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# Changing the Game: The Continuous Adaptation of Resilient Single Mothers

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**Abstract** This paper explores theoretical and conceptual developments in our understanding of resilience as these apply to single mother-led families. Rather than the earlier and simpler notion that resilience implied 'bouncing back' we suggest, consistent with work by other resilience scholars, that the varied demonstrations of resilience are a 'changing of the game'. By this we mean that resilience involves the creation of new outcomes, or, new ways of being through constant adaptation. Further, we argue this transformation to resilient ways of being occurs across all categories of resilience. This is a significant contribution of this work as we submit that even for those single mothers who appear to be just coping, their behaviours manifest significant and strategic adaptation. This important finding suggests critically new and important ways in which the life experiences and adaptive responses of single mothers should be perceived. The findings and analyses offered here derive from feminist, participatory research with 18 single mothers in focus groups and 20 in semi-structured interviews. Following the requisite ethics review processes and ensuring the confidentiality of all data, we utilized this extensive data set to examine these mothers' responses to their experiences of adversity. These included the transitions associated with family break up, solo parenting, the stigma associated with being a single mom, loss of financial security (which often necessitated social assistance receipt) and for some, coping with abuse-induced trauma. Based on these findings, we offer policy and practice implications in relation to lone mothers and their families. Among others

are suggestions that social workers and other frontline practitioners better recognize and appreciate the achievements that might be demonstrated by 'just coping' and policy changes that support families through family break up.

**Keywords** Resilience, Single Mothers, Poverty, Feminist Research, Abuse, Social Assistance

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## 1. Introduction

Many single mothers in Canada experience significant hardship and adversity. This adversity can take many forms, including abuse, addiction, poor health, limited social support and often sustained poverty and deprivation. For example, single mother households are much more likely to experience poverty than single father households. Approximately 34.5% of single mothers live have an adjusted income that is less than half the national median, compared to 13.7% of single fathers [1]. How single mothers' responses to adversity are understood, particularly in relation to resilience, have important policy and practice implications for social workers. Social workers may engage with single mothers through various systems and organizations, including income support programs, child welfare, supportive housing, mental health services and the shelter system. As such, understanding what resilience looks like in the lives of single mothers

better equips social workers to recognize and support its development. Such understanding is also important in contesting the too-ready mother-blaming that occurs when professionals and the public fail to appreciate the ways that growth and change may be nuanced, but still present for families under stress.

This paper seeks to elucidate and detail the changes made in the life circumstances of a panel of single mothers, assessing these against the commonly utilized categorizations of resilient behaviour in the current literature (to be discussed immediately hereafter). Our goal is to understand and parse in a carefully nuanced manner how we should assess the resilience – or lack thereof – in families that appear not to make large gains, who seemingly continue to struggle. Can such behaviours be considered to manifest resilience and if so, under what conditions?

A further consideration is warranted as we discuss the lives of low income and vulnerable single mothers and the absence, or presence, of resilient behaviours that lead to good outcomes. Much of what is considered to represent such an outcome has a great deal to do with the imposition of middle-class values and expectations on poor families. Thus, although we take up and analyze good outcomes, it is also our goal to recognize the place of choice, opportunity, and values in shaping what good looks like.

## 2. Coping VS. Resilience

In the face of incredible adversity, some single mothers' responses appear to be extraordinary in their ability to "beat the odds", while others are seen merely to "manage" or "cope". This reflects a particular understanding, whereby "resilience" and "coping" may be distinguished from one another. Williams [2] makes such a distinction in her work with teen sex workers who experienced a lack of shelter and nutritious food, and were regularly at risk of violence. She suggested that the teens efforts to meet their basic needs demonstrated "survival focused coping" rather than resilience. Similarly, Keller suggests that while coping refers to specific efforts to manage stressful demands, a successful outcome or adaptation is a critical component of resilience [3, p. 31], just managing is not a manifestation of resilience. Mackay [4] meanwhile, argues that while "coping" is often used to represent competence and resilience, coping, competence, and resilience are seen to have different meanings. For example, Compas et al. propose that coping "refers to adaptive responses to stress, competence refers to the characteristics that are needed for successful adaptation, and resilience is reflected in outcomes where competence and coping have been displayed" (as cited in [4], p. 105). Thus, the literature appears to suggest that adaptation in relation to coping refers to the ability to manage stress, while in relation to resilience, it is understood to result in the production of

new and different outcomes.

Masten, Best, and Garmezy [5] ascribe resilience to three kinds of phenomena, namely good outcomes despite high-risk status, recovery from trauma, and sustained competence under threat; and later work by Masten [6] also suggested a fourth type of resilience, "positive transformation". More recent research continues to cite similar resilience pathways in response to acute trauma, though perhaps with different terminology; for example, stress resistance, breakdown with recovery, and post-traumatic growth [7], [8].

Our own work supports the identification of these as key pathways but this research data suggests the need for acknowledging an additional pathway that we describe as "overcoming a setback". This is further described in our findings and discussion but derives from analyses of data that suggest that the protective factors associated with a secure, socially and economically privileged upbringing sufficiently endure such that even an experience of extreme adversity seems to be more readily overcome. This is of course consistent with much research on families and family systems [9], [10], [11].

Within these typologies, "sustained competence under threat" is understood to mean "coping", and thus resilience is seen to include more than just extraordinary responses to adversity, but also the small steps in managing the complexities of life. Indeed, Masten suggests "That resilience is made of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes offers a more positive outlook on human development and adaptation, as well as direction for policy and practice" (9, p. 277). Similarly, Canvin, Marttila, Burstrom, and Whitehead [12] suggest that resilience can be demonstrated by the continued ability to cope with ongoing difficulty and disadvantage. Ungar [13] and Rudzinski, McDonough, Garner, and Strike [14] further suggest that adaptive behaviours can be understood not only in relation to major traumatic life events, but also ongoing, small stresses. Thus, an alternate understanding of resilience suggests that it includes both processes of "coping" with, and "overcoming" adversity.

As with our earlier reference to and recognition that a determination of what constitutes a good outcome is value laden, so too are our expectations about what overcoming adversity should look like. A short vignette follows illustrating the significant adversity experienced by a single mother about which experience we inquire: Was her response a demonstration of resilience – or merely coping – and at what point is the ability to sustain such coping in the midst of hardship a demonstration of resilience?

*Mary was partnered with a much older man and they relied on his modest pension income and her small earnings from a minimum wage job. She became pregnant and subsequently delivered a daughter, June who had myriad and significant health issues. Mary's partner left suddenly and unbeknownst to Mary, their apartment was already several months in rent arrears. Her daughter*

*required numerous surgeries, needs a feeding tube and almost round the clock care. They were subsequently evicted and spent several months in a shelter. Mary went on social assistance which barely covered their ordinary expenses let alone those required for her daughter's care. Now, 4 years later, Mary lives with June in two rooms in a rooming house, sharing a kitchen and bathroom. She carries June up and down two flights of stairs. She lives on income support and loves and cherishes her daughter, working closely with professionals to develop her daughter's cognitive skills. Mary has taken numerous courses to help her care for and support her daughter and has a special tutor work with June 3 days a week. In spite of very negative medical prognoses, June has some mobility and is developing speech. Although Mary's housing conditions are far from ideal, she feels that they allow her to direct her limited resources to helping her daughter from whom she feels she gains her strength.*

We will return to Mary's story in our discussion but offer this vignette here to engage readers' consideration of the issues thus far discussed.

### 3. Transformation & "Changing the Game"

The perspective that coping is a type of resilience can be further extended if it is also understood to be a form of adaptation that results in the production of new outcomes, and not just the management of stress and stressful circumstances. A Hurricane Katrina exhibit entitled "Changing the Game", viewed by one of the authors in New Orleans shortly after the disaster, offers this perspective on adaptation:

*Resilience means the ability to return to a prior form. But when communities experience trauma, such as a war or natural disaster rarely do they return precisely to their former way of life. More often people adapt, debate, innovate and try new approaches as they reconstruct their lives. They change the game.*

Although this quote refers to a community's capacity to change and reconstruct after a natural disaster, we suggest that the notion of "changing the game" is a useful way to consider resilient responses. In this view, resilience entails adaptation whereby individuals strategize and debate options, and explore new approaches to cope with adversity. Doing so reflects resilience, and further, a transformation whereby individuals do not simply "bounce back" from adversity and return to what they were before, but constantly change and evolve. This, along with the debate between coping and resilience, highlights the value of conducting further resilience research, particularly with under-researched groups, such as single mothers [15].

### 4. Methodology

This study examined resilience among immigrant and Canadian-born single mothers living in poverty. It drew upon earlier research (2005-2010) conducted as part of five-year Community University Research Alliance (CURA), "Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion"<sup>1</sup>, and involved new data collection with 38 single mothers in three cities across Canada: St. John's, Toronto, and Vancouver. The three communities provided an opportunity to examine issues of cultural and ethnic diversity, important to the understanding of how minority status may be a factor in the experiences of single mothers. A major aspect of the previous and current research initiatives was a combined focus on research and advocacy, and the grounding of the work in a feminist, participatory methodology.

Firstly, we reviewed the interview data from the CURA project and selected only interview data from women who completed three of the four interviews. We believed that the longitudinal data was important to see the interplay of adversity and resilience over time. This reduced the original sample of 104 single mothers to 70.

We then invited 18 women who were involved in the CURA project to participate in focus groups to explore the meaning of resilience. This sampling was shaped to ensure broad demographic representation as well as the inclusion of participants who would be able to contribute to assisting the researchers in defining resilience and constructing a user friendly, understandable interview guide. Most (14) of these women were research assistants in the CURA study, and invited to participate in the focus groups because they had the combined perspectives of being low-income single mothers as well as having interviewed single mothers over a five-year period as part of the project. In total five women from Vancouver, six from St. John's, and seven from Toronto participated in the focus groups. The focus groups did not ask or expect participants to disclose personal information about their own experiences but more broadly took a form similar to that of key informants and research advisors.

The findings from the focus groups were used to code the 70 previously selected cases, and also shaped the language and questions employed in the interviews. We convened to develop agreement on which of the single

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<sup>1</sup> Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The research included a national longitudinal study of the implications of labour market and social assistance policy change for the lives of poor single mothers. Guided by a feminist participatory methodology, a longitudinal panel of approximately 110 single mothers in Toronto, St John's, and Vancouver, Canada was established, with interviews occurring every 10-14 months over a five-year period. Single mothers receiving social assistance were selected and trained as Research Assistants, and conducted a majority of the interviews. The single mothers were purposively selected to ensure diverse backgrounds including age, numbers of children, time in receipt of social assistance, newcomers to Canada, and Aboriginal persons. All of the women were receiving social assistance and had at least one child residing with them when they agreed to participate in the research project.

mothers' evidenced signs of resilience, thereby ensuring coder reliability, and selected six cases from each location for a total of 18 resilient cases. As much as possible, our selection ensured diversity by single mother age, location, education, and inclusion of First Nations women, immigrants, and women of colour. In addition, six cases were chosen who appeared to show a lack of resilience at that point in the single mother's life, which were used for comparative and triangulation purposes.

After adhering to university research protocols to ensure ethically sound data collection, data retention and knowledge mobilization processes, we conducted two panels of semi-structured interviews with a total of 20 single mothers in the three sites. The first panel consisted of 15 women (four in St. John's, five in Toronto, and six in Vancouver) whose cases were coded as resilient. As the

single mothers in panel one were receiving social assistance at the time of their inclusion in the CURA project, we developed a second panel of five single mothers in Toronto not receiving social assistance to reduce the likelihood that it alone may shape adversity and resilience, and to better triangulate the research findings. The women on panel two were referred through single mothers associated with the project, informal networks, and the Toronto Employment and Social Services. All participants were carefully advised of their rights, assured of confidentiality, provided with information on support services and signed a consent agreement. All names used are pseudonyms. The interview guide used was similar to that used for panel one, with additional demographic and contextual questions. Tables 1 and 2 below summarize the demographics of the two panels.

**Table 1.** Demographics of Panel One Participants (N= 15)

Ages	Levels of Education	Immigration/Ethnicity	# of Children
21-30 N=4	High School, Some or Complete N=4	Indigenous N=5	One child N=4
31-40 N=3	College, Some or Complete N=6	Canadian born N=5	Two children N=8
>40 N=8	University, Some or Complete N=5	Immigrant N=5 (UK, 1; Middle East, 1; Africa, 1; Asia, 1;	Three children N=3

**Table 2.** Demographics of Panel Two Participants (N= 5)

Ages	Levels of Education	Immigration/Ethnicity	# of Children
21-30 N=2	High School, Some or complete N=0	Indigenous N=1	One child N=4
31-40 N=1	College, Some or Complete N=3	Canadian born N=1	Two children N=8
>40 N=2	University, Some or Complete N=2	Immigrant N=3 (Caribbean 1; Asia, 2)	Three children N=3

Interviews from both panels were approximately 1.5 to 2 hours in length, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data were coded and analyzed using NVivo software for qualitative data management. We developed a common coding tree based both on emergent themes and on previously identified analytic categories. Issues of trustworthiness and accuracy are addressed through triangulation strategies [16], [17], such as co-developed coding themes, multiple participant sources and member checks. Additionally, the use of several different panels of interviews and focus groups strengthened the validity of the findings.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

The findings from this study with single mothers build on current understandings of resilience, which identify resilience pathways in relation to several differing phenomena, including breakdown with recovery, stress resistance, and post-traumatic growth. Masten writes, “[P]eople follow different patterns of adaptation over time, including positive-resistant paths (consistently good function or low symptoms), recovery paths (function improving, symptoms decreasing), and negative or worsening patterns (high or increasing symptoms)” (18, p. 17). We utilize these pathways in our analyses of data from this study but our data also suggest that positive transformation is an inherent aspect of resilience and applies across all resilience pathways. It appears to be noticeably absent only where negative or worsening patterns demonstrate a lack of resilience. We suggest that all individuals who demonstrate successful resilient responses undergo a transformation, and that coping (or sustained competence under threat, or stress resistance), involves adaptation – not just in managing stress – but in producing new “outcomes” or ways of being.

Evidence from this study suggests that coping involves constant debate, adaptation and innovation, which we suggest to be an appropriate way to view the lives of the single mothers in this study. Our data show continuous adaptation, wherein these single mothers must repeatedly find new and creative ways to survive as their circumstances change, which over time, results in the development of new and innovative ways of being. Thus, after experiencing hardship, the single mothers in this study do not return to a prior form, but change the game. This game changing is more readily apparent across the other resilience pathways; however, we argue that it is also present in the lives of single mothers who might be considered to be merely coping.

### 5.1. Overcoming a Setback or Breakdown with Recovery

It is our observation that in some cases, single mothers

experience relatively isolated periods of hardship in otherwise privileged lives. Ann’s story reflects this kind of trajectory; she had a middle-class upbringing and adult life until the dissolution of her marriage. She lived in an upper middle-class neighbourhood and enjoyed her time as a stay-at-home mother. However, after more than two decades of sobriety, her husband began to drink heavily and as a result, she felt forced to leave with their children, able only to find and afford substandard subsidized housing. At one point she begins to let her ex-partner back into their lives, but he shows up drunk one night, hits her for the first time, is charged, and child welfare services becomes involved. Despite this significant setback in her life, she finds her voice and advocates for better living conditions for her family and other tenants, begins volunteering in the community, and accesses a job training program for women. Also, within in a few short years, she secures a full-time job and buys a house and car. Her comments below reflect these positive changes in her life:

*Because I discovered I had a voice...I could start advocating for myself. (Ann, Panel 1, St. John’s)*

*I’m not one paycheque on the borderline of poverty. If you had of asked me that last year I would have said yup, one paycheque and I’m going to be in trouble. But not so much this year. (Ann, Panel 1, St. John’s)*

Ann’s ability to overcome such a setback in her life is clearly indicative of resilience, as well as her ability to change the game. She successfully copes with, and adapts to, her situation by engaging in different strategies to improve her life: leaving a bad relationship, advocating for better living conditions, volunteering in the community, participating in job programs, and securing a full-time job. Her life and that of her children is transformed by these actions, and she herself undergoes a transformation, to resilience. This transformation is in response to hardship and adversity, an idea conveyed by Ann who, in response to what makes one resilient, replied “whatever didn’t kill me actually made me stronger”.

Ann’s experience parallels that of other women in this study who grew up in what one might classify simply as strong, cohesive families. Marion’s experience offers another illustration. She grew up in an economically privileged family with two well educated parents. She has two siblings with whom she was close and her parents frequently organized holidays together with their adult children. Marion married and had three children in quick succession. Her partner became very abusive and Marion hid her circumstances from her friends and extended family. After one of the children went to school badly bruised, children’s services became involved and Marion subsequently left her husband. She went on social assistance, had no contact with her extended family and lived in a series of bad housing arrangements in high-risk neighbourhoods for over a year. She says:

*One day it was like I just woke up. I knew I had to do something. There was almost nothing in the fridge, I*

*slumped around all day looking like hell. I was unhappy, frustrated and failing my children. I knew they weren't having the kind of childhood I had... (Marion, Toronto).*

Marion arranged informal child care, got a job and found new better housing for her family. Only then did she reconnect with her extended family who then provided many additional supports. That sense of knowing she had to do something, feeling sufficient mastery that this was possible and having sufficient prior skills to obtain employment is of course consistent with much resistance scholarship that identifies these as protective factors, [4], [6], [9], [10], [18], [19]. As well, Marion could contrast her children's experience and her parenting with the more successful modelling her parents provided.

Somewhat in contrast to Marion and Ann's experiences and backgrounds, other single mothers in this study including Julie, identified how hardship has enhanced their ability to cope, and made them stronger and more resilient:

*... And it seems that the ones that have had a hard go of it, because I did and you did and my daughter did, too, the ones who don't have the gold spoon in their mouth have a resilience that is lacking with the ones who didn't have to fend for themselves as much, and that's just the truth. (Julie, Toronto).*

While Julie sees her challenging life and upbringing as making her strong and supporting her resilience it does seem that those with the proverbial "gold spoon" more fully overcome life setbacks, including those that may be significant. And, while they may not precisely 'bounce back' in that their experiences of adversity change them, it does appear, based on this small sample, that life post-adversity reveals elements of the privilege with which they grew up. For Ann, this transformation to resilience was evidenced by her ability to overcome a significant setback, though for other resilient single mothers, their transformation was illustrated in their ability to achieve good outcomes despite high-risk status.

## **5.2. Good Outcomes despite High-Risk or Post Traumatic Growth**

Some of the single mothers in this study could be characterized as having "high-risk status" due to such hardships as abuse by parents, partners and ex-partners, addiction, incarceration, and apprehension of children by child welfare authorities. In spite of these challenges, the single mothers within this category persevered and achieved good outcomes in their lives, including post-secondary education and sustainable employment. Erika is one of the single mothers who overcomes significant adversity to achieve positive outcomes. She has struggled on and off with addiction, lost custody of her child due to addiction, and has an ex-partner who is abusive, has addiction issues, and fails to provide child support. However, Erika met these challenges head-on, adapting

and pursuing strategies to improve her circumstances. She fought hard to get 'clean', stay sober, and attend school. Post-graduation, Erika secured a full-time plumbing position as well as subsidized housing, which allows her to purchase her first car and exit social assistance. She describes her success below:

*[My achievements are] overcoming my addiction and I guess after that would be going back to school. I did the orientation in Trades and Technology program for women which led me to, well, I was looking into plumbing before then and it kind of just proved to me that I still wanted to do plumbing, and I guess my main thing now is that I did plumbing and I graduated with honours. There was 25 men in my class and me... And I graduated in the top five in my class, and then I did get a plumbing job almost right away and that's the two—that's the big thing in my life (Erika, Panel 1, St. John's)*

Julie, an Indigenous single mother, has also achieved good outcomes despite her high-risk status. Although she struggled with addiction in the past, spent two years in prison, and has had several abusive relationships in her life, including with her children's father, she has persevered, adapted, and pursued various opportunities to improve her situation. She sought therapy, was admitted to university full-time, and demonstrated resourcefulness in securing academic funding and seeking help to purchase textbooks. Over time, Julie made other positive changes in her life including joining a gym and participating in a women's group for sober living which expanded her social network. Her educational and employment efforts culminate with a part-time position as an addiction counselor, and she also experienced positive changes in her personal life, including a new, healthy relationship. Below Julie speaks to the impact that some of her efforts and this relationship have had in her life:

*He's unbelievable. Absolutely phenomenal. That's only because I made sure this person was the complete and utter opposite of anyone previous in my life, and because of getting therapy and knowing, losing the radar to attract negative people. I don't attract those negative people anymore, so it was many years of just being alone and being comfortable with me. But for me it's been a good experience with the person that I'm with. (Julie, Panel 1, Toronto).*

Again, both Erika's and Julie's experience of achieving good outcomes despite high-risk status reflects resilience, and thus resulted in new ways of being.

## **5.3. Post-Traumatic Growth**

Many of the single mothers in the study experienced significant trauma in their lives, often in the form of one or more types of abuse. Some women experienced abuse in their childhood by family members or neighbours, while others suffered abuse at the hand of intimate partners or

others, in their adult lives. Some have experienced abuse at different times in their life by more than one individual, including verbal, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Despite these varied and often multiple traumas, some of these single mothers appear to be extremely resilient. Suzanne is one such woman who has experienced unimaginable trauma and abuse at different times in her life by different perpetrators. Prior to immigrating to Canada, Suzanne was psychologically and physically abused by her children's father. She also lived through a period of tribal genocide during which she was sexually abused by insurgents and contracted HIV. Her comment describes the abuse she experienced by her husband:

*Unfortunately, he [husband] wasn't that good for me. He was very violent, drinking and playing around with the other women, and so this kind of—I think it was he got it from—because he started working with third [world] countries when he was young before, many years before he met me, and I don't know if you have been in Africa, really to work there, those white people who stay in Africa for many years, they can become very abusive towards Africans. (Suzanne, Panel 1, Vancouver)*

Despite these traumatic experiences, Suzanne overcomes her past and moves forward in her life with her two children. She escapes her husband and immigrates to Canada, obtains social assistance, and becomes a volunteer with an AIDS organization. Over time, she secures a full-time job and her children enrol in post-secondary education. The pride she has in her job and success is evident below:

*Now, I'm working. I'm a settlement counsellor for new immigrants. It's a project funded by the Government of Canada. I'm happy. I think it's something that I like to do because those that I help most of the time are women...I like my job and, thank God, the job gave me back my dignity, gave me back, you know, my pride, and be able—you can't imagine when you have to say, "Here, this is my job. I'll give you my business card," than to say, "I'm on Welfare." (Suzanne, Panel 1, Vancouver)*

Alice shares some similar experiences with Suzanne. She too fled an abusive relationship and immigrated to Canada. However, she has also experienced significant hardship as an immigrant. Her foreign credentials and experience are unrecognized in the Canadian labour market and she is forced to accept low-wage work, and at times rely on social assistance. She is isolated from her family who remain in her country of origin, and offer criticism of her parenting rather than support. She receives no child support from her husband. Nonetheless, Alice continually trains and attempts new positions (personal support worker, aesthetician, and pharmacy assistant), and when these positions fail to work with her childcare and economic needs, she tries something new, looking for employment that works for her and her family. She continues to take English courses while employed to improve her earning

potential. Alice, like many of the single mothers represented here, continually reconstructs her life, and like all the single mothers in this study, surely changed the game.

#### **5.4. Sustained Competence under Threat or Stress Resistance**

Some may not regard the single mothers who fall under this category as resilient because the improvements or steps forward in their lives may be considered insignificant. For single mothers who overcome setbacks, achieve good outcomes despite their high-risk status, and recover from trauma, obtaining higher education and a sustainable job are common outcomes that allow them and their families to move forward. However, coping, as we have suggested, is also a form of resilience that entails not just adaptation in terms of managing stress, but also that which results in new ways of being. Although the single mothers who are coping may not be achieving great outcomes at this point in time, evidence from this study suggests they are continually adapting to their circumstances, fighting for their children, and not giving up. Moreover, they do so in the face of ongoing threat and with few resilience-supporting resources. Thus, we with a growing number of other resilience scholars, contest the more singular idea that the measure of resilience is outcome oriented rather than more fully acknowledging the role of process and progress. It is also an important political point, as it is here that social values and expectations come into play that are more likely to accord resilient status to those who achieve these socially valued good outcomes.

Many of the women in this category have disabilities, addiction or health issues, limited support from family or ex-partners, are unemployed and receiving social assistance, have often experienced difficult childhoods, trauma, or loss, and in several cases, have children with significant special needs. Madison is one such single mother. She became pregnant at 19 and was kicked out of her parent's home without having finished high school. She is isolated from her family and community, has never had a job, has accessed social assistance since her teen years, and has two children on her own, one of whom has a significant disability. Her daughter is blind, non-communicative and requires constant supervision. Children with significant health issues or disabilities can greatly impact single mothers' ability to attend school or maintain a job due to lack of social and home care support. In discussing her life goals, Madison breaks into tears because she has goals and dreams and wants more for herself and for her children. However, her oldest daughter's condition and the lack of childcare provisions leave her "stuck" and unable to do anything to improve her situation. She conveys this struggle below:

*I try not to think about it too much because it upsets me. I would like, would love to just, you know, have a little bit of*



*a life for myself... You know, go to school, get my education, get a job, you know. Feel like I'm contributing to things. I'm not a lazy person and I hate being, you know, stuck home collecting social assistance, but that's my life right now. (Madison, Panel 1, St. John's)*

Despite the significant hardship in her life, Madison perseveres. She is trying to obtain a larger apartment for her family and fights for services for her children. Her perseverance and dedication to her children are reflected in her comments below:

*Just like, never giving up, and just try to do the best, whatever your best is... And that's really, that's what I would think. Just getting through every day and trying your best and making a good situation out of whatever situation you're in. (Madison, Panel 1, St. John's)*

*...and the way I look at it a little bit, they're my children and, you know, my oldest didn't ask to be brought into the world the way that she is [disabled] and, you know, I had just taken it upon myself to become pregnant with her and to have her, so it's my job to do what I can do as best I can for her. (Madison, Panel 1, St. John's)*

Once again, by coping or sustaining their competence, single mothers such as Madison undergo a transformation to an enduring and resilient way of being. They change the game as they continually adapt, debate, and innovate as circumstances in their lives change over time.

We return to the vignette offered earlier where we described Mary's circumstances which share similarities with Madison's story. In both cases these mothers are coping and the very fact that they are coping, that they haven't given up, that they continue to struggle to improve the lives of their children, in whatever small ways, suggests resilience.

With hesitation appropriate to the small scale of this study, we offer some further reflections based on our analyses. It appears that education, even when it is followed by adversity, stood these participants in good stead, both very pragmatically by enabling better access to jobs and other social goods but more ephemerally by broadening their horizons and offering a sense of life's possibilities. As one woman stated "it's the one thing he [abusive ex husband] couldn't take away". This is further evidenced by the demographic data contained in Tables 1 and 2 wherein we see higher levels of education among those Panel Two participants who were recruited without a criterion of having been on social assistance. Overall education stands out as a significant protective factor supporting resilience.

As well, immigrant women, while initially perhaps facing additional challenges, appeared to be more willing and adept at taking advantage of available resources and putting them to effective use. For this demographic there did not appear to be a difference between immigrant participants in Panel One and Panel Two. The small scale of this study precludes further broad generalizations and

more research to better parse the processes by which low-income single moms 'changed the game' is warranted.

## 6. Policy and Practice Implications

This small study's findings broaden our current conceptualizations of resilience. This has implications for the discursive constructions of poor single mothers that shape public and social service workers' judgements, and also shape how single mothers view themselves. While single mothers who evidence stress resistance might be regarded as resilient, their creativity, problem-solving, and resourcefulness may not be recognized because the gains they make, if any, are more limited. However, examining and recognizing single mothers' resilience as we suggest, reveals more strengths and assets than case workers or the women themselves may identify. This recognition is congruent with a strengths-based or asset-focused analysis consistent with the feminist ideology and principles that ground this work. This notion is captured by Ann below:

*And beside that, I don't know how, it just happened. I just, I just—I don't know. I think I know how to manipulate a system and manoeuvre myself where I need to go, and these are strengths I guess I've always had, but I just didn't really realize that I had them. (Ann, Panel 1, St. John's)*

Identifying such strengths and assets can translate into significant benefits for single mothers and their families, as conveyed by DeFrain below:

*If one studies only family problems, one finds only family problems. Similarly, if educators, community organizers, therapists and researchers are interested in family strengths, they look for them. When these strengths are identified, they can become the foundation for continued growth and positive change in a family and a society. (As cited in [21], p. 52).*

Recognizing factors in a family that can facilitate adaptation or recovery after an adverse experience enables practitioners working with the family to co-develop intervention strategies that are more meaningfully goal-focused. Families may require assistance in the mobilizing of their resources that once mobilized, can be effective supports. The model of 'family-group conferencing' that has become more widespread in child welfare work is an example of such mobilization [22], wherein the protective factors that a family might have available are mustered through professional and family initiatives to address a particular set of issues. A key issue in such strengths-based approaches is the acknowledgement of families' own resources which if strengthened, may serve them well even after the presenting crisis is resolved [20], [23], [24], [25].

From a policy perspective, even though this is a small study, a number of policy implications come to the fore. The low income and stigma faced by single moms forced to

rely on social assistance demands a reconsideration of our income security systems which trap these families in extreme poverty. Welfare rates leave all recipients well below most recognized poverty lines and these low benefit levels have particularly insidious effects on women-led families given that women most often continue to be the custodial parent and the effects of poverty on children are well understood. Moreover, in some Scandinavian countries, when family break up occurs, a transition benefit is available that recognizes the financial and associated social stresses these changes in family status have on both children and the custodial parent. Furthermore, for many of the women in this study, family break up occurred as a result of intimate partner violence and all of the institutional structures from income support and social housing programs to courts and judicial processes inadequately acknowledge this reality. Many women query whether they would be better off to just endure the abuse given the structural realities they face as low-income single mothers.

Our research suggests the need to better acknowledge the strengths and assets of single mothers and their children, and contests the idea that a resilient person can overcome even formidable and enduring hardship such as that faced by Madison and Mary. Resilience, in our view, can be subtle, nuanced, and reflected in the processes of day-to-day life, rather than only in the highly socially desired outcomes of jobs and social assistance exits. The mothers who participated in this study are not just managing stress and continuing to function, they are constantly creating and debating options, and fashioning innovative solutions. Consequently, they are not just playing the game by managing and surviving, they are both challenging its construction and changing it, by constantly adapting to their circumstances, and trying to make better lives for themselves and their children.

## 7. Conclusions and Limitations

In this paper we explored the theoretical distinction between coping and resilience based on findings with single mothers across Canada. Furthermore, we utilized the typologies developed by Masten and others as a meaningful way to both understand our data and to test their utility. We concur with Masten et al. [5] as well as others [13], [20], [14], that coping is a form of resilience. Although some view coping as merely managing stress, we argue that it reflects a transformation to new ways of being through processes of adaptation, debate, and innovation, which we describe as “changing the game”. Although nothing radical is happening for such women, they have developed a sustained practice of mothering wherein they have adapted to becoming single parents and continually debate their best move, and what might be best for their children. They are often innovative in accomplishing their

goals, which sometimes includes making new or different goals as they continually try new approaches. Most of the single mothers we have identified as resilient have made several attempts to exit social assistance by taking low-wage jobs, or other steps to improve their lives. They have fought addictions, sought help, and attended a range of programs including counseling and/or job training. They advocate for their children, fighting for support and access to various programs and services to increase their children’s educational, or other, opportunities. These efforts, while not always successful, nonetheless reflect these single mothers’ ability to strategize, debate, and innovate as their situation changes. Moreover, we propose that this adaptation reflects a transformation to resilient ways of being.

This is a small exploratory study with all of the methodological limitations that this suggests. Given its small scale our findings cannot be generalized but can usefully point to important possibilities in our understandings of resilience and what may support it especially in the lives of vulnerable low-income single mothers. Further research that explores some of the directions and issues raised here will further contribute.

The typologies or pathways to resilience that have been developed and modified by a number of resilience scholars fit with the data from this study and we support their utilization as a meaningful way to consider the adversity experiences of diverse population groups and their responses to these life challenges. We reiterate two important but perhaps unsurprising findings: 1) Privilege endures and 2) Great caution must be exercised in assessing what constitutes a good outcome.

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