subjected to a settler-colonial and

patriarchal (dis)ordering that disconnects us from the land and from one another. Therefore, acts of decolonization must redress this disconnection. I also believe we must relearn our own history and stories and acknowledge our own generational oppression as well as the oppression we and/or our ancestors have created. As a descendent of Ojibwe people who were disposed of land and sent to residential schools and a descendent of poor Irish also disposed of land, my ancestors have passed along generational trauma as well as the privileges associated with passing into whiteness. My Ojibwe family claimed “Italian” identity and my Irish ancestors benefitted from the anti-immigrant sentiments that moved from them onto more brown-skinned folx allowing me the ability to pass into the white middle-class. I do not find this passage smooth or comfortable, and I wrestle daily with this complicated American identity.

As Fobear (2016) noted, I too find moral support in indigenous scholarship, which argues for research that is collaborative, empowering, and nonexploitative. Fobear (2016) spoke of the need to “show the authority of the participants in talking to power through their stories and lived experiences” (p. 74). She also spoke of talking in proximity to participants while acknowledging the privilege one has in being able to ask for the conversation to begin with.

Morgensen (2012) wrote, “Theories of settler colonisation will remain incomplete if they do not investigate how this political and economic formation is constituted by gendered and sexual power” (p. 3). In dismantling settler colonialism, it is important to understand what it is and how it operates through gendered hierarchies. I have situated my work within the stream of scholarship (Patel, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012) dedicated to better understanding and educating others about such hierarchies. My project explicitly works to refocus the lens of the phenomenological experience of unpartnered student motherhood through the resistance of

heteronormative/patriarchal motherhood and scholarship promoted by the settler-colonial-capitalist state.

In addition to ecofeminist examples, I also drew on ideas about healing from Chicana feminists who have described healing from racial and sexist stereotypes of Chicana/Latina women (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lara, 2005). For example, when explaining how she thought about herself, Anzaldúa (1987) described the experience of living with two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, one based on her internal sense of self and another society has imposed on her as a Latina. Such cultural collision creates spiritual or emotional wounds in the psyche of those who encounter them. Anzaldúa (1987) explained recovering from identity trauma involves crossing borders into new conceptual territories that reject the separation of self into externally imposed categories of good or bad or, what she called “divergent thinking” (p. 79). Although I do not claim unpartnered student mothers have experiences similar to those Anzaldúa described, I relate profoundly to her emotional experiences. Her writing beautifully expressed the essence of what it means to exist in a social borderland. She described the process of healing in a way I find inspirational. Anzaldúa (1987) explained the move toward healing:

The struggle has always been inner and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real world” unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (p. 87)

Although my participants may or may not share the racial oppression Latina/Chicana women endure, they did experience some of the sexism and spiritual fragmentation that occurs as a result of being an unpartnered mother. Understanding how and why such fragmentation happens is an

important component of the healing within an ecofeminist approach. Although I do not claim the experiences are analogous, I find they are parallel. Moreover, I acknowledge the importance of Latina/Chicana feminist scholarship in my thinking and approach to healing paradigms. In the previous chapter, I outlined some of the trauma that women undergo during pregnancy, labor, and delivery, as a result of the U.S. medical-industrial complex, which currently controls all aspects of the reproductive process. These facts are important to understanding the scars many women carry with them into higher education spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This section describes how my phenomenological study is shaped by an ecofeminist framework to create structure, make decisions about methods, and shape the nature of the questions guiding the study. It will also cover how my epistemological orientation is informed by queer phenomenology, which has shaped my focus on lived and bodily experiences. Queer phenomenology also structured my data collection technique, which centers experiences of power and privilege. Poststructural feminism has informed my historical understanding of how things came to be the way they are today as well as my observations and analyses as a researcher.

Ecofeminism

The use of ecofeminist practice focused my methods on relationship building, reducing power differentials, identifying trauma and violence related to one's identity statuses, and working collectively toward healing (Shiva, 2004). Although this study does not focus on obstetric trauma and reproductive control, it is essential to foreground the subject of reproductive identity development for mothers and the systems-level trauma many of us carry with us as we navigate higher education spaces. As noted in the previous chapter, many mothers, particularly

those who have physically given birth, experience both physical and psychological trauma during their medical care. Adoptive and foster mothers, mothers in same-sex, polyamorous relationships, and those who form kinships of choice often suffer systemic (i.e., legal and economic barriers) and social and emotional trauma because they do not neatly fit into socially acceptable (and binary) parental categories.

A critical evaluation of our current system in conjunction with a new approach to system-human relationships is necessary to achieve healing and gender equity. Removing colonial structures in tandem with a reorganization of our values, as an ecofeminist practice suggests, is a way to move the needle toward healing (Salleh, 1997). Although I am describing a global process that likely would take generations to accomplish, I believe some changes may begin to occur as we implement them at a microlevel and experiment with new methodologies in our research. My ecofeminism methodology attempted to put principles into practice. An ecofeminist theory values relationship and community between the researcher and subject. This relationship is an exchange of stories, as opposed to the traditional model of a researcher collecting stories and redistributing them in the academic marketplace.

Queer Phenomenology

Queer phenomenology informs my methodology and research design. Making knowledge “queer” involves investigating lifeways that are not typically seen or exist at the margins of social systems. My research engages a queer perspective in that it both centers a community of students at the margins of “student success” and seeks experiential data to answer questions about how barriers to that success are experienced and understood.

Queer phenomenology encourages a “queer perspective” to look at a situation from an angle, a slant, or in a mirror to see the subject with new eyes (Ahmed, 2006). And most notably,

to see what is always there but unremarked upon. A queer lens allows a view of motherhood and its concurrent “valueless” labor to be better understood insofar as this motherwork “labor” is both a biological and emotional reality central to my understanding of what it means to do this work (Ahmed, 2006). Although the labor of birthing and nursing infants is unique to some people—this labor is not afforded the value it deserves—I am not asserting mothering is defined by biology alone. I propose all labor contributing to children’s well-being is highly undervalued, often hidden in society, and almost entirely invisible in higher education spaces. Broadening our definition of motherwork brings all people engaged in caregiving into community and solidarity. For this reason, I called on queer phenomenology to help bring the hidden history and experience of all forms of mother labor into view.

Phenomenology is about lived experiences inside social settings and how experiences are viewed, perceived, confined, or empowered by the normative structures surrounding those experiences (Ahmed, 2006; Vitry, 2021). Because experiences of both motherhood and studenthood are perceived through normative lenses that have evolved inside a heteropatriarchal and capitalist context, a queer phenomenology is needed to resist such normative renderings. A queer phenomenology approach allows voices outside these normative experiences (i.e., unpartnered parents who are also students) an integrated identity that does not fit neatly into existing categories in higher education.

Bringing queer phenomenology and queer studies and poststructural feminism together offered a view of experience in social space and an understanding of the interplay of both straightness and queerness in constructing (or deconstructing) categories of being. It also spoke to the role of habitual actions (i.e., social norms) in shaping bodies and experiences. In many

ways, motherwork has remained invisible in our historical scholarship as a “private” or “personal” endeavor and is mostly invisible in society today:

When we resist neoliberal and normative assumptions of research, productivity, and knowledge we are doing queer scholarship. And when we do this with an end goal of intersectional liberation—we are doing critical feminist work. (Mehrotra, 2022, p. 2)

Through the phenomenological exploration of structures of experience, mother scholar participants and I attempted to make meaning of the tensions and conflicts inherent in a shared student–parent identity and how strategies of healing helped us to address the obstetric, gender, and academic violence we experienced while navigating transitions through matrescence, into motherhood, and toward scholarship.

Summary

This section described how, based on reducing power differentials and healing, ecofeminism shaped my approach to data collection and relationship building and how queer phenomenology shaped my focus on lived and bodily experiences. It also structured my data collection technique that centered experiences of power and privilege. Poststructural feminism provided the historical background for how social relationships came to be organized around access to (or removal from) power. The next section draws on these theories and describes how they influenced my methods of data collection; the section also describes how I analyzed and coded data using the values and ideas of these theories.

Methodological Approach

A phenomenological study of lived experiences allows researchers to generate thick descriptions (Geertz & Geertz, 1975) for data collection. Accordingly, I used qualitative field methods for data collection. The following section describes my methodological research design,

including the number and identification of participants, consent and confidentiality, and my data collection and analysis strategy. My study design situated me as the researcher in partnership with mother scholar participants to explore and deconstruct our higher education experiences together.

Fieldwork Methods

Bhattacharya (2017) described qualitative data collection and analysis as an iterative process that is not linear. Writing is used as a form of inquiry throughout analysis, and data are read through multiple times. I collected data through two semistructured interviews with each participant over Zoom. I also kept memos throughout the research process that captured my thoughts about the interviews, participants, and other ideas that surfaced during data collection. I also corresponded with participants multiple times via text and email throughout the 8 months of data collection.

I invited participants into the writing/revising process through a series of emails asking them to review any information in the dissertation that mentioned them. First, I sent an initial summary of the two interviews we had together and my construction of their motherhood story. Specifically, I asked them to review for factual errors or mischaracterizations of their words or experiences. I also invited them to send me poems, prose, or journal entries that may have been relevant to the ideas discussed in the interviews that I may have generated through reading my summary of their stories. I sent all participants a first draft of Chapter 4 and invited them to provide feedback. I sent participants a third draft of the chapter again to review and then sent them a final draft of Chapters 4 and 5 and invited them to provide any additional feedback. Finally, I will send participants a copy of the completed dissertation. I included all feedback participants provided in the final version of the dissertation.

Participants

My study included nine participants from two Colorado community colleges and one local nonprofit organization and explored their experiences as unpartnered parents. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), the intent of qualitative research is not to generalize to a population but rather to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon. In this type of study, the researcher purposefully selects individuals for information-rich data collection. Purposeful sampling is used to locate participants who can provide the best information about the subject under study, and I used purposeful sampling to identify participants. I present the participants comprehensively in Chapter 4.

Because most student parents attend community colleges (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020), I focused on community colleges for my research. One of the sites had an operating support program for unpartnered parents, which aided in identifying participants. I emailed program support staff with an introduction to the study and encouraged them to provide me with contact information of consenting students from diverse backgrounds and experiences (see Appendix A). Students were then contacted via email (see Appendix B) and, if they agreed to participate, were sent an intake survey that confirmed that they met the study parameters (see Appendix C).

Consent and Confidentiality

Before each semistructured interview (see Appendix D), I sent the consent statement to participants and obtained verbal consent for participation at the beginning of each interview.

Risks

I did not anticipate much risk to participants because I provided the option to select pseudonyms and took measures to mask locations and identities in any work submitted to outside readers. One risk could occur to both participants and me through the sharing of traumatic

memories and experiences related to our transitions through motherhood or scholarship. Given the documented history of violence against women who birth and care for children, as well as the emotional violence against women who experience nonnormative motherhood, the process of reflecting on these traumas can be painful to some. I personally found it to be painful, and some participants also shared experiencing discomfort reading their stories on paper. One participant initially agreed to use her real name but, as the study went on and she read through the stories, poems, and her own experiences, felt less comfortable knowing someone might identify her, and she asked that her name be changed. Although my methodological practice centered healing, as advocated through my ecofeminist framework, healing can be a painful experience. Because psychological and emotional distress likely resulted from sharing painful experiences, I provided contact information for campus and community support resources for any student who might need therapeutic support through a follow up email after the interviews concluded.

A second risk was that data containing these personal and potentially painful experiences might be connected to their person in some way. To minimize this risk and keep all data secure, I used my Colorado State University OneDrive account, which is password protected. I conducted all interviews and saved them on my personal, password-protected computer. Digital files, transcripts, and audio recordings I collected will be permanently deleted when no longer needed to support the research. All data I used to identify participants will be permanently deleted 3 years after the completion of this dissertation, approximately December 2026.

Coding

Crotty (1998) discussed how phenomenology can be both a theoretical perspective as well as a methodological approach, which is similar to my research design. Although I engaged it most intensively as a theoretical model for the type of study and the research questions I

employed, it also informed my approach to methods. As a critical phenomenological study, my research analysis was interpretive. Phenomenological studies are typically divided into two strands: descriptive or interpretive. A descriptive approach comes from Husserl's ideas about inquiry as one in which a researcher brackets (although does not abandon) their personal beliefs and ideas about a topic (Wrenn, n.d.). The aim is to try and objectively describe one's or another's experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004). In an interpretive approach, one focuses on the meanings individuals make as they move through the world inside of historical, social, and political contexts. An interpretive approach best aligned with my theoretical and conceptual frames as well as my personal orientation and beliefs about research.

I transcribed and coded interviews using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013) for first-level coding and organization of topics within the data. I read through the interview data at least twice and then chunked it into descriptive labels (Saldaña, 2013). One example of a descriptive label was "father" anytime participants referred to the biological father in discussions. I employed in vivo coding in second-level coding to capture and preserve participants' meanings of their experiences and to generate original poetry (Charmaz, 2006). In vivo codes are typically sentences or phrases from the text that contain units of meaning. In vivo coding allows for the development of symbols and metaphors and for the researcher to arrange transcripts into short poetic formations (Saldaña, 2013). I pulled out these phrases and grouped them into themes. I used the themes to create the subjects of the poems found Chapter 4.

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described a systematic process for coding interview data in which statements are analyzed and organized into clusters of meaning that represent the phenomenon of interest. In a phenomenological study, special attention is given to descriptions of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). I used an

interpretive approach to code the data in which the researcher focuses on the meanings individuals make about their experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004). In this case, I focused themes around prominent topics across all the interviews that seemed to have particular significance to participants. For example, trauma as an experience of motherhood was a theme that emerged during the in vivo stage of coding. Trauma was a theme expressed in relation to a variety of significant experiences, including matrescence and navigating higher education. Trauma then became a way to understand how unpartnered mothers felt and experienced matrescence and higher education, and acknowledging it helped us understand and process these experiences.

I loosely followed Giorgi's (2009) four essential steps of protocol analysis as applied to phenomenological research in psychology to organize my interpretive approach. I overlaid his steps with a few of Saldaña's (2013) qualitative methods to refine my coding methods further. Giorgi's steps are to (a) read for a sense of the whole, (b) differentiate the description into meaning units, (c) reflect on the psychological significance of each meaning unit, and (d) clarify the psychological structure(s) of the phenomenon. I expand on the detailed coding processes in Chapter 4.

I depart from Giorgi's (2009) approach in that my study design was feminist and queer in orientation rather than psychological. Although Giorgi focused on resilience as a way to understand and process trauma, my study focused on the structural forces behind trauma. I explored themes of trauma, violence, and transition in data collection and analysis in line with a critical phenomenology approach and with an ecofeminist aim to recognize and transcend those events in empowering ways.

Holistic coding of my analytic memos provided additional support and clarity to the findings. I made space for multiple and layered analyses, given that my epistemological

perspective is grounded in poststructuralist understandings of reality. The goal was to try and provide a multivocality of perspective as deeply layered as possible. Differences in analytical perspective were noted as part of the holistic coding process (Saldaña, 2013).

After first- and second-level coding, I ran data through a software program called NVivo to check for themes emerging from the data. Categorical themes allowed codes to be grouped together to note patterns, tensions, explanations, conclusions, and so forth to provide analytic clarity to the data (Saldaña, 2013). Theming provided greater clarity as to what the data meant or what was important to participants' experiences. After completing the themes, I used them to code the data again using in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013), pulling lines of texts directly from the transcripts that further illuminated each of the themes from the data. Using the participants' own words and sentences, allowed me to form the themes into sections of poems or prose that were used throughout the analysis to provide another layer of meaning and experience to the findings.

Poetic Analysis

Through the use of longer quotes, prose, and poetry, the mother scholar participants helped shape the nature and direction of this project just as my own story shaped its inception and growth. In addition to a queer phenomenological approach, poetic analysis became an important piece of the final product. The overarching themes of the research came together through the construction of poetry (during the in vivo stage of coding) as I made sense of the direction and contour of hundreds of pages of data generated by nine participants (and myself) across 16 separate interviews. I used the *Vox Participare* category of poetic analysis in which poems are written from interview transcripts, solicited directly from participants, and cocreated by and with the researcher (Prendergast, 2009). Through poetry, I felt I came closer to

understanding the truest essence of what the simultaneous motherhood scholar experience feels like.

In her dissertation on Black women athletes, Houston (2019) described using poems to create textural descriptions defined as an integration, descriptively, of the textual constituents and themes of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Her work transformed each participant's transcript into free verse poetic compilations that provided a rich, thick description of her participants' experiences. Variety in writing style not only enhances the presentation of ideas but also stimulates the formulation of new and original conceptions of experience (Rose & McClafferty, 2001). Just as the microscope created a different way for seeing what remains invisible, poetry allows us to write what might not otherwise be fully expressed (Cahnmann, 2003). In her research on teachers, Cahnmann (2003) used poetry to help her capture the essence of what her participants reported—their feelings, contradictions, dualities, and paradoxes—and this freed her to write in ways that named and claimed feeling, story, and relationship. As Clough (2000) offered:

Seeing another, seeing as another sees—both are impossible or impossibly so; that is to say,
both only can be desired/desirable.

This desire haunts. It is a ghosting of vision, a shadow at the edge of vision.

This ghosting of vision is generations long; it is a familial unconscious.

It is that which makes vision turn; it is that which urges poetry. (p. 318)

Poetic analysis allowed me to be mindful of my oversized voice in this project. I hold fast to the admonition from Dehart (2021) to work to shift my sense of importance from progenitor to midwife (where I started out) to doula (where I have tried to end up):

I interview and then take credit as though I gave birth to the words. Researcher-child, those birth pains belong to another mother. You were, at best, a doula. Stop naming all the babies you stand next to after yourself. (Dehart, 2021, p. 2907)

My stance does not diminish the importance of the doula in childbirth but acknowledges the true nature of qualitative research: a cocreation utterly dependent on the cooperation, goodwill, and sacrifice of others who have little hope to benefit from their contribution while I have (potentially) so much to gain.

As an example of the poetic process, I created the following poetic arrangement using in vivo coding and *Vox Participare* methods. Most of the words came directly from the interview transcript and were Anne's statements about her experiences and journey into motherhood. I rearranged them and added some bridging statements to create flow. Some of the poetry contained in the analysis section is original to the participant, some of it is original to me, and some of it is a bricolage of my participants' words that I quilted into a poetic formation. After each poem, I note whether the poem is created by me (Claire) or is a compilation of the words of another mother scholar and myself (both our names, as below). If the poem involves many quotations from more than two participants, I note it is a poetic compilation but do not include individual names. I provided the pattern and the stitching; participants provided the fabric.

We Refuse the Scarlet A. Thank You Very Much

There's a lot of stigma around the things that have happened to me.

The unintended pregnancy, the domestic violence,
the sexual assault,

All of it.

And if you don't talk about it, it remains a stigma.

Absolutely.

I refuse to walk around with a Scarlet A on my chest, thank you very much.

I am a human being.

And I refuse to let the things that happen to me stop me anymore.

Because it's no longer just about me.

I will change my world to save my child.

Keep your knights and your armor.

Because I'm growing the fuck up and saving myself.

—poetic compilation, Anne and Claire

Conclusion

My methodological approach was grounded in ecofeminism, which emphasizes relationship-building and healing. Co-contributors and I explored power, hierarchy, agency, and identity through the experiences of unpartnered scholar mothers in a higher education. My study was designed to allow fellow mother scholars and myself to deconstruct our higher education experiences together. Nine participants of diverse backgrounds opted to participate in qualitative interviews. The process was interactive and evolved as contributors discussed, reviewed the work, and contributed their commentary, corrections, and poetry, to the project. The next section covers the study's findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Find the story that shaped you, and then look for it in others. Our questions begin with us in some way, after all (Dehart, 2021, p. 2905).

The thematic consistency of the stories I am about to share surprised me. Most particularly, I was surprised by the amount of trauma that all the women in my study, me included, have suffered and how most of us have never spoken publicly about it. The machine of settler colonial–capitalist patriarchy still works to keep us silent. But I hope in some way the experience of sharing and writing these stories works to loosen its bonds just a little, to create a little crack in narratives about student support and success. Especially for those who have endured alone, I hope the hidden and entangled threads of trauma, loss, medical persecution, and motherhood women have experienced for centuries can finally enter mainstream conversations more directly. Because, as the stories in this chapter attest, the well-documented historical harm of sexism continues to be perpetuated in horrific ways and affect the women we sit next to, teach, advise, and interact with in higher education spaces.

I expected to hear stories about parents' struggle, lack of belonging, and difficulty navigating higher education spaces. I did not expect to hear these women's stories filled with incredible amounts of abuse, trauma, and mental illness. I did not expect the fathers in these stories to be almost uniformly problematic, each adding to the stress of the women's lives. Finally, I was shocked at the degree of resilience each woman exhibited. The refusal to accept the odds against them, to give up (even though only a few could envision a logistical way to complete a degree), and to refuse victimhood status. Uniformly, these women were positive, motivated, and eager to change their circumstances, bring something good into the world, and provide more than they were given to their children.

Queer Phenomenology and Ecofeminism

As noted in the previous chapter, my project explicitly works to refocus the lens of the phenomenological experiences of unpartnered student motherhood through resistance to heteronormative/patriarchal motherhood and scholarship that promotes a settler-colonial-capitalist-state. Morgensen (2012) discussed the importance of investigating how political and economic growth is derived through gender and sexual power hierarchies. Much of the focus of my analysis is inspired by decolonial scholars, such as Patel (2016) and Tuck and Yang (2012), because such scholarship is dedicated to better understanding and educating others about these hierarchies. The women in this study who came to motherhood through domestic violence, sexual assault, or unplanned/teen pregnancy, found their experiences were taboo subjects because they were outside the bounds of ideal motherhood. Moreover, because they were taboo, the women were rarely (if ever) invited to share their stories.

As an example of resistance, one of the mother scholar participants mentioned how she refused to continue to walk around with a Scarlet A on her chest. So, although she found it hard to talk about, she wanted to tell her story. I find such bravery inspiring. I was also a little disheartened to learn that, almost uniformly, these women had internalized idealized motherhood and felt they did not deserve any special consideration or exceptions because of their circumstances. They did not feel it “fair” to get extended deadlines or ask for additional help or resources beyond what other students received, despite being grateful when such help was offered.

I hope my questions prompted a few of them to reconsider their right to ask and potentially demand better from higher education practitioners. Through our two-way sharing of questions and exchanging stories and ideas about motherhood, we created a dialogue that

generated a shared experience for processing what it means to be a mother and a scholar. My own emotional state was impacted significantly throughout our exchanges, and a few of the mothers found it difficult to see their stories appear in black and white on the page. We created new perspectives as we reflected back together on our memories of what it meant to become a mother and carry that identity into higher education spaces.

This reciprocal knowledge exchange is consistent with my phenomenological approach to this research. In Husserl's practice of phenomenology, a person exists within sedimented layers of consciousness that has been accreted through temporal experience (Wrenn, n.d.). By excavating these layers, we come to understand who we are and thus gain knowledge (Fieser & Dowden, n.d.). A refusal to accept one's place in this world is a means to resist it, a recognition that its order no longer serves. By accepting their place as unworthy of special consideration, these women exist within such a world and thus accept that they must be sleep deprived, stressed, depressed, and unsupported beyond the meager offerings of traditional student support systems. They accept the scarlet letter and ongoing traumatization because they are *just the way things are*. I hope this project sheds some light on the deep layers of oppression and generational trauma that we women who do not fit neatly into the spaces designed for other bodies, have inherited. Rather than try and change our shape, we demand that the space change to better fit us.

My hope is that whoever reads these stories will be similarly inspired and perhaps will pause to consider how our business-as-usual operations in higher education impact this vulnerable group. I also hope to inspire educators to better tap into and nurture the hope, dedication, and motivation of these women. I believe we have far too long neglected their potential and desire to succeed. Additionally, in line with ecofeminism, understanding how

forces of patriarchy and capitalism impacts unpartnered mother scholars as well as the resulting spiritual fragmentation, is critical for healing the rifts on the personal and societal levels.

In the next section, I summarize the data collection and coding processes and how each connected to my theoretical and methodological approaches.

Data

To better explore the experiences of unpartnered mother scholars in higher education, I used the following research questions and subquestions to guide this study:

1. What are the experiences of unpartnered mother scholars on a community college campus?
 - a. Where do mother scholars encounter resistances or barriers related to their identity as mothers across the sites of motherhood, gender, and scholarship?
 - b. What healing strategies do unpartnered mother scholars employ to address academic or gender violence encountered inside community college spaces?
2. How do biological and social concepts, such as matrescence, gender-based caregiving, and reproductive identity development, shape the student experience?

That is, how do students make meaning of these experiences?

Data Collection

It is typical for phenomenological studies to focus on between one and 10 persons to generate thick descriptions and depth about how the phenomena are experienced (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). This type of study is meant to develop an in-depth exploration of central phenomenon with individuals who have the lived experience to generate information rich data (Creswell & Guttermen, 2019).

Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020) noted most student parents are attending community colleges, so I contacted two community colleges and a local nonprofit organization that support low-income women with children. I recruited nine study participants in colleges in the western United States. Most participants agreed to having their first names used, but a few did not, and their names have been changed. Neither college nor the local nonprofit are identified by name; I have generated pseudonyms for the community colleges.

The first school I recruited from was Eastern Community College (ECC). ECC is a small public college serving a mix of rural and smaller suburban areas. Around 40% of the students identify as ethnically diverse and over 70% are first generation. The second school I recruited from was Northern Community College (NCC), a large community college serving students across multiple campuses in mostly suburban and urban areas. Around one third of their students are ethnically diverse, about 40% are first generation, and over 75% attend school part time.

Using a purposeful sampling approach (Creswell & Guttermen, 2019), my initial outreach to advisors at the first community college yielded three respondents. I continued to reach out to other community college contacts throughout the initial stages of research. I also went to an event hosted for unpartnered parents at NCC to recruit students. Despite extensive recruiting through a number of advisors and administrators at the community college, almost half the participants ($n = 4$) came from the local nonprofit organization that supports students. This nonprofit provided additional support beyond what the local community colleges offered, so it was not surprising that almost half the participants needed an incredible amount of monetary support to manage school and parenting. Several students without such support expressed an interest in being interviewed but were unable to participate because they were not able to find 45

free minutes in their busy lives to share their experiences. For example, I had two people who filled out the intake form, but we were unable to schedule interviews.

Three participants who were unable to complete interviews were from the community college with no direct support. Several interviews were rescheduled a few times for various reasons, such as sick children, their own illness, or that they had more pressing things (e.g., school assignments, parent-teacher conferences, doctor visits) that had to be completed during their rare “free time.” It took me 8 months to schedule and complete 16 interviews with nine participants.

The Interviews

Taking inspiration from feminist, ecofeminist, and indigenous scholarship, I tried to follow models of empowerment and collaboration throughout the interview and analysis process. Fobear (2016) spoke of the need to “show the authority of the participants in talking to power through their stories and lived experiences” (p. 74). She also acknowledged the privilege one has in asking for the conversation, and I tried to be mindful of this privilege as I scheduled and rescheduled interviews. Ecofeminist models (Salleh, 1997) encourage relationship building through an exchange of stories rather than a one-way collection of stories.

Although I tried to form meaningful connections with each participant, I found it incredibly challenging to maintain the relationships because I was caught up in the capitalist conundrum of having to work full time while conducting research. Because I waited until my youngest child was in their senior year of high school to start my degree (conforming to the idealized expectation that I should put my children’s well-being and goals above my own), I was in a stage of life in which I could not afford to quit my job to attend school. The program I applied to did not have any financial support for graduate students. The pressure of knowing I

was putting my family close to \$50,000 in debt for a degree that would likely earn little material reward made me feel I had to constantly hustle to find new participants and interview them as quickly as possible. This made it very difficult to circle back once I had completed both interviews. Sadly, I found, unless one is independently wealthy or secures funding (increasingly scarce in the corporate education model), such a liberatory methodology is very difficult to maintain.

However, I employed a few strategies to move toward a more liberatory method. After my second participant requested the questions for the second interview ahead of time, I began sending all the interview questions to participants before the interview. I also sent them the consent statement because I found reading it at the start of the meeting to be tedious. At the beginning of the interviews, I asked them whether they had read it and had any questions. I also included a brief statement about me at the top of the consent form; the statement described my own motherhood journey, my family, my silly dog, and why I am passionate about this topic.

Initially, I recounted this information at the start of an interview to break the ice. In including the information with the consent form, I hoped to break some of the potential tension or anxiety one might experience when meeting a stranger for the first time. I wanted the members of the research community to feel at ease and to establish myself as a fellow student and mother rather than as an “expert researcher.” I hoped participants would see me as a fellow mom first and foremost. Sharing my story before the meeting seemed to help establish rapport, and their knowing that I had struggled as a unpartnered teen mom and college student seemed to help them feel comfortable sharing their deeply personal stories with me. I also asked them whether they had read the questions and if there were any they did not want to discuss; I also reiterated that they could pass on a question or stop the interview at any time.

Additionally, I created reflexive memos throughout the process and used these notes to structure my narratives of participants' stories. The narratives were shared with participants given my intention of creating a layered and multivocal perspective (Saldaña, 2013). For example, after I completed the second interview with each mother scholar, I created a Google Doc with my write-up of their story and gave the participant access to this document. I followed up with an email asking them to review the document for accuracy and whether they wanted to add to (or remove) any details from their story. Via the comment feature, I also asked questions to help me better understand their stories and timelines. Most of them engaged with the shared documents along a spectrum ranging from asking/answering questions to correcting ages or sequences of events. I included every change they suggested and tried to use their own words in the narratives as much as possible. I also sent them a complete draft of this chapter once it was ready for final submission so they could review and edit the final version.

In addition to participating in the editing and writing of the narratives, one participant sent me two original poems, another sent me two reflective journal entries, and a third participated extensively through narration across her biographic description. A few also asked me to omit details or quotations about their struggles with family members. As most of them relied on family members for some material resources or childcare, they did not want to come across as critical of those family members. I omitted these as requested and discussed avoiding direct quotations when I explored such challenges.

Coding the Data

I loosely followed Giorgi's (1985) 4-step protocol for phenomenological research. Giorgi's steps are: (a) reading for a sense of the whole, (b) differentiating the description into

meaning units, (c) reflecting on the psychological significance of each meaning unit, and (d) clarifying the psychological structure(s) of the phenomenon.

Step 1. As Bhattacharya (2017) noted, data analysis is an iterative nonlinear process and data must be read through multiple times. I read through all interviews at least once as a whole before the initial coding. I revisited whole transcripts and interviews multiple times as the analysis progressed through the remaining steps.

Steps 2 and 3. After re-reading each transcript and eliminating side conversations or repetitive wording, I then collapsed Grigori's steps two and three and created descriptive codes, or "descriptive labels" (Saldaña, 2013), onto sticky notes (one code per note). After going through the first four interviews, I assigned codes to the data. Each code had its own inherent meaning and significance for initial analysis. For example, codes were given labels such as "time" and "stigmas/parenting solo." I used a stack of sticky notes, and each time I assigned a code to a word or line of text, I would write that on the sticky note and place it on the transcript. After coding the first four transcripts, I collected the sticky notes into a notebook, grouping all the same or similar codes together. Once I had them all placed into the notebook, I reorganized them by subject so I could see how many redundant codes I had. I collapsed those into unpartnered categories. For example, I collapsed the codes "time" and "time management" into the unpartnered code "time." I used the final list of sticky note codes to generate a codebook for use as a list of starter codes in NVivo. I continued to add descriptive label codes as I contacted more participants and conducted additional interviews.

Step 4. The fourth step in Grigori's (1985) method involves integrating statements of insight generated from the data. It also entails an articulation of the organization of the phenomena as a whole. For this final step, I used in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013), which is a way

to capture and preserve participants' meanings of their experiences and allows the researcher to arrange transcripts into short poetic formations. To manage the in vivo coding process, I created a separate case in NVivo and used in vivo coding to generate lines of text I could pull out and organize into poetic arrangements to capture my participants' voices. After I coded each transcript using the in vivo approach, I put the lines, arranged thematically, into a separate Word document. I categorized each line of text on either the basis of its content or to create an original category. Most of the content centered on several noticeable topics, the themes from which the poems were created. As part of the analysis and healing process, I included some of my own original poems as well. Mehrotra (2022) described how reclaiming pleasure and joy as part of our scholarly efforts is critical to being nourishing, transformative, and sustainable. Writing and arranging narrative texts into poetry brings me joy.

I also organized my reflections around the themes generated through in vivo coding. These themes were, ageing (being too young or too old), COVID-19, trauma, domestic violence, therapy, illness, motherhood, school, motivations, and birth experience. I expanded on the themes when I felt the stories were particularly poignant. For instance, Anne's story of fat shaming was unique to her, but I felt it also represented traumas unique to women in that her experience was so viscerally connected to her identity as a woman.

Although I originally began writing the analysis organized around the themes listed above, I was not satisfied with the outcome because I did not feel like it provided enough emotional weight to the participants and their stories. I therefore reorganized the analysis into vignettes that incorporated the themes; doing so allowed me to provide more context and background for each individual mother scholar and better captured the essence of their experiences.

Because I assembled the transcripts according to the arrangement of interview questions, as opposed to an oral history format, I spent quite a bit of time reconstructing each story across the two interviews. I also followed up with participants when something in their timeline was unclear. Although this heavy editing and reconstruction made it more difficult to pull direct and relevant quotations, I believe the narrative format created a more accurate picture of who these women were, how their journeys through matrescence and reproductive identity evolved, and how they experienced being unpartnered mothers in higher education spaces. Additionally, their own words can be found in the poems and prose arrangements that bookend the narratives, and I used direct quotations throughout the thematic analysis and findings sections.

The analysis that follows is a kind of conversation quilt, which uses Grigori's (1985) 4-step framework for phenomenological research and is overlaid with Saldaña's (2013) qualitative methods. In addition to a narrative presentation of participants' histories and our original poetry, I have sewn my own thought buttons on top of the mother scholars' stories and have tried to tie little bows of our experiences together, as they encircled the themes of this dissertation.

In the Analysis section, I begin with a summary of themes and the findings that most stood out to me as well as demographic information about the participants. The bulk of the analysis is arranged through the stories of each mother scholar participant, roughly in the order of our first conversation together. The section also contains suggestions from the mother scholars about how they would make education better as well as their reflections on the themes and research questions.

Between and occasionally within the stories, I have included poems and poetic arrangements from the interview transcripts to highlight the emotional weight I experienced as I listened to and processed these stories. I found them to be very impactful, triggering at times, and

I wanted a way to express that beyond a factual recounting of events. Additionally, I believe the poetic sections more accurately reflect a phenomenological view of the data by providing the reader with a collaboration collage that prioritizes the person/people and their lived and felt experiences. As Dehart (2021) stated, poetry is the spoken music of people's lived experiences. By arranging participants' words in this way, rather than merely presenting my authorial summary, I tried to become doula to their stories, helping them into the world and wrapping them in a soft, white blanket.

Analysis

The Research Community

The research community was comprised of nine individuals. I conducted two semistructured interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes over Zoom. Initially, 11 people completed the intake survey, but I was able to conduct interviews with only nine. Data from 7 of the 9 who completed both interviews are included in the analysis section. One interviewee dropped out after one interview; another completed her first interview after I submitted a first draft to my advisor, so I did not have time to complete a narrative or a second interview for her. Each participant had a unique story to tell. Originally, I planned to write the analysis thematically. However, distilling their stories into quotations based around themes reduced the impact of their individual lived experiences. Instead, I chose to reconstruct their stories through individual narratives.

All 11 mothers who completed the intake survey indicated a high level of parenting responsibility that is significant to the research findings; only one participant shared parenting responsibilities equally with their partner. However, that participant was being generous: from our conversations, it was apparent she did far more caring than he did because the child lived

with her full time. All the children in the study lived with their mothers full time, although a few did spend at least some time with their fathers.

If yes, please select how much of the overall time and parenting responsibility is split between you and your partner/s?

11 responses

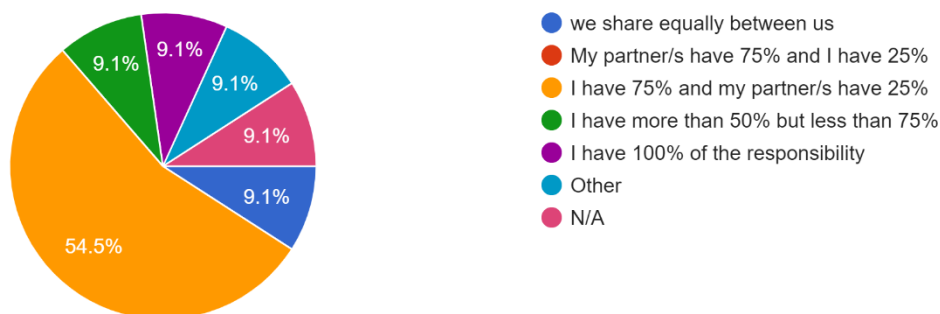


Figure 5

Percentages of Caregiving Time Split Between Unpartnered Mothers and the Child's Father or Other Former Partner/s

Note. Information collected by all people who responded to my initial email outreach. However, only seven of these participants were included in the final data analysis and write up.

Although I tried to be intentional about recruiting racially diverse mothers, doing so proved very challenging, even when recruiting from a Hispanic-serving institution. My own identity as a white scholar may have impeded my ability to recruit outside my own racial category. Of those who completed intake surveys, two identified as Hispanic/Latina, and three identified as mixed race/biracial; four participated in both interviews.

I also included some diversity in gender/sexual orientation, although I was unable to recruit nonbinary or trans parents. Overall, my sample was mostly straight/cis, so nonbinary and trans parents continue to remain an underrepresented group in motherhood research. However, a few participants identified as queer, and one had a child who was nonbinary/assigned female at

birth (AFAB) and who was also an unpartnered mother. We explored the topic from her perspective of her child's experiences as a nonbinary mother.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

<u>Name</u>	<u>Gender Identity</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Sexual Orientation</u>	<u>Number of Children</u>	<u>Ages of Children</u>	<u>College/Program</u>	<u>Year in School</u>
Dorothy	Cisgender	Hispanic/Latinx/white	Bisexual/Straight	1	under five	ECC	2nd
Anne	Cisgender	white	Pansexual	1	under five	ECC	2nd
Sunie	N/A	Hispanic	Bisexual	2	6 to 12	Local non-profit	1st
Misty	Cisgender	white	Straight	2	12 to 18	NCC	2nd
Sabrina	Cisgender	American Indian/white	Straight	1	6 to 12	Local non-profit	2nd
Destiney	Cisgender	American Indian/Latinx/white	Asexual	2	12 to 18 and adult	Local non-profit	1st
Hayley	Cisgender	Jewish	Straight	3	0 to 5, 6 to 12, 12 to 18	Local non-profit	3rd
Wendy	Cisgender	Hispanic/Latinx	Straight	1	12 to 18	ECC	3rd

As Table 1 demonstrates, half of the mothers in the study had multiple children. One respondent to the intake survey had five children, but I was unable to connect with her for an interview. I think the fact that she responded to my inquiry, took the time to complete the survey, but was unable to interview speaks to how limited these women are to do the things they wish to do for themselves given their many obligations. With the exception of Hayley, who received a lot of material support from the nonprofit, the women with multiple children had older children. I believe this speaks to the incredible amount of time as well as biological and emotional resources demanded of women during the first few years of raising a child. Having two or more young children puts school completely out of reach for most unpartnered mothers; in Hayley's case, her youngest was 4 years old and able to attend preschool.

All the mothers identified a lack of sleep as a problem; two of them described how they would exchange a precious hour of sleep just to have an hour of alone time. Most participants reported only sleeping 3–6 hours each night.

Emerging Themes

In addition to lack of sleep, some other significant emerging themes included age (ageing or being a posttraditional student), COVID-19 and its impact on their lives, trauma, domestic violence and the role of fathers, therapy (how everyone is either in it or cannot find the time or money for it), motherhood, and school. Outside of “school” and “motherhood,” “father” was one of my most often used codes. The frequency with which I used the code was surprising because they were not very involved in their children’s lives, and I did not have any interview questions directly referencing fathers. But, the frequency of the topic speaks to the little explored question of what happens to fathers (who do not assume full custody) when couples break up and, beyond the negative economic consequences, how their lack of involvement impacts women and children.

In addition to the inequity of parenting responsibilities across 100% of the group, which I found unsurprising, the consistency of trauma, sexual assault, and domestic violence these women experienced surprised me. Initially, this trauma was not part of my focus, and I did not ask questions related to it, but as stories emerged, almost everyone had experienced some or all forms of this violence. Their stories reflected national data, which indicates at least 1 in 4 women (the frequency is likely higher because of underreporting) are victims of domestic violence; at least 1 in 3 women will experience some form of sexual violence during their lives and 1 in 5 have experienced completed or attempted rape (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

2022). This topic continues to be of importance to educators given that lower education levels correlate with increases in domestic violence (Huecker et al., 2022).

After learning everyone had a different but consistent story of trauma, I added questions about mental health and how participants cope with their mental health challenges. Initially, when I approached this material from a healing perspective, I expected participants to discuss some trauma but not to such an extreme. I anticipated some microaggressions and birthing trauma but was unaware of the amount of physical and emotional trauma they carried from their relationships with men. In response to these findings, I created a mental health resource page with resources for our area. I included at least three services with free or sliding scale fees. I also included one crisis resource. I emailed this page to each participant at the end of the interview cycle.

Making Education Better

The unpartnered mother scholars offered suggestions for how institutions could improve the mothers' educational experiences. For the most part, the suggestions are modest. Some of the modesty can be attributed to their own sense of idealized motherhood. For example, most were reluctant to ask for extended deadlines when a child was sick, which caused them to miss class or have less time to work on assignments. One of them described feeling intimidated by professors. Overcoming a reluctance to speak up was a significant challenge for Sunie, who is Latina at an institution in which the majority of her professors are white. Sunie also mentioned one of her friends, a unpartnered father. She speculated he likely experienced the same challenges she does because there is a lack of support for unpartnered fathers. Although Sunie was aware of the sexism she encountered as a mechanic student in a male-dominated field, her comments indicated she was unaware of the sexism related to unpartnered mothers, specifically, as well as

the additional burden caregiving placed on unpartnered mothers. Most of the mothers significantly downplayed how challenging their lives are.

However, the mother scholars had some ideas about how the system could improve. In one discussion, Hayley and I were “dreaming big,” and she dreamed of creating an accommodations office, similar to disability access, that would provide unpartnered parents with accommodations, including extended deadlines for sick children, doctor’s appointments, and so forth, with which all professors would have to comply. That office could be responsible for educating parents about their rights and resources, including lactation support under Title IV. Having an advocate inside the system would relieve each mother of some of the stress and emotional labor of advocating for herself whenever she needed an extension for an essay or had to miss an exam.

Several of the mothers suggested having kids’ activities on campus. In advocacy work outside of this study, I have heard my fellow graduate students and faculty mothers express similar wishes, so these activities would benefit many parents on campus. Some specific activities were suggested, including a drop-in childcare service (similar to those fitness centers provide when a parent takes a class or works out), a library nook, and activities that were labeled “Family” and included all families and not just the parents of traditionally aged students. Although ECC did not provide any support directed specifically at parents, it did provide a family movie night, which was inclusive of all ages and a good example of normalizing children and families on campus. Dorothy mentioned how ECC had created a menstrual justice event where they passed out tampons and chocolate with information on reproductive health. She mentioned the event because it made her feel seen as a woman who faces additional biological, social, and economic costs. ECC also distributed diapers, diaper rash cream, and other small

items in its food pantry, which made her feel her needs as a parent were acknowledged.

Participants also mentioned more support and community building would be helpful.

The mother scholars described how a variety of course modalities would be helpful; most needed all or partially online courses to make their schedules workable. Anne stated:

I have to do online [classes]. I can't take time to go to ECC and go to the campus. I just can't. I don't have childcare. I don't have the ability to run back and forth every night for night classes.

Destiney, who took care of her grandson for her unpartnered daughter while also parenting a pre-teen herself, stated:

I can't just be like, hey I need to step in and help my daughter or care for my son. So I guess that's the best thing about being online is I can make that exception [to manage caregiving around class].

When I asked her about what it would mean to be in class at specific times, she replied, "I wouldn't know what to do."

Participants also suggested providing more flexibility with deadlines, the ability to Zoom into in-person courses, and having online access to filmed lectures so they could view them later. Hayley, who has three children and is in a program requiring her to attend in person courses, stated, "I don't know how other, bigger universities handle it but I really wish there would be Zoom options available for parents with kids for when they can't get into class." Finally, the traditional, 16-week course format wreaks havoc on parents who have their own busy schedules.

Participant Stories and Analysis

In this section, I present abbreviated stories from seven of the research participants. As noted previously, although there were nine participants, one dropped out after the first interview,

and I was not able to connect with her again. She disclosed that her partner was released from prison for running two people over with his truck, the two people who had helped her leave him. She worried he would track her down and genuinely feared for her life. Because she was unable to participate in editing her story or deciding what to omit, I decided not to include it at all. The second participant was not able to complete both interviews before the first draft was submitted for review to my advisor, so I omitted her from the write up, although both are included in the demographic data, and the second is included in Table 1.

Chthonic Monster

Hearts of stone, but you're the monster they said

And I'll never get these writhing snakes outta my head

A god sins and a mortal dies

Another one of the Temple lies

I have no words, I can only scream

My skin now molts with my self-esteem

You look at me through your privileged haze

I'm frozen forever in the male gaze

—Claire

Dorothy

Dorothy identified as a biracial, cisgender, “straight/bi” woman in her mid-30s; she returned to school as an unpartnered parent with a child under age 5. The first thing that struck me about our interview was her complete honesty and transparency. She shared openly about her life and having an unintended pregnancy in her early 30s. I was impressed with how honest she was about how the father was not ready to be a father, how hurt she was by this, and how she

was still optimistic he would one day step up and be a good father. A lot of our conversation centered around the circumstances of her pregnancy and her relationship to her child's father. Although her former partner was involved at the time of this study, she was still the primary caregiver and provided almost all of her child's material and emotional needs. Dorothy sent me the following poem about her experience into matrescence when she learned she was pregnant.

She said, "Maybe your life wouldn't be like this if you had kept your legs shut."

I felt an echo in my ear and fell over. I fell over and died.

The next thing I knew I woke up with my hands bound.

I woke up in another echo and I looked over and saw monitors and a heartbeat.

I went to speak and scream and my voice wouldn't break the silence or the beeps.

I closed my eyes and went to my last waking memory.

I remembered taking a test because I was late. The test read positive over and over again.

Test after test.

I couldn't remember the last time I had felt a touch. Any touch.

I had sat and cried in the bathtub. Cried for the baby inside of me.

Cried for the man who wouldn't care what he had left inside of me.

A person to care for.

I looked for strength in the sorrow.

The sorrow of being a woman.

The sorrow of open legs and broken hearts. I planned an abortion.

I planned to excuse the baby of its duty to the disappointment of who I am.

The dead alcoholic father. The mother, detached and cruel.

I knew she would pay for it if I asked,

One less excuse to be ashamed of me.

—Dorothy

Finding out she was pregnant changed the trajectory of her life significantly. As with other significant life stages, such as puberty, matrescence involves hormonal, identity, and role shifts as well as other physical, bodily changes (Raphael, 1975). Dorothy's story illustrated the significance of this stage and her emerging reproductive identity as a mother, a "life transition marked by disequilibrium and adaptation along with an opportunity for greater psychological integration and self-awareness akin to posttraumatic growth" (Athan, 2020, p. 448). She described that, after becoming a mother, everything seemed to change. Prior to becoming pregnant, Dorothy had worked multiple low-wage jobs to earn money. She worked hard and put in long hours. Earning money was the central focus of her life. Having a son changed what her life meant to her:

So, when you bring the baby into the real life world, everything changes. You see things differently. It didn't used to bother me to give my time to people who weren't valuing me because they gave me money and I figured I don't care. But now I had a little one, that when he's not with me, that means he's with somebody else on this planet. So that means that whatever you're doing has to be worthy of your time or you're not going to want to do it.

Motherhood changed not only her routine and her circumstances but also who she wanted to be in the world. She also felt her experiences with alcoholism and addiction would be helpful to others, so she decided to go to school to become a certified addiction counselor.

Being a new mom during the COVID-19 pandemic also affected Dorothy significantly and negatively. In our second interview, she shared her story of almost being laid off while

pregnant during the pandemic, begging to keep her job, trying to work with a newborn at work with her, and then suffering from emotional abuse and gaslighting at work that caused her to walk out during her lunch hour; she refused to return. Dorothy was one of two participants who described searching for a job during quarantine while pregnant and again with a newborn. The indignity and fear of being fired (both incidents were connected to their being mothers) during a global pandemic while solo parenting created significant stress and sent a clear message to vulnerable workers that they could easily be disposed of and were worth retaining only if they put themselves or their children at risk. Despite being a recipient of terrible treatment, Dorothy demonstrated a remarkable desire to be her best self and to help others do the same. “I think you have to do what’s right for you when it makes sense for you and in your life just accepting that and not what you know other people perceive.”

Dorothy’s birth experience supported much of the literature on women’s experiences with the medical system, which Simonds et al. (2007) and Wagner (2006) characterized as a system designed for profit and organized into hierarchies of control that inevitably damage women. Dorothy reported she had a difficult labor and birth. She recounted, at the end of her labor, “out of nowhere, a nurse pushes my mom aside, grabs my legs, and starts pushing hard on my abdomen.” Unbeknownst to her, her son was in distress. Dorothy recounted being confused and the medical staff taking the baby from her. Because of this injury, her son has permanent damage to his arm. Dorothy said they call the arm his “lucky fin.”

Although the experience of giving birth may seem routine, for women, it feels like a life-or-death experience. In fact, it sometimes is. Every unpartnered birth experience described in this project was unique and different, yet most were traumatic in one or multiple ways. Dorothy expressed this point very poignantly:

And I encourage any new mom to ask questions. Find out what they're doing. You feel like there has to be some sort of trust. Yeah, you are about to lay your life on the line to bring a little person into this world through your body. And you're going to trust all these people that you don't know with your life.

Dorothy recounted her experiences at community college, like those of most of the participants, had both positive and negative aspects. She felt her school was welcoming overall: "The cool thing about my community college is that a lot of the people there do have kids." Dorothy spoke of enjoying the process of learning and discovery and was grateful for the opportunity to engage her brain and curiosity, something she felt she had been missing since her father died when she was a teenager.

On the other hand, she wrestled with the feeling that school sometimes seemed like busy work. She discussed the difficulty and dissonance of writing an essay about something "scholarly" when she was trying to survive day to day and figure out how to put food on the table. She implied the thought of a 4-year program discouraged her from continuing her schooling. She described an exchange with her advisor about earning a degree:

"Maybe," I said, "ECC feels obsolete right now." And she goes, "No Dorothy, getting your degree is not obsolete." But I told her, "ECC is asking me to pay \$1,000 by January 12 or they're gonna drop my spring class. So, I'm looking for miracles."

As with the other women in the study who receive no external support, Dorothy existed semester to semester without a secure plan for how she would support herself to earn her degree. Although Dorothy did not need an associate degree to become an addiction counselor, her advisor encouraged her to continue by correctly noting that a degree is needed to compete in the job market. Dorothy's experience illustrated how higher education has become entwined with

capitalist market forces: It requires people to put in more time and money to pay for credentials that are not relevant to or necessary for their future work.

“Second Trimester” is Dorothy’s second poem about her relationship with her baby’s father. For most mothers in the study, this relationship proved to be an ongoing source of stress and pain.

Second Trimester

Blackness. Thumb taps screen. Light.

I enter my passcode without thinking, and go to my internet browser.

I go straight to Facebook.com. I enter your name in the search, a familiar search. My heart skips a beat as I wait to see the profile picture, and for the second time this week it has changed.

I look at it like I am using a magnifying glass.

I feel an ache in my tummy and rub where the little foot had just been.

I continue looking through your page like I am on the hunt for the reason you left.

I select your friends and look at the recently added. The new faces of unassuming women.

I wonder if they think of you the way I used to think of you.

This bad boy—a sad boi. My favorite flavor of man. They are saltier when they’re sad.

I ponder if they like that you’re sad?

I wonder if they think the crease of their cleavage or the petals of their flowers will change you into the joyful man that we all yearn to see.

I give my potbelly full of baby another rub, and continue to see your life through the lens of social media.

I refresh the page and dig deeper.

I look at the women and their slim bodies and naive optimism of you.

I am swollen with the seed of your love and you left me high and dry.

I think just 5 more months and I will show him.

I think just give me the chance to prove to you I am real.

I refresh the page.

—Dorothy

Anne

Anne identified as a 39-year-old white, cisgender, pansexual woman with one child under age 5. She was separated from her child's father, although they had an amicable arrangement (the only one in the study who expressed a positive relationship with their child's father) and he is involved in the child's life. She expressed a hope that they would grow and, at some point, get back together. Although the father shared childcare duties, their toddler lived with Anne full time, and she was almost entirely (75% or more) responsible for the child's emotional and material needs. The father worked at a grocery store and made just above minimum wage.

Anne worked as a high school paraprofessional in a town she could not afford to live in, so she commuted about 60 minutes each way. Each day, she took her son to her mother's (who lives in the town Anne works in) and then drove to her job. Anne described the difficulty of managing her life around her job and childcare in one place and school and home in another. She wanted to CLEP out of some courses but had issues determining how to attend the test while working full time in a different town. Unpartnered mothers without much support often face overwhelming transportation and living challenges because many of them cannot afford paid childcare. None of the women in this study could afford paid childcare options.

Despite her long days and long commute, Anne loved working with challenging students and was interested in sex education and working with students with diverse gender identities. She identified as pansexual and had an interest in sexology and gender studies. She related how she had very minimal and unsatisfactory sex education in school and was excited to see how education in this area would evolve. She hoped to pursue a degree in consumer and family sciences so she could teach the subject. She mentioned this was the only thing she felt passionate about doing and, without that passion, attending school would not be something she could do. Anne said about returning to school:

It wasn't until my son was about 2 years old that I finally faced the fact that, without furthering my education, I could never give him the opportunities I wanted to give him, and to set him up for success in life. Success for myself, too. It was the scariest moment of my life . . . his father and I were separated, and I had this tiny human who unless I got my ass in gear, would have very little from me other than existence, and I need to leave my son with all the tools and opportunities for a successful life that I can.

As with the birthing experience, for some, going to college may also feel very high stakes. Anne initially went to college right after high school for a music degree. She played several instruments and was in competitive ensemble groups, including all state honor band. Her dream was to be a music teacher. She shared she was sexually assaulted by another student while in high school. A supportive teacher saved her life after she contemplated suicide, which made a huge impression on her. She wanted to help other kids in crisis, and her teacher's support motivated her to combine her love of music with a passion for young people.

Unfortunately, Anne damaged her wrist tendons and lost her ability to play. She described this experience as losing a limb. A daunting issue with her current college experience

was that because of a mismatch between or expired credits, Anne (who was a 2nd-year student in college) had to start over earning college credit. Moreover, she was placed into remedial coursework, which cost her two precious semesters. For instance, she had to take two developmental math courses to fulfill the one math course required for her degree. Many mothers in the study recounted similar issues with not receiving credit for prior course or transfer credit for new programs. Transfer and expired credits cost many of them valuable time and money because they were forced to start over when they entered or re-entered community college.

Learning she could become a teacher again in a subject that interested her motivated Anne to return to school. However, Anne was uncertain about how she could achieve her dreams with her current uncertainty and financial instability. Because her child relied primarily on her, she had to work full time and try to attend school. She could only manage online classes one or two at a time. If everything stayed on track and she did not take any time off, her son would likely be between 8 and 10 years old when she graduated. He was 3 years old at the time of this study. Hers is a long and daunting road of struggle.

Anne described her son as “lucky number 10.” She suffered nine miscarriages and did not believe she could carry a child to full term. She was told there was less than a 1% chance she could carry a child to viability. She was grateful she had him and felt fortunate to have a healthy, smart, and funny child in her life.

Anne was my second participant. During our second conversation, she opened up and told me her full, incredible story. As a result of the sexual assault in high school, she kept gaining weight until she was over 300 pounds. She said she had overheard boys talking about how they would not want to sleep with Rosy O’Donnell because she was fat, so Anne felt being fat would keep her safe from future assaults. However, her weight opened her up to a different

kind of abuse. She gave examples of girls following her and making “boom, boom, boom” sounds every time she took a step forward and told stories about young men who sexual harassed her because they saw her as fair game.

Anne made me more fully aware of just how much trauma, more than I would have conceived at the beginning of this project, many of these women carried. She spoke openly of being sexually assaulted twice, being held hostage in her own home by an abusive ex-boyfriend, and experiencing horrific incidents of fat shaming (both verbal and physical).

On Domestic Violence

We started off as friends. We grew into more.

We developed a relationship and he’s like, don’t worry about that.

I got you—and I fell for it.

And I got trapped.

He became abusive—

Physically. Mentally. Emotionally.

He controlled all the money and stuff.

If I did things the wrong way, I would be slapped.

He used to take my phone and sometimes my car keys.

I wasn’t allowed to meet the neighbors unless they were Cuban or white.

He was a racist.

And I overheard about how he was going to kill my cat.

I wouldn’t run to save myself.

But I ran to save my cat.

—Direct quotes from Anne’s transcript, arranged by Claire

Yet, despite so many difficulties, so much abuse at the hands of people who claimed to care for her and horrific brutalities by strangers, she persevered with optimism and a clear desire to help others. In the final moments of our second interview, she explained why she was willing to share, despite the difficulty of reliving so many terrible moments in her life: “I want other people who have gone through those situations to know that they’re not alone either. And if we don’t talk about it, they feel even more alone.” A few minutes later, as we wrapped up and she discussed her plans for moving on to a 4-year school, her natural optimism shined through. She said, “And so I’m just incredibly excited. I mean, it’s been a long journey.”

Fat Shaming and Trauma

The town I lived in was mostly dirt roads and awful people.

I got run off the road into a ditch because I was a fat bicyclist.

A bunch of boys thought it would be funny.

I was wearing headphones and biking to work because I worked at McDonald’s.

And there was no public transportation.

This town was so tiny that it literally had one main road with three stoplights.

And I was biking to work and they thought it would be funny to start cat calling and making nasty comments which I kind of heard through one headphone.

I turned up my music and ignored them until one of them chucked a glass bottle and hit me.

They started yelling nastiness like you want to ride, I can teach you how.

You know the usual toxic masculinity junk and I kept ignoring them.

And so they, in front of the public library no less,

literally used their truck to run me off the road into the ditch.

I don't know if you can even see it, but I've still got a scar.

—Prose compilation from Anne's transcript, direct quotes, arranged by Claire

Sunie

Sunie had a buoyant personality and identified as a bisexual, Latinx female in her early 30s; she had two boys, ages 5 and 11. She shared partial custody with her oldest child's father, yet she had the children 75% or more of the time. She was in her 1st year of her program, although she had attended school before to become a car mechanic. She described herself as a tomboy who loved camping and fishing. She spoke warmly of her boys and described her greatest motivation for school was to make her kids happy. She described herself as “Big Mom”—many of her nieces and nephews would come to her for support because they did not have decent support from their own parents and knew they could rely on her. Although her natal and extended family suffered from alcohol and drug abuse, she pursued a different path.

Sunie's experience with motherhood was very challenging as both she and her children had physical and mental health issues. For instance, she experienced preeclampsia and the induced, premature birth of her youngest child; her oldest began exhibiting several mental health symptoms at the age of 5, which accelerated into a suicide attempt when they were 10. Both children had ADHD. Sunie was diagnosed fairly recently with Celiac disease and experienced bouts of anxiety and depression. She wanted to begin therapy but was not sure how she would manage the time commitment given all her other demands. She had worked on getting her oldest into therapy, but, as I heard many times, pediatric therapy has been very hard to access and often involves a long waitlist.

As with several other women in this study, Sunie described her experience with multiple domestic violence incidences over the last 6 years, which added to the trauma and stress of her life, but, as did a few other participants, Sunie used nature to process and heal. She described long drives into the mountains to just scream or cry. Being in nature allowed her to talk out loud to the universe about her experiences and challenges, and she sat in her car and talked or cried out loud to process her emotions. She described being in the mountains as a way to release some of her emotional weight. A few research participants described being in natural settings as a way to find joy or healing. As advocated by an ecofeminist approach, some of my participants found release in getting far away from their “normal” lives and using nature to decompress. Such experiences speak to the need for providing space to synthesize and integrate experiences related to gender, obstetric, reproductive, and academic violence, and thus create healing processes through reflection in natural settings (Salleh, 1997; Shiva, 2004). Despite immense challenges, Sunie was a very optimistic person and was devoted to her children and their well-being. Her eyes lit up when she described her children and her summer plans to take them on road trips to her favorite spots in the mountains.

When asked about the best things about being a student, she described how the experience taught her to ask for help and reach out to others. In a subsequent interview, Sunie described she lacked trust in others and how most of the adults in her life had let her down. Although I did not realize it initially, I came to realize what a significant accomplishment it was for her and why it was something she was very proud of. She also described how important and motivating it was to have college staff and professors care about her and her success. She also described how she had to push herself to be upfront and vulnerable with her professors.

She recognized early on that, without putting herself out there and making her voice heard, she would have slipped through the cracks of the institution easily. She spoke about asking for paper deadline extensions when she or her son was in the hospital; she ended up not needing them. This was not uncommon among the participants, many of whom went to extraordinary measures and self-sacrifice to keep up with coursework and not receive any additional help. Many of the women described not wanting to “get special attention or help” and feeling they needed to prove they could be good students and scholars, despite the incredible challenges they faced. It was clear to me that most of them (as have I) had an internalized sense that motherhood labor is not deserving of any special status and that mothers are expected to give up sleep, time, energy, and well-being to succeed in school. Throughout the interviews it became apparent that most of us wrestled with the capitalist indoctrination that ideal motherhood is a burden one shoulders alone and that we should not expect any help or support beyond what any “normal” student would receive.

As I got to know Sunie, I realized she relied entirely on herself for motivation and support. The strength to go through so many challenges every day, unpartnered, and only have herself to vent to, process through, and problem solve with spoke to her incredible resilience, but it also reminded me that many adults, both younger and older, go through their challenges alone and validation and support within their institutions are critical for them.

As a Latinx woman, Sunie described not only experiencing racist microaggressions personally but also experiencing racism through her sons’ experiences. In her case, she sometimes felt professors spoke condescendingly to her, which prevented her from wanting to ask questions or stay after class for help. However, rather than become bitter or depressed, Sunie

used her experiences to try to improve herself by becoming a more empathetic person. In one of her journal entries, Sunie wrote:

Because I am Mexican people automatically think I can speak Spanish or know how to understand or even cook certain foods all while calling me a wetback or a beaner. I used to judge people based on their race. But I feel the way I use my words has changed over the years not only because I'm maturing but also realizing that we are in a different time and the poor words I use causes problems and can hurt someone's feelings. Just taking a step back and understanding that we have all been raised in different ways and how to look at others and figure it out ourselves. To hear someone else's point of view opens my mind to understanding how I respond or how I will make connections without judgement.

She also reported her son was the only Mexican boy in his class. The teacher called her in one day and told her that her son was "freaking out" in class. Later she learned from another teacher that all the boys were having behavior issues, but Sunie felt her son was singled out because he was the only brown boy in the class. Mothers of color not only endure the pain of microaggressions inflicted upon them personally but also often manage the pain of experiencing racism through their children. Problems at school can mean moms often have to miss their own classes for parent/teacher visits. When I asked her if she thought the microaggressions were worse because of her race or her gender, she said:

I would go with both. I had people looking at me weird because I was a girl going into mechanics. Everybody's like, "Oh, no, you're not supposed to do this." I guess we all have to work as a nurse or a doctor or a social worker.

Sunie's birth experience with her second child was also incredibly traumatic. She was constantly sick throughout her pregnancy and, despite taking multiple medications, she could not go more than a few hours without vomiting. Halfway through the pregnancy, they discovered she had preeclampsia and induced her labor. Her baby was born with some of his brain undeveloped, so he was put into the ICU immediately. Sunie was not allowed out of bed on her own because hospital staff thought she was in danger of developing blood clots, so she did not see him for the first 2 days following his birth. Sunie was in the hospital with her son for 4 weeks although she wanted to leave earlier and felt her son would make better progress if she could take him home, feed him, and hold him all day. He started eating better and growing as soon as she was allowed to take him home.

Although Sunie felt helpless and without agency in the hospital, she spoke fondly of her community college. She described a lot of resources from disability services and tutoring. Such resources made her feel valued and worthwhile because she knew the college was investing in resources to help her succeed.

Trauma

Trauma twisted DNA mutation
unintended inherited transformation
of the deaths we've mourned,
All the scars we've torn,
Twisted helix of pain
Buried deep in the vein
An altered soul code,
Viral overload

I am stricken with regret

My unknowing unpaid debt

Overdue bill, my child's mutated karma

Chronic forever,

The crushing weight of my trauma

—Claire

Destiney

Destiney was a posttraditional 1st-year student. She identified as multiracial, cisgender, and asexual (demi grey ace); she has two older children and a grandchild. Her mother's family was Hispanic/Native American and was in the western United States before it became a part of the United States. Her father's family were white immigrants who came west during the Dust Bowl. In a follow-up email, Destiney related a little more of her family history:

This was a family secret. Hispanics and whites were considered an unwelcome interracial marriage in our town's history. Not only from the community, but from the families as well. This is why my parents made the choice to raise my brother and I as English speaking only.

Destiney had 100% of the parenting responsibilities for her children and also supports her eldest child (AFAB/nonbinary) who is also an unpartnered parent to an infant. Destiney began college as a traditional student in the 1990s but stopped out. She wants to be a social worker with Hospice. The last of her four marriages ended after 16 years when her partner decided being a dad was not working for him. He moved into a van and essentially left the family. Destiney still cares deeply for him and finds it painful how he disengaged from his life and family. After being

married for 16 years, she did not imagine she would find herself on her own, supporting two children, and living in poverty. She returned to college so she could better support her family and create a better future for them all.

As with other mothers in the study, Destiney's journey through matrescence was difficult and emotionally scarring. The father of Destiney's eldest child was not supportive of her pregnancy, did not attend birthing classes, or help with chores or tasks, even when she was put on bedrest for preeclampsia. When she went into labor over the weekend and called her doctor's office, they told her to wait and come in once the office opened in the morning. She tried to wait, but at 3:00 a.m., she began having intense pain and went to the hospital.

After her child was born, Destiney experienced severe postpartum depression and subsequently did not feel any connection to her child. Her mother, who helped and supported her (even though Destiney was partnered at the time), did not believe in mental health challenges, such as depression, and subscribed to the philosophy that people needed to figure out their problems and not complain about them. As Destiney struggled to understand her feelings and bond with her baby, her child's father descended deeper into drugs and alcohol. He was abusive. She left him to live in a women's shelter when her child was 1½ years old.

Destiney struggled to share her story even after 20 years because she was still emotional about this period of her life. However, her eyes lit up and her demeanor changed completely when she described a positive memory from that time: A nurse came in with a beautiful, peach hat with a bow and said they were saving the hat for the most beautiful baby and, when they saw her child, they knew she was the perfect child for the hat.

Even with a lack of support, Destiney educated herself about her illness and got help. She was on medication and was very open about her mental health challenges and the positive

support she never had when her own child experienced postpartum depression. She said her mother called her the family “mental health activist.”

A Question of Age

They want you to go to work, pay your bills

I did that in my 20s, had all kinds of jobs

I don't want to do that anymore

I'm just too old to be there

My mom called me middle-aged

And I'm in class with fresher faces

Looking around, they seem so young

Am I too old to learn here?

Guess what? He said.

We took a poll, you're the oldest in class

For women, old age is not an accolade

Am I too old to stay here?

We are taught that at a certain age,

Society wants to close a door on you

They don't want you to be inspired anymore

Am I too old to dream here?

So I'm back in school

To re-open some doors

I might be too old for some people

But for me (and me alone)

I'm the perfect age to be here

—Poetic compilation

Destiney described her 12-year-old son, who has dyspraxia, as having an extremely caring nature and empathetic heart. Although he struggled with motor skills and some processing issues, he was already a great computer programmer and a whiz at puzzles. He struggled with introversion and social situations. Destiney described how she and her eldest child experienced some trauma together. They both had PTSD, and her eldest also had borderline personality and bipolar disorders. Despite their challenges, Destiney found great support from her eldest, and they frequently helped each other with childcare and shared vehicles. She described them as incredibly artistic and creative and noted they had a natural charisma that drew people in.

Destiney described her own journey to understand her sexuality as difficult, especially because growing up she did not have the language society does now to describe differences in gender and sexual expression. In follow-up email correspondence in reference to a draft I had sent out, Destiney wrote:

Although there was awareness for LGBTQIA community, there was no awareness of Asexuality when I was growing up. I didn't learn that there was a term for my identity until I was 40. I am 44 now. It has only recently been identified as the A in LGBTQIA. Previously people have thought the A stood for Ally. It is amazing to see recognition of Asexual characters in books and on screen. I was thrilled when I read about Asexuality in my college textbook for my sociology class. I felt seen.

Although her eldest child had a community of other queer people with whom to interact, Destiney had not been in contact with older adults who shared her identity. She shared, “I always thought I was broken, people kept saying you’re supposed to enjoy sex and I thought of it as a chore.” She described how some people, even in the LGBTQIA community, looked at her as “not normal.” She said, growing up, people would tell her she was a lesbian, but this did not feel correct to her: She was more of a tomboy who liked to work on cars and fix things. Destiney and her eldest child demonstrate motherhood is not uniformly heteronormative and can be lonely and isolating when one does not fit inside that box.

Her experiences also demonstrated affinity groups can be restrictive and unwelcoming when members of the group do not attend to the diversity within their identity. Moreover, affinity groups and centers often coalesce around the needs and schedules of younger, traditional students, which robs older students of community and younger students of the wisdom and experience of the older students. When I asked Destiney about why she pursued an education, she stated:

When you’ve gone through a lot of negatives in your life... Like in my last relationship, I’m opening my eyes to the realization of how it was emotionally abusive toward the end and manipulative and controlling. I’m finding out who I am in starting over after all this time and starting to see some strengths within myself. It’s good to know I can actually do something and I’m worth something that I think that is something worthy on its own.

Although Destiney was an older student, her journey into higher education created a new awareness about her life and her abilities. She began to question her previous way of being in the world and has generated a new sense of self-worth.

Misty

Misty, who identified as a white, cis-straight woman who struggled with ADHD, grew up in a midsized town in Colorado. At the age of 16, Misty ran away and moved out on her own; she had her first child at age 18. She has some family in the area and was the first in her family to attend college.

She had an incredible work ethic and created a complex organizational system for tracking her responsibilities and deadlines. She shared stories about self-reliance and her uncanny ability to hustle and make things work, despite significant challenges. Having moved out and starting a family as a teenager, Misty developed an amazing creativity for getting things done and working systems to her advantage. For instance, she learned she needed a root canal, but her state-supported medical care would not cover a tooth replacement. Not accepting lesser treatment and living without a tooth, as she was advised to do, Misty got a cottage food license from a local University and sold banana bread until she made enough money to buy herself a new tooth.

Misty was the mother of two teenage girls but left their father when she was pregnant with her youngest. They moved in together when she was pregnant with her first child, but after six domestic violence charges, she had enough and moved out. She did not complete high school, but she did earn her GED. When her youngest was 3 years old, she went to school to complete the prerequisites for nursing and stopped because she felt she had missed too much time with her young children. She worked as a CNA and added a phlebotomy certificate but was disappointed it only yielded \$1 an hour more than what she made as a CNA.

For several years, Misty worked multiple jobs and stayed afloat with the help of assistance programs. However, a few years ago, when things had become increasingly untenable, she decided to try school again. She was good with technology, so she pursued an Associate of

Science in cybersecurity. As with other participants who stopped out, Misty experienced the pain of having to retake expired courses. She also mentioned, to pursue her education, she had to give up her Section 8 housing voucher, so she could move closer to her program, which is administered in person. When we first spoke, she had entered a transitional period of houselessness because she and her children would live with friends and family. She had put most of her stuff in storage and planned to switch off between three different homes until she could find a job and get work study and financial aid at her new college. She also tried to find two jobs, one as a work–study and one in something else, so she could eventually move into an apartment:

I can keep doing freelance work. I can go get another waitressing job, I can work as a CNA and those are all good things, but I really really don't want to settle. I know I'm capable of so much more and I will sleep in my car if I have to so that I can just graduate and get a job where we can actually live comfortably and finally have some freedom for once. Because it's been survival like as long as I can remember. So, I was pretty excited when I saw that you were doing a project [about unpartnered mothers] because it is really exhausting and it's hard to get through the day to day right now.

Misty also struggled with needing proof of residency so she could enroll her children into local schools. Without a permanent home address, she hoped to use her paystubs as proof of residency, but she would not have those for at least a few months.

Misty described her daughters as “amazing” people with servant hearts and entrepreneurial spirits. They were hardworking and supportive young women who dreamed of becoming veterinarians, business owners, or engineers. When I asked Misty what she loved most about school, she replied, “I love the ability to learn.”

During our conversations, Misty and I connected over being young moms. One of her ongoing challenges was revealing the ages of her children and having to endure people's shocked expressions and skepticism. I have rarely had such a frank conversation with another teen mom, so it was incredibly validating to hear another woman describe cringing at these encounters. Neither of us felt good that people would immediately say, "It's just that you look so young, that is a good thing!" We both agreed their attention was not on our looking young but on our having children so young and how it is not normal or desirable in our culture. The exclamations never felt complimentary and were another example of the microaggressions one experiences when outside idealized motherhood norms.

During our second interview, Misty described the control the medical community assumed over her body and her choices as a young mom. After her first pregnancy, which required specialty care because of a blood clotting disorder, Misty was told she should not have another pregnancy. Being on state-supported health care, she was counseled that it was not acceptable to willingly get pregnant because she knew she would be at high risk and require expensive medical treatment. However, before leaving her daughter's father, Misty decided she wanted to get pregnant because she did not want to raise an only child. She went to the doctor to have her IUD removed and the doctor refused, stating it was irresponsible to remove it. Misty subsequently removed the IUD by herself at home.

Looking back, Misty thought removing the IUD was probably not the best decision, but she felt she had no other choice. When I heard her story, I was appalled that her doctor did not provide the care she wanted and subjected her to patriarchal and economically motivated control over her reproductive health. Misty's story demonstrates how young poor women are often presented with limited options and subjected to institutional control over their bodies.

When I asked Misty whom she relied on for emotional support, she thought for a few moments and gave a sigh. “I guess myself,” she said as tears welled in her eyes. Although she had friends and family who provided material support, she had no one in her life to whom she could reliably turn for emotional support and care. I was again struck with sadness at how many women within the participant group felt emotionally alone and how much resilience it must require to endure such hardships without anyone else to help shoulder the emotional burdens.

Sabrina

Sabrina was a posttraditional student who had one elementary-age child. She identified as biracial white/American Indian, cisgender, and straight. Sabrina had expansive, positive energy and a strong sense of self. She wanted to become a mental health counselor. Sabrina earned an associate degree in criminal justice about 10 years ago but was not sure what to do with her degree. She then earned her CNA certificate and spent the intervening time working lower waged positions, such as working as a CNA and in food service. She was 19 years old when she had her daughter.

Sabrina always raised her child alone, although early on the father had part-time custody and spent more time with his child. She described the difficulty of dating as a unpartnered mom, and, although she was just barely 30 years old, she felt trying to date would severely disrupt the dynamic of her household and her relationship with her daughter. She described her daughter as sassy and 10 going on 25. Her daughter was artsy but also sporty, and she enjoyed swimming, softball, and volleyball. Sabrina said her daughter had moments of true kindness that sometimes caught her off guard and balanced out her daughter’s sassy side.

When I asked Sabrina what it was like to manage life, school, and solo parenting, she replied, “I’m, like, constantly feeling overwhelmed. Yeah, that’s a constant feeling. But if

anything, I give up sleep just to watch TV for a little bit.” Although Sabrina had family in the area who provided some help, she felt she was mostly on her own and the help was limited. Her mom helped with childcare once a week, but the rest of the time, she took her daughter to work with her. As with many relationships with family, sometimes the help had unintended strings attached. Some of my participants described not wanting to ask family for help because their family members would expect something in return—if not immediately, then later on. Sabrina described navigating her and her mother’s different parenting styles, which caused some friction between the two of them. Relying on someone who is unpaid can be stressful if one disagrees with how they do things. In a paid relationship, you can easily terminate the care if you are not satisfied with it. If you rely on family members, you must spend a lot of time and energy navigating the relationship so not only do you ensure your child is safe and receiving consistent care but also that you do not alienate your family member so they refuse to help you in the future.

Sabrina also described the guilt that came from being an unpartnered parent, especially at a young age. She said it was challenging to look back and realize she was unable initially to be the parent she grew into because she was still a child herself. The knowledge one was or was not an “ideal mother” caused a lot of anxiety for the young, unpartnered parents as they reflected on their experiences.

Sabrina was in and out of therapy for several years and felt it helped her become the functional person she became. She disclosed suffering from depression and had “what [felt] like constant anxiety.” Her years with a therapist were very impactful and one of the main inspirations for her current path. She shared, “I crave to know people’s stories and I crave to

learn. To just help yourself grow and change. And yeah, it's super hard, but that is kind of like what inspired me to want to go this route."

Regarding her experiences on campus, Sabrina described a number of challenges and struggles. For instance, she had to bring her daughter to campus and have her sit outside the classroom because the elementary school was closed for a holiday. She pointed out that classes with a strict, no-cell-phone policy are challenging for parents. She would receive a call from her child's school and then decide whether she should answer it and risk violating the class rules or wait until after class and hope the call was not urgent. She described these kinds of gut-wrenching decisions as a "real struggle." She also mentioned one of her teachers, in attempting to acknowledge students' struggles, made things worse:

One of my teachers said, "I know that you're all different. And I know you all have different things going on in your life. And I understand but I can't accommodate the differences. I know some of you have kids. And that doesn't change how I have to grade things or the quality of work that has to be submitted or the time that you submitted, it doesn't matter.

Unlike many participants who accepted this kind of treatment as status quo, Sabrina described this approach as an "educational flaw in the system" and continued, "You know, it's not geared toward necessarily trying to help people, especially people, who are doing things slowly and trying to better their lives. It's not geared toward them."

The following poem describes the feeling of moving into matrescence during a turbulent young adulthood as experienced by Sabrina and those of us who went through matrescence at a young age.

Motherhood

On the way to motherhood,
I worked up until the week I gave birth
And I worked the week after

I carried an infant and mental health struggles
pulled in all directions all the time
With no time but deadlines
Looming like burnt-out trees across
my shadowed path

I sat upon the verge of despair
A sheer cliff face of high alert
And dangled my numb feet into dark pools
of rippling anxiety

My baby's strapped to a hunched-over back
We lost the map and only know where we've been
In back alleys making footprints from fear
I put down the baby and pick up a book
A faint tread of hope on this lonely road.
—Poetic compilation of ideas arranged by Claire

Hayley

Hayley was a bright, spirited, cis, straight, posttraditional student with three children between the ages of 4 and 14 at the time of this study. Her schedule was chaotic because one

child was in middle school, another was in elementary school, and one was in preschool. She discussed how deadlines always hung over her:

And I think the most challenging part of that is, how it affects your ability to really be present with your kids. And so I would say that by far the biggest challenge is staying present even with the stress of this new standard that you set. My son has said to me sometimes, “Mom, you’re here but you’re not here.” Oh, that doesn’t feel good.

Between her school schedule and her children’s schedules, Hayley relied on a variety of friends and family members to help her get everyone where they need to be each day. Hayley also commuted from her hometown to a different town where her school was located. She said, “And it’s almost impossible trying to rearrange the kids’ schedules [when the semester changes]. It’s incredibly stressful.” She also noted the difficulty of navigating educational spaces: “It’s just built around like 20-something free people that just do whatever they want and have their time at their disposal.” Despite her time challenges and the structural barriers she encountered in higher education spaces, when I asked her what being a student meant to her, she said:

It feels like this gift of being able to actually figure out things like who I am and what I love and what I’m good at. And that’s my favorite part of school. Last semester I did a class on healing trauma. It was really beneficial to me, and so that feels really rich. Those are my favorite parts of like, finding little parts of yourself that kind of were dropped along the way.

Hayley described how impactful her childhood was on her as an adult woman parenting without a partner. She discussed how the church in which she grew up did not prepare women for independence or living a life on one’s own. She spoke about how she did not learn to ask questions of herself, such as what she wanted to pursue in life and what her dreams were. She

described being conditioned to be a wife and to put her family first. She had to relearn many of these messages and found empowerment by focusing on her own development. Her personal journey to independence and being a person in her own right had greatly influenced the work she hoped to do in the future. Attending school and exploring her own needs and desires has been an important part of her development and growth.

As with other mothers in the study, matrescence was a period of intense growth, trauma, and self-actualization. Although Hayley's life grew more chaotic as her relationship with her husband deteriorated, her birth experiences became increasingly positive as she learned to take more control of her body. During her first birth, she attempted to labor at home. However, after 21 hours, she was in intense pain and went to the hospital where she underwent a C-section. After that experience, she struggled to bond with her son and felt dissociated from the labor and birth experience. Although most women are not allowed to give birth vaginally after undergoing a C-section, Hayley, who had been training as a doula, decided to fight to do so. She had to find a midwife outside her community who would work with her. With her second delivery, she began experiencing problems after several hours of labor. As the medical personnel discussed doing another C-section, her doula coached her to move successfully through her labor and birth:

She's like, "Is there anything emotionally, that maybe is impeding your progress?" And I was like, "Yeah." I knew immediately. "My relationship with my mom has been extremely rocky for years. And I am terrified to be a mother to a girl. I'm so scared. My family history with moms and daughters is not awesome, it's generationally bad." And so, she's like, "Why don't we just tell her? It's okay, you can come now." So, we just started talking to her. And within about an hour, the midwife comes in and says, "You're gonna be able to push your baby out."

Hayley's story demonstrates the power of connecting one's mind and body and allowing women the time and knowledge to better control their own birth experiences. After learning how she could find some empowerment through matrescence, Hayley tried additional holistic methods with her third pregnancy even though her situation at the time was less than ideal.

Despite Hayley and her husband agreeing to have a third child, she was not sure whether she was ready for another pregnancy and birth. However, her partner pushed for it, and she thought it would help them rebuild their family—the past several years had been difficult because their home flooded, and they experienced a period of homelessness. Hayley acquiesced to him and soon found out she was pregnant with their third child. However, Hayley learned he had been with other women, and, when she was 6 months pregnant, he sought a separation. Hayley was incredibly sick through the pregnancy and had no help, so a friend, who also knew about the separation, offered to pay for a birth coach who offered hypnotherapy. Hayley credited the coach and the therapy for helping her stabilize emotionally during this difficult time, sharing, “Hypnobirthing taught me that the practice of going into myself taught me to deal with huge waves of my own anxiety and not to tense and resist but to allow things to flow through me.”

Hayley applied these lessons to her emotional pain as well and experienced a personal awakening. Learning how to control her emotional pain and trauma also taught her how to control her physical pain, and she grew up a lot through the process. She noted that, at one point in her labor, she began worrying she could not go through with it, that the pain would overwhelm her. But she decided, rather than resist and fight it, she would listen to her body, which told her to stand up. She got into a standing position, and soon after her daughter was born. As she tried to figure out what to do next and how she would live with two young children, an infant, and no

partner, her doula said something very profound: “I know that a woman who stood up to birth her baby can stand up for herself and her life.”

Today, Hayley is a strong advocate of education for women. As Anne did, Hayley expressed dissatisfaction with how women are poorly educated about matrescence, birthing, and their own bodies. She was also a strong advocate for learning how to better connect mind and body to heal and manage pain. Hayley also discussed how connecting to nature was essential to her journey in becoming more confident and healing the pain and trauma from being abused and abandoned by her life partner. Despite her experiences, Hayley remained positive and optimistic about the future and was excited about her educational journey.

Reflection on Themes and Research Questions

This chapter covered the following themes that were significant to all or most participants: lack of sleep, age (ageing or being a posttraditional student), COVID-19, trauma, domestic violence and the role of fathers, therapy and mental health challenges, motherhood, and school. The following research questions guided the development of the survey questions and the formation of narratives and analysis:

1. What are the experiences of unpartnered mother-scholars on a community college campus?
 - a. Where do mother scholars encounter resistances or barriers related to their identity as mothers across the sites of motherhood, gender, and scholarship?
 - b. What healing strategies do unpartnered mother scholars employ to address academic or gender violence encountered inside community college spaces?

2. How do biological and social concepts such as matrescence, gender-based caregiving, and reproductive identity development, shape the student experience? That is, how do students make meaning of these experiences?

In addition to the themes that emerged through the interviews, most participants described difficult pregnancies and birth experiences; their experiences support research that has demonstrated women who give birth in mainstream U.S. medical institutions often do not feel they are in control of their bodies and do not have the knowledge or agency to make informed choices (Simonds et al., 2007; Wagner, 2006). Consequently, they often carry shame, guilt, and trauma from these experiences.

Although all women suffer from a health care system not designed for them, poor women and women of color are subjected to a greater level of dehumanizing control over their bodies and options. Having gone through two pregnancies myself, one as a poor, unpartnered teenage mother using indigent care and one as a partnered middle-class woman with paid insurance, I found my birth experiences and how I was treated in medical facilities to be vastly different. Anne explicitly discussed the inadequacy of her sex education classes and how she was motivated to study this area. States that have banned curricula on LGBTQ topics in their primary schools, while removing women's right to control their bodies and reproductive choices, signal a strong push to elevate a capitalist–corporate–motivated hegemony that will likely lead to worsening outcomes for all mothers and babies as well as greater disparity in treatment between those inside and outside the norms of ideal motherhood. Stories from the women in this study attested to the critical importance of educating women about their bodies and their choices as well as matrescence and its impact on one's identity and mental health. Higher education

practitioners in the medical field have continued to support a corporate model, and students are trained in this medical model (Wagner, 2006).

Simonds et al. (2007) and Wagner (2006) have proposed mainstream medical institutions in the United States often cause unnecessary stress or trauma during the birthing experience. From my own experience of not having a choice of what drugs I received during my labor and delivery and not having a choice whether to have an episiotomy, to Sunie not being allowed to spend more than 20 minutes a day with her newborn son for a month and being denied any options for when he could be released to her care, to Sabrina who discussed being pressured into an epidural she did not want and being shocked to learn some mothers create a “birth plan,” and, finally, to Misty being denied the right to determine her own reproductive future when her doctor refused to remove her IUD, which forced her to perform an unsafe extraction at home, the experiences of women in this study supported these findings. Ageism, classism, and a capitalist for-profit medical system demonstrate matrescence, for these women, can be unnecessarily traumatizing. Hayley’s story, however, provided a small counterpoint that, with a more holistic model (i.e., a model based in practices developed during historic and contemporary midwifery), the transition can be empowering.

In addition to not feeling entirely safe during or satisfied with their birthing experiences, women in the study reported high rates of sexual assault, domestic violence, and mental health challenges. Many of our children have suffered from significant mental health challenges as well. Sunie’s case was the most extreme given that her eldest child suffered from severe depression. Many of the women expressed dismay that there is limited, pediatric mental health care, and what is available requires money or significant wait times, which make it inaccessible

to most. All participants were either in therapy or wished they were but could neither afford nor had the time for therapy.

Women outside the bounds of ideal motherhood also suffer from microaggressions and/or demeaning ideology about their sexuality. One example is found in Dorothy's poem on finding out about her unintended pregnancy. Being told her life was bad because she could not keep her legs shut is a slur aimed at women to shame them for having an unintended pregnancy, and therefore reinforcing heterosexual marriage norms as the only acceptable way to produce a family. Both Dorothy and Sabrina described the guilt of bringing a child into the world during what was portrayed as a personal failing for becoming a parent in such a way. This guilt is the result of patriarchal and gendered structures that make women and people assigned female at birth predominately responsible for the care of the children to whom they give birth. Families formed amid such pain and trauma are subjected to ongoing reminders of it when they enter spaces that reinforce norms of family. Higher education events that promote "family" activities aimed at traditional-age students and their assumed middle-age parents reinforce patriarchal norms and send messages that unpartnered mothers with children are not meant to be in these spaces.

The women without the support of the nonprofit had additional stress related to paid labor. In line with Sun's (2021) research on the differential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on unpartnered parents, two women in the study lost jobs because of their difficulty finding childcare or their refusal to work while a child was ill. Extreme sleep deprivation was common among participants, who routinely slept between 3 to 6 hours a night, adding to their mental health challenges.

Many of the themes are interconnected with one another. For instance, domestic violence leads to trauma, which leads to mental health challenges, which results in insomnia and PTSD.

Destiney's case illustrated such intersections:

So, I'm one of those people who because of the trauma and PTSD and things I've gone through in my life, it comes out mentally. So, my dreams are in color. And audio which I learned not everybody has and they are so realistic. It's like I'm awake so it's hard to feel rested. So, then I've actually had dreams where I cuss and I yell at my kids. Like my son has come in once he goes mom I just plopped on top of you to get you to stop [having the bad dream]. They know when I'm not doing well mentally by my state of sleep.

Trauma, sleep, and mental health also were connected in Dorothy's story, which opened my eyes to the significance of unpartnered parents' "silent" partner. All but one member of the research group described various levels of stress, abuse (ranging from stalking to death threats), and chaos resulting from absent fathers who seemingly offered little or no support yet simultaneously caused an incredible amount of ongoing stress and trauma. Absent fatherhood is a significant factor in the lives of most of the participants. Although fathers have taken on more responsibility in partnered couples, this study attested to the continuing trend of mothers taking on most of the childcare labor when the parents are not together (Cruse et al., 2019). This trend has significant, negative impacts on both their material and mental or emotional well-being.

Many of the mothers described a shift in their sense of self because of motherhood; their experiences spoke to the need to develop and include reproductive identity theory as part of student development literature. Dorothy described her decision to go back to school as an awakening to her own value and self-worth. Although she had not always had positive work

experiences or relationships, she had thought consistently about how to leverage her experiences and skills into something better. Dorothy shared:

I think not having to worry about those things has given me the freedom (to sound cheesy) to dream again. And I'm dreaming and I'm seeing my future that I was a year from now I could be in a different place than I am right now. If I just worked really hard for like a year, I could be in a totally different place.

Despite the difficulties they encountered in their shift into motherhood, the traumas they had endured, and the stress of parenting solo, most of the women described how their experiences helped them become better mothers and scholars. As Sabrina noted, "Even though really shitty things happen, it's a part of your story, and it's good to own it and learn from it and accept it and move forward."

Participants offered many suggestions for improving higher education, including providing more kid-friendly activities on campus to normalize the parent experience in campus spaces. None of the participants felt completely at home on campus, despite their overall positive educational experiences; none felt comfortable having their children in campus spaces. Hayley recounted a conversation with her therapist about being a parent in school. Her therapist, also a mother, expressed dismay at how difficult it could be:

Because female body is ideally designed for childbirth in your early 20s. So actually, mothers who are not in school, they have good fertility in those early 20s and come back later [for higher education]. But it's not designed for you because now you're here and raising children. For parents that do have babies in their early 20s and are in school it's especially difficult. Because I can't imagine giving birth and going back to papers and

assignments within a few days when you're already recovering from major trauma in your body.

Hayley then added: "It's a whole thing; the patriarchal sucks of higher education."

Misty described the pressure of deciding to give up her Section 8 housing voucher and experiencing a period of homelessness, so she could move to a different town to complete her education in cybersecurity:

People think it's a selfish decision because of like, what my life looks like right now.

Like yes, I could quit my job and go quit college and go work at Chick-fil-A and have a living wage, but that's not the life I want. It's hard for people to understand my work ethic right now. I'm like, they're not gonna understand so I'm not even gonna say anything and I just pretend I'm fine, but I'm not. It's been super-duper stressful. Last night, my thoughts were racing, and I got 2 hours of sleep. It wasn't anything to do with caffeine, I just was so stressed. And then this morning I'm proud of myself for still going to work today and still getting my assignments done, but it's definitely a challenge.

Although these stories were filled with challenges, the mothers were also incredibly creative, bright, motivated, and in love with their children. This intense love motivated them to seek and attain higher education, despite the very long odds. Dorothy described how motherhood motivated her to continue by dreaming about her future with her son, post-graduation:

So, I just can't wait to stand in my cap and gown holding him as my profile picture and be like super proud that I have accomplished not only being a unpartnered parent but getting a degree in furthering my life for my son. When he's 18 years old and got friends doing drugs and friends going to college and friends doing this and doing that. He's

gonna go to his roots and he's gonna go okay, my mom went to school and got an education so she could do better for me. That's what I want.

Although it is important to acknowledge the trauma to process and heal, it is also important to acknowledge the growth, determination, and fortitude accompanying matrescence. These attributes are crucial to student success, and allowing mother scholars to understand and draw upon them, despite the struggle, can be empowering and can bolster self-efficacy.

Summary

Nine participants were recruited from two western community colleges and one local nonprofit; there were 16 separate interviews with participants. I used a collaborative methodology, comprised of narrative sections and associated poems shared with participants, to illicit feedback, clarification, and offer participants some agency during the process and control over the final product.

A queer phenomenological lens was used to clarify and analyze participants' experiences, which are in contrast to those who are traditional or "ideal" scholars in higher education. As Lane (2021) noted, queer phenomenology adds a dimension of *disorientation* in space and time to the unit of analysis; by focusing on the queer phenomena of lived experience, the research can explore what it means to occupy a particular identity, specifically one that is not valued or does not fit well within one's current environment, in greater depth. Lane (2021) further noted a function of stigma associated with being outside the norms of heterosexuality causes a person to "experience harm by way of self-stigmatization" (p. 2177). Similarly, a queer phenomenological view provided a frame for understanding how unpartnered mothers, who are outside of heteronormativity, experienced stigma and shame.

Thus, interview questions and methods focused on interrogating the potentially disorienting experience of being both an unpartnered mother and a scholar. All the unpartnered mother scholars reported instances of self and social stigmatization as well as resulting high degrees of trauma and mental health challenges. The study also revealed that all the participants experienced consistent and sometimes severe physical and mental abuse. Wertz (2011) noted a concerted effort to transcend victimhood and “reopen the future” (p. 155) can be empowering. Consequently, discussions with participants centered on motherhood as a form of empowerment and the ways in which motherhood brings incredible joy and fulfillment as well as the motivation to overcome structural barriers in higher education spaces.

After data were collected, I used Grigori’s (1985) 4-step method in conjunction with Saldaña’s (2013) in vivo approach to code the data. In addition to a phenomenological approach, poetic analysis, which was developed during the in vivo stage of coding, was important for the final product. Through the construction of *Vox Participare* poetic analysis, the overarching themes of lack of sleep, age (ageing or being a posttraditional student), COVID-19, trauma, domestic violence and the role of fathers, therapy and mental health challenges, as well as motherhood and school came together naturally (Prendergast, 2009). I used these themes to understand better how unpartnered mother scholars experienced a community college campus; what barriers they encountered; what healing strategies they employed; and how concepts like matrescence, gender-based caregiving, and reproductive identity shaped their experiences.

Becoming a mother was a defining experience of the women’s lives and significantly impacted their ability to engage in meaningful scholarship, especially because they were solely responsible for their children. The women reported past and current trauma made it difficult to focus on their academics and increased the “normal” stress associated with being in school. Most

of the women found their birth experiences to painful and difficult, yet Hayley's story provided a counter example of how, when given the opportunity to connect their biological experiences to their emotional states, there are opportunities for growth and self-realization.

Most participants felt their colleges provided little if any community around their identity as a parent and little to no support directed to them as parents. Consequently, the institution rendered a significant part of their identity invisible and did not provide them with space to celebrate how much they had overcome by being there. Mothers in the study were incredibly motivated and hardworking, personality traits widely corroborated in other literature on this population (Carpenter et al., 2018; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Hensly et al., 2021). Almost all participants cited a love of learning and discovery as significant for their higher education journeys; they are exactly the kind of students who excel when given the support to do so.

The next chapter reviews the primary findings of this study, presents implications of the study for higher education practitioners, and proposes potential, future research on this topic.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes my study and methodological approach, reflects on the findings through the lens of my theoretical framework, highlights the main themes and their implications, and discusses the implications of the study. Additionally, I note suggestions for future research.

Summary of Research Study and Methodological Approach

The research study consisted of interview data with nine individuals and 16 interviews over the course of 8 months. Participants were recruited from two western community colleges and one local nonprofit that works with parents pursuing a higher education degree or credential. I generated the analyses through narrative arrangements of each participant's story and *Vox Participare* poetry. All participants were mothers whose children lived with them full time and who provided most or all the children's material support.

Data were collected through semistructured interviews over Zoom. I employed a variety of methods to improve participants' collaboration and agency throughout the interview and analysis processes. Before data collection, I provided participants with consent forms and the interview questions, so they could think about questions and opt out of any before the interview. I also briefly shared my own story and educational journey prior to the first interview to introduce myself as a fellow mom and student and to minimize their perceptions that I was a disconnected researcher/expert.

Data were coded using an interpretive approach focused on meaning making. I loosely followed Giorgi's (2009) 4-step protocol, which includes (a) reading for a sense of the whole, (b) differentiating the description into meaning units, (c) reflecting on the psychological significance of each meaning unit, and (d) clarifying the psychological structure(s) of the phenomenon to code the data in stages and begin to generate themes. In the preceding chapter, I presented an

analysis of the data through a demographic description of the research community and a discussion of the emerging themes in the data. The chapter also included suggestions from participants about how higher education staff and faculty can make education better for mother scholars. Narrative descriptions, which include why they pursued higher education and what their journey has meant to them, accompanied by poetic arrangements, helped to describe each participant's background and birthing experience(s). In this chapter, I further discuss and interrogate the main ideas and takeaways of the analysis.

Theoretical Framing and Findings

Ecofeminism provided the theoretical framework for this phenomenological study. While phenomenology provides the overarching approach and purpose of the research, ecofeminism, poststructural feminism, and queer phenomenology further refined the lens, scope, and methodology. As the main theoretical lens, ecofeminism proposes an explanation for women's eroding status in society and advocates for using nature and natural/biological processes (as opposed to medical/technological solutions) to heal historic and contemporary trauma (Errington & Pasque, 2011; Estévez-Saá & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018; Segato & Monque, 2021). My conceptual framework also included poststructural feminism and queer phenomenology. Poststructural feminism (like ecofeminism) provided an explanatory model of the status of women and offered a frame for me to explore power, hierarchy, agency, and identity, all of which are important for understanding the identity and trauma (and concurrent microaggressions) that are particular to unpartnered mothers in higher education. It also provided an analysis of institutional structures and systemic oppression and how such oppression impacts the student experience.

Queer phenomenology lends another dimension of critical analysis focused on family and the reproduction of gendered social and familial relationships. Queer phenomenology contributes

a more tightly focused lens, which encourages a critique of the formation and elevation of white, middle-class, able-bodied, straight, cis, partnered motherhood as “normal” and “ideal” for parent and family formation. Queer phenomenology proposes the creation of a heteronormal family renders all those outside its norms as deviant or deficient (Butler, 2004). This focus on the family specifically is important for understanding the experience of unpartnered motherhood. The inclusion of queer phenomenology brings a deeper understanding of how the forces of patriarchy, capitalism, and heteronormativity come together and create challenges for those who are unpartnered mothers.

Ecofeminism as an Explanatory Model and a Mechanism for Healing

Ecofeminism is both a framework for this work and the primary lens through which it was developed. Ecofeminist theory illustrates the forced identification of women with nature through cultural, historical, psychological, spiritual, and political perspectives that then degrade and exploit them for settler–colonial capitalist benefit (Errington & Pasque, 2011). Ecofeminism also seeks to dismantle such forces, thereby bringing human and ecological dimensions into congruence with one another (Estévez-Saá & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018). It promotes conditions that are more conducive to personal and societal healing.

This project was developed with an ecofeminist healing approach, particularly its emphasis on healing through natural/organic life cycle processes. Only through a shift in priorities from a capitalist paradigm of productivity to a new emphasis on humans as animals who exist within a complex web of other beings (who have needs beyond pure consumption) can we truly begin the process of healing. Segato and Monque (2021) provided inspiration for working toward solidarity by sharing in the fieldwork process and using self-awareness and reflection to generate healing within a research context.

Sharing, Reflecting, Healing

In my creation of an ecofeminist research model, I kept memos about my journey through the research and reflected on the impact of sharing and receiving these stories. I often felt myself suffering deeply after the conclusion of an interview. I felt the pain viscerally in my own body as if I had experienced the trauma the mother scholar described. I felt moments of pure rage.

Sometimes these moments extended into days where I was angry. Sometimes the rage melted into a lingering sadness. I clipped memos from a podcast that deeply impacted me during a time I felt worn down by the research:

We've all been trained and taught under the curriculum of white supremacy and capitalism, grind culture, grind culture has taught us everything that we know about what resting is, about our labor, about what our bodies are, about who we are. We can't trust a professor of capitalism, that curriculum can no longer be trusted, and we have to totally ignore it, totally dismantle from it, and deprogram from it, to begin to slowly bring ourselves to what's really true. Resting is anything that slows you down enough so that your mind and body can connect. (Young, 2023, para 10).

My poetry was very dark at this time:

I Walk Along This Lane of Commerce and I See...

The

Unwanted

Unloved

Unidentified

Unhoused

Cast aside

Cast adrift

Castaway in the

Capitalist rift

It's not a nation-state

It's a fugue state

And we're all simply

Ghosts in the Machine

Captives of the American Dream

Those with badges (me)

Those without (unseen)

Is this badge for "security" or ownership?

Proving I belong, let's ignore that whip

I wear this collar around my neck

My bit of soul for a digital check

I turned to the earth to recover from these moments and find ways to reduce my rage. I forced myself to take many breaks and to spend weekends outside, even though the winter was particularly long and difficult and spring more rainy than usual. I created practices around connecting to the rain, the river that runs near my home, and the trees in my neighborhood. I found my own little, sacred grove I could reach within 20 minutes if I needed a quick recharge. I had never been able to connect to the cold and the snow, but I still work on it.

I encouraged the mother scholars to create such practices, and they shared their practices with me. Several found solace in nature: Sunie's screaming in her car in the mountains, Misty's running outdoors, Hayley's hypnotherapy lessons about treating pain as if it were a wave running through her and then dissipating. Although Anne and Dorothy both described the negative effects of telling their stories, of sharing them during the interview and seeing them in print, we also shared strategies for healing and cultivating joy. Several women also expressed gratitude that someone was interested in their stories and wanted to learn more about their lives. I found listening an important part of a more equitable research process and instrumental to healing.

A Queer Approach

Throughout this project, it was important to me to call into question our language and the ways language shapes our thinking about motherhood. For this reason, I wanted to reference Ahmed (2006) who was very influential in my development as a scholar and interest in phenomenology (I was *not* interested until Ahmed made it queer). I wanted to describe not only how an experience can be distilled and understood emotionally but also be viewed outside itself from a queer angle. I have always loved Emily's Dickinson's (n.d.) poem, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant—." In my reading of her poem, she encourages the reader to see "truth" but with a slant perspective. Queer phenomenology provided a slant perspective in this work because motherhood conceptually is not necessarily inclusive, and (as with sex and gender) there are many assumptions about what motherhood should be, what it should look like, and even what it should feel like. Calling these assumptions into question is an important part of this work. For example, it took me several tries to come up with the right phrase—"unpartnered mother-scholar"—for the community I was interested in researching. "Single mother" has so many negative connotations and, having been subjected to that label myself for many years, I wanted

to challenge this label with a new term that was not as loaded or reflective of patriarchal heteronormativity. I also wanted to challenge the academic power that determines who is called a “scholar” and who is called a “student.”

Additionally, I wrestled with using queer phenomenology because I am a straight/cis scholar who is not researching a specifically queer topic. In the end, I embraced Mehrotra’s (2022) argument that the meaning of “queer” should supersede gender and sexuality-based identities and that “queer” destabilizes what is considered “normal.” Taking a queer lens to a topic that includes both straight cis women and queer people legitimizes queer scholarship, and I believe this work supports the notion that queer scholarship has much to contribute to both queer and straight communities.

Vitry’s (2021) work on queer organizers was particularly helpful in demonstrating that bodily perceptions shape how bodies extend into space. Similar to how Vitry’s participants discussed bodily perceptions, participants in my interviews discussed challenges related to fatness, ethnicity, gender, and queerness and how these impacted their experiences in higher education. Additionally, being an unpartnered mother (as well as a younger or older mother) impacted how these women felt as they navigated their community colleges. Several described feelings of discomfort because they were too young (for motherhood) or too old (for college). Clearly, there are “ideal” ages that have been connected conceptually to higher education, and these ideals impact one’s development of identity and sense of personal agency.

Destabilizing Ideal Motherhood While Acknowledging the Costs of Motherhood

In several ways, this work reflected the goal of destabilizing what is normal because it challenges societal assumptions about unpartnered motherhood. Such assumptions were seen most clearly by the mother scholars who felt unable to ask for more help than other students

might ask for. Moreover, we all felt hugely obligated to care for our children before ourselves, so when one of us confronted our child struggling in some way, that mother took the burden on, into her body and soul as the primary person responsible for the child's well-being. Several of us experienced a sense of guilt over what we felt were personal failures in our mothering. Across the board, we internalized the feminization of caregiving models and accepted motherhood as an unpaid source of labor that has very high stakes, which must be provided at a great personal cost—and, for some, their very lives. This is especially true for Black women because they are 3 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women (Hoyert, 2023). For many women (e.g., Destiney), the cost is their mental well-being because they suffer from postpartum depression for weeks to months. Women tend to bear many other costs, such as weight gain or mastitis, in silence.

When I was pregnant with my son, my youngest aunt (with whom I was closest) gave birth to a daughter who was born on my 17th birthday. Later, we exchanged many letters about being new moms. She was a ray of hope and love during this very dark time for me. However, about a year in, she developed what she was told was severe mastitis from breastfeeding. A year and a half later, she died of invasive breast cancer. According to her doctors, her mastitis had masked her cancer until it was too late. I very clearly remember my mother coming into my room in the middle of the night, waking me, and her being unable to speak anything but her sister's name, her breath coming out in sobs. I realized my beloved aunt had died at the age of 34. It happened too quickly for us to be at her side as we would have wished.

Doctors dismissed her initial complaints of severe pain as complications of breastfeeding. Also, in my family, women had been conditioned to suck it up and not show pain, to not complain because doing so would inconvenience others. Likely my aunt neither questioned her

doctors nor revealed the true level of the pain and discomfort she felt. Such an unfortunate confluence not only robbed me of an important support person, but, more significantly, her daughter would never remember what a wonderful mother she had, one who loved her immensely. For years, I had nightmares that I also would die young and that my son would be orphaned and alone in the world. I could not listen to Live's song "Lightening Crashes," which came out a few years later, without dissolving into tears.

My aunt's traumatic death occurred during my 2nd year of college. Although my combined experiences of suffering the death of a loved one and mentor, of going through matrescence as a very young adult, of working and raising a child while going to school full time are not typical among 2nd-year students, many students face similarly challenging circumstances.

Neoliberal Capitalism and Structural Barriers

The mother scholars in the study also experienced a lot of trauma as they wrestled with the structural and economic barriers of motherhood. Their stories of struggle illustrated deeper structural and ideological tensions in higher education, especially because higher education presents itself as democratizing and liberatory. In many ways, as I explored in the literature review, higher education has reproduced broader societal norms embedded in a neoliberal, settler-colonial and patriarchal system (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Wilder, 2013). When educators seek to help women, including unpartnered mothers, improve their socioeconomic status, the educators replicate the very system that oppresses women. Yang (2017) spoke of the doppelganger of freedom: a little bit of land, a little bit of wealth, a right to rights. He described this condition as a mirage that fools many of us into believing we are free. He noted access to material comfort is not freedom—it is privilege.

As the scholarly work of Low and Martin (2019) and Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) has demonstrated, the culture of higher education has been modeled on neoliberal capitalism that upholds ideals based on patriarchal, white, Christian, cisgender, straight, able-bodiedness, and the myth of the nuclear family. This model places a double burden on women within higher education: they must be unpaid domestic workers and caregivers as well as productive scholars. What remains unseen and unrecognized is that such a model dehumanizes individuals' lived experiences and forces women to subvert their humanity to produce products that are beneficial to capitalist interests.

The current neoliberal model of higher education also has associated success with hard work and individual achievement and failure with a lack of hard work and personal shortcomings. This ethic predominates much of the mythology around student success. For example, in the first-year seminars I teach, much of my curriculum has focused on time management, motivation, financial decision making, and similar skills. Ostensibly, these skills help students continue past their 1st year of college and move toward graduation. However, these skills also are needed to fit into a corporate capitalist culture. For caregivers who learn these skills, there is no room in this skill set for self-care, joy, or the thought that such care might have significant societal benefits and therefore be worthy of additional consideration or remuneration.

The creep of neoliberalism into higher education has impacted its ability to create truly inclusive spaces (Ray, 2019). This approach often treats negative characteristics like racism and sexism as flaws within individuals rather than rooted in organizational systems and practice. The practice of addressing such flaws is to educate individual actors through human resource trainings and identity workshop programming. Focusing on inclusion in the form of personal education is important but falls short of a broader commitment to transformation (Park, 2018).

Neoliberal inclusion efforts proliferating across the corporate and U.S. education systems allow individuals to feel good about addressing the effects of racism and sexism without having to significantly change the structural barriers related to them. In other words, it allows a microlevel approach to a macrolevel problem (Kopp, 2022). Racist and sexist ideology endow actors with differential forms of agency, spawning a social identity often in conflict with social ideals. Cabrera (2018) described how universities aspire to be spheres of democracy, yet they leave intact structures that undermine it in day-to-day interactions.

The physical and biological experiences of motherhood are unique to those of us who give birth, yet most of us never talk about or acknowledge the heavy burdens related to these experiences. We accept them as individual burdens because we are socialized within a neoliberal capitalist context. And, although biological experiences are significant and must be better addressed in higher education, the emotional burdens of caregiving also fall most heavily on AFAB people. These emotional costs are rarely acknowledged or discussed. Additionally, many students are not just caregivers for their own children but also for their siblings, grandparents, and other relatives. Caregiving, while trying to meet strict deadlines and juggle heavy workloads, impacts students' ability to succeed in their classes. The patriarchal, neoliberal, higher education model of productivity, competition, and individualism must be confronted and disrupted if a truly liberatory approach, one freed from neoliberal capitalist, patriarchal norms, is to emerge.

The next section expands the discussion from theory to the practical themes that emerged throughout the interviews and explored in Chapter 4. After a brief overview of the themes, I summarize each theme and reflect on the themes as they relate to the research findings.

Main Themes

The main themes that emerged from data analysis included the impacts of age (ageing or being a posttraditional student), COVID-19 and its impact on participants' lives, trauma, domestic violence and the role of fathers, therapy (how everyone is either in it or cannot find the time or money for it), motherhood, and school. Fatherhood was also a significant topic of discussion across all interviews. Another significant finding was that in the 30 years that have elapsed since I was an unpartnered mother in college, little to nothing has been done to improve outcomes for this group of students.

Ageing

Most of the mothers were posttraditional students in their 30s and 40s. They found being posttraditional meant they were often without a campus community, such as ethnic, religious, or sexuality-based groups, designed for their identities as mothers. The mothers who had children when they were younger often felt targeted as being mothers who did not look old enough to have older children; they were reluctant to mention they had children because, in response, they often received uncomfortable comments about “looking so young.” Their perceptions of ageist microaggressions are likely accurate. Yang (2015) found, in discussions about why students dropped out, participants were least sympathetic to young female student parents; participants often thought they were out partying and not engaged in school. Perceiving oneself as too old or too young makes opening up difficult and creates challenges in creating community or a sense of belonging.

COVID-19

COVID-19 disrupted the lives of the two mothers with young children in the study. Both participants related stories about the extreme stress and anxiety when they lost their jobs and had to look for work to support themselves and their infants during the global pandemic. Their stories

support national data showing that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted women with children differentially and that whatever small economic gains women made prior to the pandemic were likely lost (McKinsey, 2020; Sun, 2021).

Trauma

Trauma was a major theme for both the women and their children. Many participants' children faced mental health challenges, and all the women experienced trauma related to their experiences before, during, or after matrescence. Domestic violence and sexual assault were some of the most severe examples of trauma contributing to some of the mental health challenges the women faced. All but one participant identified domestic violence as a cause of their mental health challenges. Despite the small sample, the statistics, as one might suspect, may fall short of the actual number of women who have or will experience domestic violence.

Fathers

Fathers were often the source of domestic violence, yet they were largely absent in their children's lives. With a few exceptions, fathers provided little emotional or material support. "Father" was one of my most often used codes, which was surprising because they were not very involved in their children's lives and because I did not ask interview questions directly referencing fathers. As an unpartnered mother for 7 years, I would occasionally hear comments from family members or acquaintances remarking on the difficulty of raising a son with a "missing" father figure in the home. However, this study indicated most problems associated with unpartnered parenthood seemed to be mostly attributable to women being forced to assume nearly all the care and support for their children while dealing with relationship trauma, birth trauma, and matrescence. Maintaining support is made more difficult because unpartnered women have not attained economic parity with people without children because of a lack of

structural and societal support. When unpartnered mothers are fortunate enough to be in a program that provides some economic support, such as the nonprofit mentioned in this study, it is often privately funded and therefore unstable. For example, during the 2 years I worked on this research, Flying Solo, one of the positive examples of a successful support program for single parents, had its funding revoked because of a conflict between the university and the program's private donor (J. Dias, personal communication, February 7, 2023).

School

Although most participants cited positive experiences related to personal growth and the ability to learn new things at school, most found their school lacked resources that supported them as parents. None of them felt “seen” as parents and could not identify any clear way their campuses worked to create a sense of community or belonging; their perceptions support much of the literature concluding campus climates are unfriendly to parents (Lynch, 2008; Vega, 2019; Yang, 2015). To address this gap, the mother scholars described a variety of ways college campuses might be more family friendly. Their suggestions included hosting more family (and kid-friendly) activities on campus, providing drop-in childcare centers, creating more kid-friendly spaces on campus, and creating spaces where parents might gather to meet one another and form community. They also described the importance of providing flexibility around deadlines and class attendance for parents. Hook (2015) described how the timetabling of classes is a regulatory practice that creates inequities for single parents because it does not account for their unique scheduling challenges. Finally, participants suggested a center, similar to the disability office, focused on parents and their needs would be very helpful.

Motherhood

For these mothers, matrescence was difficult because of societal, cultural, and familial pressures, yet all the women were extremely proud of their children and only had wonderful things to say of them. They all expressed how motherhood was a significant challenge yet one that provided them with a sense of self, a wish to be a better person, and a desire to grow intellectually. These women demonstrated motherhood can be a powerful and positive motivator for success in higher education if there is enough support for them to be there.

Reflection on Themes

Two main takeaways of the themes stood out to me. First, if this small, random sample was in any way representative of the level of domestic abuse students experience, then U.S. society is experiencing an epidemic of domestic violence. I was the only person in this study who had not experienced domestic abuse. Unfortunately, domestic violence is not spoken about on campus unless one is in an explicitly women-centered space. However, domestic violence contexts are not just composed of women. In straight couples, most women are abused by men and it is men who are most often the initiators of abuse (Huecker et al., 2023). Understanding perpetrators is just as important as understanding survivors; however, discussions often center on healing and support rather than prevention. Ultimately, abuse often follows lines of power, so it is not surprising that women and children are abused most often.

Exploring the intersection of abuse and male privilege/power might be a helpful way to center discussions on men as perpetrators and hold men responsible for preventing abuse by refusing sexist media, refusing to engage in the sexual objectification of women, and calling out sexist and abusive acts they may witness. On college campuses, women and gender centers usually sponsor awareness events such as “Take Back the Night.” What would it mean to have men sponsor events that challenge them to give back the night? Such education might reframe

men's awareness of, as well as their responsibility to challenge, sexism, relationship abuse, and sexual assault on campus.

The second takeaway is that, before they ever step foot through the schools' doors, the traditional educational model creates stress and hardships for women who are already living in extremely stressful conditions and carrying significant trauma. My sample only included women who had the fortitude and time to meet for an interview. I believe this second idea speaks to the little-explored question of what happens to fathers (who do not assume full custody) when couples break up and how, beyond the economic consequences, this impacts women and children. More research into the fluidity of modern families and the declining rates of marriage and posttraditional family arrangements is required for understanding how unpartnered women with children are faring. As more families move toward posttraditional and postheteronormative families, welcoming these families into higher education spaces will require deep thinking. The following section explores how the study's findings informed my research questions.

Reflections on the Research Questions

The following questions guided the research study:

1. What are the experiences of unpartnered mother-scholars on a community college campus?
 - a. Where do mother scholars encounter resistances or barriers related to their identity as mothers across the sites of motherhood, gender, and scholarship?
 - b. What healing strategies do unpartnered mother scholars employ to address academic or gender violence encountered inside community college spaces?

2. How do biological and social concepts, such as matrescence, gender-based caregiving, and reproductive identity development, shape the student experience?

That is, how do students make meaning of these experiences?

The Experience of Being an Unpartnered Student on a College Campus

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the unpartnered mother scholar experience is primarily one of struggle and sleep deprivation. It is also often lonely but tinged with hope. To me, the perfect visualization of the feeling of being unpartnered and in school is an untitled painting by Beksinski (n.d., see Figure 6). I wrote the accompanying poem as I thought about that painting one day and contemplated it as a visual metaphor for the feeling of unpartnered motherhood on the journey toward a better future. Although mother scholars encounter significant barriers, they also carry a lot of hope and motivation with them.

Figure 6

Untitled Horsemen by Z. Beksinski



Z Beksinski and Me on a Rainy Day

She sits astride a long-legged horse with her frantic hair whipping around a skeletal face. Her child sits before her, small back leaning in and unaware that the rain is lashing and the trees are dripping dead leaves all around them. They are moving toward a distant light always chased by history's fire.

They don't know where they are going, they don't know how to get there.

But they trust the horse with its monstrous head to take them where they need to be.

—Claire

Barriers to Success

Participants and I identified many barriers to their academic success. Several of them confirmed what the literature has identified—that time and money are the biggest barriers (Ajayi et al., 2021; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). For unpartnered mothers, it is not just tuition money but money for day-to-day expenses and childcare while they attend college. Participants' consensus was that attending school meant they would not get enough sleep; would experience guilt about not being as present for their children as they would like; and would experience significant stress, anxiety, and depression. Some could access therapy through their school or work, but many did not have access, mostly because of time constraints. In line with Henshaw (2022), this study indicated mental health continues to be a significant challenge for mother scholars because their needs continue to be unmet.

Absentee Fatherhood

In addition to time, sleep, guilt, and mental health, absentee fatherhood was another barrier to success. Unfortunately, the emotional costs of absentee fatherhood are not explored

sufficiently in the literature. It would be exciting to see scholarship by and with men that explores masculinity and the notion of fatherhood in families that does not replicate a nuclear model. In this study, absentee fathers added to the economic and emotional burdens unpartnered mothers experienced. Most mothers in the study expressed a need for therapy, for themselves or their children, because of trauma, economic struggles, and lack of support from fathers.

Inadequate emotional and material support creates a great deal of stress. The amount of trauma the mothers endured, coupled with their status as students, spoke to the need for more access to therapy and healing. Pursuing healing modalities, such as those rooted in ecofeminist principles, would provide more space for integrating experiences related to gender, obstetric, and academic violence. Ecofeminist healing strategies call attention to imbalances in power within a global capitalist system and for a radical re-ordering of society (Salleh, 1997; Shiva, 2004).

Economic Impacts of Absentee Fatherhood

The material ramifications of unpartnered motherhood are supported by economic data demonstrating the absence of fathers has a material impact on women's ability to attain economic parity (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Demographic statistics collected across the United States place married women with present partners and children under 18 as having a median weekly income of \$1,049. For women with "other" marital statuses (including those who never married, have absent spouses, or are widowed, divorced, or separated), their median weekly income drops to \$752. It drops to \$683 for women with children under 6. Unpartnered women with no children had the highest income in the "other" category at \$840. Married men with children have a median weekly income of \$1,317, and unpartnered men with children under 18 are listed as having \$905. However, the statistics failed to show mothers with a \$752 median weekly income frequently support themselves and one to four children on that income, whereas

men are more likely to support only themselves (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). None of the participants in my study reported receiving much if any child support.

Among the research group, Sabrina's case was typical: She had court-ordered custody of her child, and her child's father was required to pay \$300.00 per month, but he rarely sent the entire amount. Occasionally, he would buy his child a gift, such as a gaming system, that approximated his monthly amount. Sabrina commented, "A present does not put food on the table." More research is needed on the ways emotional and material support impact unpartnered families' mental health and economic well-being. The ongoing economic lag women with children experience supports Butler's (2004) ideas that a strictly regulated, gender binary discourse places women into a narrow category of being that performs a regulatory operation of restricting their options in a capitalist economy and situating them at the bottom. The monetary needs of unpartnered mothers are significantly higher than those of students without children because the mothers have less time available to themselves.

Campus Climate

This study also confirmed that college campuses are places where most unpartnered mothers felt they needed to leave their motherhood at the door. Sabrina's story of deciding between answering a phone call from her child's school or violating a classroom rule about cell phones was one example of how classroom management needs to be considered thoughtfully through the lens of our most vulnerable students.

In addition to rules often making them feel unwanted, unpartnered mothers rarely feel they are seen as an important demographic in college campus spaces. On their campuses, there is little marketing directed at them on websites, signage, or in spaces. Many of them also are

unaware of Title IX policies benefiting them. Resources allocated to unpartnered parents are rare, and community building and emotional support are glaringly absent.

Several studies have confirmed that, throughout higher education, single mothers find campus climates unfriendly to them, so they feel they do not belong (Lynch, 2008; Vega, 2019; Yang, 2015). Hook (2015) pointed out, for unpartnered mothers, a sense of shame was connected to messages that they do not belong. Because they are subjected to microaggressions associated with not conforming to traditional motherhood ideals, they not only experience a lack of belonging but are simultaneously shamed for prioritizing their education over their caregiving responsibilities. This study also found, in addition to other emotional barriers to which they are subjected, mother scholars were shamed for being too young, too old, or unmarried. Duquaine-Watson (2017) described the connection between single motherhood and deviant motherhood whereby single mothers have been labeled deviant and subjected to state control. Deviant motherhood was deemed anything outside the boundaries of “good” motherhood. Association with this historical norm can create shame. Hook (2015) described how shame can lead to communication breakdowns and thus exacerbate the power differentials between students and faculty.

Matrescence, Gender-Based Caregiving, and Reproductive Identity Development

My final question examined the concepts of matrescence, gender-based caregiving, and reproductive identity development. Matrescence was a significant time of life for each participant. Although the student identity development literature rarely discussed matrescence, this study found mothers find matrescence a life-altering experience that is significant to their life goals and development as a person. All participants described how becoming a mother made them a better, more focused, and more motivated person.

However, many of the benefits of this stage of life are countered by the heavy burdens of gender-based caregiving. Because the fathers were not held accountable for supporting either the mothers or their children, mothers placed huge expectations on themselves to be both parents for their child. They also felt societal pressure to be an exceptional parent because, as Hayley noted, they acknowledged people placed negative expectations on their children because the children did not have two parents present.

Student services providers would benefit from understanding how such expectations and realities collide in the identity formation of unpartnered mothers. Such knowledge would help student service providers envision policies that could mitigate the negative forces of gender-based caregiving and better support and enhance the positive benefits that accompany matrescence. I discuss additional recommendations below in section on recommendations.

Implications

This section explores the limitations of the study and provides a summary of suggestions from the unpartnered mother scholars about how to make their educational experiences better. This section also proposes additional recommendations, suggests areas for further research, and offers some concluding thoughts.

Reflections on the study

As with all phenomenological scholarship, this study was limited to participants' lived experiences and informed by my personal epistemology as well as the concurrent assumptions I carried with me into this work. This research provided a crucial window into the lives of students who rarely have a platform and are often excluded from conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Parents and their children often do not feel welcomed in higher education spaces, and this work sought to discover why and how. A small, intimate study with multiple interviews

across several months, aligns with a poststructural, feminist approach that foregrounds a participant's own production of meaning and allows for a multi-voiced, multi-layered text (Lather, 1992). Additionally, although this study offered recommendations, it does not seek a “best practices” resolution, which some may see as a limitation. I view this study as research that will hopefully lead toward better practice in an iterative cycle of education and improvement.

A limitation of this study was my ability to discuss parenthood using inclusive terminology. I struggled to find inclusive terminology, such as “unpartnered mother scholar,” given that, as noted, “single mother” is loaded with patriarchal implications. Even so, my terminology is flawed. There is no word in English that includes all sorts of parents—adoptive mothers, trans mothers, nonbinary mothers, foster mothers, lesbian mothers who have not given birth, and others—who inhabit a nonnormative identity. Some of these parents would not identify as “mothers” *per se*, but they all had a shared history of oppression that should be acknowledged. Using the term “mother” may erase some of those for and about whom this research was intended.

The study also was limited to community college students and students associated with a local nonprofit to identify and recruit unpartnered student parents more easily. These participants' experiences may not be similar to or generalizable to students at other types of institutions because participants had greater SES needs, which made them more likely to attend community colleges, and because their experiences related to smaller institutions, which typically have fewer resources.

Finally, the small number of participants means many voices will remain unheard. A very large gap in educational research is intersectional scholarship. Although I did my best to recruit diverse participants, more work is needed to understand how multiple minoritized identities

impact the student experience, and a wider range of parents (i.e., queer parents, parents of color) need to be included in educational research.

Recommendations for Making Education Better

Although I was hoping to discover significant change and improvement among higher education institutions in answer to the low rates of higher education attainment for unpartnered mothers since the time I attended, I did not find much at all. Success metrics are still very low and there is very little attention given to student parents and even less to unpartnered mothers specifically. Very few programs addressed mental health, trauma, and systemic sexism as barriers to achievement. None of them addressed them all at once.

Despite ongoing obstacles, most of the mothers significantly downplayed how challenging their lives were. For the most part, their suggestions were modest. Some of their modesty could be attributed to their own sense of idealized motherhood. For example, most of them were reluctant to ask for extended deadlines when a child was sick, so they missed class or time to work on assignments. One mother described feeling intimidated by professors. Overcoming her reluctance to speak up was a significant challenge for Sunie, who is Latina in an institution in which most of her professors are white. Nonetheless, when discussing support for unpartnered parents, Sunie speculated one of her friends, a single father, also experienced the same challenges she faced because there was a lack of support for unpartnered fathers. Although Sunie was aware of the sexism she encountered as a mechanics student in a male-dominated field, her comments indicated she was unaware of the sexism related to unpartnered mothers as well as the additional caregiving burdens unpartnered mothers have.

Recommendations for Administrators and Professors/Instructors

Participants did have some ideas about how the system might shift to improve mother scholars' experiences. In one of our discussions, Hayley and I dreamed of creating an accommodations office, similar to disability access, where unpartnered parents could receive accommodations, including extended deadlines for sick children, doctor's appointments, and so forth, with which professors would have to comply. The office could be responsible for educating parents about their rights and resources, including lactation support under Title IV. Having an advocate inside the system would relieve each mother of the stress and emotional labor of advocating for herself each time she needed an extension for an essay or had to miss an exam.

Several of the mothers suggested having kids' activities on campus. In advocacy work outside this study, I have heard some of my fellow graduate students and faculty mothers express similar wishes, so these activities would benefit many parents on campus. Some specific activities were suggested, including a drop-in childcare service (similar to those fitness centers provide when a parent takes a class or works out), a library nook, and activities that were labeled "family" and included all families and not just parents of traditional students. Although ECC did not provide any support directed at parents, it did provide a family movie night, which was inclusive of all ages and a good example of normalizing children and families on campus. Dorothy mentioned how ECC had created a menstrual justice event where they passed out tampons and chocolate and provided information on reproductive health. She mentioned this event because it made her feel seen as a woman who faces additional biological, social, and economic costs. ECC also distributed diapers, diaper rash cream, and other small items in its

food pantry, which made her feel her parenting needs were acknowledged. Participants also mentioned more support and community building would be helpful.

The mother scholars described how a variety of course modalities would be helpful; most needed all or partially online courses to make their schedules workable. Anne stated:

I have to do online [classes]. I can't take time to go to ECC and go to the campus. I just can't. I don't have childcare. I don't have the ability to run back and forth every night for night classes.

Destiney, who took care of her grandson for her unpartnered daughter while also parenting a preteen, stated:

I can't just be like, hey I need to step in and help my daughter or care for my son. So I guess that's the best thing about being online is I can make that exception [to manage caregiving around class].

When I asked her about what it would mean to be in class at specific times, she replied, "I wouldn't know what I would do."

Participants also suggested providing more flexibility with deadlines, the ability to Zoom into in-person courses, or having online access to filmed lectures filmed, so they could view them later. Hayley, who has three children and is in a program that requires her to attend in person courses, stated, "I don't know how other, bigger universities handle it but I really wish there would be Zoom options available for parents with kids for when they can't get into class." Finally, although most courses are offered in a traditional 16-week format, this wreaks havoc on parents who have school-age children involved in their own busy lives.

Additionally, engaging in more research and advocacy for women who parent alone might address some of the barriers that stress unpartnered mother scholars and cause them to feel

unwelcome. For example, a serious overhaul of policies regarding children on campus would be helpful. Investments in family-oriented housing, childcare centers, drop-in services, and child-friendly zones or activities would go a long way in addressing the huge imbalance in investments for traditional-age students and those for posttraditional students. An unintended benefit might also be that such facilities could improve the work–life balance for faculty with children and allow for greater attraction and retention of faculty talent. Bringing more kid-friendly activities and spaces to campus would normalize the parent experience on campus. No participants in this study felt completely at home on campus, and, despite many of their overall positive educational experiences, none felt comfortable with their children in campus spaces.

Family-friendly activities or zones would help create a sense of belonging and work to generate community because all kinds of parents would meet each other in ways they cannot in traditional classrooms. In this study, no one felt they had a parent community on campus they could go to for help or support. Even the mothers who attended the campus with a support group and who were involved in the group felt they lacked a sense of community centered on their motherhood because the group was more often about accessing high-impact advising or providing more material support through campus resources than about building community. No centralized place or center for parents exists on most college campuses. Building affinity groups for mothers/parents would go a long way to creating a sense of belonging. However, because of their incredible time restraints, achieving such communities will require new and creative ways to think about forming community and not those developed for traditional students.

Many of the mothers also discussed how online options allowed them to have their child with them during “class time” and provided greater flexibility in scheduling. Providing flexible modalities is important for removing structural barriers for unpartnered mothers. Consistent with

my own findings, Martin (2023), in her dissertation on first-generation doctoral mothers, found the women constantly evaluated how they spent their time; choosing between school and children made them feel inadequate and guilty. They also felt mentally overtaxed and felt they were not present for their children. Mothers in her study, and two mothers in this study, noticed as they advanced in their program or as their GPAs went up that their children's GPA decreased because they did not have enough time to help their children with their schoolwork. Providing flexible deadlines and reducing workloads would also help address these kinds of concerns and challenges.

Recommendations for Student Service Providers

To address the retention of mother scholars, student services providers need training on reproductive identity theory and how to support all parents, especially women who experience biological and social/emotional changes. Additionally, it is crucial that student services providers understand how unpartnered mother scholars find significant meaning and validation through their journeys into parenthood. By drawing on student mothers' motivation to provide better lives for their children, practitioners can affirm and elevate their choices (in opposition to criticism from family and friends who are unsupportive of unpartnered mothers' choices to pursue their education).

Higher education practitioners need to make it clear why education is worth it, and we need to provide more opportunities for students to engage in paid learning opportunities rather than volunteer and unpaid work. Many professions the women scholars plan to enter, such as counseling and psychology, require unpaid time outside of class. In one of my undergraduate psychology courses, I was told I had to participate in three outside studies, each of which involved coming to campus on an evening or a Saturday to participate in a graduate student's

research. I could only attend one session, so my grade was docked for the two uncompleted assignments. It is imperative that we examine whose interests curriculum requirements serve and whether we are considering the needs of our most vulnerable students.

Student service providers can also help unpartnered mothers draw on their incredible household management skills. Wayne et al. (2023) identified the varied and complex tasks related to managing a household with children as well as the emotional and mental work accompanying this level of management, such as planning and remembering schedules, reading bedtime stories, arranging pickups from school, and providing emotional support. Although I started my PhD when my youngest child was a senior in high school, I found I still spent a significant amount of time and energy to support them. Inevitably, I would go into my small home office at 9 p.m. to work on papers, and 10 minutes later they would appear silently in the doorway until I acknowledged them. Then, we would have a very long (often hours long) conversation about a situation or problem they were facing.

Research has supported that this emotional labor frequently falls to women/AFAB parents. Wayne et al. (2023) identified this default as the “invisible family load” and reported it leads to negative health and well-being outcomes that spill over into work contexts. Their research indicated bearing most of the invisible family load of worrying, thinking about, or remembering everything related to their children’s well-being was particularly stressful and depleting; they also found occupying this role is harmful to one’s health, well-being, and performance. However, they also found certain role demands (though stressful) lead to growth and feelings of fulfillment. Their study respondents felt valuable and important because of the challenges and responsibilities they faced and managed every day. Thinking about family needs and how they met them led to a greater overall job performance and satisfaction. Such nuanced

findings are critical for understanding how parental identities intersect both positively and negatively within higher education spaces. As they grow as parents and students, it is important to help them make meaningful connections between the two roles and help them identify how their skills as parents can benefit them as scholars.

Because many of us have internalized a version of “ideal motherhood” (Low & Martin, 2019; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), which creates heavy guilt and stress around our status as unpartnered mothers, we should continue to develop reproductive identity theory with a critical lens. Many of us are the targets of microaggressions, especially because unpartnered mothers are portrayed negatively in media, by our family members, and by professors who question our decision to be in school. The lack of attention to these concerns has created a gendered reality rooted in a patriarchal–colonial modernity (Segato & Monque, 2021). Such a reality creates ongoing stress and disparity for unpartnered parents who exist outside the ideals of heterosexual marriage norms. Hayley described how people scrutinized her children’s behavior when they found out her children came from an unpartnered home:

But people are extra looking at their behavior and like, I think kind of, I don’t know, judging their behavior a little bit more harshly. Their behavior is scrutinized more deeply, and it’s like, oh, you know, the single parent family and, yeah, that’s what I’ve experienced. The criticism from that, that’s a really hard thing, because I’m doing the best I can to be both parents and all the things and sometimes I can’t catch every single thing, every single day.

Although most college students likely feel supported by family members and feel their family’s pride at their decision to attend college, a few participants spoke about how family members or close friends critiqued them because they parented children while attending college. Although

some asked me to redact direct quotes, more than one participant related their struggles with family members who either explicitly stated or implied they had neglected their children by pursuing their educations.

Organizational Approaches

In addition to providing one-on-one support for unpartnered mothers, it is important to consider organizational approaches, in line with ecofeminist approaches, that center healing. One example of such a healing-centered approach began in human service areas but has migrated slowly into higher education. Based on recommendations from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (2014), a trauma-informed approach focuses on six principles that provide a more culturally responsive organizational structure. Henshaw (2022) described how this approach, implemented at the organizational level, can better address cultural and collective trauma many of our students experience. This approach advocated a response to the cultural needs of students, including issues related to their intersectional identities, and for a consideration of historical traumas perpetuated on individuals or cultural groups. Henshaw (2022) pointed to addressing power hierarchies that are critical for healing:

However, where power is stripped in the midst of trauma, whether individual or collective, there are also opportunities for resilience and growth, and trauma-informed approaches offer a unique opportunity for harnessing these strengths. (p. 4)

Henshaw discussed intentional, positive disruption as a way to embody inclusion and this disruption includes questioning what is normative, evaluating how actors and systems perpetuate oppression, and examining power relations at a structural level.

Application of Organizational Approaches to Student Trauma

Thinking through trauma-informed approaches to student development, as well as providing robust mental health services on campus, would benefit unpartnered mothers. A few participants also mentioned time in nature or time outdoors is important to their well-being. Institutions can consider thoughtfully how accessible outdoor spaces are configured to address healing through time in nature. For example, large open lawns filled with grass (or the concrete of my urban campus) do not invite peace and contemplation. However, shade trees with benches or plant-filled patios could benefit all students, as well as staff and faculty, who seek calming spaces to de-stress.

Programs also could emphasize work–play balance better and encourage, or even teach, students how to unplug occasionally. Curriculum designed around the science of the negative effects of stress on the brain might better engage all students. Campus extracurricular activities could also include practices, such as forest bathing or wildflower viewing,⁴ to create more intentional ways students can connect with and appreciate being a part of the natural world or ways they can connect to their internal natural cycles. These practices might also have a positive effect on students’ mental health and provide students with more agency and control over their own well-being (as opposed to relying solely on mental health providers for this labor).

Pregnant and Parenting Students Initiative

At a recent conference, Islas and Nare (2023) presented an example of an organization approach: the Pregnant and Parenting Students Initiative (PPSI) at San Diego State. They described, in addition to several practices mentioned previously, the following practices for administrators and student services providers:

⁴ For more information on forest bathing and its health benefits:
<https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/wellnessevidence/forest-bathing/>

1. Ensure campus has clear policies for pregnant and parenting students that are easily searchable.
2. Make parenting data visible on campus website.
3. Advocate for on-site child care that prioritizes student parents.
4. Advocate for family housing.
5. Provide faculty learning around the needs of parenting students.
6. Provide pre-registration for parents.

The PPSI at San Diego created a visible and welcoming website focused on student parents and organized a resource fair targeting the group. They have created a system of data collection for this community and a baseline for achievement. Although such attention to parenting students is important work, 4-year universities tend to have smaller populations of student parents yet can often dedicate more resources toward the population than can community colleges, which have higher proportions of student parents.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although previous sections have discussed various levels of improvement for mother scholar students, from individual knowledge acquisition and action, to structural, environmental, and organizational change, more research is also a key part of improving conditions. Mental well-being and the impact of stress and trauma may be significant areas to explore more directly if we are to close the equity gap for women. Although the demands of caring for children are significant burdens on one's time and mental/emotional health, some of these burdens might be lessened with improvements to student parents' material circumstances. Domestic violence and its impact on unpartnered mothers in college is also an important area of research, particularly because domestic violence is underreported because of the associated shame.

Research into creating more space for conversations around healthy sexual expression, healthy relationships, and mental health in domestic relationships would improve practice while also creating more normalcy around these topics and help demonstrate their importance to

educational conversations and curriculum. More conversations on these topics would help student services providers become more educated about the issues and how they impact the student development of those they serve. Finally, drawing men, particularly as allies who are knowledgeable about recognizing stress and abuse in their own relationships and in those of friends or classmates, into this research is important.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter summarized the primary methods and findings of the research study and reflected on its framework, analysis, and findings as well as my own personal growth. This chapter also reviewed the study's themes and reflected on how the themes depict the unpartnered mother scholar experience. I have generated some implications from the findings and suggestions for improved practices in student services.

As I composed and worked through participants' narratives, I was humbled and in awe of how these women cope with their everyday lives and hold on to dreams that seem so far away. For these women, higher education is their only lifeline for a better future and a life that provides a modicum of stability. That lifeline is in our hands as higher education staff and administrators. I hope their stories inspire us to thoughtfully consider their suggestions for improvement and how we may better serve this vulnerable community.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAM STAFF

Greetings [*name*],

My name is Claire Kopp (she/hers) and I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University in the Higher Education Leadership program. I am conducting a research study on single-mother students. The Principle Investigator is Dr Ryan Barone and I am the Co-Principle Investigator.

I am reaching out today to ask for your assistance in recruiting participants for my study. I am seeking participants who are unpartnered mothers, or unpartnered parents who identify with other gender categories such as gender fluid, nonbinary, queer, etc. I am only seeking mothers, female, women, transwomen, and others who currently identify as women/mothers or were identified as female at birth. I am hoping to recruit participants with a diversity of gender identities if possible.

As someone who works directly with student parents, I am asking for your help to identify individuals who may be a good fit for this study. Would you be willing to send out a recruitment email to any qualified participants?

I have attached the recruitment email here so you can read more about my study and what I will be initially asking of potential participants. Please let me know if you have any questions or if you would like to connect over phone or Zoom to discuss possibilities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Claire Kopp
Co-Principle Investigator
Doctoral Candidate
hkopp@colostate.edu

*Attachment: Appendix B

This study was approved by the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board. Protocol Number: 3633

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Hello,

My name is Claire and I'm a doctoral student at Colorado State University in the Education Department. I am conducting a research study on unpartnered parents, specifically those who identify as unpartnered mothers, women, queer, trans, nonbinary, genderfluid, or other nonnormative gender identities. If you are a straight/cis mother OR a queer/trans mother/parent, I'd love to speak to you! You do not have to have physically given birth to a child to participate, you just need to identify as a parent to a child. As an unpartnered mother myself throughout my undergraduate experience, I am very empathetic to the concerns of unpartnered mothers and am passionate about researching this topic and learning about other parents' journeys in higher education.

If you are interested in participating in two one-hour interviews, please complete the brief survey using the link at the bottom of this email. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time during the study without penalty.

I will be asking for your name, email, year in school, racial/ethnic identity, gender, age, sexual orientation and ages of your children. When I report and share the data with others, I will combine the data from all participants and you will be given a pseudonym so that nothing you share will be linked to your real name. I will keep your data confidential; your name and personal data will be kept separately on a password protected drive accessible only to the research team. The only exception to this is if I am asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary.

While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, I hope to gain more knowledge about the lives of unpartnered parents in community colleges. My goal with this study is to share this knowledge with educators, administrators, and policymakers, to help them make informed decisions about student challenges specific to unpartnered parents.

Participation involves two in-person or Zoom interviews with me about your experiences as a parent. Each participant who participates in both interviews will be provided with a \$25 Amazon gift card as a thank you for your time. Participants will also be invited to keep and share journal entries pertaining to your experience as a parent and you will be invited to one group Zoom session with other study participants. The only study *requirements* are the two in-person or Zoom interviews. Each interview will be around an hour to an hour and a half in duration.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but I have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

To indicate your willingness to participate, please click here: <insert link>.

If you have any questions, please contact me at hkopp@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

Dr. Ryan Barone
Principal Investigator
Associate Professor

Claire Kopp
Co-Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate

This study was approved by the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board. Protocol Number: 3633

APPENDIX C: INTAKE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Contact Information:

Name: [text box]

Pronoun(s): [text box]

Email: [text box]

Demographics:

Do you identify as a parent? [yes/no]

Are you parenting with a partner or partners? [yes/no]

If yes, please select how much of the overall time and parenting responsibility is split between you and your partner/s: [We share time equally between us, My partner/s have 75% and I have 25%, I have 75% and my partner/s have 25%, I have more than 50% but less than 75%.]

What is your gender identity (select one)?

[Agender, Bigender, Cisgender, Gender expansive, Gender fluid, Genderqueer, Gender questioning, Nonbinary, Poly or Pangender, Transgender, Two spirit, I do not identify with any of these categories]

If you selected, “I do not identify with any of these categories”, please type in how you name your gender: [textbox]

Are you currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at a community college? [yes/no]

What year in school are you (select one):

[first year, second year, third year, fourth year, fifth year or more]

What is your race/ethnicity (check all that apply):

[African American/Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Bi-racial/multi-racial, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, White, my race/ethnicity is not listed here].

If you selected “my race/ethnicity is not listed here” please write in how you describe your race/ethnicity: [text box]

Sexual Orientation: [Asexual, Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Straight, I do not identify with any of those categories]

If you selected, “I do not identify with any of these categories” please type in how you name your sexual orientation: [textbox]

How many children do you have? [text box]

What are their ages (you can select multiple categories)? [0-5, 6-12, 12-18, adult]

Are you interested in participating in a 1-hour interview over Zoom to discuss your experiences as a parent in college? [yes, no, maybe/I’d like more information]

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Pre-Interview Script

Thank you for taking the time out to meet with me today. As a reminder, I am conducting a research study on unpartnered parents, specifically those who identify as unpartnered mothers, women, queer, trans, nonbinary, genderfluid, or other nonnormative gender identities. You do not have to have physically given birth to a child to participate, you just need to identify as a parent to a child. As an unpartnered mother myself throughout my undergraduate experience, I am passionate about researching this topic and learning about other parents' journeys in higher education.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time during the study without penalty.

I will be asking for your name, email, year in school, racial/ethnic identity, gender, age, sexual orientation and ages of your children. When I report and share the data with others, I will combine the data from all participants and you will select or be given a pseudonym so that nothing you share will be linked to your real name. I will keep your data confidential; your name and personal data will be kept separately on a password protected drive accessible only to the research team. The only exception to this is if I am asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary.

While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, I hope to gain more knowledge about the lives of unpartnered parents in community colleges. My goal with this study is to share this knowledge with educators, administrators, and policymakers, to help them make informed decisions about student challenges specific to unpartnered parents.

Participation involves two in-person or Zoom interviews with me about your experiences as a parent. There will be other opportunities for you to add to this research if you would like to, but the only real requirement is to conduct two interviews with me. Each participant who participates in both interviews will be provided with a \$25 Amazon gift card as a thank you.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but I have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks. Are you able to proceed with the interview today? *[If yes, proceed to questions. If no, thank them for their time and end the interview]*

Interview Questions (Set 1 – The Student Experience)

1. To begin, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? For example, what are you studying in school, and why did you decide to attend school at this time in your life?
2. Tell me about your child/children? What are their ages, genders, and what are a few of their dominant personality traits?
3. Describe what an average day is like for you as an unpartnered student parent.
 - a. What are the best aspects of being a student?
 - b. What are the most challenging ones?
4. What is it like to be a parent and a student at the same time?
 - a. Do you consider yourself a parent first or a student first?
 - b. How do you prioritize your needs as a student versus the needs of your children?
5. Do you share your status as an unpartnered parent with other students? Professors?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. How do people react when they find out you are an unpartnered parent?

- c. Do you notice or experience any differences in being a unpartnered AFAB/mother or queer person versus how a unpartnered AMAB/cis-father experiences student or campus life?
- 6. Have you experienced any discomfort/criticism or other similar challenges related to being a parent on campus?
 - a. Can you describe a specific example?
- 7. Do you have all the resources you need as a student parent on campus?
 - a. If not, what is missing?
 - b. What could your school do better to support you?

Interview Questions (Set 2 – Identity and Parent Experiences)

Read through pre-interview script and gain consent before proceeding.

- 1. How have things been going for you since our last interview?
- 2. How are the kids doing?

Questions Preface:

In this interview, I will be asking some personal questions about your identities and how they intersect with your school experiences. I will also be asking more personal questions about parenthood, being unpartnered, and your birthing experiences. Please know that you can skip any question that does not feel safe to answer.

- 1. Why is it important to you to get an education?
- 2. How do you define your racial/ethnic identity?
 - a. Do you think your racial identity has an impact on your school experiences?
- 3. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Does your gender identity have an impact on your school experiences?
- 4. Describe your birth experience/s.
 - a. In what ways were they positive?
 - b. In what ways were they negative?
 - c. How much control did you have over the birth process/experience?
 - i. Did you ever wish you had more control or that things had gone differently?
- 5. How does being an unpartnered parent affect your ability to navigate your environment on campus and in classes or other campus spaces?
 - a. How does it affect your ability to navigate outside campus?
- 6. Who do you lean on for emotional support?
- 7. Who do you lean on for financial support?
- 8. Do you have others who help with parenting duties?
- 9. Do you have strategies or systems to help you take care of yourself?
 - a. For example, hobbies, “me time,” relaxation techniques, or activities that bring you joy?

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