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Coping Mechanisms Utilized by Single Mothers in College

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COPING MECHANISMS UTILIZED BY SINGLE MOTHERS IN COLLEGE

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Natasha Elise Maness
Kristina Rene Munoz

June 2019

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of study was to explore the various coping mechanisms used by single mothers who are pursuing higher education. Furthermore, this study examined the various relationships, personal and financial needs the mothers face. This study also explored the interpersonal relationships that exist for single mothers raising their children in the U.S. while facing financial burdens, lack of resources and childcare dilemmas. This study utilized a qualitative design. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews. The data collected from this study will allow for social workers to provide services in order to ensure single mothers attending college are utilizing effective coping mechanisms. Furthermore, it will assist social workers and other professional with addressing the needs that single mothers face while trying to get their education and provide for their children simultaneously. It is recommended that colleges and other social service agencies could offer more programs to help assist single mothers with accomplishing their goals. The common themes that were found through this study are: childcare, time management, financial concerns, and support systems. Additionally, themes of coping both adaptive and maladaptive were also recognizable in this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

JESUS CHRIST

It is nothing but the miracle of God that I was able to change my life around for good. I know that miracles exist because of the living testimony of the power of prayer. I'm so grateful for my journey of recovery.

Research Advisor

Dr. Lizano,

Thank you for providing me with positive affirmation that assisted my journey of education. You taught me that human resiliency is the most powerful tool to overcoming adversity. It was truly your kind spirit and faith in my abilities that gave me hope for a better life. I can stand proudly in a sense of accomplishment that I finally belong.

Participants

I thank you for being vulnerable and expressing your experiences as single mothers. I am grateful for the time you spent to participate in this study with your busy lives. You are going to do amazing things for your children.

Research Partner

Thank you for being not only an amazing partner, but a friend to me during this journey.

Written by: Natasha Elise Maness

The completion of this project could not have been accomplished without guidance and support from my research advisor, Dr. Erica L. Lizano. Thank you for all your enthusiasm and encouragement throughout this journey. Your passion for macro social work truly inspires me.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my children for being patient with me throughout this journey. Mom, thank you for loving me unconditionally and raising me to be an independent woman. Thank you for always supporting me. Dad, you are the most selfless person I know. Thank you for always being there for me. Kyla, I am so blessed to be able to call you my best friend. Thank you for always being a positive role model in my life. To all the rest of my family and friends, thank you for your continuous support and love.

Lastly, I want to give a special thanks to my research partner. Thank you for always being there no matter what time of the day it is. I appreciate all your positive affirmations, words of encouragement and friendship. I am grateful we had the opportunity to walk this journey together.

DEDICATION

To my children,

I did this all for you, because of your lives, I found mine. I am so blessed to call you mine, forever and always.

To my grandma and grandpa,

I am so grateful for the love you have shown me and I hope I finally made you proud. I thank you for never giving up on me!

To my parents,

Thank you for teaching me values, respect and integrity- it shaped the woman I who I became.

To my husband,

I'm so blessed to have you in my life, thank you for pushing me all these years. It was always you who supported me and believed in me.

To my friends and mentors,

The friendship throughout the years kept me alive, thank you for being present.

To all the single mothers in the struggle, there is hope, don't ever give up!

In memory of my grandmother,
I am forever grateful for the years we had together,
And the values you instilled in me.

To my children,
All my hard work is to show you that anything is possible.

To all single mothers,
Never give up! Hang in there,
Every sacrifice will be worth it!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
Problem Formulation	1
Purpose of the Study	3
Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice	4
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction.....	6
Challenges of Single Motherhood.....	6
Poverty in Single Motherhood	7
Childcare.....	7
Supportive Systems	8
Studies Focusing on Coping Mechanisms.....	8
Adaptive.....	9
Maladaptive.....	9

Theories Guiding Conceptualization.....	10
Summary.....	12

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction.....	13
Study Design.....	13
Sampling.....	14
Data Collection and Instruments.....	15
Procedures.....	16
Protection of Human Subjects.....	16
Data Analysis.....	17
Summary.....	18

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction.....	19
Sample Description.....	19
Qualitative Results.....	21
Childcare.....	21
Time.....	22
Financial.....	23
Support Systems.....	24
Stigma.....	25

Lack of Resources at College.....	26
Coping.....	27
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	
Introduction.....	31
Discussion.....	31
Limitations.....	34
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research	35
Practice.....	35
Policy.....	36
Research.....	37
Conclusion.....	37
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT.....	39
APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL.....	41
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	43
APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE.....	46
REFERENCES.....	48
ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES.....	51

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics.....	20
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

Single mothers in the United States make up a large portion of the population and are left without financial and emotional support (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Single mothers face significant challenges, which cause stress to their children and affects the greater population around them. Single mothers are considered an at-risk population and have developed coping mechanisms in response to the stress they develop in pursuit of a college degree. Studies show that women are faced with unique challenges. Motherhood brings on stressors, which become more complex as we shift towards a 21st-century approach (Trepal, Stinchfield, & Haiyasoso, 2013). Many educational opportunities are limited to single mothers because of external circumstances including poverty and childcare. Also, internal factors including the of lack of supportive relationships affect single mothers and result in maladaptive coping mechanisms for which social work practice is needed on both macro and micro levels.

In the past and in more recent years, single mothers have experienced the hardships of poverty. Single mothers who live in poverty have even more difficulty investing in an education due to systematic oppression. Studies demonstrate that more than 42% of single mothers with minors under 18 lived in poverty (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Many single mothers

experience difficulty accessing interventions needed to assist with gaining a diploma. In regards to the portion of single mothers who have never been married, research states that 46% of women who have never been married are non-white, uneducated and have low income (Wang, Parker, & Taylor, 2012).

In the year 2006, the majority of children born in the United States were born to single mothers under 30 (Beauchamp, Sanzenbacher, Seitz, & Skira, 2018). These numbers are only increasing as women are marginalized in society. There are many factors directly affecting single mothers who are pursuing a college education, and poverty is a main cause. Single mothers in education have various coping strategies, which they utilize in the father's absence from the lives of their children.

Many single mothers who are raising minor children experience gender bias and discrimination across the United States (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Single mothers experience discrimination with their attempts towards gaining higher education due to the stigma associated with single motherhood. Studies also suggest that it is difficult for single moms to achieve financial stability when many jobs do not offer the resources needed without a college degree (Brown & Lichter, 2004). The conditions of poverty make it extremely difficult for single mothers to obtain stability outside that culture.

With the help of exploratory research, we observed the single mothers' perceptions of the struggles they face, challenges and limitations. Researching the coping mechanisms used by single mothers can assist social workers with

determining the need for supportive services needed to assist single mothers in education. The ramifications for need of policy practice change outline the need for education with an increasing rate of poverty and systematic oppression. Because of the relationship between higher education and social mobility, issues regarding education are important factors for single mothers raising the future of America (Cerven, 2013). Research studies show there is little work done to provide interventions on both macro and micro levels regarding how social workers can help provide supportive services for single mothers and helping them achieve education for upward mobility.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research study was to examine the various types of coping mechanisms that single mothers use in order to deal with the absence of the other parent while pursuing a college degree. This study will assist social workers in working with single mothers pursuing educational goals and raising healthy children. Studies have shown little achieved research towards this study (Broussard, Joseph & Thompson, 2012). If the individual does not have the proper coping mechanisms in place then they may not be able to successfully complete college. Additionally, by conducting this research study, social workers will gain an understanding as to what types of coping mechanisms single mothers' use and be able to identify different types of positive coping mechanisms that can be taught to clients through psychoeducation.

The overall research method that was used in this research study was an exploratory design with a qualitative approach. This study consisted of data gathered from interviews of single mothers that are attending college. A qualitative research method was most suitable for this study because it provided content rich feedback. Furthermore, it consisted of evaluations of single mothers' perceptions through conducting in-person interviews. Conducting dialogues with single mothers allowed for researchers' to uncover the coping mechanisms that are utilized to cope with being a single parent and higher education. Data that was collected during interviews was interactive and allowed researchers' to fully understand and interpretation of responses (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005).

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

With such a large percentage of single mothers attending college, it is essential to understand the coping mechanisms being used. Social workers can learn a lot about a client's difficulties by examining how they have coped with past problems (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney & Strom-Gottfried, 2013). A single mom that is unable to properly cope with the absence of the other parent and the stressor of attending college may not be able to successfully complete college. According to Goldrick and Sorensen (2010), family stability is promoted by preventative measures such as allowing single mothers to have opportunities in college. The study findings allow for social workers to better assist single mothers attending college by identifying what coping skills work well. Social

workers can implement different coping skills and support groups on college campuses that are specifically focused on serving single mothers. This study contributes to the significance of an education by addressing the ramifications of generational poverty.

This study provides support to social workers using the generalist model in assessing and effectively identifying the coping skills needed by single mothers while attending college. Furthermore, the implications of this study will contribute to macro level social work practice by offering social workers insight into the identification of different types of programs and interventions that will assist single mothers in college. With the knowledge obtained, the social workers will be able to advocate for policies that benefit single mothers in college, which in turn will make the process of going to college easier to cope with. Single mothers will be encouraged to better their future and obtain a degree if they know there are supportive services in place that will make the process easier. The importance of this study that was conducted is posed through the following research question: What coping mechanisms do single mothers utilize in pursuit of a college degree?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Research on single mothers in education was limited, extensive information on single mothers alone was discovered by researchers. This chapter examined literature specifically relevant towards the population of single mothers pursuing higher education. There was a primary focus on the challenges of single motherhood. The subsections included poverty in single motherhood, child care and supportive systems. The final subsections comprised of the two types of coping mechanisms, both adaptive and maladaptive. The final area of literature will be focused on two theories that are Lazarus' Stress Theory and Intersectionality Theory which were used to conceptualize this study.

Challenges of Single Motherhood

There are an estimated 14.9 million households in the United States which consist of a female householder and no father present (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In regards to meeting everyday needs, single mothers experience hard work and labor, therefore single parents lack rest and leisure (Nelson, 2005). Furthermore, single parents report higher rates of poor sleeping habits, which causes an increased rate of parents reporting that they are not well-rested (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016). Lack of sleep is found to be

directly related to depression (Frazen & Buysse, 2008). Moreover, due to the variety of obstacles that single mothers face, higher education is exceptionally challenging. Many single parents enroll in higher education but often do not graduate with a degree due to experiencing numerous kinds of difficulties (Goldrick & Sorensen, 2010). Poverty, child care, and support systems are three significant areas affecting single moms.

Poverty in Single Motherhood

Single mothers suffer significantly when it comes to issues surrounding poverty. Moreover, single mothers who are non-Caucasian are more likely to be affected by poverty. Research shows that almost half of the population who fall under the poverty line are single mothers. Those statistics vary when the population of single mothers are broken into racial/ethnic groups with 47% being African American and 50% being Hispanic (Broussard, Anne, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). There are limitations towards gathering research data partly because there have been gaps from the past as mothers have recently composed of the majority of those in poverty.

Childcare

Mothers in higher education are more susceptible to experienced hardships, than male counterparts (Lynch, 2008). They experienced greater hardships because of the difficulty in accessing childcare while they attended school. Research shows that this factor alone plays a significance difference in the mother's level of persistence in achieving these goals. The majority of single

mothers in education explain the difficulty in obtaining quality of child care as being a defining factor with scheduling classes and attendance (Cerven, 2013). Additionally, providing programs for childcare in low-income households would be purposeful. Funds and grants created should be made accessible to all single mothers working towards a college degree.

Supportive Systems

Single mothers struggle with the father's absence in their children's lives. Research suggests that having a strong family support system is one of the most important factors to a single mother (Son & Bauer, 2010). Son and Bauer (2010), also demonstrates various supportive systems such as employers, educators and community support system. Family resilience is the ability to successfully cope with adversities in life, including the challenges faced by single mothers. Strong support system and family community can provide a sense of belonging and strength to single mothers (Black & Lobo, 2008). Single mothers are often isolated and the lack of social support leads to mental and physical stress (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012).

Studies Focusing on Coping Mechanisms

Specific coping mechanisms that individuals utilize offer insight about the individual's stress levels and how it might affect their level of functioning (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried, 2013). These coping mechanisms are a natural human reaction towards stress caused from the

environment. This stress is felt by single mothers in the U.S. who have taken on both parenting roles, act as the head of the household and sole provider for her children. These difficulties are intensified by the mothers attempt to achieve a college degree and the barriers which she faces in those endeavors.

Adaptive

Research has presented several adaptive coping mechanisms used by single mothers from pets, exercise, internal strength, resilience, humor, counseling, arts and volunteering (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Pets have also been known to clinically help lower rates for depression (Allen, 2003). Exercise alone promotes physical well-being, directly impacting mental health in the lives of those who stay active. By utilizing these methods of coping, there is a better chance of having a successful outcome in life.

Maladaptive

Behavior is strongly influenced by emotions. Furthermore, the emotional reaction of some individuals causes them to behave in such a way that it intensifies the problem (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried, 2013). Research demonstrates that single mothers who are smokers spend significantly less time with their children (Pabilonia & Song, 2013). These results are significant in determining the amount of quality time spent with children and less time with maladaptive coping mechanisms. Social work practice has the ability to provide single mothers with the proper resources and tools for parenting.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Two theories used in this study are Intersectionality Theory and Lazarus Stress Theory. The theories inform the central research question in this study.

According to Hutchinson (2013), the concept of intersectionality was brought about by feminists of color. Furthermore, gender, race, and class all intersect which create different experiences for women of all different classes and races. This theory is used to examine women's lives at several intersections. For example, categories such as religion, age, race, nationality, disability (Hutchison, 2013).

Intersectionality Theory is applicable when examining coping skills among single mothers who are pursuing higher education because it frames an understanding of the diverse intersections that affect individuals. Furthermore, single mothers attending college may be experiencing oppression from multiple dimensions such as age, sex, class, race, immigration status, and culture. Moreover, Intersectionality theory, can provide a framework to help social workers understand the significant intersections that single mothers are facing in addition to the stressors of obtaining a college degree. It will offer social workers insight to how all the intersections come together and how it affects an individual. Additionally, it will help guide the current policies and practices to help meet the needs of college students that are single mothers to ensure that they successfully complete college in order to better their future.

Lazarus' Stress Theory suggests that stress is looked at as a relationship between the individual and his or her environment. Lazarus identified three stress processes, which are perceiving a threat, forming a response, and coping with the response (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Lazarus' theory has two different types of coping mechanisms which are problematic coping and emotion-focused coping (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Problematic coping comes with a solution to the stress being viewed as the problem and emotion-focused coping comes with the belief that stress is beyond the individual's control.

Applying this theory to the coping mechanisms used by single mothers, the reward of achieving a college degree is a long process and very demanding. To cope, single mothers use mechanisms that provide self-gratification during the waiting process by a pattern of appraisals (Krohne, 2002). This theory is applied towards the challenges single mothers face in response to coping with poverty related issues (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Social workers can assist by recognizing the barriers and providing resources to help alleviate stress among college students that are single mothers.

Summary

This study examined coping mechanisms utilized by single mothers pursuing higher education. Poverty, childcare, and support systems all play a significant role when a single mother decides to better her life by attending college. Intersectionality Theory and Lazarus' Stress Theory can help social workers understand the different intersections that can affect this specific population and how the single mothers cope with the stress. This study adds to the literature review by providing examples of how individuals cope with the stress of being a single mom in addition to the stress of being a college student.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study determined the various coping mechanisms used among single mothers and helps to identify barriers they face while obtaining an education. This chapter contains details in completing this study and how it was carried out. The following sections will be discussed: Study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the challenges, which affect the lives of many women who have children. This research project is a qualitative exploratory study, since there is a limited amount of research on the topic from the perspective in which social work is studied. The viewpoints in this study are from the single mothers themselves, which will reveal various answers to literature not yet explored in research studies. There were individual interviews were conducted and developed from open-ended questions as the tool for collecting data from human subjects.

An important quality in this study was using an exploratory and qualitative approach with personal interviews, because their answers provided greater detail. A qualitative design allowed for opportunities for personal experience to be

a part of the research study. In review of other research studies, the need for social work practice through the perspective of the client's needs, has rarely been conducted before. The research approach used in this study allowed for participants to identify the barriers and challenges they are faced with.

Furthermore, the participants had the opportunity to react to those external factors affecting their educational opportunity. The individual interviews allowed participants to provide rich and detailed experiences of their personal struggles and barriers.

The limitation of using personal interviews was they are more intrusive rather than conducting survey collections. Each participant was expected to be open and honest with their answers to the interview questions. This might cause the participants to not fully give a detailed answer of their experiences because they feel uncomfortable about sharing private information. They also may have felt threatened to answer the questions truthfully in case there are experiences which might be private in nature. In addition, qualitative data determined the barriers between single motherhood and education. Therefore, the findings of this study did not cause any type of stereotypical viewpoints regarding the coping mechanisms which are used in a human response to stressful situations.

Sampling

This study used a non-probability purposive sampling, specifically snowball sampling of women who are not married with children in the pursuit of

higher education, in the San Bernardino and Riverside county area. This study consisted of n=10 single women who have full custody or partial custody of their children, and parenting children who are younger than 18 years old. Single mothers were either single, divorced or separated for their marital status. In order to be recruited for the study, single mothers were also required to be seeking higher education through a California education system.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data was collected through in-person interviews from January 2019 to March 2019. Interviews were conducted in a public and secure location to ensure the safety of the participants. The data collection consisted of face-to-face interviews, which started with an introduction of the study and consent of information form signed by willing participants. Demographic information was collected prior to the beginning of each individual interview. This demographic information consists of race/ethnicity, age, achieved educational level, number of children, whether or not they have a support system, and religious beliefs.

The next issue that is to be addressed is the type of coping mechanisms in which single mothers use while attending school, to address the challenges faced in these circumstances. The researchers conducted the interviews using the interview guide as outlined in Appendix B. The individual interview guide is a tool that was developed to work specifically for this study. The purpose of the interview guide was to elicit information from single mothers so that unique

insight is determined by the answers to the interview questions. Finally, specific questions were asked to better help social workers understand the needs and challenges of single mothers in education to help better develop programs to help children and families.

Procedures

The data for this study was gathered through face-to-face interviews. Data collection began taking place in January 2019. Researchers contacted any acquaintances that met the qualifications for this study. The participants referred any additional individuals that they knew who met the criteria. Each participant came to a mutual agreement with the researchers in setting up a meeting date and time. A quiet location that was convenient for the participant was chosen to conduct the interview. The researchers explained in detail the purpose of the study to each participant and provided Informed Consent. The researchers asked a series of opened ended questions during the interview.

Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of each participant was kept confidential. Prior to the interview each participant was provided with an Informed Consent form (Appendix A), explaining the purpose, duration, risks and benefits. Furthermore, the Informed Consent stated the role of participant within the study as well as the rights of being a volunteer. The confidentiality and anonymity was protected by

not requiring the participant to sign their name on the Informed Consent form. An X in the place of the participant's name is sufficient and each participant was referred to numerically for transcription purposes. Furthermore, the audio recordings of interviews and transcripts were kept in a password-protected computer that only the researchers had access to. Once data analysis was completed the audio recordings, transcripts and any other documents were properly destroyed.

Data Analysis

All data was collected during the face-to-face interviews will be analyzed using content analysis. The information received through audio recordings was transcribed into a written form upon conclusion of the interview process. All non-verbal forms of communication were noted during the interview, as well. Furthermore, data that had similar meanings were grouped together. Moreover, descriptive statistics was used to identify the demographics of all respondents. These statistics consisted of ethnicity, culture, age, number of children and achieved education level.

Emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights and understanding were identified during the analysis. The researchers read and reread transcripts until they were able to obtain all answers from the audio recordings. There were several common themes that researchers anticipated to identify, first, the need of more resources provided by the college. Second, accessible and more affordable

child care for students on a low income. Lastly, it was expected that support systems impact the coping mechanisms utilized by the student.

Summary

This study was designed to examine the different coping mechanisms that single mothers utilize while pursuing higher education. The research method that was utilized is a qualitative design with in depth face-to-face interviews. Using snowball sampling of acquaintances, ten single mothers that are currently attending college were selected to participate. The interview questions were open-ended questions, in order to receive content rich feedback. Each individual was provided with an Informed Consent and a debriefing form. Furthermore, all audio data collected was transcribed and analyzed, then later destroyed to protect the confidentiality of all participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This study explores the coping mechanisms and barriers experienced by single mothers who are pursuing higher education. Unique information was gathered from all participants but several common themes emerged. The succeeding section presents a description of participants and provides a narrative from the participants' perspectives. The participants were asked approximately seventeen questions regarding coping skills, support systems, barriers faced, financial concerns, childcare, and struggles associated with single motherhood in general.

Sample Description

This sample included ten female participants in this study. The age range for these participants is 26 to 37 years old. These women were individually interviewed on different days. During the beginning of the interview, each participant filled out a demographic questionnaire comprised of the following information: age, race/ethnicity, county of residence, attending/attended type of college, and how many children they have. Participants were asked open-ended questions to illicit responses regarding single motherhood, education and coping mechanisms used.

The majority of participants were of a Hispanic descent with 90% and one 10% Caucasian participant. In terms of education, one participant was from a trade school, two were from a community college. For four-year college, a total of three participants had this level of education. There were four participants who were students in graduate or professional school. As previously discussed, the single mothers in this study met the requirement of not being of married status, and has a child of 0-18 years old.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics

	N	%	M
Age			30.3
Race/Ethnicity			
Latina	9	90%	
Caucasian	1	10%	
Education			
Vocational College	1	10%	
Graduate/Professional	4	40%	
Four-year College	3	30%	
Community College	2	20%	
Number of children	19		1.9
County of Residence			

San Bernardino County	6	60%
Riverside County	4	40%

Qualitative Results

A thematic analysis was conducted. The themes that emerged include: childcare, time management, financial concerns, and support systems, coping in both maladaptive and adaptive forms. The following will provide details obtained during interviews in regards to each theme that emerged.

Childcare

Participants were asked about some of the challenges they undergo as a single mother, most of them responded with the dilemma of struggling with childcare. The interviews revealed many participants experience similar dilemmas when they had to be in class at a certain time, and finding accurate day care facilities that are affordable and available. Mostly all participants stated that childcare is one of the most difficult challenges they face. One participant stated that:

“One person is the mom and the dad. So, the sole provider of our children, and then it's hard to just pay for the classes to get in the classes, plus the books and supplies, and then you have your children's supplies and their things and then child care because to get into childcare, you must meet the requirements (participant 1, personal communication, Feb 7, 2019).”

Some participants expressed that childcare is not affordable for a single mother. Several participants agreed with the participants' statement above, they shared that there are many stipulations that prevent single mothers from qualifying for government funded childcare programs. By not having accessible child care it makes it difficult for single mothers to attend classes and to have devoted time to complete homework.

Time

Participants were asked questions regarding time management and balance between school, work, and parenthood. Mostly all participants answered to the fact they had time constraints, which limited them with class choices when it came time to register. Finding time to do homework was something that several participants shared was something they struggled with. One participant stated:

“Finding time to study, if I need to say something like, hey, I need to study for this test. If she was in daycare, they only give you the time that you're in class to out and they don't give, you know, extra study time. I need more than 30 minutes. Because by time it gets somewhere and actually start getting into it. 30 minutes is nothing (participant 4, personal communication, May 12, 2019).”

Another participant stated:

“I just take it day by day (participant 5, personal communication, Feb 12, 2019).”

Many participants stated that as a single mother they have many responsibilities in addition to attending college. Working and taking children to extracurricular activities are two examples of activities they also need to fit into their busy schedules.

Financial

Participants were asked several questions regarding financial hardships faced by single mothers who desire to have a college degree. One of the major barriers faced by single mothers is financial instability. One participant explained:

“Financial struggles because their father is not financially supportive.

Finding a babysitter when it comes to working and going to school. Also being my only source of income (participant 4, personal communication, Feb 12, 2019).”

Some participants shared that they still have to live at home with their parents because they are unable to financially afford to live off one income. Participants also commented on how outrageous rent prices are and how at this point they just cannot afford to pay rent on their own. One participant stated:

“I feel like California is financially so hard to like, move out right now. or rent a place like there's no way I can afford any of them it's way too expensive. So to me it so hard financially to be a single mom. I feel like we need more resources as single moms in order to survive (participant 7, personal communication, Feb 15, 2019).”

Another participant said:

“I know that I need to go to school to ever afford to live on my own. So I don’t have a choice (participant 3, personal communication, Feb 10, 2019).”

All participants mentioned financial strains in one area or another. Participants explained how financially difficult it is on them to be a single parent. The participants are attending college in order to better their future to ensure they are able to financially take care of their children.

Support Systems

Participants stated the types of support systems they are currently utilizing and how they are helpful to them. Many mothers commented on how difficult it is for them to attend classes and also meet their children's school schedules. Several participants shared that their families are a great support system. One participant stated:

“So I am fortunate that I have my parents, my sisters who help me and support me because without them. I don't think I could make it through college, really (participant 6, personal communication, Feb 14, 2019).”

Furthermore, another participant shared:

“My parents definitely help me one hundred percent with him. My mom a big supporter, like one hundred percent (participant 9, personal communication, Feb 21, 2019)”

Several participants placed a strong emphasis on how much their family has supported them through their journey of being in college.

In addition to family, several participants mentioned that after school programs were a helpful support system. One participant stated:

“Her school offers and the Boys and Girls Club, after before and aftercare, and I signed up for it. (participant 5, personal communication, Feb 12, 2019).”

Additionally, another participant shared:

“I utilize after school program think together. So think together has been like a lifesaver for me, because I'm not able to pick my kids up at 2:12 when they get out of school. So they're able to go there for free until I get off. Without them I don't know how I would have been able to do it throughout all these years (participant 9, personal communication, Feb 21, 2019).”

The participant explained how without the help of free after school programs, they do not know how they would be able to get through college.

Stigma

The participants were asked questions regarding the way they perceive any stigmas society can have towards single mothers. Some of the participants expressed the term of, “single mother” having a negative connotation to the term used with regards to gaining an education. One of the participants expressed during the interview this following statement,

“ I think society thinks that women aren't capable that we're fragile in something that's ability or crippling that it's not something we, we can do

but we have to do so it's, I think they view us as like a sad case, basically
(participant 3, personal communication, Feb 10, 2019).”

Furthermore, several participants in the study expressed difficulty with Latina culture background with regards to being a woman and seeking an education. These stigmas and stereotypes are relevant in addressing certain beliefs and barriers, which create challenges for education. One participant stated:

“I think there's a lot of cultural challenges just because, for example, my mother doesn't agree with the fact that I'm going to school she thinks I should just stop going to school and be a parent and work hard for my kids
(participant 2, personal communication, Feb 07, 2019).”

Some participant’s felt that single mothers do receive the recognition that they deserve for all that they do as a single mother.

Lack of Resources at College

Researchers’ asked participants to identify how social workers help provide assistance for single mothers to help them achieve their educational goals. Many participants felt that resources are not being advertised enough; therefore the participants are not aware of services that may assist them while attending college. One participant stated:

“I think a lot of the programs, a lot of people don't know about. I think better advertisement on what resources there are because no one knows. And better advertisement on what a social worker can assist people with
(participant 4, personal communication, Feb 12, 2019).”

Based on the information gathered, many single mothers are unaware of the different resources and programs that are available to single mothers.

Several participants felt there are no resources available to single mothers on their college campus. Additionally, they felt that if there were such resources available it would make obtaining an education manageable. Participants shared detailed examples of what resources would be beneficial to single mothers at college campuses. For example this participant said:

“I feel like more support actually on campus. Like a room where like, single moms can go in, there's like social workers on staff. And they can have support for like textbooks. We can check them out and like use them in the room, if you're in a designated area where there's like other single moms going through the same things, you're more likely to find out about more resources. They can offer support groups or something so we can learn different techniques on how they get their studying done (participant 9, personal communication, Feb 21, 2019).”

This participant offered valuable insight as to how social workers can provide college campus based resources to single mothers. Furthermore, other participants mentioned that social workers could offer counseling resources at the college that are specifically aimed towards single mothers. One participant explained how the government should create more programs that will assist single mother getting a college degree.

Coping

Adaptive. Participants were asked questions regarding various adaptive coping mechanisms they utilized. Adaptive coping mechanisms include either character traits of resilience or healthy methods to deal with stress management. Mostly all the participants had a healthy balance of adaptive coping mechanisms they utilize. Many of the participants stated they exercise as a method of adaptive coping to deal with stress in their life. They expressed emotions of relief when effectively dealing with stress in a positive way. The following quote from one of the participants stated:

“I try to exercise, big emphasis on try. So I tried to exercise as much as possible just to relieve some of that stress, it helps (participant 1, personal communication, Feb 07, 2019).”

Another participant shared:

“So the gym is a really big part of my life. Like it kind of gets my mind right. I'm able to focus when I'm done and then I'm like okay (participant 7, personal communication, Feb 15, 2019).”

The responses of some of the participants expressed they dealt with stress by reading spiritual books, or utilizing the gym at their college. Participants also expressed their children were a source of using an effective coping mechanism. They explained in some parts of the interview that going out for ice cream or theme parks with their kids made them feel better about their stress levels. Another response from this study concluded with using music as a

therapy intervention to help promote serenity and empowerment. This participant expressed using music as an outlet for adaptive coping,

“Music has been a really big part of me. I listened to songs and I try to get the breakdowns of them. I play my own songs. I don't look at it as a negative, I look at it as I'm empowering (participant 1, personal communication, Feb 07, 2019).”

Maladaptive. Some of the participants shared the experience of utilizing maladaptive coping mechanisms in order to cope with stress. Maladaptive coping mechanisms are considered to relieve stress temporarily but fail to directly address the problems. Mostly all participants stated they use For example one participant stated that in order to cope she smokes marijuana, and that helps calm her down.

“I just get me time, I have to put time away for just me. If I don't, I feel like I'm going to go insane. My biggest thing I do is I smoke weed to deal with my stress (participant 2, personal communication, Feb 07, 2019).”

Some of the participants in this study stated that they enjoyed alcohol as a coping mechanism used to help relax from stress. For example one participant stated:

“Always, alcohol. The sense of not thinking when you're using alcohol. You are obviously not in your right state of mind so I forget about financial stress and stress from my parents, and not being able to just take on all the burden of their dad not being there to help me and help financially. It

just doesn't feel like everything is all on me at the time (participant 7, personal communication, Feb 15, 2019)."

Participants expressed how the maladaptive coping mechanisms such as alcohol and marijuana assist them in coping with all the stressor of being a single mother. Moreover, each common theme that emerged throughout the interviews contributed to the amount of stress that the single mothers had to cope with.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The following chapter discusses the findings, which were presented in the previous chapter four. Additionally, this chapter explains the limitations of this study, recommendations for future social work practice, and policy and future research studies. This chapter culminates with a conclusion regarding the importance of meeting the needs of single mothers while they're pursuing a college degree.

Discussion

The intention of this study was to explore the various coping mechanisms utilized by single mothers who are progressing towards a college degree or have earned a college degree. There were many themes which occurred during this research study including; childcare, time management, financial barriers, support systems, stigma attached to single motherhood, lack of resources at college, and coping mechanisms used- both adaptive and maladaptive. The qualitative responses of the ten participants in this study provided researchers with a descriptive idea of the systemic barriers and the single mother's resiliency towards those systematic oppression. The responses provided by each participant explored the willingness to seek an education to provide financial

stability to their children. For example, the majority of participants expressed common stressors, which are associated with financial burdens of raising children with a limited income.

The most popular theme in this study was childcare, and associated costs related to childcare. Throughout the process of the interviews, all of the participants expressed childcare was their main barrier towards their education. Trepal, Stinchfield, & Haivasoso (2013), explain in their study that many educational opportunities for single mothers become limited because of the lack of a childcare resource. Single mothers working toward an education are often left without financial or emotional support. The participants expressed their challenges with obtaining childcare during their school hours and with their children school hours. Several of the participants expressed how having an after-school program from their children as being one of the major helpful resources towards achieving their educational goals.

Another major theme within this research study was financial burden associated with single mothers having the responsibility of being the sole provider of the household. According to Broussard, Joseph & Thompson (2012), more than 42% of single mothers live in poverty in the United States. The participants expressed how their financial burdens have increased with the struggle of earning a college degree, and so have their levels of stress. Thus, participants of this study shared with the researched how they've developed various coping mechanisms attributed to single motherhood and education. It

could be noted from this study, that both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms have both been effective strategies to achieve success. In support of this study, Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried (2013), propose that coping mechanisms are utilized to control the emotional imbalance caused by stress.

Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed feeling like escaping the burden of stress upon them at times. They identified with their peers who are also college students, and almost felt as if they had another life as a mother. These findings from the study support research regarding intersectionality theory, according to Hutchinson (2013). The majority of participants (90%) self-identified as Latina, which allowed the expression of identity as a mother, student and woman of color.

This study also determined that the support systems utilized by the participants are composed of family, friends, schools, and community. This finding was significant for the study because research suggests that having a strong support system is one of the most important factors to a single mother, according to Son & Bauer (2010). Almost all of the participants explained how much their support systems influence the outcome of their educational success. The participants who lived with their parents found it helpful both for emotional and financial support. They explained how they are grateful for their children's grandparents being involved as a supportive factor in their children's lives.

Furthermore, the research study determined that participants demonstrated great resilience in uncontrollable life situations. A few of the participants explained they experienced emotional stress caused by the absence of their children's father. This relates to the research presented in terms of single mothers experiencing mental and physical stress according to studies by Broussard, Joseph & Thompson (2012). The strength and perseverance to succeed in obtaining a college degree outweighed the respondent's adversities they have experienced. Thus, single educated mothers show enormous strength and success in obtaining their goals.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The first limitation is a lack of ethnic diversity among participants. As previously mentioned, 90% of the participants in this study were Latina. Therefore, the findings in this study may not adequately represent other ethnic groups. Another limitation of this study is the small sample size. The study was comprised of ten participants. Due to the small sample size, it may not be a representative of all single mothers attending college. Additionally, the participants were chosen using a non-probability snowball sample. Thus, participants may have been reluctant to provide true answers due to fear of judgment and stigma.

Lastly, the researchers' did not provide participants a clear definition of the term single mom, as it applies in this study. It would have been beneficial for the

researchers to identify the difference between the term single mom and a mom who is single when recruiting participants. For the purposes of this study, a single mom is referring to a mother that is raising her children with no support from the other parent. On the other hand, a mom that is single refers to a mother that is no longer in a relationship with their child's father but the father is still actively involved in the child's life. The study was intended to focus on single mothers. Although there were several limitations of this study presented, there are many contributions to social work, which will be presented in the following section.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

This study allowed for researchers' to gain insight on the coping mechanisms utilized by single mothers and the barriers they are faced with while trying to attend college. The study aimed to provide information on how social workers can assist single mothers attending college. Based on the findings of this study there are several implications for the field of social work practice, policy and research.

Practice

The findings of this study indicated that there is a lack of support on campuses for single mothers. It is vital for social workers to offer services on college campuses in order for single mothers to successfully graduate. For example, social workers can provide campus-based supportive services. An on campus resource room that is specifically designed for single mothers would

greatly benefit this population. The resource room can be staffed by social workers that can offer support groups, coping skills group, parenting classes and individual counseling services. By social workers offering these types of services in a campus setting, they are empowering single mothers and equipping them with positive coping mechanisms in order to overcome the previously mentioned barriers. Moreover, based on the results, participants were unaware of many of the services and programs that are available to single mothers. It is important that social worker advertise their services by posting flyer on the bulletin boards around campus. By social workers engaging in community outreach, they would be able to advertise their services and recruit single mothers.

Policy

As evidenced by this study, there are not enough policies in place that provide funding to programs that assist single mothers in college. With almost half of the population of children belonging to single mothers living in poverty, it must be said that facilitating the educational goals of this population will be beneficial to generations to come. Also, the education earned by single mothers can be passed onto their children by setting an example for them to set goals that can be obtained. We believe this study demonstrates how important an education can be to the population of underserved individuals who are at risk of falling through the holes of systematic oppression.

It is essential for social workers to vote for individuals in office that have values that align with social work values. Thus, programs will be created that

offer childcare assistance and affordable housing assistance. As indicated in the results, childcare is one of the biggest challenges faced. Single mothers report challenges with the requirements of qualifying for childcare assistance. It is essential for social workers to evaluate the programs and make necessary changes. Additionally, affordable housing was a barrier identified in this study. Social workers must advocate for programs that will provide low-income housing for single mothers attending college. Furthermore, such programs can potentially alleviate a great amount of stress for single mothers to fully focus on obtaining a college degree.

Research

Based on the results of this study, further research is needed on this topic. There have been limited studies on single mothers, and especially in an educational setting. Researchers observed during this study that many of the existing articles were outdated, and there are few current studies. Future research could also expand on long term studies involving following these families post education, and the outcomes of these children who did not have to grow up in poverty because they had the opportunity of an education. Furthermore, these studies can also be researched in terms of studying the resiliency of single mothers in providing for their children, in terms of utilizing coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to explore the various coping mechanisms utilized by single mothers in education. The data in this study was gathered from ten participants who are single mothers, and earning an educational degree and have been successful. Single mothers were asked questions regarding their experiences and struggles faced while obtaining a college degree. The results of this research study support previous research studies, which indicates the need for supportive services to assist women in the pursuit of upward mobility in society. Additionally, the importance of this study could suggest improvements for systems in place, which can potentially limit opportunities to rise above oppression.

The study results suggested there are many realistic challenges according to the single mothers' experiences. Additionally, personal choice of coping mechanisms have proven successful for graduating college. The study also suggests the need for policy reform to help future generations navigate educational systems and provide opportunities to limit the number of children growing up in poverty in America.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT



Academic Affairs
School of Social Work

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407
909.537.5501 | fax: 909.537.7029
<https://csbs.csusb.edu/social-work>

California State University, San Bernardino
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee
APPROVED 1/18/2019 VOID AFTER 1/17/2020
IRB# SW1926 CHAIR Janet Chang

Informed Consent

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the coping mechanisms used by single mothers who are pursuing a college degree. The study is being conducted by Natasha Maness and Kristina Munoz, both graduate students, under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang and Dr. Erica Lizano professors in the School of Social Work at California State University San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the use of coping mechanism among single mothers who are seeking a college degree and their needs to improve education achievement.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked general demographic questions and questions regarding their needs and challenges of caring for their children as a single mother, their coping mechanisms, and their social support while obtaining a college degree.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take about 45 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: There will not be any unforeseeable risks to the participants, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Janet Chang, Professor, School of Social Work at JChang@csusb.edu or (909) 537-5784.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2019.

I agree to be audio recorded: YES NO
This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

_____ Place an X mark here

_____ Date

The California State University • Bakersfield • Channel Islands • Chico • Dominguez Hills • East Bay • Fresno • Fullerton • Humboldt • Long Beach • Los Angeles
Maritime Academy • Monterey Bay • Northridge • Pomona • Sacramento • SAN BERNARDINO • San Diego • San Francisco • San Jose • San Luis Obispo • San Marcos • Sonoma • Stanislaus

APPENDIX B
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee

Researcher(s) Natasha Mares & Kristina Hurst

Proposal Title Coping Mechanisms Utilized by Single Mothers

in college
SW1921

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

Proposal is:

approved

to be resubmitted with revisions listed below

to be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

faculty signature missing

missing informed consent debriefing statement

revisions needed in informed consent debriefing

data collection instruments missing

agency approval letter missing

CITI missing

revisions in design needed (specified below)

Javier Chavez

Committee Chair Signature

1/12/2019

Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. What are some challenges you undergo as single mother?
2. In which ways does being a single mother limit your opportunities in higher education?
3. What current support systems do you utilize? (Family, friends, social networks, childcare centers, parenting classes, any support groups).
4. How have the support systems been helpful to you as a single mother?
5. What coping mechanism do you utilize to deal with the absence of your child/children's father?
6. Have you used any alcohol and/or illegal drugs to cope with the stressor of being a single mom and a college student?
7. How financially difficult is it to be a single mother in the United States?
8. What current struggles do you face as a single mother while trying to achieve a college degree?
9. How do you perceive the way in which society takes into regards with you being a single mother?
10. What is the most difficult challenge you face being a single mother in college?
11. How can social workers help provide assistance for single mothers to help them achieve their educational goals?
12. When you are feeling overwhelmed with all the responsibilities of single motherhood who do you turn to?
13. What is your understanding of coping skills?
14. How do you cope with stress of homework, motherhood, and school?
15. How do you manage balancing out school and motherhood?

16. Have you ever felt overwhelmed with your responsibilities and what did you do?

17. How effective have you been with your coping mechanisms?

Developed by: Natasha Maness and Kristina Munoz

APPENDIX D
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Questionnaire

Ethnicity: African America Caucasian Asian Hispanic/Latina

How old are you? : _____

County of Residence: San Bernardino County Riverside County Other _____Currently Attending/Attended Type of College: community college 4- year college
graduate/professional Technical college

How many children do you have? _____

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two-person project in which the authors collaborated together during the entire process of conducting this study. However, for the project there were assigned responsibilities delegated to each author. The assigned responsibilities were distributed in the following manner below.

1. Data Collection:

Team Effort: Natasha Maness & Kristina Munoz

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team Effort: Natasha Maness & Kristina Munoz

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

- a. Introduction and Literature:

Team Effort: Natasha Maness & Kristina Munoz

- b. Methods:

Team Effort: Natasha Maness & Kristina Munoz

- c. Results:

Team Effort: Natasha Maness & Kristina Munoz

- d. Discussion:

Team Effort: Natasha Maness & Kristina Munoz