THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF STUDENT MOTHERS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explored what it is like to be a student and a mother at the same time by using a phenomenological approach to identify and describe the processes by which seven undergraduate student mothers make meaning out of their everyday lived experience. As part of a larger study on stress and coping, each woman was interviewed and the interviews analyzed for common themes and meanings. A follow-up interview served to confirm or clarify the summary of each initial interview.

The themes that emerged from this study are that student mothers' lived experience (a) involves having to face conflicting demands, (b) leads to feelings of guilt and inadequacy, (c) induces helplessness and frustration, (d) fosters alienation and disconnection, (e) contributes to self-neglect, (f) encompasses anger, resentment, and questioning of the status quo, (g) facilitates re-definition of self as mother, self as student, the role of family and friends, and/or the role of the university, and (h) either strengthens or weakens the woman. These results add to the understanding of this particular student population, and offer recommendations for counselling agencies and policy makers alike.
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My role as a parent is very important to me, 
and my role as a student is also very important to me, 
so it's very hard to make choices!

It’s important to me to be a good mother but there’s more to me than that.
...it’s a juggling act - one conflicts with the other.

The student life requires more introspection, more focus, 
and the family life is always conflicting with that.

I want to do well, otherwise, what’s the point, 
but there doesn’t seem to be enough room in my head for everything, 
not enough hours in the day, not enough energy, not enough money.

I’m not there for my child, I’m letting her down, 
‘Mommy will play with you later’.

I’m not a good student, and I’m not a good parent, 
I’m a failure as a human being!

If one part of the system breaks down, the rest goes too.
We’ve run out of money, but there’s no room to negotiate.

I thought I was doing the right thing, but I hear voices saying I’m a drain on society,
What is she doing here? Why doesn’t she just go home?
Don’t want to give them an excuse to say, oh, she’s just a mother.

Survival of the fittest!

How can you go from being an honor’s student to barely passing?
I AM one of the fittest!

I didn’t just wake up stupid one day!
Scholarships go to those who get the marks, who have volunteer experience,
But all the demands, how will we survive, is this still a positive in my life?

I feel like I’m just a big weed, and they’re trying to get me out.
My daughter, I don’t want her to grow up ignorant, like me.
But I’m sticking in here, I’m NOT giving up.
I was told I had to fight. I’m tired of fighting.

When they look at me and say, YOU made the choice, 
I can’t sleep, I’m thinking: did I...? How will I...?
I’m thinking to myself: yes, but You have the problem
And my marks are slipping and my child is acting out,
That’s just too bad that I couldn’t write the exam,
I’m not who I want to be, and who I know I could be,
There’s nothing I could do, my child had the flu,
I see no one else who is struggling like me.

I was up with her all night,
My schedule’s ridiculous, my health goes downhill,
And still, I have to fight not to feel responsible, all right.
The joy of learning is gone, I can do what I will,
I know they expect me to do just as well, even if I just had the night from hell,
If I’m forced to give up, an important part of me will die,

A voice inside me says: you’re their mother, its up to you!
But I have no support, and I don’t know how or why.

And the university, too, demands its due.
Maybe they’re right, I should stay home and be a mom,

I constantly have to talk myself through my degree,
It’s all up to me, I must carry the can.

Something’s got to give, and it can’t only be ME!

This poem was constructed from student mothers' own words.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale For The Study

Today, more women than ever pursue a university education. Among undergraduate students in Canada, more than 50% are women, and 61% of part-time students are women (Statistics Canada, 1997). At the same time, the mean age of students has increased. By the mid 1990s, almost one half of all postsecondary students were 25 years and over (Foot & Stoffmann, 1996) and in Canada, more than 25% of part-time students are 39 years or older (Statistics Canada, 1996). For reasons of privacy and because it is generally not deemed relevant to university administrations (Personal communication, Budget and Planning, University of British Columbia, 1997), no official data about students' parental status is available. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that the number of students, and in particular women students with children, has increased over the years as well.

Little is known about the experiences of women who combine the pursuit of a post secondary degree and of motherhood. The experiences of mothers in the paid work force and its effects on home and family have been explored (Dornbusch & Strober, 1988; Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyds, 1991; Swiss & Walker, 1993), however, only a meager body of research about mothers who are in
graduate programs can be found (David, Edwards, Hughes, & Ribbens, 1993; Swift, Colvin, & Mills, 1987), and a real dearth of information on undergraduate 'student moms' exists (Edwards, 1993). Because education is one of the strongest predictors of an individual's access to occupations that offer autonomy and authority in the workplace (Statistics Canada, 1997), there is a need for more knowledge about the experience of being a student and a mother at the same time.

**Historical Background**

The 'ideal of womanhood' in early nineteenth century Victorian Britain was heavily influenced by the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who described women as being of inferior intellect, submissive, and "essentially born to be the helpmates of men" (Kyle, 1986, p.1). Middle class women's sphere of existence was the private realm of the home, running the household, and taking care of her children and husband while men worked in the public sphere, earning the money necessary to support household, wife, and children (Bose, 1987; Evans, 1990; Kyle, 1986). Higher education was a male prerogative and served the function of increasing earning potential and gaining or maintaining status in society. Both education and employment were to be unencumbered by household and childcare obligations,
which were the woman's domain (Bose, 1987; Evans, 1990; Kyle, 1986).

Education for girls and women, which focused heavily on training in domestic arts, was meant to increase their value as wives and mothers (Evans, 1990; Kyle, 1986). This gender division between the public and private spheres was less visible in the lower classes, where social and economic conditions resulted in poor education for both men and women (Kyle, 1986). Regardless of class, however, a woman's primary role was seen as being a wife and mother (Evans, 1990; Kyle, 1986; Purvis, 1991).

Around the mid-nineteenth century, when the first women were admitted to institutions of higher learning, it was seen by many as an aberration and a waste, because a woman was still expected to follow her 'nature' and devote herself exclusively to her family as soon as she married (Purvis, 1991). Women who managed to get a higher education were the exception. Their numbers were few, and they concentrated their studies in the 'feminine' areas of education, home economics, and nursing (Purvis, 1991; Stewart, 1990). Since then, fueled by the women's movement as well as by economic changes, women have found admittance to every faculty, but are still most strongly represented in the traditionally female fields (Statistics Canada, 1995).
Although the concept of womanhood today includes the option of obtaining a higher education and/or working outside the home, the care of children and home also still falls largely into the lap of women (Coverman, 1989; Hochschild, 1989). In particular, women with children experience great pressure, both internally and externally, to be 'good mothers' (Everingham, 1994; Held, 1983; Nakano Glenn, 1994).

The Research Question

It is common knowledge that women's entry into the world of paid work has become, for many, an economic necessity and a societal reality. Higher education provides increased opportunity for earnings and satisfaction. However, women who pursue a university education while raising children face constant demands from two directions—the university and the family. Yet, little has been published about their experiences or their needs. The undergraduate years in a student's life are generally more structured and less flexible than graduate studies. They are also the testing ground that decides whether the student 'makes it' or drops out. This study explored what life is like for undergraduate student mothers. The research questions addressed were exploratory, and therefore necessarily broad:
1. What are the lived experiences of undergraduate university women students with children? and

2. What meaning do women assign to these experiences?

Conceptual Framework

Being a mother is a very demanding role, and being a student is also a very demanding role. This study began with the assumption that a tension exists between these two roles for women who attempt a university education at the same time as being mothers. Motherhood and studenthood are therefore the pillars of the conceptual framework for this inquiry. The way in which these two concepts interfere with or complement each other in the lived experiences of student mothers is the topic of this investigation.

Motherhood, today, is not seen as simply the female equivalent of fatherhood. For a woman, much more so than for a man, to have children is seen as her natural destiny and fulfillment (McMahon, 1995). To be a 'good mother' is equivalent to being a good woman (McMahon, 1995). Childcare is thought to require self-sacrifice, nurturing, and empathy, and women are believed to be perfectly suited to fulfill those requirements (Thurer, 1994). As a result of the perpetual glorification of the 'ideal mother' role in society, childcare is naturally seen as women's duty. Although this concept of motherhood is all
pervasive and almost universal (Edwards, 1993; Lewis, 1991; Thurer, 1994), it has been shown by many to be socially constructed (Edwards, 1993; Hays, 1996; Lewis, 1991; Thurer, 1994). There are increasing objections to this idealized model of a 'good mother' because it is the construction of specific historical, social, and cultural circumstances, and not necessarily a natural state of being. However, even progressive women find it hard to free themselves from feeling that they have to live up to this self-defining concept (Thurer, 1994). Clearly, motherhood, a role that is demanding and entwined so strongly with self-identity, poses a dilemma when pursuing alternative goals.

Studenthood, or what it means to be a student, has also not received much attention in the literature. It is commonly accepted as a given that a university education requires determination, hard work, and dedication. The very structure of institutions like universities has been built on the assumption that, for the duration of their studies, students would make the pursuit of academic knowledge their main priority in life (Acker, 1994; Edwards, 1991). This implicit expectation by universities of monopolizing a student's life has led to the term 'greedy institutions' (Acker, 1994; Edwards, 1991).
Interestingly, this term has also been applied to the institution of family (Coser, 1974).

The phrase 'competing urgencies' has been used by Hochschild and Machung (1989), Rubin (1983), Young (1992), and others to describe the simultaneous and pressing demands felt when two or more self-identified, identity-related roles vie for an individual's resources, be they time, energy, money, or anything else. For this study, I assumed that the role of mother and the role of student would be experienced as competing urgencies in the women's lives.

Because so little is known about undergraduate student mothers, and because the focus of this study was on intra-personal experiences, an exploratory and descriptive method of inquiry was used. Phenomenological research methods examine a phenomenon in the everyday world of an individual and strive to understand the personal meaning derived through this lived experience (Giorgi, 1985; Van Manen, 1990). This methodology is built on the tenet that reality is constituted by what is 'out there' as well as by the meaning the individual gives to it (Karlsson, 1993; Van Manen, 1990). It seeks to describe how a person experiences a phenomenon, rather than why (Giorgi, 1985). For those reasons, phenomenology was chosen as the
methodology to explore the lived experience of being a student and a mother at the same time.

Scope, Limitations, and Implications

This study explored the lived experiences of seven undergraduate student mothers enrolled at a Western Canadian University. Its intent was to shed light on the meaning making experience of being an undergraduate student and a mother at the same time. The focus was on how women experience this phenomenon, not why or to what degree. Subjective experience is not only acknowledged in this study, but was the very focus of its inquiry.

Because this study is descriptive in nature, causal inferences are not possible. The results also would not necessarily extend to graduate students or to student mothers in other universities, or other cultures. Instead, true to the tenets of phenomenology, which emphasizes the subjective nature of experience, the study's interpretive validity is limited by the cultural, societal, temporal, and circumstantial factors in which the phenomenon was experienced.

Given these particular circumstances, the everyday-reality of student moms was the subject of this inquiry. What this study aimed to do was to shed light on the lived experience of women
students with children in order to highlight how they derive meaning from the experience of this phenomenon.

On a theoretical level, theories about multiple roles for women, as defined by Pleck (1977), and many since then, will be enriched by information about the experiences of student mothers. In particular, the lived experience of the concept of 'competing urgencies' for women students with children should add to our understanding of the impact of these particular multiple roles on women.

In practical terms, gaining understanding of what the experience of being a student and a mother at the same time is like, would help inform university and government policies, as they relate to this relatively unknown sub-group of students. The greatest contribution of this study, however, will be to the field of counselling. Exploring the experiences and struggles of student moms will add a much needed building block to the foundation of empathic understanding of student services and other counselling agencies.

It is hoped that this study contributes toward making a largely invisible student population group more visible, and that it might spark further, more detailed, larger scale, studies that explore the universality of these experiences, as well as the specific needs of this student group.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, the literature relevant to the experience of being a student and a mother is reviewed. In the first section I examine what has been published specifically about student mothers. Because this topic has not been the focus of much research attention, however, in this section I also look at the literature about non-traditional students, mature students, and re-entry students, as it relates to women with children. The second section deals with the concept of motherhood. I examine how the literature defines this concept and its relevance to women students with children. In the third section I examine, what I call in a parallel vein, the concept of 'studenthood,' that is, how the ideal student is defined by the structure of the educational institution.

Student Mothers

Increasing numbers of older students choose to acquire higher education (Foot & Stoffmann, 1996). This increase is due, at least in part, to what Swift, Colvin, and Mills (1987) term the displaced homemaker, that is, women with families who have decided to go back to school. Acker (1994) also examines the growing evidence that there are today more mature women with
children enrolled as students in higher education. It is generally acknowledged, however, that this changing trend has largely been ignored by colleges and universities (Acker, 1994; Caplan, 1993; Edwards, 1993; Foot & Stoffmann, 1996; Swift et al., 1987). Hooper and March (1980) concluded that universities seem to expect young, unattached, male students—a statement that seems, in light of a lack of change, still true today.

Several researchers have attempted to identify the special needs of women students with children, especially single mother students (Danowsky, 1983; Gorlick, 1992; Hooper & March, 1980) and graduate students with children (Acker, 1994; Caplan, 1993; Dyk, 1987; Guppy & Trew, 1995).

Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann (1994) interviewed 46 low income single mother students at a medium-sized American university about their attributional beliefs regarding academic success. They came to the conclusion that this group of women students believe their academic success to be more dependent on sociological factors, such as support from different groups of individuals, family, peers, and faculty, than on psychological factors such as ambition or determination. However, Rendon and Jalome (1995) found that full time mothers were at the top of their list of student groups having difficulties getting involved socially or academically on campus. In a study based on
involvement theory, which asserts that the degree of involvement with and in life on campus is proportionate to the degree of academic success, they interviewed 72 first-year college students about their campus involvement, and examined their academic records. Hooper and March (1980) also found that student moms felt isolated, as did Caplan (1993), who, in addition, reported that women students with children are talked to in a patronizing way by faculty, suggesting "that they ought to be home with their children" (p.13).

To counter-act this isolation, several writers have suggested the implementation of support networks for student mothers (Danowski, 1983; Rendon & Jalome, 1995; Swift et al., 1987; Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). Danowski (1983), however, also describes the difficulties they encountered in establishing such a parent network, as they found there to be a danger of adding to the women's difficulties, instead of lightening them, and therefore attendance was low.

Insufficient funding for single student mothers, and an "attitude of deterrence" (p.56) by funding agencies has been observed by Gorlick (1992), whereas Guppy and Trew (1995) have reported that graduate students with family responsibilities report having access to fewer non-financial resources, such as an office or telephone on campus.
One seemingly inescapable consequence of being a student mother is described as role conflict, that is, a tension between being a mother and being a student (Caplan, 1993; Dyk, 1987; Edwards, 1993; Welch, 1990). This role conflict is attributed, in part, to limited resources, such as time, money, and/or energy, all of which are required for both roles.

Edwards (1993) took a wider sweep when examining the plight of mature women students. She used a feminist approach to place women's role(s) in historical context. Being a wife and mother, according to Edwards, has been the main societally prescribed function and destiny for women. Even while women work outside the home, their priority, so they are told, must always be the private world of caring for their family. For mature women students it is often impossible to separate the private world of the family from the public demands placed on them as a student. The primacy of the mother/wife role is challenged by impinging demands of the student role, while at the same time the mother/wife role gets in the way of fulfilling the student role. Women either adopt an attitude of integration, trying to combine and connect these two spheres of their lives, or they struggle trying to keep them separate (Edwards, 1993).

Because society still gives women the message that childcare and household duties are mainly women's
responsibility, and because universities are not amenable to accommodate family demands, women find themselves in a double bind (Caplan, 1993). As real women, they are expected to have children, but as mothers in university, they are often not seen as reliably performing students, because their childcare duties may interfere with their school work (Acker, 1994; Caplan, 1993; Edwards, 1993). If they are performing well, they might be suspected of neglecting their child(ren), because they obviously did not make them their main focus (Caplan, 1993). Invariably, however, student mothers find that their academic performance sometimes is lower than expected (Hooper & March, 1980). As Hensel, cited in Welch (1990), states: "Being a mother means being constantly interruptible and continually responsive to the needs of someone else" (p. 3), which makes it difficult to develop the concentration necessary to write and study (Hensel, in Welch, 1990).

Chartrand (1990) obtained questionnaires from 179 non-traditional undergraduate students at a large midwestern U.S. university and explored the students' self role evaluation, role commitment, self-good student role incongruence, and various personal distress variables. These variables were then used in a Linear Structural Relations program to predict the students' personal and academic adjustment. A second questionnaire, as
well as academic transcripts, served to test the accuracy of the predictions. The results indicated that the Person X Environment fit of nontraditional students, that is, role commitment, role evaluation, and self-role congruence, were all related to academic adjustment. As predicted, the commitment to and identification with the student role was weaker for students with family responsibilities than for traditional, single students.

Edwards (1993) similarly suggested that role conflict does not only result from societal expectations, but that women have internalized the mother/wife role to such an extent that it defines their personality. The struggle, therefore, does not only take place externally, involving the structures of both family and university, but also internally, each woman struggling with her own values and expectations of herself.

Graduate student mothers' interrole conflict resolution has been identified by Dyk (1987) to involve certain coping types. Based on a cursory literature review, as well as informal conversations she had over the period of one year with her fellow graduate student mothers, Dyk distinguished two main coping strategies: women either redefine the roles of the structures in their lives, that is, the family, and/or university, or they redefine their personal role within these
structures. Often, and most successfully, women do both (Dyk, 1987).

In the ongoing, larger study, out of which this thesis developed, both undergraduate and graduate student mothers were interviewed about the specific stresses and coping strategies involved in living these two roles at the same time (Long, Lovato, & Frankish, 1998, Hampton Research Fund). Preliminary results suggest that stresses for these women originate both externally and internally and that coping happens, as described by Dyk (1987), in part through restructuring processes.

Student mothers, as noted earlier, have not received much research attention. The existing literature focuses mainly on single mother students or graduate students, and attempts to outline these groups' special needs and characteristics. Edwards' (1993) examination of mature women students perhaps comes closest to describing what it is actually like to be a student and a mother at the same time. She based her book on 31 interviews, but examines and explains her theory by placing the data into feminist historical and personal context. The focus of her examination, therefore, shifts to why mature women students feel, think, or act a certain way. No literature has been found to examine how women experience the phenomena of being a student.
and a mother at the same time, and what meaning they derive from
that experience.

**Motherhood**

For women today, as in the past, becoming a mother is seen
as a natural destiny (Birns & Hay, 1988; McMahon, 1995; Thurer,
1994). It is not only becoming pregnant and giving birth,
however, that is supposedly the ultimate fulfillment of the
female role in today's society, but the inherent work associated
with nurturing, caring for, and raising the child (Caplan, 1985;
Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995; Thurer, 1994). This hidden
connotation becomes quite clear when one examines the phrase
mothering a child. The image that comes to mind is that of a
selfless, warm, caring, and nurturing woman (Caplan, 1985).
Contrasting this with the common meaning of 'fathering a child,'
which generally only establishes biological paternity, brings
into focus the ideologically laden nature of mothering, and,
therefore, motherhood.

It is this ideology that has been the focus of a recent
body of literature (Birns & Hay, 1988; Hays, 1996; Lewis, 1991;
Nakano Glenn, 1994; Thierney, 1991; Thurer, 1994). In examining
the concept of motherhood in its cultural context, Thurer (1995)
observed that the connotations attached to it have come to be
accepted as natural by society, so as to render their social
construction invisible. She calls this the 'myth of motherhood,' whereas Lewis (1991) refers to the 'motherhood mandate.'

Historically, this ideal of motherhood as being the natural fulfillment of womanhood can be traced back to the separation of the private (home) and the public (paid work outside the home) spheres (Thierney, 1991). With the division of labour, women were given primary responsibility for child care. Motherhood became idealized, but did not correspondingly gain economic value, which Hays (1996) identifies as the cultural contradiction of motherhood.

The idealization of motherhood, however, brought with it norms against which women were measured, and measured themselves (Birns & Hay, 1988; Lewis, 1991; McMahon, 1995). Being a 'good mother' became, for most women, part of their female self-concept (McMahon, 1995). A good mother possesses qualities that make her uniquely suited to the job: she is selfless, patient, caring, and nurturing (McMahon, 1995), and consequently judges her own needs to be of less importance than those of her children and family (McMahon, 1995; Thurer, 1994; Woollett & Phoenix, 1991).

The motherhood ideal is being perpetuated, even today, in the media, by child care experts, and religious dogmas (Caplan, 1985; Hays, 1996; Thurer, 1994; Woollett & Phoenix, 1991).
Unfortunately, women have accepted and internalized this ideal to such an extent that it often interferes with their ability to make alternative choices (Caplan, 1985; Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995; Thurer, 1994; Woollett & Phoenix, 1991). A woman who chooses to work outside the home often cannot escape feeling guilty, because she is made to feel that she has placed her own needs above those of her child (Thurer 1994). More than that, her self-concept as a woman may be shaken by such a decision (McMahon, 1995). Society, as well as her own socialization, tell her that she is the one who is best suited to and ultimately responsible for her child's care and needs (Woollett & Phoenix, 1991). A mother who pursues other goals as well as motherhood, therefore, cannot escape experiencing conflict, because mothering is seen by society as a full-time, all consuming endeavor (McMahon, 1995).

The review of the literature about motherhood presented here is not comprehensive, but rather, is meant to highlight those aspects important to student mothers. According to the critiques of the motherhood ideal, the life, work, and goals of a student are not compatible with what society, and women themselves, expect of a good mother. The assumption of conflict is, therefore, warranted.
'Studenthood'

I chose the word 'studenthood' in this context because I want to draw a parallel between motherhood and what it means to be a student. Like motherhood, the life of a student is defined by societal, cultural, and institutional conventions (Coser, 1974). And just as with motherhood, what defines the ideal student is most clearly seen through critiques of the limits of this role (Acker, 1994; Caplan, 1993; Edwards, 1993; Smith, 1987). The most common critique of universities is the 'maleness' of the environment (Acker, 1994; Dagg & Thompson, 1988; Edwards, 1993; Guppy & Trew, 1995; Pyke, 1997; Schick, 1994). But what does that mean? In a physical sense, it means there is a distinct lack of female mentors and role models in faculty and administration. Pyke (1997) makes the observation that between 1960 and 1994 the percentage of women on faculty in Canadian universities 'skyrocketed' from 11% to 20%, and quotes "At the rate we're going, it will take 1,920 more years...before women see equity as faculty, administrators and role models in Canadian universities (p.160).

Beyond the fact that 80% of faculty are male, the very structure of educational institutions, many assert, is built on male principles (Acker, 1994; Edwards, 1993; Katz & Vieland, 1988; Smith, 1987; Stewart, 1990). Acker (1994) explains this
male structure as "men impose[ing] their conceptualization of the world on women, whose own experiences are regarded as a less valid, less convincing, and less scientific way of understanding" (p. 130). Smith (1987) speculates that this structure is an ongoing, conscious attempt to discredit and exclude the 'everyday world' of women's knowledge from university, and thereby implicitly reinforce the notion that higher education is, and properly should be, the business of men.

Compounding the women unfriendly climate in higher education is the fact that universities outwardly present themselves as gender neutral meritocracies (Acker, 1994; Katz & Vieland, 1988). With this argument, they disregard and avoid any acknowledgment of family and/or child care responsibilities, deeming them irrelevant to a student (Acker, 1994; Edwards, 1993; Katz & Vieland, 1988). Instead, true to the term 'greedy institutions' they demand exclusive and undivided attention and dedication from those who want to succeed (Acker, 1994; Coser, 1974; Edwards, 1993). This unencumbered state, however, is much more likely to be the reality of a male student than of a female student, because even if a male student has a family, he is usually not the one primarily responsible for household and child care duties (Acker, 1994; Edwards, 1993).
As this cursory review of the literature on 'studenthood' illustrates, the higher education system is implicitly oriented towards the young, single male student. This ideal student is able to focus exclusively on his studies, has a flexible timetable, and speaks the positivist language of science. In return, he will find adequate mentorship and role modeling, will find his experiences reflected in the topics and language of study, and his ideas reinforced by the dominant ideology. This ideal of 'studenthood' is not modeled on the needs of women.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study sought to elucidate what it is like to be a mother and a student at the same time, by examining the meaning women in this situation give to their every-day experiences of this phenomenon. A phenomenological method (Van Manen, 1990) was deemed to be the most appropriate for this purpose.

Phenomenology arose within the field of philosophy as a challenge to the assumption of the scientific world that knowledge must be based on the 'natural world,' that is, on observable, measurable, and stable units (Holstein & Gubrium, 1986). Husserl asserted that this approach to knowledge ignores the fact that what is out there in the 'natural world' must be consciously observed and understood in some way, that is, a meaning assigned to it, for it to become knowledge (cited in Osborne, 1989). As Jennings (1986) describes this phenomenological way of understanding knowledge: "Whereas [traditional] psychology studies actual subjective responses to actual environmental events (empirical data), phenomenology studies the essential character of consciousness in meaning-conferring acts (essential knowledge)" (p. 1231). A phenomenological method of inquiry, therefore, attempts to
describe a phenomenon as experienced by the individual in the every-day world (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985; Van Manen, 1990).

Although Husserl believed that phenomenology was able to arrive at a 'pure essence' of knowledge (Jennings, 1986), Heidegger and many of today's phenomenologists argue that reality, when it is being defined not only by what is but also by how the individual perceives the world, cannot lead to an absolute, pure knowledge (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989).

When researching the lived experiences of another person or persons, the phenomena will be doubly constituted, first by the person living the experience, then by the researcher attempting to describe this lived experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). It is, therefore, necessary to 'bracket' one's presuppositions about the nature of the phenomenon and to attempt to set them aside for the duration of the analysis (Osborne, 1994, p. 170). By acknowledging one's biases and presuppositions with regard to the phenomenon, and continually trying to eliminate them from the process of analysis, the researcher is better able to arrive at the structures of consciousness that give meaning to a particular lived experience (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985; Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

In summary, a phenomenological method was chosen for this study, because little is known about the experience of being a
mother and a student at the same time, and because empirical methods of research would not as clearly elucidate the phenomenon as experienced by the women.

Placing the Researcher

The belief in the constitutive character of knowledge and consciousness is a fundamental part of phenomenological research. To be able to distinguish the researcher's presuppositions from the actual lived experiences as described by the participants, it is necessary to attempt to state clearly all assumptions, biases, and preknowledge, in other words the 'natural attitude' the researcher brings to the inquiry (Osborne, 1994, p.170).

My own experiences as a student-mom prompted my interest in the original study. Having been a freshly divorced mother of three when I returned to university as an undergraduate student, I found it difficult to do justice to expectations of myself as a mother and expectations of myself as a student. I believed that as a mother I should be 'there' for my children, that is, be available when they needed me. At the same time I expected to be able to perform maximally as a student. My experience was that there were not enough hours in a day to live up to both of these role expectations. I also found that it was very difficult to make ends meet on a student loan with three children. This
meant that I had to have a paid job, which made it even more difficult to live up to my expectations for myself as a mother and as a student.

I experienced being at the university as an anomaly, as I often had to apply for 'exceptions to the rule,' be it in due dates or financial support. At the same time, I felt that being a student, while I had children to raise, was seen as a selfish indulgence by many around me, both friends and family. It was communicated to me that being a mother should always take precedent over anything else. I found myself holding the same attitude. Fortunately, my children were always supportive and understanding.

In spite of all the difficulties, attending university was very stimulating and rewarding. I felt that I had a chance to grow tremendously and that it could only benefit myself and my children in the future.

In summary, my preknowledge of the phenomenon consists of my own lived experience, and the meaning I have given to it. In particular, I assumed that:
1. time constraints would be a factor in satisfying both the mother and the student role;
2. lack of adequate finances would be a fact of life for many student mothers, possibly adding to a lack of time;
3. the mother role would be seen as primary by many student mothers and by society as a whole;
4. the university as an institution is not prepared to accommodate women with children as a normal part of its population, but rather as an exception to the rule;
5. women students with children have a strong desire to do well in school; and,
6. women who attend university while they raise children experience some kind of benefit from being a student - why else would they stay?

Participants

A sub-group of seven women was selected from among the participants of a larger study on stress and coping experienced by women who are students and mothers at the same time (Long, Lovato, Frankish, & Bowie, 1995). This larger study included women in undergraduate and graduate programmes. Although some research has been done on graduate student mothers, and mature graduate students, little is known about what it is like to be an undergraduate student and also a mother. For this reason, the focus of this thesis was on undergraduate women students, enrolled in a Western Canadian University, who also had custody of one or more child(ren).
Recruitment and Sampling Procedure

Recruitment of participants was achieved through posters placed throughout campus, through advertising in student newspapers, and through word of mouth. Only those women who actually responded to the notices were included in the study, and so the sample was initially self-selected. Participants were prescreened by telephone for suitability. They were required to be enrolled in a university programme, and be a custodial parent of an underage child at the same time. Selection of participants was made by judgment sampling (Bernard, 1994). For this study, only undergraduate women were selected. I personally interviewed all seven women.

Participant Criteria

To avoid unidimensional representation, selection was purposefully made so that a variety of faculties, years of study, ethnicity, age of participant, marital status, number of children, and age of children was represented. Of the seven women, four were enrolled in various departments of the Arts faculty, one was in Science, one in Medicine, and one was in the Faculty of Law. They ranged in age from 28 to 45 years, and had between one and six children. Four of the women were single and three lived with a partner. In terms of their self-described ethnicity, three women called themselves white Canadian, one
white Eastern European, one white British, one Native North American, and one Chinese Canadian.

**Procedure**

The participants were selected and interviewed as part of the original, larger study, using the following procedures:

**Selection Procedure**

Posters and advertisements were placed at strategic places throughout campus, inviting women who were students and mothers at the same time, and who experienced stress, to tell us their story. An initial telephone interview served to screen respondents for suitability and to provide the women with more information about the study. It was stressed that we did not come with rigorous preconceived notions and questions about what it would be like to be a student and a mother at the same time, but that we were interested in each woman's personal feelings and thoughts about the experience.

To increase the likelihood of empathic understanding on the part of the interviewers and to encourage openness on the part of the women being interviewed, most of the members selected to be part of the research team were, or had been at one time, student mothers themselves. All of the interviewers were student moms, a fact that was imparted to the participants. Each woman
was also asked a number of demographic questions and was given the opportunity to ask questions about the study herself.

A list of potential participants was established. The research assistants decided, on a case by case basis, whom to interview in order to establish a broadly representative sample, as one of the goals of the larger study was to achieve broad representation of various demographic factors. Participants were then scheduled for a one-on-one interview with one of three research assistants. For this study I decided to interview only women enrolled in undergraduate programmes, but strived to achieve variability within this group.

The Interview

When a woman had been selected to be interviewed, every effort was made to make it as easy as possible for her to participate. Attempts were made to customize the time and location of the interview to best suit the women's needs. They were given the options of being interviewed at their home, the interviewer's home, at a lab room on campus, or some other location suitable for them. Six of the seven undergraduate women described in this study chose to be interviewed on campus in the lab. Interviews were conducted at various times throughout the day, whenever the women could fit it into their schedules--some before classes, some after, most during lunch time. The
interview room was small, intimate, and windowless, and a 'Do not disturb' sign was placed outside the door during the meetings.

The development of the interview protocol was a combined effort of the research team of the larger study. In developing the interview protocol, the three research assistants conducted interviews on each other, as well as several pilot interviews with students, which resulted in revisions to the initial protocol. We arrived at a very open-ended format that revolved around the question: 'What is it like to be a student and a mother at the same time?'

Because qualitative research is best based on concrete descriptions (Giorgi, 1985), each participant was asked to recall a recent typical day and specific stressful event, and describe it in as much detail as possible. At appropriate times prompts were used to find out more about explicit feelings, thoughts, actions, consequences, precipitating factors, and helping or hindering circumstances. To end on a positive, affirming note, we asked each woman at the end of the interview what qualities or strategies she felt she had that allowed her to deal with the stresses of being a mother and a student at the same time.
Before the actual interview, each participant was asked to sign a consent form, was reassured of confidentiality, and was asked to provide us with a pseudonym we would then use in place of her name. The interviews were audio-taped and lasted between 1 and 3 hours.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim, reviewed by the interviewer, and identifying information removed to maintain confidentiality. The interviewer wrote a summary of the interview, which was presented to the participant at a second interview. Each woman was given the opportunity to read this summary. She was asked if it was an accurate representation of what she had wanted to convey during the first interview, and was encouraged to correct, add, or delete anything she wanted. A summary of the second interview was then prepared.

Data Analysis

Analyses of the seven interviews selected for this study proceeded parallel to the analyses of the original study. At times, methods were overlapping, but the starting points, as well as the questions being asked of the data, were different.

For this study, it was taken for granted that women who have child care as well as student responsibilities experience stress. Because little else is known about this specific population, however, descriptions of experiences of the
phenomena of being a 'student-mom' were sought, in which the
data would speak for themselves (Osborne, 1990). A
phenomenological approach was seen as the most appropriate to
shed light on the every-day reality experienced by these women
(Van Manen, 1990). I was interested in their reality, construed
by the women via the meanings they gave to their experiences and
by what they perceived as being mirrored back to them from their
environment (Osborne, 1990). I listened to, then read and re-
read the interviews with this perspective in mind. Wanting to
elucidate the lived experience of being a 'student-mom' and the
meaning derived by each woman from that lived experience, I paid
attention to tone of voice, pauses, tears welling up, and other
signs of emotion, as well as the content of what was said.
Moreover, I was interested as much in what was not said as in
what was said.

Ongoing meetings and discussions as part of the research
group for the larger study were invaluable during my analysis,
as they served to contrast my way of looking at the data, that
is, phenomenologically, with the perspective of the original
study. Although at times difficult, this process of wearing 'two
hats' proved helpful in clarifying and re-focusing again and
again on how the women experienced the phenomena, rather than
what they experienced, and added to the validity of the research.

Because the phenomenological method used here is akin to "the practice of science within the context of discovery" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 14), and because acknowledging the researcher's orientation is part of that discovery process by setting the perspective for the inquiry, I began keeping an informal research journal from the moment I first contacted each woman. The purpose was to create a record of my reactions, thoughts, and questions as they arose, so that I could refer to them later during the analysis stage.

After each initial, as well as the follow-up interview, the same personal processing occurred, that is, I recorded my thoughts about each experience. This differed from writing summaries in that I focused on how I had received and reacted to the information being offered.

The transcribed interviews were initially read with an open mind set, having no other preconceptions than the desire to bring the experience fresh into mind and to get a sense of what it was like for each woman to be a student and a mother at the same time. After the initial reading, successive re-readings of each interview served to identify meaning units (Giorgi, 1985) of relevance to the experience of being a student-mom. Using my
notes, and, at times re-listening to the audio tapes, the analysis process spiraled back upon itself again and again (Osborne, 1994) within each interview. This hermeneutic circle (Polkinghorne, 1983) helped me to discover themes that emerged from the meaning units that then guided the direction in which analysis continued. Throughout the process, I tried to keep in mind my own biases and expectations, and to remind myself that examination of the data happened through this filter.

When all interviews had been processed in this way, an across-interview analysis began. This required comparing meaning units and themes amongst all seven interviews, again spiraling back again and again, until meta-themes of meaning behind the lived experience emerged. Van Manen (1990) speaks of essential themes, likely to be found with other members of the particular population, as opposed to incidental themes, specific to individual circumstances. It was often necessary to return to the original source, that is, to return to the quote, in its context, to be able to determine whether the meaning or theme was truly a shared one, or specific to the particular circumstances of that woman.

The reflexivity of this process--going from the particular to the general, from the individual woman to the group, and back again--meant that analysis did not proceed in distinct chunks or
steps, but in spiral-like circular motions, sometimes widening, sometimes narrowing, until I was satisfied that the information in the data had been exhausted, and that all that could be discovered with regard to the research question had reasonably been discovered. A similar reflexive process was necessary to examine whether the meanings derived from the data were those expressed as the lived experience of the women, or whether, and to what degree, they were tinted by my perspective. This reflexivity is what Van Manen (1990) calls "a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience" (p. 77). It was not a mechanical, step-wise labour, but, as Van Manen (1990) describes it, a process of interpreting its meaning, more accurately described as "insightful invention, discovery or disclosure--grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning" (p. 79).

Finally, a "synthesis of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement" (Giorgi, 1985, p.19) of the lived experience, and therefore the psychological structure of what it is like to be a student and a mother at the same time, was achieved.
SUMMARY

The goal of this study was to elucidate the every-day lived experience of being a mother and a student at the same time. Because I wanted to know not only what actually happened, but also how women make sense of, and give meaning to their experiences, I chose a phenomenological research method.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

DESCRIPTION OF EACH PARTICIPANT

In order to provide a more comprehensive picture of each participant, a brief description of each woman's demographics, relevant history, and life circumstances at the time of the interviews is included here. Also reflected in these descriptions are my impressions of, and thoughts about each woman during the interview, as I had recorded them in my diary. The descriptions are listed in alphabetical order of the pseudonyms the women had picked for themselves.

Emma

Emma struck me as an intense, young looking mid-thirties woman, who is married and has a 3 1/2 year old daughter. She emigrated from eastern Europe 4 years ago, when she was 5 months pregnant. In her country of origin she had attended medical school and had been close to finishing when she had become pregnant. She and her husband decided that they wanted their child to be born in Canada. Emma was alone in her new country, with no friends or family, when she gave birth, but her husband followed her shortly thereafter.

Emma gave up her career plans and started over again, because her previous studies were not fully recognized here. She
discovered a related field, which had not been offered in her home country, and started in this direction. She is in her third year of a 4 year programme.

Just when she felt that she had made some headway, had organized her responsibilities, and could see an end to her studies in sight, she found out that she is pregnant again--this time with twins. At the time of the first interview she was in her fifth month of pregnancy. Being pregnant again threw her into a panic, as she saw her career plans threatened for a second time. Her husband is out of town frequently, sometimes for 2 weeks at a time, leaving her in effect a single parent.

As she had requested, my meeting with Emma was arranged to coincide with a free period she had on campus, so that she would not have to make alternate arrangements for her daughter. This young woman seemed quite earnest and focused, and when I found out that she had already nearly completed a medical degree, I could understand my impression. She had already dealt with many adversities, and had overcome them, and this confidence in being able to work things out clearly showed. Emma seemed very poised, sitting erect, focusing on the questions and formulating her answers carefully. Only when she spoke about finding out that she was pregnant again, did I sense panic and disappointment. She seemed, initially, to fear that she again could not finish
her degree and when talking about that, her voice became quiet and defeated. She had explored her options, however, and found that she may be able to finish, taking part time courses. Also, the support and accommodation of her department gave her hope and confidence. Her attitude of dealing with problems as they come along, one by one, seems to have served her well before, and she had regained the confidence of someone who believes it would work for her again.

Having been an emigrant myself, I could relate to her experience of coming to this country, learning the language, making new friends, but feeling quite alone at times. I also could relate to her determination to make things work, a kind of pioneer spirit.

Emma was grateful for the resource list we provided for all participants, as she said she had not much time to look for these things herself.

Irene

This participant is a divorced, 41-year old, white mother of three children. Her oldest child, a 20-year old daughter, lives on her own, but her two sons, aged 7 and 5, live with Irene. Up until 5 months ago, Irene had lived with a partner, but since then has been a single parent. The father of her children is not part of their lives.
Irene is in her first year at a professional school. She had 2 years of general undergraduate Arts education before coming to this university. She lives off campus with her two sons, and has a 35 minute drive to school.

When Irene contacted me, she said she preferred to meet on campus, but that she did not know the campus very well. In fact, aside from her own faculty, the Student Union Building, and the book store, she does not know her way around at all. She stated that she only spends the absolute minimum time she can on campus. Normally, she would work during her breaks, but she said that she really wanted to participate in this study, because she felt it might be good for her to talk about her experiences.

Irene's demeanor was somewhat harried and anxious, and her attire was not what I had expected from a student in her faculty. She was dressed in what seemed to be second hand clothes, and gave the impression of a 'poor' person. Her attitude toward school, however, seemed very goal directed, and almost driven.

Joanne

This participant is a 45-year old, white, married mother of six children, ranging in age from 10 to 24 years. They include her three sons from her first marriage, as well as one more son and two daughters she had with her current husband. Five of her
children still live at home. One son is emotionally unstable, and has attempted suicide. Joanne lives in the suburbs with her family, in a rented home. Her husband travels extensively on business, and Joanne feels that the household and taking care of the family always end up being her responsibility.

Joanne is in her third year of a science undergraduate programme. She had started going back to school many years ago, by taking evening courses, one by one. Her teachers, all along, had been very supportive and encouraging, so much so that she was surprised and felt that they believed in her abilities more than she did. This is the first year in which Joanne has attempted to carry a full course load. Already, though, she has had to drop two courses, after facing multiple obstacles. She now considers having to drop even more courses in order to be able to maintain a decent average mark.

In my telephone interview with Joanne, she emphasized just how much of a candidate for our stress study she would be, because she felt her stress was just coming to a peak, and she feared it would make her physically sick. She stated she had already had shingles, and that she felt that this had been a result of the stress she is under. One of the first things Joanne said to me was that it would be hard for her to separate the stress arising out of the conflict of being a mother and a
student, from being a wife. In other words, she wanted to know if we recognized that a husband may figure into this conflict as well. In fact, her biggest stress seems to be that she may have to face having to choose between continuing her studies and continuing being a wife.

Joanne appeared in worn clothes, and seemed like a person who is used to considering others' needs before her own. She seemed organized and focused, as was apparent when she told me that she had figured out exactly how much time she could spend with me, and still beat the rush-hour traffic home.

During the interview, I felt myself experiencing pity for Joanne and the dilemma she found herself in. She described a very unsupportive husband, who even boycotts her studies. Joanne and her children are financially dependent on her husband and she feels she would not be able to continue her studies if she left him. Facing the possibility of having to drop out of school, that is, losing this part of her identity, she felt would be "the end of her." I do not believe that she is actively suicidal, but I certainly could tell how important this part of her life is to her, and how devastated she would be if she had to give it up. I felt myself getting angry that she should have to make such a choice, or that it could be made for her. Trying to give her encouragement and support, I pointed out as many
support organizations on and off campus as I could. I found that I wanted to do what I could to help her stay in school, because I could sense what it means to her, and also because it is so rare to find a mature woman who excels in the sciences.

**Marianne**

Marianne is a 37-year old single parent of a 7-year old daughter. She is in her fourth year of an undergraduate Arts programme, her second year at this university, after 2.5 years at a college in her home town.

When I initially contacted Marianne, she was not sure if and when she could find the time to participate, but said that she really wanted to. She called me back with 2 options when she was going to be on campus and had two hours available. At our interview, Marianne struck me as a tall, proud, native Indian princess. She did not provide information about her cultural background on the demographic questionnaire, but her hometown and her name are clues indicating a native Indian heritage. At a later date, she confirmed my hunch. I wondered why she would not want to talk about her cultural origin.

Marianne claims that she was illiterate when she graduated from high school, and that she gradually taught herself to read and write. She stated that she does not want her daughter to grow up ignorant, as she felt she had been. I sensed, again,
this feeling of determination and pride from her, but also frustration, exhaustion, panic, and anger. I experienced Marianne as very expressive of her emotions, verbally as well as non-verbally. I enjoyed the interview with her, but also felt and could sympathize with her frustrations and panic, as she relayed experiences I have had myself.

Marianne has held two part-time jobs until 5 months ago, on top of her studies, and being a single parent. Receiving a bursary shortly before Christmas enabled her to quit one of her jobs since then.

Marianne owns a house in her home town, which she rents out while she is at university. For this reason, she was told initially that she would not qualify for a bursary. She was afraid that she might have to give up her studies when her finances ran out. But with the help of the Women Students' Office, and a mature women's group she now belongs to, she found out that she could apply for a bursary, which she then did.

Marianne's financial difficulties are partially due to debts she carries from a relationship that ended last year. She is paying down a substantial credit card debt. She has no family support, and the father of her child is not involved in her upbringing.
Mary

Mary is a 35-year old, white single parent with one son, who is 2 years and 2 months old. She is in her final year of a Fine Arts programme and will begin a Master's degree right afterward. She has recently come from England, and broke up with her partner, the father of her son just before she entered this university. Mary lives in the same housing complex as I, but aside from her name, I knew nothing about her. When asked if she would prefer to be interviewed by someone else, she answered in the negative. She stated that she really would want to be interviewed in the evening or on weekends in her home, so that she could be with her son, which would be easiest if I were to interview her. Her son had been baby-sat by one of Mary's women friends, who, when we arrived, left.

Mary introduced me to her son, and then popped a children's video into the video machine, saying that this should keep him occupied for a while. Mary's eyes were on her son during the whole interview. Her answers were relatively brief and did not go deep into any subject. It felt like the proverbial pulling of teeth.

I soon felt as if I was intruding and limiting their already sparse time together. Mary did not volunteer much detailed information, and seemed unable to be fully focused on
the interview. When the child's video had ended, her son came over to us and began to demand attention. He proceeded to the book case and pulled all the books out, dumping them on the floor. Mary commented that he does not like it when she is not focused on him in the evenings. She did nothing to inhibit or distract the boy, but instead became less and less able to focus on the interview.

Finally, Mary said she would like to put her son to bed. After discussing how to proceed, that is, if we should continue on another day, or if I should wait, she suggested to "just finish now," if it would not take much longer. Needless to say, I felt pressured to be brief, but tried hard to remember what I still needed to ask. We talked for another 5 minutes, and then closed the interview.

My feeling after the interview was one of frustration, but also of just having witnessed first hand the divided feelings of a student mother, who enjoyed both being with her child, and her studies, but who felt guilty about taking time from being with her son. I felt that there was as much expressed by what had not been said as by what had been said.

Sarah

Sarah is a 45-year old 4th year undergraduate Arts student of Chinese heritage. She is the single parent of a 2 ½ year old,
adopted boy, who came to live with her at the age of 10 months. Sarah had tried to become pregnant, and then to adopt, for over 15 years. She is a massage therapist who had a successful practice for 16 years. However, she developed Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, that is, she had chronically inflamed wrists, and could not work at her profession any longer. She decided to sell her practice and go back to school. As a young woman, she had done 2 years of undergraduate studies, and had always planned to go back. Her re-entry into student life coincided with the adoption of her son.

During her first year back at school, her 3\textsuperscript{rd} year in an undergraduate Arts programme, she became ill with Mononucleosis. That year had been financed through disability insurance and RRSPs, but this year she has had to take out a student loan.

Sarah lives alone with her son, off campus, and states that she has mainly women friends.

When I first contacted Sarah, she said she really was interested in participating in this study, but was, at that moment, unable to do so because her son was ill with whooping cough. We agreed to talk again 3 weeks later, by which time her son was well again. Sarah, however, had fallen so far behind in her assignments and studies that she felt she could not take the time this time either. We again postponed. One month later, we
finally met on campus, when she had a 2 hour break between her classes.

My first impression was that of a young, energetic, purposeful woman. She has short hair and wears practical, no frills clothing. She smiled at me warmly, and had an open, direct approach to talking with me. I felt we were both at ease with each other. Sarah said she was glad that we could meet during school hours, because she would not want to take time away from the time she had with her son in the evening. She also stated, however, that she felt it was important to her to share her experiences, because she felt she had experienced a lot of stress lately.

During the interview, Sarah's eyes teared over several times, when she talked about her feelings of guilt at leaving her son in daycare, the fact that her son had been abandoned at the age of 1 month, and that she, Sarah, was 'all he has.' At the end of the interview, Sarah acknowledged that some of her sadness and guilt relate to her own experiences as a child.

This woman felt clearly relieved to have been able to talk about her experiences, and she was happy to contribute to the investigation into the plight of student moms. She appreciated the resource list she was offered, and explained: as a student mom "you don't have the time to go look for resources."
Tara

Tara is a 34-year old white, single parent of two children, a 13-year old boy, and a 10-year old girl. She shares custody with the children's father, who lives in a different province. The children visit and spend holidays with their father. Tara is in her 4th year of undergraduate studies in an Arts programme, with a minor in Women's Studies. She lives in family housing on campus with her children, who also attend the university school. Tara's income consists of student loan and part-time work.

Tara seemed very eager to be interviewed. We met the day after I initially contacted her, and she stated she was glad to spend her lunch time participating in this study. During our initial telephone contact, Tara indicated that she felt the subject of student mom stress needed to be investigated more, and that she believed she certainly had something to contribute. She wanted to know what this study "would be used for," and I explained that our aim is to increase awareness and understanding of the phenomena. When reading the informed consent form, Tara chuckled about the reference to student mothers' stress, as if to say that she could relate only too well.

My impression of Tara was of a grounded, very self-aware young woman. She seemed organized and on top of things. I feel
that we 'hit it off' from the beginning and that she trusted me and felt that I could relate to her and she to me. During the interview, I detected a sarcastic tone in Tara's voice at several points. She seemed frustrated and hopeless at those times, and even cried. This happened when she talked about the low marks she had received in an exam written after being awake with her sick child the night before, as well as when talking about not being able to afford the time and money for enough, or very nourishing food for herself. This theme of food reappeared during our second interview as well. Tara is of average to low weight.

Tara's information about grad school requirements, and funding availability and eligibility was obviously incomplete, and I felt she would have benefited from hearing from other student moms about their experiences. I shared with her my personal understanding of the process and the available help, and also gave her our resource list, which she gratefully accepted.

I felt that the experience of examining her stresses related to being a student and a mom added to her self awareness, as she, for instance, remarked that she had not been aware how upset she was about her low mark. Tara reiterated, again and again, her frustration with the "system," which, she
felt, advantages single, young, white students, and
disadvantages mothers. Venting this, in the hope of contributing
to some change, she acknowledged, made her feel better.

EMERGING THEMES

Phenomenology as a methodology "tries to ward off any
tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed
procedures, techniques, and concepts that would rule-govern the
research project" and "indeed it has been said that 'the method
of phenomenology and hermeneutics is that there is no method'"
(Van Manen, 1990, p. 29). Instead, one has to be able "to sit
with uncertainty" (personal communication, Van Manen, April,
1998). Through countless readings and re-readings of the
transcribed interviews as well as my notes, and through bringing
the interviews to life again by re-listening to the audio tapes,
meaning units were identified. These meaning units, combined
within and across interviews, eventually emerged as common
themes, a process Van Manen (1990) describes as "insightful
invention, discovery or disclosure" (p. 79). The following
themes attempt to give shape to the notions of meaning that
emerged as aspects of the lived experience of each of the
participating student moms, and describe its basic structure.

1. Theme: The lived experience of student mothers involves
having to face conflicting demands.
2. **Theme:** The lived experience of student mothers leads to feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

3. **Theme:** The lived experience of student mothers induces helplessness and frustration.

4. **Theme:** The lived experience of student mothers fosters alienation and disconnection.

5. **Theme:** The lived experience of student mothers contributes to self neglect.

6. **Theme:** The lived experience of student mothers encompasses anger, resentment, and questioning of the status quo.

7. **Theme:** The lived experience of student mothers facilitates re-definition of: self as mother, self as student, the role of family and friends, the role of the university.

8. **Theme:** The lived experience of student mothers either strengthens or weakens the woman's sense of agency.

Combined, these themes tell a common story and form a consistent statement about the lived experience of being a student and mother at the same time.

**THE COMMON STORY**

The lived experience of student mothers is an ongoing, repetitive, complex process, which originates with the demands
of the dual roles of mother and student. Although each woman might be at a different stage in this process, all women described going through the various stages at various times.

Being a mother is a very demanding job, and being a university student is also very demanding. Trying to be both at the same time often leads to urgent, competing demands.

The role of mother is very important to women, who usually see themselves as the main caregiver, and as the best suited to fill that role. When, due to limited resources, such as money, time, or energy, a conflict arises that does not allow the woman to live up to her own expectations of herself as a mother, she feels guilty and inadequate. Compounding these feelings is the woman's belief that her shortcomings as a mother are due to the fact that she has made the choice to be a student, leading her, at times, to feel selfish, and to question her priorities.

On the other hand, being a student is also very important to women. This is partly because they want to be a role model for their children, but also because it adds another dimension to their being and leads to self-fulfillment, as well as increased economic viability. The women report, however, that the demands on them as a mother compromise their marks at school. Their ability to devote time, uninterrupted attention, and focus to their studies, they feel, is diminished by the 24-
hour/day 'on call' nature of being a mother. They are frustrated when, as a result, they get lower marks than they believe they are capable of achieving. Having to drop courses, and subsequently take longer to finish a degree, accumulating higher debt loads, and not being able to log the necessary volunteer work to get into graduate school are just some variations on the theme of having to compromise school work because of motherhood.

The policies and expectations at university, the women feel, are based on the life circumstances of single students, and do not accommodate the needs of women with children. A student mother comes to view herself as an anomaly, who is, at best, tolerated, and who frequently has to ask for exceptions to the rules, in order to cope. She does not see herself reflected in the university scheme, and often does not know other student mothers. This, combined with her chronic lack of time, leaves her feeling isolated and alone.

The demands on her as a mother, as well as the demands on her as a student seem, at times, written in stone to the student mother, that is, she sees it as 'the way things are.' At those times, she feels defeated and helpless, and her extreme frustration expresses itself in exhaustion and inability to function.
In an attempt to 'make things work,' the women frequently cut back on their own needs. They do not exercise, take time to unwind, socialize, or even sleep enough. Some women also neglect their nutritional needs, eating too little, or only fast food. All of this, the women acknowledge, actually diminishes their ability to cope.

When all attempts to satisfy both the student and the mother role fail, however, there comes a point at which the woman becomes angry and begins to question the situation. She examines the different aspects of her life in an attempt to find areas that could change and actively re-defines her expectations in these areas. She may re-think and change her expectations of herself as a mother, to reflect the added demands on her life by the student role. At the same time, she may re-negotiate the contributions of other household members to child care and the running of the household, or she may lower her housekeeping standards and lessen the degree of importance it holds for her, in order to free up more time for studies. The woman may also learn to frame her expectations of herself as a student more realistically, as she realizes that her study time and focus are often compromised, and that her marks do not accurately reflect her abilities. And finally, a woman may begin to expect greater accommodation from the university system
itself, actively demanding to have her needs met. The shift here is from believing herself to be a failure to recognizing the failure of the university to meet student moms' needs.

A student mother may re-define any or all of these aspects of her lived experience—or she may drop courses and eventually give up on her education, at least at this point. The process is dynamic: it repeats itself and starts anew with every change in circumstances, such as different courses, professors, childhood illnesses, or change in income.

If the woman meets with co-operation in her family and/or university environment, and thus can make changes that enable her to be both the mother she wants to be and the student she knows she can be, or if the woman can adjust her expectations of herself as a mother and/or of herself as a student, so they reflect the realities of her life, or both, the woman's sense of agency will be enhanced, and her self-worth will increase. If the woman is not able to renegotiate any areas of her lived experience, however, the woman will end up feeling hopeless, helpless, defeated, and weak.

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF STUDENT MOTHERS

An Illustrated Account

The following accounts illustrate the lived experiences of student mothers with concrete anecdotes, quotes, and by
creatively re-writing the meanings assigned by the women to what they experience. The accounts are based on the listed themes and sub-themes that emerged from close phenomenological examination of the interviews. They reflect the common struggles women experience as they negotiate the daily competing demands of motherhood and being a student.

The Lived Experience of Student Mothers Involves Having to Face Conflicting Demands

Facing conflicting, but equally urgent demands on a daily bases is the underlying dilemma student mothers have to face. As a mother, a woman generally feels she should be available to her child when the child seeks contact. There are certain, often internalized societal expectations of a mother: she should be patient, read to her child, bake cookies and prepare nutritious meals, keep her child and her household tidy, and in general, make her child's well-being the focus of her attention and her priority. Joanne states:

Externally, there's an awful lot put on me that says your parenting role has to come first and every time there's a conflict: you should quit school. Obviously I have conflicts as far as what children need and what I need to do....the major underlying problem's
always conflict of interest and being mother, there's all of the stuff that says that you are last.

Being a university student, however, often does not allow for this ideal to be enacted. Undergraduate studies, especially, are time structured and inflexible, such that a woman will have to attend classes when they are offered, not when they fit into her day. She has to study before exams, read, and prepare her assignments, and shift her focus to these tasks when she does them. University studies, unlike a 9 to 5 job, do not allow one to punch out at a certain hour and leave work behind, but often occupy one's thoughts and emotions throughout the whole day.

The conflicting demands on student mothers, then, are mainly related to time and focus. Organizational skills are necessary to maximize the use of time, schedules have to be followed, and still, there often are compromises that need to be made. As Tara states:

It's stressful--I mean, it seems to break that threshold--that comfort level of just being able to concentrate on one thing and do that one thing well. I have to concentrate on quite a few different things and do all of those things well...often, there just doesn't seem to be enough room in my head for everything.
Child care and household duties are ultimately seen as the woman's responsibility. Joanne speaks for most, when she says: "Once I am home, I carry the can. The buck stops here."

Finding time for household, child care, family, as well as studying is often compounded by the need for a paying job. Many student mothers report that student loans are not sufficient to support them and their child(ren). Marianne states:

If you wanted to know what the biggest burden for a single parent student is, it's financial. When you think, O.K., well, I don't have the rent in April, and it's my daughter's birthday and I'm writing finals, and this and that, and sometimes it's so overwhelming that I just practically can't function at all - the financial burden is so tremendous.

And Tara describes her thoughts:

I think about the money. That's my primary worry. [School] is a luxury, and I'm over-spending to do it and I shouldn't be.

Marianne describes what she experienced when she ran out of money:

If one part, like money, if the finances drop, it throws the whole rest of the system out of whack....You're spending time with your child but
you're like a zombie. You're thinking, where am I going to get the money. How am I going to pay the rent? What are we going to have for dinner? Are we going to have dinner? So, you're not really there. You're not there for your child. You're not there for your studies.

The need for part-time jobs places additional strain on an already tight time schedule, and fragments the women's day and focus even more.

In addition to actual scheduling problems, women describe difficulties with keeping their focus on what they are doing at any one time. In class, a woman may find herself thinking about organizing daycare needs, or a sick child, while in the evening, at her child's bedside reading a story, her mind may be on the assignment she still has to finish. Irene observes:

One conflicts with the other. The family life conflicts with the student life. I think the student life requires more introspection, more focus, and the family life is always conflicting with that. It's always looking to others' needs.

As well as the dilemma over where to spend one's time and focus, competing demands can also be described as the internal struggle with priorities. Although all women state that their
child(ren) are very important to them, they also clearly place great importance on being a student. Joanne states:

It's important to me to be a good mother but there's more to me than that. There's a lot more to me than that.

Being a role model for their child(ren), as well as for other women, increased earning potential, self-realization, and economic necessity are the various reasons women give for going to university. Their motivation for doing well is high, "otherwise, what's the point" (Irene), and the thought of giving up on their education is painful. Joanne explains:

Having to give up on some courses, which I've already done, and which I'm really having to heart-search now to think about doing it even more in order to keep my sanity for the rest of the year, it's at great cost to me. In fact....it kills, just kills. It hurts because when I'm here, I'm me. I'm not somebody's mother and I'm not someone's wife. I'm not anything to do with anybody else.

When faced with competing demands, the decision about which area gets the attention depends largely on the woman's priority at the time. A sick child might motivate a woman to miss several days of classes, whereas final exams may cause her to hire a
baby sitter and not be available to her child for a while. Everyday routines are usually worked out, but any change in routine, unforeseen circumstances, or additional demands threaten the whole plan. Joanne remarks:

When I start to get most stressed is when I'm being flexible and things are still pushing and pushing. Because there's never just one stressor - there's always 10.

Although women liken their handling of competing demands to the act of juggling, unforeseen circumstances add more and more balls to the set, causing some of them eventually to fall, or, as Irene describes it:

I felt like I was, you know, the little ball in the pinball machine, that I was just sort of bouncing from one thing to another, and that I wasn't really accomplishing anything.

The Lived Experience of Student Mothers Leads to Feelings of Guilt and Inadequacy

Student mothers experience a lot of guilt corresponding to the areas in which they are forced to make compromises. Because the family life and the school demands are experienced as conflicting with each other, and both get compromised to varying
degrees at different times, student moms feel inadequate in both areas.

Women with younger children in daycare regret having to leave the care of their child for a large part of every day to someone else. A mother feels it should be she who is there to comfort the child when it is hurt or tired, who answers the child's questions and passes along her values. Marianne says:

My child, it's me and her, that's it. If I'm not there for her, and I try to be there for her as much as I can, then I'm letting her down. So there's the guilt of not being the kind of parent I used to be when I was a stay-home mom and my focus was my child.

Having made the choice to go to school, and therefore not being able to live up to her own ideal as a mother, often results in doubts about the quality of her mothering. As Emma explains:

There's a discrepancy between my expectations of me as a mother and a wife and what I can actually offer, and that's the major source of stress.

When the children are older, a student mother worries more about the quality of time spent with her child(ren). She is aware that her focus often is on her school work, even when she is at home with her child. Irene states:
My expectations of myself, when you're a parent, you want to be the best parent you can be and my idea of being a good parent is being attentive and available and having the energy to do things with my children, and not always pushing them away or being too tired to do something that's involving....The effect on my family is that I'm just not available to them in a meaningful or consistent way. There are times, but I just generally feel like I'm just kind of there. We're in the same room but we're really not connecting.

Not being there, emotionally and/or physically with the child, rushing to get out of the house in the morning, putting the child to bed early to create a little more study time, all combine into the heavy burden of guilt that creeps up into every student mother's subconscious. Even if she has weighed the pros and cons of going to school, and has decided that there are more positives than negatives, all things considered, the every day struggle to find time for her child(ren) means she may have to justify her decisions to herself every day anew, as guilty feelings come up again and again.

Especially if the woman enjoys her schoolwork, she has to fight feelings of guilt about leaving her children. Mary says:
I feel some guilt around enjoying it so much, and having him (son) in daycare....I'm focused on my studies, which is what I want, but I feel torn about it and guilty as well....Because he's in daycare, I can't justify not working. I don't go shopping and hang around.

Spending time on anything other than school work or the child seems frivolous to a student mother and makes her question her priorities. Marianne describes her feelings:

I went out this weekend with another student mom. And I felt guilty. Why? What an irresponsible thing to do as a parent. You have this evening. You could be spending it with your child. Now you're going out. You selfish woman.

When a child is ill or in crisis, but the student mother can not stay with the child, the decision is especially hard. Irene describes her feelings when she took her sons to school:

I felt really mean. I felt very selfish, as if I was choosing my own needs above my children's when they're obviously in a very vulnerable situation. But I didn't feel I had a choice, or I felt that it was going to create more of a problem for me not to go to school than it would for them to go and to feel
guilty. The decision I was making, it was right for me, it wasn't right for them.

Not being able to be as available to their child as they would want to be, women also worry about a weakening of the mother child bond. Mary states:

I wonder whether I'm missing out on quite a lot of his early childhood...I'm sure it impacts on my bonding with him because I'm so focused on my work.

And similarly, Irene says:

I feel worried that it might have an effect on them and our relationship. That it's very hard once you've lost a connection with somebody, especially with children, to rebuild that connection. I worry that they will see my lack of attention as not caring about them. (Her eyes tearing up).

In addition to battling the feeling of being a bad mother, student mothers may struggle to find time for their household, husband, and job. Emma describes:

I come home late and I'm very tired, and I could use some sleep, and he [husband] wants to talk, and I have no energy anymore to face that.
Often, when their standards of tidiness are compromised, women feel inadequate. Tara states: "My mother would have never let her kids go out the door like that."

The many subtle ways in which student mothers do not measure up to their own expectations of themselves as mothers and wives not only lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy, but also to self-doubt. Joanne observes:

Unfortunately, there are times when you begin to really doubt yourself. Am I really being so selfish? Maybe I am just wanting too much...those kinds of thoughts bring with them, or come alongside an immense amount of depression.

Student mothers, however, do not only feel they are doing an inadequate job as a mother, but also often as a student. Usually, they believe that they are performing below their abilities. Aware that the cause of their lower marks is the chronic lack of time and focus they have to live with, student mothers none the less find it hard to accept. Tara observes:

I don't necessarily get the grades that would match my--I know that I have that in me, but the time just isn't there.

Marianne wonders:
My grades have dropped and I've had to accept that's all I can do. It's really a heart-breaking experience, because I was an honours student and now I'm barely passing....How do you go from being an honours student to failing? I don't know. I don't think I suddenly woke up stupid one morning.

Even marks in the higher range are not acceptable, if they fall below the level the woman knows she can achieve. Joanne:

I'm having a very hard time because I like to do well. I can do well and I'm not. I'm still passing everything, but that's not good enough....It's destroying my positives. If I'm not doing as well as I should be doing, and I never ever do, even when I get 80%, I know it should have been higher. I know how well I can do.

Performing at a lower level than one is capable of results in guilty feelings when not spending your time studying. Even spending time with your child becomes a conflict. Sarah:

It's the kind of guilt that you feel if you take time away from your studies to be with your child.

Having to miss classes because of other responsibilities means more to student mothers than to single students, because
they have less time to study, and the time they do manage to
squeeze out is often fractured and interrupted. Marianne states:

To miss even one class is deadly because if I can't
study at night or if I'm not focused enough to study
at night, I need the information I'm getting in
class. I need it. I'm desperate to have it, because
it's where I will draw my strength from come exam
time.

It is at exam time that student mothers feel the inadequacy of
their student experience accumulating. Marianne:

....so maybe it was just one exam, but maybe you
don't do quite as well at the next exam either. It's
a self-fulfilling prophecy. It just keeps snowballing
and getting bigger and bigger, until the problem is
so far out of control, you don't know how to fix it
anymore.

To summarize, the meaning women students with children
derive from their experience of living with competing urgencies
is that they believe they perform below their ability as a
student, feel guilty about not being the mother they want to be,
and, as a result, often question their priorities.

The Lived Experience of Student Mothers Induces Helplessness and
Frustration
One recurring consequence of the every day lived experience of student mothers is that they feel there is no way to change their situation. As a mother, they believe, they will always be the one responsible for the child's well being. On the other hand, they do not see any indication that changes in the university system and/or policies to accommodate their needs are forthcoming. It is when describing the helplessness they feel, that student mothers become the most emotional. Tears of frustration were wiped away by many of them.

One source of frustration is that there simply is not enough time. Lack of time leads to lower marks. Joanne explains:

In order to maintain that kind of course load on top of this size family, I'm going to have to accept marks in the low passing area, which stinks to me. This no longer is a positive in my life. It's just another stress. That's no good.

Women with children are keenly aware that their marks are not evaluated in light of their other responsibilities. Emma:

It doesn't matter to them [university] if you spend time at home raising your kids. Later, when I have a job, they will never appreciate the fact that I didn't do just schooling. But it's hard to be as
competitive as someone who doesn't do what you are doing.

Joanne describes her frustration at the situation:

Part of the struggle that I go through is I'm so aware that the person sitting next to me is having this time to be prepared for the class that I don't have, and I have to, I feel very pressured to be on equal footing with them.

Other areas of frustration for student mothers are the policies regarding student loan and insufficient funding. Tara:

There's all these weird little limitations. You have to get a certain GPA although you can't get that GPA with the four classes and two kids and a job. It's just too bad that they don't understand that.

It takes a lot of effort and time to get funding. Marianne:

I was told I had to fight. I don't have time to fight for things anymore. I just need to go, go, go. I'm tired of fighting....Student loans are not enough to live on....But I don't have options. It's not like I can take another night job and make it all better. I can't. I can't even afford a baby-sitter.... What options do women have when you're saddled with
children and no one is helping you and basically you have no out? No support, nothing.

In their homes, as well, women feel frustrated, as their attempts to distribute the burden of housework and childcare among all family members over time often revert back to them. Women report, in some cases, that they encounter active resistance, as Joanne describes:

I'm being expected to carry everything at home and everything at school because the school is being perceived as a privilege. It's play. You don't really need to do this....Makes me want to howl at the moon because I'm prevented, by lack of co-operation, passive-aggressive stuff, really.

The meaning women draw from their frustrating experiences amounts to feeling as if they are doing something that is outside the norm. There is no provision made in either the system of family or the system of university to incorporate one with the other, and women have to constantly struggle to find a way to combine the two. The implicit expectations of a mother and of a student are often not compatible, and cause the woman, at times, to question whether she can continue to be both. Mary:

Around Christmas time, I was thinking, I can't take anymore. I can't do this. I'm not going to get my
degree. I'm just going to quit because I couldn't cope anymore.

The Lived Experience of Student Mothers Fosters Alienation and Disconnection.

Women students with children often describe feeling alone. Many state that they do not know any other student mothers. Not seeing themselves reflected in the student population, and not acknowledged in the policies, they feel out of place, as if they were an anomaly. Tara says:

Sometimes I think I shouldn't be at school. I'm wasting the government's money....doing all these things that I shouldn't be doing....I hear a lot of voices who have told me that people or women who are going back to school are just a drain on society.

Comparing themselves with single students, student mothers realize that they have less time, and are less focused on their school work. Again they feel that their experience falls outside the norm, and is not recognized. Tara explains:

I'm competing with other classmates who don't have this kind of responsibility....and I just think to myself, well, god, it would be so easy to pull off those A+s in everything if you could just have that solid focus and an opportunity to spend all that time
reading all that other stuff that you never get around to....People who are getting the scholarships are the single students who are able to focus their whole lives on their studies.

Although believing others see her as different, as Tara says: "There are definitely some who kind of give you that look, like, what is she doing here?," the student mother herself feels different from the single student and believes others cannot relate to her experience. Marianne:

I'm envious of them....They don't have the financial responsibility and they can actually focus on being a student and I never can do that.

Because they usually spend as little time as possible on campus, student mothers often do not feel part of the groups that form in every class. Irene explains:

I remember actually feeling very isolated from everybody in the class....I felt I wasn't part of the group....I felt kind of out of it. It seemed like everybody else was having a conversation with somebody and I was just not....I think I'm operating on my own understanding, I don't really have a lot of input and if I'm making a flaw in the way I'm
thinking or perceiving something, I have no opportunity to find that out.

Similarly, Mary says:

If you have problems, they're your problems. There's no one around to support you.

Not having the time to spend with other students outside of class also has other effects. Mary:

I look at students without children, and they socialize together, and they invite me and I can never go....I don't have a social life, I have university....everyone goes to the pub, that's a very important part, the social aspect of it, and I usually can't do that, so I feel I miss out....[When she stood for election] no one voted for me because they don't know me.

Lack of time to socialize, on and off campus, is a frequently recurring statement from student mothers. Often, scheduling problems are the reason, as Emma describes:

Family housing has groups and tea parties but they all happen when I have to be at school so I never have a chance to be involved.

Even if the student mother takes the time to socialize, it often is a negative experience, because, as Emma says: "....it turned
out to be more stressful afterwards, because I constantly felt I was wasting time."

No time for a social life, and not seeing yourself represented on campus are two of the main reasons student mothers feel isolated and disconnected. Another reason is the tone in the class set by the professor, and, whereas some women report supportive experiences with faculty, all have stories to tell of being alienated and made to feel like an outsider. Sara:

Most profs have in their mind that all students are twenty, eating pizza, and having parties....You come a few minutes late and they make some crack about partying too late. [When she explained that her child was sick] it's like: what are you doing back in school then, if that's your responsibility?

Tara describes vividly her struggle with feeling unwelcome:

This....man is not very understanding, so I didn't want him to have the excuse to say, oh well, she's just a mother or something. Why doesn't she just go home....I can just see it in his eyes....he would really belittle them. I couldn't see myself going to that prof because I didn't want to use my children as an excuse.
Not feeling understood and supported in your struggles as a student mother, however, makes succeeding all the harder. Tara:

To me, this is the stressor, is trying to get that point across to certain individuals who are in those positions of power, who are going to make those decisions on your life....Here I feel like I'm just a big weed, and they're trying to get me out of there, and they're pulling as hard as they can, and I'm sticking in....I definitely feel like I'm not wanted here by the faculty.

The everyday experiences of student mothers, then, convey to those women that they are not a valued part of the student body, but are largely invisible, and, at best, tolerated.

**The Lived Experience of Student Mothers Contributes to Self Neglect**

As must be clear by now, the everyday experience of student mothers involves a chronic lack of time. To maximize their day, many women will either get up very early, before their families, to study, or study after their children are in bed. As a consequence, all women report being tired. In fact, as Sarah calls it: they are **devastatingly** without sleep. Not finding enough time to sleep is probably the most often mentioned complaint of student mothers. Not only do they have to cut back
on their regular night time, in order to study, but also to do their housework, and relate to their husbands. When a child (or husband) is ill, their already sparse sleeping time will be shortened even more.

In addition, in order to try and satisfy their family responsibilities and do their school work, women neglect their own needs in a number of other areas. As Joanne explains:

I think that's a common thing with mothers. Mothers come last. If there's not enough of something to go around, guess who doesn't get any....You get so used to putting everybody else first....It was apparent to me that I don't do things for me.

More specifically, women report cutting back on personal grooming, exercising, and eating nutritious meals. Tara reports:

It means having to give up on certain things. Giving up on little luxuries....to be able to have time to be better prepared, in grooming, appearances, maybe not eating properly....at home I find I just sort of snack on stuff whenever I have the time and I maybe eat really late or really early.

Marianne expresses a similar tendency:

I don't take care of myself. I don't eat properly.

There's no time to take care of myself. It's just go,
go. Tight schedule. Not a minute to drop. There have been times when I would realize that it had been a week since I had a bath.

Student mothers also neglect their need for alternative activities to studying and taking care of their families. Irene:

I don't have as balanced a life as somebody who has time to go out and spend with friends or go skiing. I feel like I don't really have any--my time is either at school or with my family. I don't have any time to really restore myself, to really do something spontaneous. Do something that will make me feel good, so I feel very constrained in my situation.

Mary echoes her sentiments:

There's not a lot of fun other than the enjoyment of accomplishing things at school. There's no frivolity.

In fact, the more the stress level rises, the less student mothers do for themselves. Emma explains:

I'm not able to create my own space and time for relaxation, which would probably help....the fact is that I'm so stressed that things take so much longer, its like a vicious cycle. The more stress I get, the less I spend time in dealing with stress.
When student mothers talk about the things they do not do for themselves, it is said more as an aside. They do not want sympathy, but state it as a fact of life for them. Often, they also report various physical symptoms of stress. Headaches, migraines, tension, and generally being more susceptible to illnesses are the main complaints. Irene explains:

Physically, I get very hypertense. I can feel my body tensing up. Even in driving, I get very angry and aggressive. I felt very helpless, generally. I felt like I was just trying to take care of all these things.

In their attempt to cope with the everyday experiences of competing urgencies, it seems that student mothers cut back on their own needs first, in order to try and satisfy the needs of their family, as well as their student responsibilities. Some of the women were aware that this is actually counterproductive, as they become less and less able to cope with and manage the stressful situations. Others only began to realize this during the interview. It is their first response, none the less, to attempt to satisfy everyone else.

The Lived Experience of Student Mothers Encompasses Anger, Resentment, and Questioning of the Status Quo.
Living with the everyday struggles to find time and energy for both their child(ren) and their school work, and still feeling like an outsider and not valued for what they are experiencing, often leads student mothers to use a sarcastic or angry tone. Although they generally seem resigned to the facts that child care will always be mainly their responsibility, and that the university is premised on single students without other responsibilities, each of them at times gets angry or resentful about this situation, and questions why it should be so. Tara:

I was brought up to just get married, find a rich guy, get married and he would look after me. But that doesn't work out for me because I don't want to do that.

She also is angry about her children's school system and teachers, who, she feels, judge her as a mother by how well her children are dressed, and how well adjusted they are:

I really wasn't expecting that kind of attitude from the school system but it's there and I hear it every year with a new teacher.

Student mothers with young children are resentful about having to spend so much time and worry about securing daycare. Line-ups and poor organization at the university are another sore point for these women, because they mean that their already
tight time schedule is further stretched, and the lists of things to do do not get any shorter.

Inadequate financial support makes many student mothers angry. Not having enough money means not being able to buy good food, having to worry about running out of money before the end of term, having to take on, sometimes several, part-time jobs, and owing a large debt. Tara:

We're always having to kind of play catch up all the time....They say they've got all these great funds for single mothers and isn't it wonderful but it's a pretty liberal attitude because you don't realize what it's like to actually live it. You've got to be some super human being to do that....I wish the government or the people who do the funding would kind of lighten up on people like myself and say, well, why don't we just give you the money you need, instead of not quite enough so that you're not always struggling.

Sarah's description of the pain it caused her to hear her son mumble, as he fell asleep "Mummy will be right with you," is echoed by several other students. Seeing their own behaviour mirrored back to them is an inescapable confrontation with what
their child experiences. Yet, they do not know how to change the situation, without giving up on school. Sarah:

I can't create any more time without cutting my study load back so much that I can't be considered a full-time student anymore....There's just not the resources to cover that kind of part-time study....I don't really have a choice....But at this point I'm thinking, does he (son) have to do it? He doesn't have to if I take the time - it's up to the parent to decide what they have to cope with.

Mary describes her resentment when she had to stay at home with her son, who had the chicken pox:

You wouldn't fail the course, but you're not the star pupil when you miss classes....Especially if people don't realize that I'm a single parent, then they would think, well, why can't she be better organized, or get her partner to do it...but I don't want to be seen as a victim. I don't want to be seen as struggling. I find it just a little bit humiliating.

Marianne expresses her anger at her situation:

I'm a single parent. Last term I was working two part-time jobs, studying four courses and raising a child. My schedule was ridiculous. To even consider
that I could do that in the course of a week is ridiculous.

Irene is angry, because:

I'm a mature person....I was more in control of my work situation, whereas as a student, I'm not in control at all of my workload.

The lack of time to socialize, and in particular, not knowing any other student mothers is mentioned by many women. Not having the chance to exchange their experiences, get feedback, or helpful hints is something they feel contributes to their feeling like outsiders, and disadvantages them even more. Irene: "I know no one in my situation."

In general, much resentment is also directed at unsupportive faculty and administration. Sensitivity training for professors was suggested, as well as "making the experience of being a mother a valid one and respected" (Tara).

In that context, evaluation procedures were seen as unfair, because grade point average is the most important criterion for admission to graduate school, whereas life experience is assigned no, or only lower value. When Tara went to an advisor to get information about graduate admission, he discouraged her:

He said, 'well, you know, it's survival of the fittest and this is a weeding out process, and those
who can take it will succeed, and those who can't, won't, and the grades show that'....After I left, I thought, I am surviving. I am one of the fittest.

At those times during the interviews, when the women expressed their anger or resentment, they spoke with great force and animation, contrary to frustrating experiences, which were described in a weak voice. It was as if they were issuing a challenge to the status quo, saying: This is NOT how it should be.

The Lived Experience of Student Mothers Facilitates Re-definition of: Self as Mother

Although all student mothers expressed guilt over not being as available to their children as they feel they should be, several women blunted their statements or contradicted them by pointing out advantages to their child. Mary:

I'm really enjoying the work I'm doing. I have more energy because I'm happier....I believe daycare is good for him (son).

Emma: She needs to be with children, so she's probably getting more from the daycare than just spending time with me.

The importance of children's physical appearance, as well, may be downgraded. Tara:
Well, it's just too bad. Their jeans have a rip in them and that's just too bad. I have to let that go. It's just appearances, so I don't think those things are really priorities.

Some women actively plan changes to their routine. Irene:

I want to sit down and have one night a week that I spend with my children....I worry about, do I have my priorities straight? Is this a healthy thing for me and for them?

Many women incorporate being a role model into their idea of what a mother should be, and so a common justification for being a student also is, as Marianne states: "How can I tell them about the world, if I don't know?"

Wanting education to be a valued part of life for their children, women see themselves as a living example. Tara:

I still hold education as a priority and what I'd like from the whole experience is that both my children say, as just a matter of their everyday conversation, that they say, when I graduate from university, this is what I'm going to do, so it's already set in them that this is a possibility for them.
Finding ways to relax, and therefore to be able to deal with their stresses more effectively, and to react more patiently to their children, is planned by many student mothers. All are aware that they probably would be better able to handle the competing demands on themselves if they were to take some time to unwind. Various methods are mentioned, such as taking a bath, going for a walk, or getting a massage. Only a few women, however, have made such methods of relaxation a regular routine. Most talk about that they should do it. Emma: "I try to make it so I can relax for myself and also involve my family."

Against the backdrop of their feelings of guilt, these statements represent the women's attempts to redefine their role as mother, so that it can more easily incorporate the needs of a student as well.

**Self as Student**

A common experience of student mothers is that their marks are lower than they believe they are capable of, or than they were before they had children. Although this is a painful experience, many of the women learn to evaluate their marks in light of the other demands on them. Emma:

I was used to high academic performance but then I was just by myself and now I had other priorities.
Sarah: I could have done better, but given the circumstances that was the best I could do.

Emma is a good example of how women reframe their views:

I try to look at things in a different manner. Even if the mark is lower, you are able to achieve some things, like being with your daughter, look at it as: I achieved 80% rather than I lost 20% of the grade.

Often, women make the observation that their abilities as a student have become enriched by having children. Sarah:

Having a child is an advantage because it deepened my work. I think it makes me better at what I do because I'm a parent.

Irene echoes a similar sentiment:

I think in some respects, having children is an advantage in terms of being real....having somebody to pull you back down to earth.

In talking about admission criteria to grad schools, Tara says:

I think they're selling their program short by only allowing those people who have the privilege, yeh, the privilege, to be able to focus all their attention on it, but they're losing out on certain perspectives that aren't being brought up in the research that's being done.
To summarize, student mothers reframe how they see themselves as students by evaluating their marks in light of the difficulties they have in finding time to study, and by beginning to value those special contributions they as mothers can make to academia.

The Role of Family and Friends

Among those women who are married, the experiences they report can be very different. Emma's husband, for instance, takes on child care when she has to be at school, or needs to study. Her negotiations for sharing of this duty are met with support. Joanne, on the other hand, meets with constant resistance. Joanne:

He will occasionally do dishes, but makes it well known that he is making this great sacrifice. After all, he has been out all day working.

Not only does Joanne not find support from her husband, he also boycotts her efforts to get support from her children:

If I'm assertive, my husband doesn't like that. He doesn't want me to delegate. He thinks it's all my job. We have this terrible problem with what is a mother. Leave it to Beaver has an awful lot to answer for.

Joanne's way of renegotiating her expectations of her family:
I stopped fighting it and it's a significant breakdown in the marriage because I stopped needing him. So what I did was sort of decided not to need what I couldn't have.

Most women, however, report that they do get some support from their family, although it may be a tedious undertaking that needs constant re-affirmation.

A striking finding is the realization by all participating student mothers how important social contact with supportive friends or other student mothers is, or would be. Tara:

I always make sure that I have a little network of people that I could depend on.

Sarah: I do have some support, and I think that's another thing that helps with the stress....talking with others.

Emma: I try to ventilate....my husband is the first person and I have a good friend at school....it's easier because we can communicate and when there are issues we try and talk about them....Support, I think, would do miracles.... There is someone who has children and I'm going to get in touch.

Irene summarized:

I actually realized that I can't do it all alone.
The Role of the University

Although all student mothers have made the experience that some of their particular needs are not met by the university, they are able to articulate which changes would be helpful.

Tara: A little less rigid structure in the classroom. A little less emphasis on this survival of the fittest in the classroom environment....It's a privilege and it shouldn't be.

Sarah: It would be nice to have a little more flexibility [deadlines] but that's discretionary with professors.

Irene: The other thing is the funding. You can go 40% of the time, but then you don't qualify for student loan. You need to go 60% of a course load.

The call for part-time study, funded by student loan, is a common one. Many women have had the experience that the system is not set up for part-time study, and does not allow for time off when a child is ill. They see their funding threatened whenever they cannot live up to the expected course load.

Several women, however, have found support networks through which they have discovered ways to obtain financial help.

Marianne:

I work very closely with the Women Students' Office.

They're a tremendous support network for me....I got
quite a substantial bursary, which enabled me to stay in school and not drop out....It was a godsend. It was an absolute godsend. It gave me energy, courage. It was like, I walked in there weighing 3 tons, and I left weighing 50 pounds....I had hope, and I felt like I was heard.

When student mothers encounter difficulties in meeting deadlines, some actually experience support from faculty. Sarah: [Talking to professors] took the weight of having all these deadlines off my shoulders. I'll do what I can do, but I don't have to, I won't fail if I don't meet these deadlines.

Marianne: I've had exams deferred, and I've actually had pretty good experiences with instructors on stuff like that.

Emma: The school itself, it's great in accommodating my needs [for flexibility] that way. It was good that I found out the school would be so supportive.

These experiences have caused some of the women to revise their view of how the university can accommodate them. Other women simply take accommodation for granted, when the child is ill.

Mary: I just told them that I had to do it [stay home with the child]. I'm not sure if they'd tell me if it wasn't O.K....even if they're thinking it's a weak
excuse, no one would ever say because it's a sacred area.

On occasion, women react strongly to unsupportive faculty. One woman regularly sits in on classes to observe the professor, before she decides to take the course. This takes extra time, but spares her some negative experiences, such as Sarah's: "When he made that comment [about student mothers] I got so mad I transferred out of his class."

In general, women feel that their life experiences are appreciated by many professors, even if that is not usually reflected in their marks. Tara:

My profs always tell me, yes, you're a good student, I really like what you have to say, you've got excellent insight. It's just too bad that it does not show in my marks.

Joanne: I appreciate education ten times more now than ever I did when I was 18 years old....it just didn't mean what it means now. When I listen to lectures now, it all means something. However, I'm virtually excluded from any honours because I'm not able to do at least....so that closes doors to me and that seems a hell of a shame because I think I'm a good student.
This discrepancy for many of the student mothers, between enjoying their studies and getting support from some faculty, yet still not performing to their own standards, brings home the point many women make: that they feel they really need contact with others in their situation. Several of the women stated that their participation in this study was fueled by the hope to meet other student mothers or find a support group. Being able to exchange stories of their experiences, find out about resources, and discuss which professors are supportive or not means they do not have to do it all alone and feel alienated.

Marianne: It's like, I'm normal, I'm an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances, and you have to remind yourself to look at it that way. You must, or you're going to lose it.

The Lived Experience of Student Mothers Either Strengthens or Weakens the Woman's Sense of Agency

This theme arose not so much out of actual quotes from the interviews, but rather as a result of the culmination of the meanings gleaned from the previous seven themes.

When women are faced on a daily basis with the dilemma to have to decide between attending to two often equally urgent demands, but find themselves consistently unable to satisfy either of the demands to their own satisfaction, they will begin
to feel inadequate and guilty, frustrated, and resentful. At the same time, their attempts to compensate by neglecting their own needs often fail, and student mothers then begin to feel angry and start to question the status quo. They may attempt to re-define their own role as mother, or their expectations of themselves as a student. Or they may try to re-negotiate the support they receive from family and/or friends. They may even re-define how they see the university system, and their role within it. A student mother may try any or all of these strategies at one time or another.

Although all student mothers in the project reported struggling with competing urgencies, each of them has met with differing degrees of success at different times in attempting to re-define her world. It is the cumulative net effect of the successes and failures in re-defining and renegotiating her world that will determine whether she will feel strengthened in her belief in her ability to be a student mother, or whether she will end up doubting that she can make it.

Sense of agency, or the belief in your ability to effect a difference, for student mothers, then, is a matter of degree. On one end of the continuum are women like Marianne, who have very little support from family and/or friends, feel inadequate
as a mother, as well as a student, and who have met with little success in securing support at school. Marianne feels:

[I have] no control and no hope. You're not going to finish your education. This is too hard. You can't live like this.

Sarah is another example of a woman whose sense of agency has been diminished. Her devotion to her son prevents her from spending more time on her schooling, she is exhausted, and her health is deteriorating. She considers:

I will probably drop out after this term. Maybe I can continue when he's older, but people tell me that once you stop, you usually don't go back.

On the other end of the spectrum are women such as Emma, who have repeatedly found ways to be both mother and student. They usually have supportive family and/or friends, as well as faculty support. Or they may have been able to re-frame their expectations of themselves as mothers and/or students. These women have come to believe that it is possible to be a successful student mother, and that they have the power to bring it about. Emma says emphatically: "It's not like I'm going to give up!"

Joanne, as well, in spite of her unsupportive family, is determined to finish her degree. She draws her strength, it
seems, from the support of her instructors, as well as the joy she gets from being a student. She is certain:

I know I'm going to make it. Come hell or high water, even if I have to cut back this year to two courses.....I will do it somehow.

Although all of the student mothers in this study described situations in which they felt helpless, frustrated, etc., and went through different stages before attempting to re-define their world, some have consistently met with little success, and others have had the experience that they can make a difference. Because student mothers are forced to confront the difficulties they encounter, their lived experience changes their sense of agency, one way or the other.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This study attempted to elucidate the lived experience of women who try to combine being a mother with being a student. Seven women enrolled in an undergraduate university programme and also have at least one child, were interviewed about their everyday experiences as a result of being a student mother. The use of phenomenological analysis allowed eight common themes to emerge. The lived experience of student mothers (1) involves having to face conflicting demands, (2) leads to feelings of guilt and inadequacy, (3) induces helplessness and frustration, (4) fosters alienation and disconnection, (5) contributes to self neglect, (6) encompasses anger, resentment, and questioning of the status quo, (7) facilitates re-definition of self as mother, self as student, the role of family and friends, and/or the role of the university, and (8) either strengthens or weakens the woman's sense of agency.

These themes suggest that the lived experience of student mothers is a complex, ongoing process whose outcome depends on both the woman and her environment. It is a process that is extremely challenging and often painful, and it has the potential to change the woman's sense of self. Far from being a
simple combination of two roles, the lived experience of student mothers is a life-altering metamorphosis.

**Multiple Roles**

Early theories on multiple roles for women were generally built around the mother who also is employed outside the home (Pleck, 1977). The industrial age, as well as the emergence of feminism had brought about a drastic increase in the number of women--even women with children--who worked for pay outside the home (Caplan, 1985). The concern of social scientists, when examining women's multiple roles, was focused largely on whether these women would still be able to be 'good mothers' (Lewis, 1991; Pleck, 1977). More recently, the focus has shifted to examine the incompatibility of being a mother and having a career, as opposed to simply a job (Acker, 1994; Bose, 1987). This distinction is also important for the results of this study. A job might occupy a woman's time and energy for, on average, 8 hours of the day, after which she could switch off and focus on her family. A career, on the other hand, requires more devotion. Overtime, irregular schedules, and taking work home are all possibilities. As a result, a career encroaches on family time. The same is true for student mothers. Being a student means having to find quiet time to study, to work on papers, and to think about assignments. Mental, and often
emotional involvement is required, and that is not limited to 8 hours a day, or to class time only.

Conversely, this study shows that the effects of being a mother encroach on study times. Not only is there a tension between the actual amount of time required to be a (successful) student, but actual thoughts and worries may intrude during class and study times.

Competing Urgencies

The pressures women feel to be 'good mothers,' and the definition of what a good mother is has not changed appreciably along with the change in women's employment status (Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995). As a result, many women today experience urgent demands from at least two sides: their family and their job.

The results of this study clearly indicate that the same is true for student mothers. The women experience internal and external pressure to live up to established standards of performance, both as a mother and as a student. Their inability to consistently satisfy these competing demands leads them to feel guilty and inadequate.

Similar to what Edwards (1993) describes, the results suggest that women experience the university system to be built on the premise of the single student who can, and should, devote all her time and energy to her studies, and not have other
responsibilities. At the same time, women struggle with their own, as well as sometimes with others' concept of what a mother's duty should be. Although they realize that there are not enough hours in a day to satisfy both sets of demands on them as a student, and what they feel they should do and be as a 'good mother,' women find it difficult to shirk some of the responsibility for their children. This is partly due to their own internalized beliefs about mothering, as well as due to a lack of alternative care for their child.

Because both the university and the family are experienced as "greedy institutions" (Coser, 1974), women are in a constant dilemma. They do not see any way to consistently satisfy both of their roles, and they do not easily perceive any way to change the situation. This means women students often feel helpless and frustrated.

The results of this study also indicate something that multiple role theories fail to acknowledge: Student mothers feel like outsiders on campus, and at the same time disconnected from other mothers. Because time pressures do not allow them to socialize appreciably, these women have little contact with other students outside of class, and often do not know any other student mothers. At the same time they do not have time to socialize with mothers who are not students, and find that they
have little in common. Edwards (1993) describes similar results from her interviews with mature students. A second reason why some student mothers feel alienated on campus is that policies, practices, and curricula simply do not reflect them. They feel they must be an exception to the rule, and feel themselves, at best, tolerated.

A strong common theme in this research is that student mothers believe they must meet the demands placed on them before they satisfy their own needs. All student mothers report that they get too little sleep, and therefore are chronically tired. In addition, they cut back on socializing, exercising, and other forms of relaxation, because they feel it would be a waste of time. As a result, many report feeling more tense and anxious than they believe they would be if they would fulfill their own needs better. Yet, student mothers find it difficult to justify taking time for themselves.

In the reports of specific incidents of their lived experience, student mothers usually describe reaching a point of crisis, where they realize that, in spite of all their efforts and self-sacrifice, they will not be able to live up to their expectations. This is the point at which they express anger and resentment about the unfairness of the situation. They may question why they are the only ones responsible for the
household and child care, or they may question university policies or an individual professor's inflexibilities regarding deadlines. In short, they begin to question the status quo. Although they expressed hopelessness in changing the system or their role as mothers earlier on in the interview, when they described reaching their limit and feeling in crisis, these same women now began to question the situation.

Student mothers then describe, tentatively, how their world does, or may function differently. Some make tentative peace with the idea that their child has to be in daycare while they are at school, or that someone else is looking after the child at times. Many of the women describe beginning to view their academic accomplishments in light of their other responsibilities, and realize that they deserve to give themselves more credit for the marks they achieve. They may also begin to accept the possibility that they may take longer to finish their degree. Another way of re-defining their world is to negotiate more participation and help from their family and/or friends in household and child care. Admitting that they cannot do it all by themselves, and realizing that they should not be expected to do it all by themselves, is a big step for the women. And finally, changing how they see, and what they expect from the university allows some women to cope better with
their situations. They may begin to feel that they are justified in asking for extensions or other special considerations when their child is ill. They may speak up, or refuse to attend classes in which a professor makes disparaging remarks about student mothers, or ignores their needs. And most importantly, they may actively seek contact with other student mothers or support groups which share their problems.

A student mother may, at different times, and to differing degrees, attempt any or all of these strategies. Dependent on her own psychological make-up, her family situation, and the responsiveness of her academic environment, she may meet with success to varying degrees, or she may meet with resistance. If she consistently meets with resistance, and is unable to improve her situation, her belief in the hopelessness of the situation will grow and she is more likely to give up her attempt to combine being a mother and a student. To the degree that she meets with success in re-defining and renegotiating her situation, her sense of agency will increase, and she will become more confident that she can be a successful student mother.

The existing research on multiple roles does not address the specific implications for student mothers, in particular undergraduate student mothers. Edwards' (1993) study of mature
women does point out many of the same problems that the women in this study described, but she does not come to the same conclusions. Just as Edwards (1993) shows, the role of mother, and the role of student are much more than roles. They are self-defining concepts. The results of this study go beyond Edwards' (1993) by revealing how women attempt to re-define these concepts, and/or their environment in order to negotiate the difficult goal of combining motherhood with being a student. Thus, this study makes a valuable contribution to the scarce research literature on student mothers, and provides important implications for student counselling, as well as for university policy makers.

Implications for Research and Practice

Because so little is known about the experience of student mothers, a basic foundation of knowledge about this particular student population needs to be created. This research provides an account of the lived experience of student mothers, that is, an account of how they themselves experience their lives. As Van Manen (1990) points out, getting at the nature of knowledge must begin with understanding how it is known. The phenomenological approach used in this study to understand what it is like to be a student and a mother at the same time contributes a basic building block for the study of this phenomenon. As women make
up more than half of the student population in North America, it is hoped that many more researchers will find this population worthy of interest. Because this study is based on only a small number of student mothers, replication studies with larger numbers could further explore the re-negotiation processes that emerged here. In addition, the results of this study enrich the understanding of multiple roles for women, by demonstrating that motherhood and 'studenthood' are both more than just roles. Women's struggle to re-define themselves, in their own eyes, and the eyes of those important to them, is a painful and complex process, that some women negotiate successfully, and others do not. It seems an important area for continued research.

This research also contains information for university policy makers and counselling agencies. Student mothers clearly do not see themselves reflected in policies or the student body. The fact that they feel isolated and alien to the norm of what they feel a student is expected to be, contributes to their problems at university. Policy makers would do well to attempt to address some of the areas student mothers have pointed out as problematic. More part-time studies, with better funding, more flexibility in schedules and deadlines, greater visibility for student mothers, and sensitivity training for professors are just some of the suggestions the women made. The account of the
women's lived experiences should provide many more suggestions for improvement.

Counselling agencies that service student mothers also can benefit from the accounts of the lived experiences described in this study. Student mothers' struggles with feelings of guilt, inadequacy, frustration, helplessness, anger, and resentment may lead them to seek counselling. The implications of this study should inform the training of counsellors in the field of higher education, to enable them to assist student mothers to sort out those feelings, and help them re-define themselves and their world. In addition, this study clearly points out the need for group support for student mothers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide a phenomenological account of the lived experience of student mothers. It offers an understanding of what it is like to be a student and a mother at the same time, from the perspective of the student mothers themselves. The intent of this investigation is to provide a basic structure of the lived experience of the relatively new phenomenon of student mother. As is reasonable for a phenomenological investigation, it is based on a relatively small sample size. It is hoped that the results of this study will spark the interest of other researchers to build on the
basic structure this study provides, and explore the subject of student mothers further. It is also hoped that the results of this study will help inform policy makers and counselling agencies at universities, so that student mothers will find their needs met to a greater degree than they have to date.

This study provides a rich description of the struggles and pain student mothers encounter in their attempts to be both the mother they want to be and the student they know they can be. It gives an account of the meaning women derive from their experiences, and the attempts they make to change their situation. Descriptions of the strategies women employ to meet their goals include re-framing and re-definition of self and re-negotiation of terms with the world around them. The lived experience of student mothers also gives an account of the different outcomes possible under different circumstances. A woman may be strengthened or weakened in her resolve and ability to cope with the demands of being both a mother and a student.

This study presents in rich detail the lived experience of undergraduate student mothers at a university. The results suggest that these women experience a complex, constantly recurring process of being challenged in their roles, and consequently re-defining themselves and/or their world. The lived experience of student mothers contributes significantly to
the transformation of the women, and how they view themselves and the world around them.

Finally, it is important to recognize that this study has a number of limitations. First, the seven student mothers in the sample were recruited for a study on stress and coping. Second, some of the interview questions were general, but others asked specifically about stressful or distressing experiences. It is not possible to know, therefore, whether different recruitment procedures and interview questions would have yielded similar themes or a different common story. Third, the study did not include a validation process in which the themes were presented back to the women to obtain their reactions, as is done in some, although my no means all, phenomenological research. Fourth, the small sample of seven student mothers limits the generalizability of the findings and interpretations to these seven women's specific cultural, social, and historical contexts. Further research is required, and indeed needed, to determine the extent to which the limitations of this study are truly limiting, or whether the same themes and a similar common story would be found in a study that did not have these limitations.
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DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. age: ________

2. Faculty: __________________________
   Part-time: ___ Full-time: ___

   Programme: __________________________

   Year: 1\textsuperscript{st} 2\textsuperscript{nd} 3\textsuperscript{rd} 4\textsuperscript{th} 5\textsuperscript{th} 6\textsuperscript{th} 7\textsuperscript{th} 8\textsuperscript{th}

3. race/ethnicity: __________________________

4. Are you: married/common-law: ___
   separated: ___
   divorced: ___
   widowed: ___
   single: ___

5. What is the make-up of your household? Please include all relatives and non-relatives living with you their relationship to you and their age.

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<th>Relationship to You</th>
<th>Age</th>
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INDEPTH INTERVIEWS

The interviewer will introduce herself, briefly explain the project and verbally explain the informed consent. The interviewee will read the consent statement, ask any questions they may have, sign a copy, and retain the original.

The following types of questions will be asked. The interviewer will respond by reflecting and asking for clarification where necessary.

1. What do you consider the most distressing aspect of being a student mother?
2. Could you describe that to me as if you were telling a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.
3. What did you do to try to deal with the situation.
4. What consequences did you experience (social, behavioral, health, etc.)
5. What helped?
6. What hindered?
7. What have you learned about yourself as a consequence?
8. What would you like to see changed?
9. What advise do you have for other student mothers?
First contact telephone protocol

We are currently compiling a list of interested participants. The study will involve individual interviews and/or participation in a focus group to discuss your experiences of what it is like to be a mother and a student at the same time. The individual interviews will consist of a first interview which should take 1 to 1.5 hours, and a follow up interview which could be somewhat shorter. We expect the focus groups to run approximately 3 hours. You may participate in either the interviews or a focus group or both. Childcare subsidy will be available. Of course, all information you give us will be held confidential, and you may decline participation at any time.

Do you have any questions at this time that I may answer? If not, may I ask you a few short questions?

1) Are you a registered student?
2) Which faculty? Program? Year?
3) How many children do you have? Ages? Gender?
4) Single parent or living with a partner?
5) Mature student? Age?
6) Name? Phone number?

Thank you. We are conducting individual interviews at this time, and plan to start with focus groups soon. Someone will contact you to set up a time and place most convenient to you. However, the study will run over a number of months, therefore it may be a while until we will get to you.