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Kelly Lyn Chandler  
An Exploratory Study of the  
Experience of Single Mothers  
in Higher Education

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of single mothers in graduate school. Past research indicates heightened rates of psychiatric distress among single mothers (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000) as well as overrepresentation of single mothers living in poverty (Kates, 1996; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Qualitative studies on single mothers within post-secondary and undergraduate programs exist, but little research has been done on those obtaining graduate level degrees.

This descriptive study included past or present students who maintained single parent status as well as had at least one child under the age of six during program enrollment. Data for this qualitative study was collected via an anonymous online survey. Coding was conducted via thematic review.

Sixteen participants participated in this study. The majority of respondents identified as White and 44% maintained an annual income at or below \$15,000 while enrolled in their program. The average age of participants upon graduation was 31 years.

This study's findings revealed that participants sought graduate degrees as a means to improve the standard of living for themselves and their families. Major areas of challenge for participants during enrollment included financial strain and having access to adequate childcare. Sources of strength included motivation for an improved future and the availability of supports throughout their time as a graduate student. Implications

for this study include the need for improved awareness on part of social service providers and college program administrators to ensure academic success and healthy mental status for this unique student population.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2010

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I would like to thank all who assisted me in the process of completing this thesis. First and foremost, I must thank all of the participants who took the time to complete this survey. The most exciting part of this project for me was reading through your responses. Know that your contributions are much appreciated and valued.

Thank you to my family and friends for their support this year. This includes all who lent me their ears, eyes, and time during my moments of struggle. Thank you to those who helped feed me this year when I was too busy with research and writing. Thank you to my advisors for sticking with me, and the OB/Gyn Social Work Department at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center for their consistent belief in my abilities. Lastly, I'd like to thank Bill, Marsha, and Loren for your unwavering love and support throughout this process.

This report is dedicated to Rainelle, my inspiration for this project, and Maggie, the strongest and most hard-working single mother I will ever know.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of single mothers in graduate school. As the student body population of higher education expands with time, it is important to highlight what is known and unknown about various subgroups within this domain. More specifically, it is important to know more about the populations that face great obstacles to achieving these degrees.

Single mothers are a historically disadvantaged group that must overcome great barriers to obtain graduate level education. Literature highlights their overrepresentation at and below the poverty line (Kates, 1996; Zhan & Pandey, 2004), as well as being at increased risk for psychological distress (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000; Kessler et al., 1994). These statistics, combined with what is known about the overall stressors of graduate program participation, serve to highlight possible barriers to this population with regards to educational access as well as successful degree obtainment. Increased knowledge about the experience of these mothers' lives, particularly the challenges faced by this graduate student sub population, may have implications for supportive policies and programming at social service agencies and educational institutions.

Past studies have discussed the experience of single mothers within post-secondary and undergraduate programs (Adair et al., 2007; Haleman, 2004; Kates, 1996). Additional studies have explored single mother populations receiving financial assistance in the United States (Quinn & Allen, 1989). This study sought to explore the ongoing strengths and struggles of single mothers in higher education by focusing on those who are current or past master's or doctoral students.

The scope of participants included those who were either currently enrolled in a graduate program, and those who had obtained their degree within the last three years. They must have had at least one child under the age of six years old during program participation, as well as maintained single parent status at some point during their degree. Participants were asked to complete an anonymous online survey regarding their experience. Areas of interest focused on reasons why these women chose to obtain a graduate degree, challenges faced, available supports, as well as concerns for themselves and their family related to their degree enrollment.

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first has addressed the purpose of this project as well as a general description of who was studied. Chapter II, the literature review, describes statistical data and provides available research on the following populations: single mothers, graduate students, and single mothers in higher education. Chapter III, methodology, describes how this project was conducted including participant recruitment, data collection and how the data was analyzed. Chapter IV presents this study's findings in detail. Chapter V, the discussion chapter, describes the results found in this study in relation to the literature and provides the implications for these findings. Chapter V also discusses limitations to this study and suggests areas for future work.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

It is clear that the student body profile of higher education is diverse and evolving. While post-undergraduate populations were once dominated by White, male, affluent groups, women now account for more than half of the students within this domain. According to the American Community Survey (2006), 3.4 million female graduate students populate our nation's colleges and universities, which account for 59% of students in graduate school overall (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Additionally, some of the highest concentrations of graduate and professional degree holders tend to be located along the East Coast, with attainment for the 25-and-over population being among the highest in the state of Massachusetts at 14.5 percent (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2004). Yet even within the concentrated group of female graduate students in the state of Massachusetts, little statistical data is known on the diversity of these women's lives - especially the single-mother sub population of female graduate students.

Women account for more than 90 percent of custodial single parents in the United States (Atwood & Genovese, 2006), consisting of 10.4 million single parent households, whereas comparatively, single father families consist of 2.5 million (United States Bureau of the Census, 2000). While single parents can be defined as those who have not married or widowed individuals, there exists more statistical data regarding the high-level trend of singlehood through divorce in the United States. Current estimates indicate that approximately 500 divorces take place for every 1,000 marriages (Atwood & Genovese, 2006), with a prevalence of 1.1 million each year nationwide (United States Bureau of the Census, 2000). Whether it be the result of divorce or otherwise, it is clear that the

experience of single parenthood provides unique struggles for single custodial parents, who are overwhelmingly mothers. Some common struggles and concerns are that of loneliness, children's wellbeing and finances (Atwood & Genovese, 2006). Most documented stressors within the general undergraduate and graduate student populations also commonly involve financial strain, quality of interpersonal relationships, job obtainment, and marital status (Hyun, Quinn, Madon & Lustig, 2006; Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999).

It is clear that the common known stress of graduate student status combined with belonging to the historically disadvantaged at-risk population of single parents has major implications for mental health services and social work at large. Specifically since the utilization of counseling services was positively associated with those identifying as female (Hyun et al., 2006), there exists a heightened need for awareness around the common strengths and struggles of single mothers in higher education in order to provide effective treatment.

Single mothers are often referred to as "non-traditional students" in most undergraduate and post-graduate programs nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). While little statistical data is known regarding exact percentages of single mothers' national enrollment rates, their participation represents an important yet underreported perspective of the strengths and struggles of graduate program demands. The combined stressors of single-parenthood and student status require unique skill sets for balancing multiple responsibilities; however, most of the available literature is focused on risk factors for these multi-stressed groups as opposed to the development of these skill sets.

## *Single Mothers*

### *Mental Health Status & Financial Strain*

Statistics show that single mothers are at greater risk for psychiatric distress when compared to the general population, with 17% of these women having experienced a DSM-III-R diagnosis of major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, agoraphobia or panic attacks. Such rates are shown to increase within the non-working mother population and those who are receiving financial assistance. Additionally, poor single mothers are at heightened risk for experiencing traumas such as rape, domestic violence and molestation, also increasing the likelihood of PTSD related symptoms (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000).

While single mother populations show increased presentation of psychiatric symptomatology than other groups of women, prevalence of mental disorders decrease with individuals' rising socioeconomic status (SES) (Kessler et al., 1994). Neugebauer, Dohrenwend, & Dohrenwend (1980) found that those in the lowest SES groups are two and a half times more likely to have mental health related problems than those of highest SES membership (as cited in Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000, p. 620). Current welfare reforms may have been aimed at increasing self-sufficiency, but those with lower educational attainment have shown increased likelihood of hitting the time limit for receiving financial assistance (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000). While it is hoped that educational attainment would assist with raising families above poverty lines, little data has been collected on the financial strain and/or annual income rates of single mothers in graduate school, or other challenges specific to single mothers as they pursue post-graduate education.

### *Quality of Life for Children*

According to McLoyd (1998), & Weissman et al. (2006) poor parental mental health is documented as a consistent risk factor for less optimal parenting and poor developmental outcomes for children in low-income families. The results of a three-year longitudinal study on single mothers with young children served to support the idea of educational/employment development as a means for positive family and financial life change. Participants were composed of employed and unemployed current and former welfare recipients both before and after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (Jackson, Bentler, & Frank, 2008). The study focused on the prevalence of depressive symptoms within this population as well as parenting style patterns. Results of this study showed positive association between educational attainment, employment, and positive parenting. While single mother employment at the onset of this study was positively connected with fewer depressive symptoms, the presence of job-attainment at the outset of this study appeared connected to less negative parenting style. Such results leave room for consideration on part of social work professionals to consider increased advocacy for “policies allowing welfare recipients to be supported in getting as much education and training as they need to pursue the jobs that they want” (Jackson et al., 2008, p. 272).

Therefore, policies and programs supporting higher educational and job-level attainment should be supported, while keeping in mind the immense barriers to self-sufficiency that are highlighted in mental-health statistics for this population. “The need for effective intervention and treatment efforts to improve economic and social

outcomes” (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000, p.617) cannot be met without such knowledge and sensitivity.

### *Common Challenges & Parental Concerns*

It is clear that the challenges single mothers face go beyond that of the stereotyped image of a poor, publically assisted parent - even those who obtain economic stability as head of the household face immense challenges. Those who find themselves in singlehood due to divorce must redefine their definition of family, and single parents as a whole must extend their responsibilities in terms of managing time, money, and energy available to support this role. In addition to the common experience of single mothers being disproportionately represented in low-paid service sector jobs and working long hours, single mothers must worry about resources available to care for their children while they are at work, as oftentimes these women are the custodial parent for their children (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000; Quinn & Allen, 1989). Finding childcare that is both affordable and high quality was a common concern in various qualitative studies (Quinn & Allen, 1989; Richards & Schmeige, 1993).

Regardless of financial resources, a common theme for parental concern involved worry about the quality of life for their children. Parental fear of compromised time availability to participate in activities with their children, including school involvement, appeared to be a recurring worry for parents, as well as a risk factor for lack of sleep and sufficient self-care (Quinn & Allen, 1989; Richards & Schmeige, 1993). However, mothers’ desires for the improved wellbeing of their children appeared to be the most identifiable strength and source of motivation for these women.

Maintaining success at providing financial support for family, actively managing dual responsibilities of work and at-home obligations, communicating with support systems, and sustaining pride for their children's successes were the most commonly noted reasons parents endured throughout their experience as head-of-household figures (Richards & Schmeige, 1993). Additionally, many women viewed themselves as survivors, having endured a situation that they had never expected to experience in such a manner (Quinn & Allen, 1989).

Although individual experience of stress, support, and level of predisposed risk (i.e.: mental health status, financial strain) varies within the single-mother population, noted commonalities in the lives of single-moms provide important implications for the field of social work considering the high probability of serving these women. Supporting work policies that provide benefits to families such as flextime, child care provision and support, as well as paid leave/time off would help advocate for the already documented needs of the single-parent population (Quinn & Allen, 1989).

### *Graduate Students*

#### *Mental Health Status & Common Struggles*

According to the U.S. Department of Education's report for 2007 there were over 2 million graduate students enrolled in both public and private institutions nationwide, with women comprising more than half (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

While much research on the mental health needs of college enrolled students has focused on undergraduate groups, it is clear that graduate students face unique challenges (Hyun, Quinn, Madon & Lustig, 2006). While sources of stress range from various intrapersonal, academic and interpersonal domains, Turner & Berry; Wilson, Mason & Ewig,( 2000;

1997) found mental health problems to be “significant contributors to graduate student drop-out” (as cited in Hyun et al., 2006, p. 248). Common areas of concern for both undergraduate and graduate students alike often focus on financial strain, marital status, increased responsibility and changes in sleeping and eating habits (Calicchia & Graham, 2006; Hyun et al., 2006; Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). While such experiences of stress may vary from student to student, certain research findings serve to call attention to the severity of felt stress within graduate student bodies. Findings from a large Midwestern research study indicated that 74% of graduate students reported having an “emotional problem that interfered with their daily functioning” (Hyun, et al., 2006, p. 260). Combined with noted documentation of students feeling symptoms of depression, approximately 40% of students in this (2006) study reported feeling exhaustion, and 46% reported feeling overwhelmed “frequently” and “all of the time” (Hyun, et al., p. 260).

### *Supports*

While certain stressors and levels of demand cannot be eliminated within this population of students, various factors have been noted to improve the reported mental health status of students. One source of support on the institutional level is that of graduate students’ relationships with their academic and research advisors (Hyun et al., 2006). Findings have indicated that the quality and frequency of interaction with institutional supports have had significant impact on students’ emotional well-being and probability of utilizing counseling services (Hyun et al., 2006; Ross, et al., 1999).

### *Single Mothers in Higher Education*

Much of the research that has been done on single mothers in higher education has focused on issues of poverty and welfare reform (Haleman, 2004; Kates, 1996).

Ample statistics show that single mothers are not only overrepresented with regard to the population of those living in poverty throughout the U.S., but that rates of households being run by single-parent families are continually increasing (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Various data indicates that single mothers view education as a mechanism for moving away from poverty to middle-class status (Haleman, 2004). Accomplishing this goal often requires single mothers to face personal and systemic obstacles as well as combat frequently held negative stereotypes about single motherhood present in today's society. Some of these stereotypes have frequently included images of "poor, welfare-dependent, and minority women who lack adequate education and employment skills and the motivation to acquire them" (Haleman, 2004, p. 770). However, studies that have qualitatively focused on the perceptions and experiences of women receiving welfare services have produced different results (Adair, Brown, Clark, Perez-Cotrich & Stanfield, 2007; Haleman, 2004).

#### *Students Receiving Services: Strengths and Struggles*

Haleman's (2004) study identified three main purposes of education held by single mothers who simultaneously maintained the roles of being post-secondary students and social service recipients; claiming their education as "instrumental, transformative and modeling desirable outcomes for children" (p. 770). Furthermore, the motivation for increased knowledge, skills, training, and access to academia can be noted in the recorded stories of single mothers who fought to achieve their college degrees amidst the obstacles of balancing educational responsibilities with that of full-time work, single parenting, and maintaining their homes (Adair et al., 2007).



In addition, many single mothers in higher education have faced stigma and discrimination from the very communities in which they receive services, as these women have noted experiences of being stereotyped by fellow students (Adair et al., 2007) and caseworkers who oversee the progress of students and families receiving welfare aid. Such relative difficulties faced by these service clients include struggles with getting reimbursements for transportation to/from school, cuts in food stamps and limitations to childcare, as well as strict policies surrounding the monitoring of students' class attendance and grades on monthly, weekly, and even daily bases (Kates, 1996).

The regulations for the supervision and monitoring of students receiving aid, coupled with the documentation of felt experience on part of these women indicates that social service providers “often hold many of the same stereotypes about single mothers that the larger society holds” (Haleman, 2004, p. 773). Additionally, stipulations of Job Opportunity and Basic Skills programs (which provide occupational training for those receiving welfare assistance) often limited students in terms of flexibility of changing courses and majors mid-stream. They also place matters of decision with regard to students' choice of degree specialization in the hands of caseworkers who are untrained in areas of academic counseling in higher education (Kates, 1996). While this known data focuses on the undergraduate student experience, relevant information is vital for prospective studies that seek to describe common strengths and struggles within the graduate population of single mothers.

#### *Limitations in Services within Higher Education*

The need for empirical studies to highlight the experience of single mother graduate students receiving government assistance remains, as recent reforms continue to

impact the general population of welfare recipients at large. While welfare reform and JOBS programs were created in the hope of pushing people out of poverty, two-year service limit policies have created further obstacles to populations like single mother students in terms of achieving their goals of completing a post associate level college degree. Such reforms serve to undermine empirical data that support educational growth as a necessary resource for single parents to achieve financial independence, as those with a four year college degree are found to be 12 times more likely to live above the poverty line than their counterparts without a high school degree (Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

Although data supports the idea that college degree attainment provides increased job opportunities and access to reasonable income (Kates, 1996; Zhan & Pandey, 2004), “position obtainment is increasingly difficult as job competition at the post-secondary level is on the rise” (Haleman, 2004, p. 774). To that end, it can be hypothesized that the obtainment of higher level, more specialized degrees (such as Master’s or PhDs) are needed in order to secure financial security for oneself and their children.

#### *Benefits of Graduate Degree Obtainment*

Many single parent women in higher education have mentioned the benefits of increased respect they received from family members, positive changes in their personal development, increased self-esteem with regard to interpersonal relationships and notable aspirations to instill values for education in their children (Adair et al., 2007; Haleman, 2004; Kates, 1996). While the additional responsibility of being a parent can serve as a stressor to this student population, women have noted that their children have also served as a major support throughout their participation in educational programs (Calicchia & Graham, 2006). Limited data exists on the single mother graduate student population. In

order to better understand the strengths and struggles specific to this student body profile, further research is needed.

### *The Research*

The Center for Disease Control found that between 1993 and 2001, 10.1% of the adult population self-reported frequent mental distress, with women being more likely than men to report mental health concerns (CDC, 2004). Considering the increased rates of self-reported psychological distress in both single parent and graduate student populations when compared to American society at large (Hyun et al., 2006; Ross et al., 1999), this presents a cause for concern for those working in social services and counseling agencies. As single-parent-status can be acquired through various ways, sensitivity regarding women's experience of singlehood (whether it be through divorce, widowhood or having been never married) is important for clinicians to keep in mind when working with this client base. The stressors of graduate students and single mothers are multi-faceted and overlapping, as common noted concerns are referenced in areas of money, time and energy management (Calicchia & Graham, 2006; Hyun et al., 2006; Ross et al., 1999). The likelihood of social workers serving this population is high, and therefore maintaining an educated stance on the common issues of distress for this population will serve to enable best practices.

This study will seek to explore the experience of single mothers in graduate school. Participants will be asked to comment on relevant themes of strength and struggle, support systems, areas of concern, and hopes for themselves and their families as a result of their decision to obtain a degree. Qualitative results that offer increased insight on the relevant issues present within this unique population may help to provide

implications for policy reforms regarding access to educational attainment for these individuals as well as increased supportive services provided for this population.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was designed to explore the experience of single mothers in graduate programs. The literature has shown various intersecting stressors of the graduate student and single mother populations, including financial strain and limits on sleep and time availability, as well as increased risk for mental health diagnoses. Past research has supported the need for increased services for single mothers enrolled in high school/GED, associate and bachelor's level programs, but little data has been collected on those obtaining their Master's or PhD degrees. This chapter will discuss the methods used for this research project and describe the sample, data collection and data analysis procedures.

#### *Sample*

Study participants were limited to current students and those who graduated from Master's or PhD programs within the last three years, and had at least one child under the age of six at some point during graduate program enrollment. Additionally, participants must have maintained single parent status via divorce, separation, widowhood or having never been married. All survey participants must be female, over the age of 18 years old and maintained primary physical custody of their child(ren).

Participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling methods. This researcher contacted various website administrators and received approval to post an approved advertisement about the study on sites geared toward single mother populations, as well as various student body listservs at graduate programs throughout the Northeast. An approved flyer was posted at local sites throughout the Boston area geared

toward graduate student body populations (such as libraries and student lounges that schools considered public domain). This researcher also utilized snowball sampling via email and Facebook networking to obtain participants for the anonymous online survey. All recruitment techniques were approved by the Human Subjects Review Board Committee at Smith College (See Appendix A). The inclusion criteria for this study was posted on the approved flyer and text excerpt sent out online to prospective participant networks. Thirty-three people visited the site during time of data collection. Sixteen participants qualified for and completed the survey.

#### *Data Collection*

Research data was collected via the completion of an anonymous online survey consisting of ten open-ended questions. Procedures to protect the study's participants were described in this project's proposal and approved by the Human Subjects Review Board at Smith College School for Social Work previous to data collection (See Appendix A). Participants were asked a series of qualifying questions and clicked "agree" to an online consent form, complete with a list of mental health resources, before participating in this study (See Appendix B). Survey respondents were asked a series of background questions following informed consent, including their age, racial identification, annual income, youngest child's age, level of degree program (Masters/PhD), area of concentration (i.e. Master's in Biology), and year of graduation. The study's survey questions were geared toward participant's experience of being a single mother while in graduate school, including reference to the strengths and challenges they faced during program enrollment. This survey also included questions about how these mothers' choice to obtain a graduate degree had or would affect their

family (see Appendix C for survey question guide). Participants were allowed to skip any question and were able to abandon the survey at any point before hitting “submit” to record their completed responses. The entire survey was estimated to take 20-30 minutes to complete. All data collection took place between March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010 and April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

### *Data Analysis*

Research data was analyzed via the thematic coding review strategy (Anastas, 1999; Kuchel, 2000). This was done by observing completed surveys, looking for similarities and differences in participants’ experience, and categorizing responses into thematic domains. The researcher manually coded similar words and phrases noticed in written responses across the survey’s sample group for purposes of data analysis. Salient responses regarding the felt pressures, supports, and contributing factors toward participants’ decision to obtain their graduate degrees served to formulate the basis of this exploratory design.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This researcher sought to explore the experience of single mothers enrolled in graduate programs. Research was conducted with both past and present students who were obtaining either a Master's or doctoral degree within the last three years. Participants were asked to reflect on the strengths and struggles experienced while completing their graduate degree, as well as their thoughts about how this decision had affected their lives and the lives of their children.

#### *Sample Demographics*

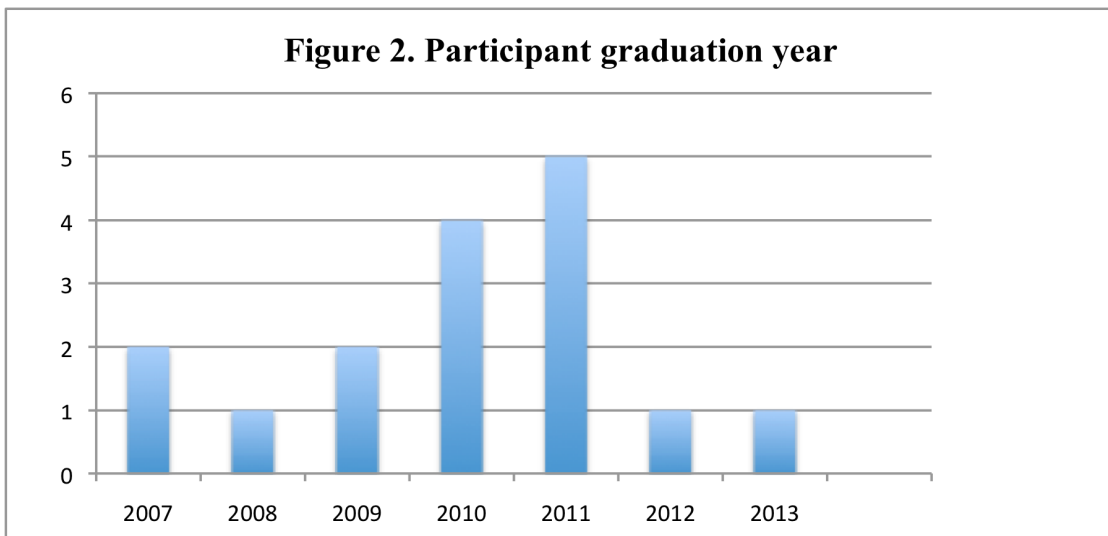
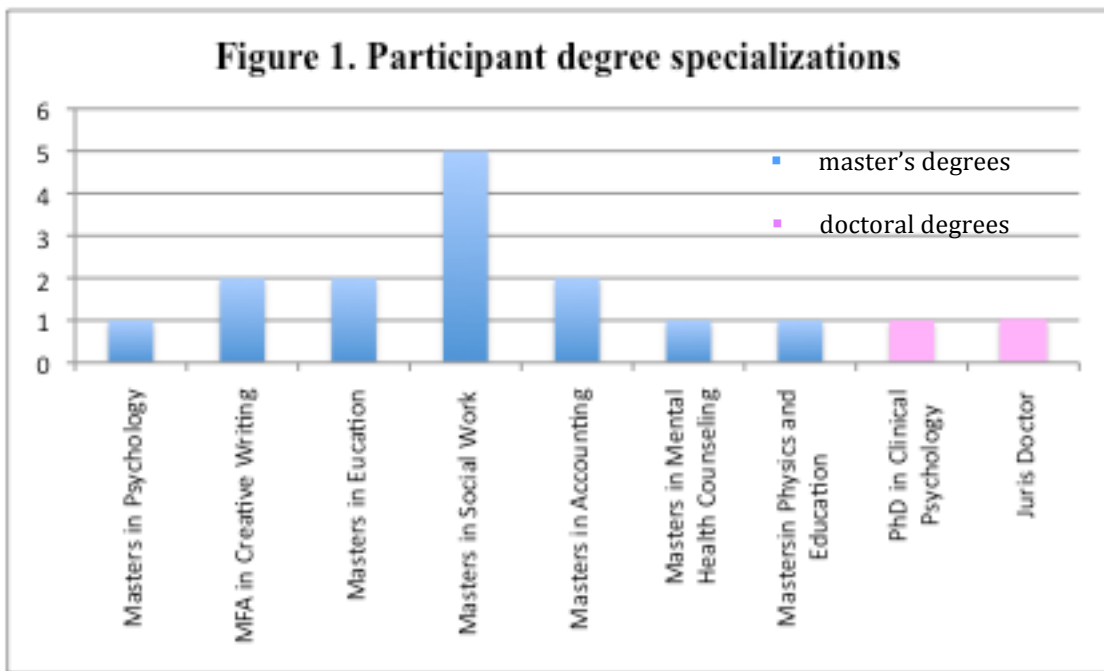
Participants were asked a series of background questions during the first portion of the survey, including their age, racial identification, annual income, and details about their recent degree. Most participants reported having been enrolled in a master's level program (87.5%), while 12.5% had received a doctoral degree. The most common degree obtained by survey participants was a Masters in Social Work. Participants' degree specialization rates are shown in Figure 1. The graduation year for survey participants ranged from 2007-2013 (Figure 2).

The current age of participants ranged from 23-41 years, and the average age of participants during time of graduation was 31. Sixty-three percent of participants identified as White, 12.5% as Black or African American, 12.5% identified as biracial and 6% as Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, one survey participant did not record her racial identification. Forty-four percent recorded an annual income of or below \$15,000 while enrolled in their program of study. Six survey participants stated a yearly income range between \$30,000-\$45,000 during enrollment, and two respondents recorded having



made between \$30,000-\$45,000. One participant received between \$45,000-\$60,000 annually throughout her course of study.

All participants had at least one child under the age of 6 years old during some point of program enrollment. Participants' children ranged from 22 months to 8 years old during their time of graduation. The most commonly recorded age of participants' children at the time of data collection was 4 years (25%). Fifty-six percent of the mothers who participated in this study had achieved single parent status due to never having been married, while 19% had divorced, 19% separated, and 6% were widowed.



While much of the project recruitment took place in various locations throughout Boston, Massachusetts, the study did not record the geographic location of survey participants. Therefore, research findings cannot be specified or generalized to the Boston area graduate student population.

### *Descriptive Findings*

The major findings of this qualitative study included an overall desire for participants to improve their career and standard of living for themselves and their children. Sixty-three percent of respondents participated in some form of financial assistance while enrolled, and 56% noted childcare assistance to be a major support that enabled them to pursue their degree as a single parent. The majority of participants reported feeling hopeful that their children would value their decision to obtain a graduate degree.

### *Reasons for Degree Enrollment*

Participants were first asked to describe the reasons for their decision to obtain a graduate degree. Four themes were indicated in the responses to this question: the desire to improve their career (69%); increase financial status (50%); further personal development (19%); and improve the standard of living for their family/children (38%). One participant said she decided to pursue a graduate degree “to create a career path for myself that would provide more opportunities, which would improve my standard of living for both my son and me. I also need to feel good about myself!”

Additional benefits were also noted in the participants’ survey responses. The most notable themes included: increased salary rates and fostering their children’s value

for education. Some participants described the positive aspects of their experience as a collective effort within the family. One participant wrote,

My son was my driving force. When I landed my first job in this field and was able to go out and buy a brand new car off the lot, he picked the color. We were a team.

Another mother described a felt benefit to discussing her education with her daughter:

My children are learning that it's important to continue their education. When my daughter complains about her homework, I tell her I know how she feels and I complain about mine. She sees that even though it can be frustrating at times, I still do it. She also knows that I do enjoy school. It's not a question that she's going to go to college someday. We talk about it all the time.

### *Major Supports*

All 16 survey participants identified family members and/or friends as major support factors that enabled them to pursue their degree. Additionally, 9 out of 16 respondents stated childcare as vital to their degree enrollment, whether obtained through subsidized programming, college day-care exchanges, or assistance from their individual support systems. One participant wrote, "...the daycare center at my college has been incredible. I would not be able to do this without my parents and having affordable daycare at school."

Of the 16 survey participants, only 4 reported receiving financial aid from their school. Two respondents reported having received graduate assistantships that covered tuition costs. Seven respondents participated in some form of financial assistance program via state or government services, including fuel assistance, food stamps, welfare, childcare vouchers, and reduced-rate insurance plans. One participant combined available financial service programs with supportive childcare options in order to get by:

My mother is very helpful (babysits every other weekend); exchange child watching with fellow single-mothers and other parents in my child's school; governmental assistance programs, including SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps), LIHEAP (fuel assistance), and Mass Health (Medicaid); nearly full academic scholarship from school.

Another student utilized child scholarship programs and subsidized services offered at local community centers to help pay for her daughter's activities ("scholarship for gymnastics class for example, subsidized YMCA membership").

### *Common Challenges and Parental Concerns*

Participants were asked to describe obstacles or barriers faced while achieving their graduate degree as a single parent. Four themes were identified within survey results: financial strain, increased stress, time availability, and social isolation. Toward the end of the survey, participants were asked to further comment on areas of time availability, and if/how their families were impacted financially during graduate study enrollment. One question directly asked participants to comment on the amount of stress felt while enrolled in their program, as compared to "life before graduate school."

#### *Financial Strain*

Ninety-four percent of participants stated that their family experienced financial strain as a result of their decision to obtain a degree. Seven out of 16 stated their family was or is "greatly" impacted, and 6 participants identified financial strain as a major barrier to degree obtainment. Forty-four percent of respondents expressed a concern for how this strain would affect their children. Participants' financial concerns were also expressed as they described limitations in available service programs. One woman stated:

I was unable to continue receiving a child care voucher because graduate school is not considered to be a service need. This increased my monthly expenses by nearly \$300. Furthermore, the student budget for the academic year does not

allow added expenses no matter how many dependents you have, except for child care. What about the extra clothes I have to buy? Or the extra room I pay for in rent? Or food? In my opinion, increasing the student budget for heads of households would be one of the biggest changes you could make to help offset the financial burden that single-mothers experience when trying to attend graduate school.

Another wrote:

If it weren't for the support and help from my parents I would have been in a homeless shelter, graduate study is not easy for a single parent. The amount of time required for school work and then taking care of a child makes it so difficult to work but somehow you have to find a way. In this country you have to be extremely poor to qualify for any assistance or really rich to be ok. If you're in the middle or a bit above income according to their unrealistic financial standards then you don't get any help.

Also of note, fifty-six percent of respondents did not participate in any form of financial assistance program during graduate enrollment. It is unclear as to whether or not these students maintained a financial need, and if they knew of available supports. These details were unrecorded in survey responses. Four survey participants reported having been financially supported by their parents during their time of study.

### *Stress*

Fourteen out of sixteen participants felt increased stress levels since graduate program enrollment, and 50% percent identified this increase in direct correlation with their dual role of single parenting. One woman wrote:

I felt an overwhelming amount of stress while enrolled in my program. It started off as a three year part-time program that turned into four years because I had to take a mental health leave of absence during the middle of my fourth semester. Life before graduate school was difficult and I had lived with major depression since I was a teenager, however, something about not being able to provide for my children in a manner that we had gotten used to, and feeling like there was really no one else out there who understood caused me to suffer terribly in that first year of being both in class and in the field.

Another woman commented, “Too much stress. I hate it. I’m near breaking point. I honestly don’t know how I’m going to do everything...and there are professors that just don’t understand.”

Of the sixteen participants, only 12.5% participated in counseling services while enrolled in graduate study. One mother commented on her utilization of this service: “I go to counseling at my school and it is helpful but it’s hard for people, my counselor included, to really understand what it’s like unless they’ve been through it.”

#### *Time Availability*

Fourteen survey participants referenced time availability as a major challenge during program enrollment. Sub-themes identified within this area included lack of sleep, self-care, free-time, and adequate time with their kids. Five participants referenced feeling “exhausted” and seven respondents expressed concern for the degree to which their children were affected by this compromise. One mother commented:

I felt like I missed out on a lot of things, like chaperoning field trips and parent-teacher conferences. My lack of free time meant I didn’t get to spend as much time with my children doing fun things. Also, since I couldn’t work as much my family and I had to make some real changes in how we lived, including selling the car.

Another woman added, “I had to spend a great deal less time with them. I feel this created a rift between my daughter and myself. They also got used to not having me around and had to readjust when I finished my program.”

Some parents expressed a degree of shame related to the management of their dual roles. One mother wrote, “Even when I’m spending time with her [my daughter], I felt a guilty pull toward work. While working on homework I feel a guilty pull toward

her.” Others stated a concern about their program participation might affect parent-child bonding. A mother described her “greatest concern” during enrollment:

Attachment--I wanted to make sure that he knew that I loved him, cared for him, and I was trying to do my best to balance my school, job and him. I did not want him to feel as if he was unimportant and I did my best to be there for him and take care of him.

Another mother illustrated the multiple ways in which time constraints have affected her life:

I am exhausted at the end of the day. By the time the kids are in bed, I am usually too tired to stay focused on school work. If I want to work on school work during the week when they're home, I have to go to bed when they do and get up at 5AM. But sometimes I am still too tired to get up. Then I have to cram all the work into the times they are away on visits with their fathers, which leaves me very little rest and personal time. I am either taking care of kids, working or writing/studying. It's almost impossible to date or have a relationship.

#### *Social Isolation*

Thirty-one percent of participants commented on the social challenges involved in being a graduate student as a single parent. Some described feelings of being misunderstood by others, including professors, classmates, and college counselors. One student wrote:

The academic program that I am in requires a lot of group project work. Unfortunately sometimes the professors and classmates are not sympathetic to how planned and organized/structured I have to be with my time in order to get everything completed.

Another mother commented on her relationship with peer graduate students:

There is little to no camaraderie with “peers,” extreme difficulty in performing at the same level as fellow students...difficulty finding childcare when needed to participate in certain school-related activities, often feel excluded because I cannot participate in social activities and other school-realty activities that take place during non-school time hours.

### *Hopes for Family and Future*

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to report on how they felt their kids would understand their decision to obtain a graduate degree as they matured. Seven out of sixteen hoped their children would understand and value this decision, as they felt it would positively impact their family. Additionally, 50% of participants believed this experience would have a positive impact on their children's values. Specifically, five participants felt this decision would teach their children values for education and hard work. One mother wrote, "I hope she [my daughter] sees it as something I did for both of us. I hope it inspires her to persevere no matter what, too."

Another added:

I think they'll [my children] see our family's financial situation improve when the degree is finished and I'm able to get a better job. I'm starting to publish and the kids are aware of that, they know that the degree I'm working on is part of the reason that's happening. They will know they'll have to work hard to have the kind of life they want.

One mother commented on how her family's life has changed since achieving her

Master's in Social Work:

Because of having this degree, I am able to provide them with the life and financial means I did not have as a child. Also, it shows them the importance of higher education and family support.

### *Unexpected Findings*

Most of the findings shown in this qualitative study directly reflect noted topics in past research on single mothers in higher education. However, two unexpected findings were noted as a result of this study that may merit future exploration. Fifty-six percent of respondents made reference to the theme of parental shame around managing student



responsibilities. One mother described, “feeling like I’m missing out on my child’s formative years” and another states, “at times I felt as though [my son] was bonding with other people instead of myself.” Another mother illustrated feelings of guilt with her son about experiencing academic strain:

I feel as though I have missed a lot of his first school year. I also feel like the time I do spend with him is more stressed, as I am frequently worried about getting school work done. It takes a conscious effort to fully be there when we do spend time together.

Another added, “Unfortunately I find myself putting her in front of the TV sometimes when I have mid-terms or finals to study for. If I didn’t have these exams we’d probably be playing together interactively.” One woman writes, “sometimes I don’t have the patience I should with my family” as a result of her graduate enrollment and another worried, “that my son is not getting enough of my focus and not getting enough relaxed family time with me because I am always under so much pressure.”

Yet others commented on increased parental attunement and revealed a theme of family support due to degree participation. One mother wrote, “as a single mother my creative writing gained new/deeper insight. My daughter inspires me to want more for myself so I can give her more.” Another mother added, “Because I am studying education I have been able to better identify my own child’s needs, skills, etc.”

One parent directly referenced how her degree has positively affected her child’s life and their relationship:

I think in the long run my son will appreciate and understand why I did what I did and it was not a decision made to just benefit me but was to benefit us. Because of it I have been able to afford t-ball, soccer, swimming classes. Although as a social worker we generally do not get paid well but it has had its benefits. I also think I have been able to set myself as a positive role model in the long run for my son in terms of finishing my degree, being a stronger woman for it.

A mother commented on her child's reaction to her degree attainment:

By the time I completed my graduate program, my oldest child, my daughter, was 16. As soon as the graduation ceremony was over, she came running up to me shouting "We did it!" I think they learned what it really means to be a family that takes care of each other and supports each other during the really difficult times. I know that they currently understand that it was something I did in order to make our financial situation better in the long term. I hope they can relate to the sacrifice in their future.

### *Summary*

Sixty-three percent of survey participants identified as White, and 44% maintained an income at or below \$15,000 during program enrollment. Fifty-six percent of respondents maintained single parent status via never having been married. Fourteen out of sixteen respondents were past or present master's students whereas only 12.5% participated in a doctoral degree program. Overall, findings reflect themes of financial strain, increased stress, lack of time availability and fears about compromised relationships. Most participants were hopeful about an improved future for themselves and their family as a result of their decision to obtain a master's degree. Unexpected findings included themes of parental shame and increased familial support. Of note, less than half of the survey's respondents participated in financial assistance programs and only 12.5% received support via counseling services. The implications of these discrepancies and overall findings will be explored in the following discussion chapter, as well as limitations to this study.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This descriptive study explored the experience of single mothers in graduate school, with particular focus on the strengths and struggles of their lives throughout program enrollment. Enrollment rates for single mothers in higher education remain underreported, and there are few studies on their experience available, particularly with the graduate school population. Past studies done on single mothers within undergraduate programs have indicated that they experience similar concerns for themselves and their families as they achieve their degree (Adair et al., 2007; Haleman, 2004; Kates, 1996). Atwood & Genovese (2006) discussed an overarching theme for single mothers' concerns about their children's wellbeing; participants of the present study discussed fears about how their children's lives would be impacted during their graduate enrollment. Atwood and Genovese (2006) also described mothers' worry about how they would provide for their families. Similarly, this current study focused on those who chose graduate enrollment as an avenue to achieve this goal, and combat the risk for living in poverty that the single mother population maintains overrepresentation in.

Past studies have focused on the heightened reports of psychological distress experienced by single mother populations (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000; Kessler et al., 1994), a risk factor that is also noted in general student body populations of higher education programs (Hyun et al., 2006; Ross et al., 1999). Results from the present study are reflective of these statistics, as participants reported feelings of increased stress, exhaustion, and social isolation throughout graduate enrollment. However, few respondents reported having sought out formal support during this stressful time, and

those that did had also mentioned feeling “misunderstood” by college counselors and professors regarding the struggles they faced as a single parent with graduate student responsibilities. These reports conflict with past qualitative research, in which the frequency of interaction with institutional supports had a positive impact on students’ emotional well-being (Hyun et al., 2006; Ross et al., 1999). This may imply a need for increased training amongst college administrators and counseling service providers around the unique challenges faced by this particular student population.

Almost all participants in this study identified financial strain as a major challenge and barrier to obtaining their graduate degree. Past studies have indicated this challenge amongst graduate student populations at large (Hyun et al., 2006; Ross et al., 1999), as well as made note of the daunting statistics regarding low financial status of single mother populations (Jackson et al., 2008; Kates, 1996).

While some participants received a degree of monetary support from their families, others struggled because they didn’t have access to adequate financial support. Reasons for this barrier included being denied assistance and lack of available financial aid. Stated limitations in services included long waiting lists for subsidized child care, and graduate student status not qualifying as a “service need” for state and federal assistance programs.

Research focused on single mothers has indicated additional restrictions in financial service programs, such as welfare assistance, due to a two-year service time limit (Jackson et al., 2008; Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000). Yet the need to maintain full-time caretaking responsibilities (in conjunction with school assignments) might compromise these women’s availability to complete their degrees within this time frame.

Study participants reported daycare assistance (via college childcare exchange programs or help from their families) to be a vital support that assisted in their success of graduate enrollment. It is unknown as to why some survey participants did not receive any financial services during graduate enrollment. One proposed idea could be that it is due to the aforementioned barriers in service access for these women. Another might be that these individuals do not maintain a heightened level of need, as opposed to other single parent students in higher education programs (Adair et al., 2007; Haleman, 2004).

Participants in the present study reported that their graduate experience provided them with increased parental attunement as well as improvement in their self concept. While many made note of ongoing financial strain throughout enrollment, most hoped that achieving a graduate degree would improve their financial status and help them to better provide for their families post graduation. This is consistent with past research, which has indicated that highly educated mothers are more confident; specifically that with regard to the ability to better adjust to familial transitions, including “union disruption and the likelihood to gain from the formation of a new union” (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows & Brooks-Gunn, 2009, p. 69). Conversely, mothers of low-level education may experience losses in social resources that place them at increased risk for heightened stress in parenthood (Cooper et al., 2009). With this study in mind, the positive experience of gaining a graduate degree may serve as a barrier to psychological distress and provide a source of strength for single mothers.

It is clear that single mothers in graduate school maintain unique skill sets. Survey participants in the current study reported increased parental attunement and time management skills experienced during their time of study. However, it is unclear as to

whether participation in a graduate program encourages the development of these skill sets, or if having a natural tendency for these skills makes it more likely that one will enroll and be successful in a graduate program. One must consider the idea that the women who enroll in graduate programs are somewhat self-selective, and that there exists an entire population of single mothers whose experience is not reflective of these participants' experience.

### *Implications for Social Work Practice*

One consistency amongst survey results indicated an overarching belief that these women's decision to obtain a master's degree would not only improve their personal success and wellbeing but also provide an overall improved standard of living for their family. Participants were hopeful about their future and maintained a belief that the value they placed on education would have an intergenerational affect on their families. Furthermore, they believed it would also instill positive values for their children as they mature. While these long-term effects could not be measured or reported in the present study, such ideas provide important implications for the social work and public health perspectives. If societal goals involve decreasing poverty for families and increasing educational attainment rates, then providing services that allow for mothers to obtain higher degrees would be a vital avenue for achieving this goal. The need for such advancement is arguably more vital in today's world as the need for higher-degree obtainment exists in order to keep people above the poverty line (Haleman, 2004).

### *Limitations*

This sample of this study is very limited in size as only sixteen people completed the survey. The online survey design limited access to participants who were able to use

the internet. Only two of the sixteen participants were doctoral students, which indicates a sample that is mostly reflective of master's students' experience.

The sample majority consists of mostly White women of or around 30 years old, which further biases survey results. Other studies have indicated that women of Color, particularly African American women, are more likely to be poorer, younger and have younger children living with them as compared to their White counterparts. Furthermore, this population maintains lower levels of education and work experience when compared to White women living in poverty (Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

Furthermore, anonymous survey responses were somewhat inconsistent in nature. Some participants provided brief answers to the questions asked, while others provided in-depth descriptions of their experience. An in-person interview design would allow for additional prompting when participants were brief or unclear in their responses. The sample of this study, due to size and aforementioned biases, restricts the validity of findings.

#### *Future Studies*

The current study explored the experience of both present and past graduate students. In some ways, this diversified perspective allowed for rich research material. However, exploration of these two populations might better be handled via a mixed-method design. One's presentation of their current experience (in this case, that of being a graduate student) might look very different from those who are able to take a reflective stance on past experience. Also, longitudinal studies on single mothers in graduate programs (before, during and after enrollment) would help address some of the above issues mentioned in this discussion, including questions about improved financial

stability and positive impacts on participant's families due to their decision to obtain a graduate degree.

### *Conclusions*

Overall, survey participants described an experience reflective of various environmental stressors, with financial strain and childcare being the primary barriers to degree obtainment. Respondents expressed restrictions in time availability during program enrollment, and how these restrictions negatively affected their relationships. These noted concerns are similar to past reports of single mothers' experiences in undergraduate programs (Adair et al., 2007; Kates, 1996). Yet, the successful management of these multiple responsibilities and hopes for an improved future served as major motivators for survey participants. Past studies have indicated the utilization of available supports as vital to successful completion of post-secondary education programs (Calicchia & Graham, 2006; Hyun et al., 2006; Quinn & Allen, 1989). Financial statistics on the single mother population, as well as the findings in this present study, would indicate limitations in services offered to assist this population in achieving the goal of graduate degree obtainment.

These findings indicate the need for improvements in supportive policies and programming in the fields of social services and higher education. This might include improved training on part of college counseling service providers as well as administrators as they consider the institutional value of recruiting diversified student bodies. It might also be suggested that universities begin to track single parent status data as an indicator of student body diversity, as these statistics remain widely unknown at the present time. Future researchers might want to consider the value of longitudinal studies



to assess the presence of intergenerational affects of graduate degree obtainment in single parent families.

It is hoped that this limited research will provide others with an informed perspective of the multifaceted experience of single mothers in graduate programs. Social workers and college administrators are apt to be at the forefront of supportive services and programming that improve access and success for single parents seeking graduate education.

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## Appendix A

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter



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Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7960  
F (413) 585-7904

March 19, 2010

Kelly Chandler

Dear Kelly,

Your amended materials have been reviewed. They are fine and we are happy to give final approval to your study.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Marsha Kline Pruett".

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Marsha Kline Pruett, Ph.D., M.S.L.  
Vice Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Carla Naumburg, Research Advisor

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent & Referral Sources

Dear Research Participant,

I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work conducting a research project for the purpose of a Master's thesis, which may also be used for future presentation and publication. My research will explore the experience of single mothers in higher education. This exploratory study will seek to provide insight regarding strengths and struggles of these mothers' lives as well as common concerns for themselves and their children related to their decision to obtain a graduate degree.

You are eligible to participate in this study if (a) you are currently a student obtaining a Masters degree or PhD, or have achieved this degree within the last three years (b) you were over the age of 18 years old during program enrollment (c) you maintained single parent status at some point during your degree completion or participation in degree programming, via divorce, separation, widowhood or having never been married (d) you had at least one child under the age of six years old at some point during your program enrollment and (e) you are/were the primary caregiver and maintain(ed) primary physical custody of your child(ren) during degree completion. As a participant in this study you will be asked to complete an online survey that will last approximately 20-30 minutes.

The potential risks of participating in this study are the possibility that you might experience emotional discomfort or stress during the completion of this survey, as some content questions may ask you to provide insight regarding experienced stressors and obstacles faced while obtaining your degree. A list of mental health referral resources is listed below, in the event that you may wish to access additional support. While there will be no financial benefit to participating in this study, the sharing of your experience as a single mother in higher education may provide useful implications for policy and supportive programming for this unique student population. Additionally, the sharing of your story may offer valuable insight for those who may not be aware of the strengths and struggles single mothers face in obtaining college degrees.

Your identity will be protected throughout the course of this study, as all survey participants will remain anonymous. No personal and/or contact information will be collected for the completion of this survey. Your name will never be associated with the information you provide in the online questionnaire, unless you provide it in one of the answers to the survey. Electronic data collected during this study will be securely protected. Any printed data will be stored and locked in a secure file for the duration of three years, as consistent with federal regulations and standards of the social work profession. Non-printed data will be secured via a password protected computer. Should I need these materials beyond the three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed. My thesis advisor may also read anonymously completed survey responses.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time during your completion of the online survey and will be given the option to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. However, once you submit your completed survey, you will not be able to withdraw from the study. Should you have any further concerns about your rights regarding participation or any aspect of this study, please contact Kelly Chandler, [klchandl@smith.edu](mailto:klchandl@smith.edu) or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413-585-7974.

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By checking "I AGREE" below you are indicating that you have read and understand the information above and that you have had an opportunity to ask questions about the study, your participation, and your rights and that you agree to participate in the study.

Boston Area Mental Health Resources:

*Brighton-Allston Mental Health Clinic*  
77 Warren Street  
Brighton, MA 02135  
617-787-1901

*Arbour Counseling Service*  
49 Robinwood Avenue  
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130  
671-390-1485

*South Shore Mental Health Center*  
460 Quincy Avenue  
Quincy, MA 02169  
617-857-1914

*Somerville Mental Health Center*  
167 Holland Street  
Somerville, MA 02144  
617-623-3278

National Mental Health Resources:

*Mental Health America*  
2000 N. Beauregard Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
703-684-7722 or Toll Free 800-969-6642  
[www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/find\\_therapy](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/find_therapy)

## Appendix C

### Survey Questionnaire

#### Demographics

1. Please select your highest level of degree attainment. If currently a graduate student, please specify the program level to which you are currently enrolled:

*Masters degree*

*PhD*

2. What is/was your concentration or area of study for the degree program which you will be describing throughout this survey? (ie: Masters in Biology, PhD in Psychology)

3. Please indicate the graduation year of your highest level degree. If currently enrolled in a program, please indicate your prospective graduation year.

4. What is your current age?

5. What was/will be your age during the time of graduation from your highest level program of study?

6. Please select the racial group in which you identify:

*White*

*Black or African American*

*American Indian or Alaskan Native*



*Asian*

*Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander*

*Hispanic/Latino*

*Biracial*

*Multiracial*

*Other (please indicate: \_\_\_\_\_)*

7. What was your average annual income while enrolled in your program of study?

*\$0-\$15,000*

*\$15,000-\$30,000*

*\$30,000-\$45,000*

*\$45,000-\$60,000*

*\$60,000-\$75,000*

*above \$75,000*

8. If currently in a program, what is the age of your youngest child?

If you've already completed your degree, what was the age of your youngest child upon the year of your graduation?

9. How did you become a single parent?

*divorce*

*separation*

*never been married*

*widowed*

### Questionnaire

This is a survey about your experiences as a single mother and as a student in a Masters or PhD program. Your responses are greatly valued and appreciated. Thank you for your input and time!

1. What are the main reasons why you decided to obtain a graduate degree?
2. Please describe the major supports, including people, that enabled you to pursue your degree while being a single parent.
3. What are/were your positive experiences of being a student as a single mother? Please comment on any possible benefits for yourself, and/or your children, as a result of obtaining your degree.
4. What are/were your negative experiences of being a student as a single mother? Please describe any obstacles or barriers you may have faced in achieving this degree as a single parent.
5. What are/were your greatest concerns for yourself and your children as you obtain(ed) your degree?

6. Did you participate in any programs or receive any services to assist you as a student who is/was also a single parent? (This can include counseling services, financial assistance, social or community resources). How have these services been helpful, if any? How have they been limiting, if at all?

7. How was your availability to spend time with your children impacted, if at all, while enrolled in your program of study?

8. How has your family been impacted financially during your enrollment in graduate study?

9. Please comment on the amount of stress felt while enrolled in your program of study, as compared to "life before graduate school."

10. How do you think your children will understand this choice you've made to obtain this degree as they mature?

Survey web-address: [www.surveymonkey.com/SingleMoms\\_in\\_HigherEd](http://www.surveymonkey.com/SingleMoms_in_HigherEd)

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Letter

#### Dear Prospective Participant,

I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work, seeking the voices of single mothers who are current or past Masters/PhD students for participation in a research study. Participants will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey that will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. I am hoping this study will provide insight regarding the strengths and struggles of these mothers, as well as concerns for themselves and their children related to their decision to obtain a graduate degree.

If you are a current graduate student or have graduated from a program within the last three years, you may be eligible for this study. In order to participate, you must have/had at least one child under the age of 6 at some point during program enrollment, as well as identify/identified as the primary caretaker and have primary custody of your child(ren). I will not ask any identifying information during this study, although some background questions will be asked of you. Your greatly valued responses will give insight to the strengths and struggles of single mothers in graduate school, and may provide implications for supportive policies and programming.

If you do not meet the inclusion criteria to participate in this study, I would appreciate you forwarding this message to your family, friends and/or coworkers who may be eligible. The link for my survey is listed below. Thank you for your time and consideration in this exciting project--it is much appreciated!

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact  
[klchandl@smith.edu](mailto:klchandl@smith.edu)

Sincerely,

Kelly Chandler, MSW Candidate

Survey Link: [www.surveymonkey.com/SingleMoms\\_in\\_HigherEd](http://www.surveymonkey.com/SingleMoms_in_HigherEd)

Appendix E

Recruitment Flyer



WANTED  
Single Moms in Higher  
Education

**Seeking the voices of single mothers who are current or past Masters/PhD students in any field for participation in research study**

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Participants must have had at least one child under the age of 6 at some point during graduate program enrollment, and identify as the primary caregiver of their child. Your greatly valued responses to the online survey will take 20-30 minutes to complete.

Researcher Kelly Chandler (klchandr@smith.edu) is a student at Smith College School for Social Work

Please sign on to [www.surveymonkey.com/SingleMoms\\_in\\_HigherEd](http://www.surveymonkey.com/SingleMoms_in_HigherEd) for more information and access to this anonymous online survey!