SINGLE MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE

EDUCATION: A CRITICAL INCIDENTS STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

Single-mother families represent a large and growing segment of the population and are the poorest of all family types. There is a demonstrated link between educational attainment and employment and income, yet single mothers are also, as a group, the lowest-educated of all family heads. Little published research exists on the needs and issues of single-mother students. The purpose of this descriptive and exploratory study was to discover and categorize the types of incidents that facilitate and hinder single-mother students in their progress through a two-year college program. Ten single-mother students were interviewed using the critical incidents technique. Two-hundred-and-fifty-two incidents were identified and categorized into three major and nine minor categories. The first major category was Intrapersonal, containing two minor categories, Coping Strategies and Academic Issues. Interpersonal, the next major category, subsumed five minor categories: Instructors; Children; Friends and Family Members; Other Students and Ex-Husbands. The third major category, Situational, contained two minor categories, College Administration and Policies and Government Services and Programs. Tentative implications for future research, counselling practice and social policy are discussed.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to single-mother students everywhere who are striving, in spite of all sorts of obstacles, to improve the lives of themselves and their children. Keep on keeping on.

CHAPTER I - THE PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

The present study sought to explore experiences that make the process of post-secondary education easier or more difficult for single-mother students. A review of the literature has shown relatively little published research in the area of single mothers in post-secondary education. Because of the current lack of theories, models, and research findings regarding the needs and issues of single-mother students, it was deemed sensible to undertake an exploratory and descriptive study. McMillan and Schumacher (1989) point out that "descriptive research provides very valuable data, particularly when first investigating an area" (p. 282). The critical incidents technique, pioneered by Flanagan (1954), falls into the category of descriptive research methods and was chosen for the present research.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

Succinctly stated, the significance for the current study is as follows. Single-mother families represent a considerable portion of the general population and are a growing phenomenon. Most single-mother families live in poverty, especially those who rely on welfare as their primary source of income, as a large percentage of single-mother families do, and a host of negative consequences are associated with living in poverty and on welfare. This represents a huge social and financial cost to society. For all Canadians, higher educational attainment is linked with higher income and lower unemployment. Of course, not all single mothers are able or interested in attaining more

education; but for those who are both, post-secondary education is an important potential solution to welfare dependence. As a society, it behooves us to encourage single mothers to attain post-secondary education and to understand how to facilitate them in that process. Yet little research regarding the needs of single-mother students in post-secondary education and the issues faced by them has been undertaken. Therefore, the present research is significant because it tentatively explores an area which to date is poorly studied and because it is related to a current, important social issue (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, p. 107).

Demographic Statistics

In this section, the most recent demographic information available from Statistics Canada and other sources is presented to verify the assertions made in the preceding paragraph.

Single-parent families represent a large segment of the Canadian population, constituting approximately 20% of all families. This figure translates to nearly 1,000,000 such families in Canada and over 100,000 in British Columbia. There are over four times as many single-mother as single-father families (Statistics Canada, 1992). This is clearly not an inconsequential population in terms of size.

Moreover, this demographic group is growing faster than other types of families. From 1971 to 1981 alone, the number of single-mother families in Canada increased by over 300% (Health and Welfare, 1989). From 1981 to 1991, there was a further increase of 34% in the number of all single-parent families, while two-parent families increased in number by only 6% (Statistics Canada, 1992).

Single-parent families, especially those headed by women, often live in or near poverty, and their situation is getting worse. In fact, according to a study released by the Joint Centre for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington-based think tank, "single-parent families are more likely to live in poverty in Canada than in any of eight other industrialized western countries except the United States" and "single-parent families headed by women are in particular [economic] need" (Eggerton, 1991, p. A12). In Canada in 1993, single-mother families had the highest poverty rate — almost 60% — of all family types. This represents a recent deterioration in their situation: in 1989, the poverty rate was 51% (Statistics Canada, 1990).

Single-parent families represent a large proportion of welfare recipients in British Columbia, and of those, over 92% are single-mother families. For example, in British Columbia, for the month of December 1995, single-mother families, 52,900 in number, constituted almost one-quarter (24%) of all welfare cases but received over one-third (34%) of all expenditures. That amounts to $55,791,613 for one month's benefits for single-mother families (Communications Division, Ministry of Social Services, personal communication, April 2, 1996).

Further, welfare clearly offers single-mother families a meagre existence. For instance, in 1993, in single-mother families with no wage-earners (i.e., those relying on some form of social assistance), the poverty rate was 96%, and average family income was a mere $12,100 (Statistics Canada, 1995). Yet almost half of single mothers rely on some form of social assistance as their major source of income, and compared to single fathers and to both mothers and fathers in two-parent families, single mothers are the least likely to be employed. (Statistics Canada, 1992).

Despite the recent disillusionment of "Generation Xers" (Coupland, 1991), it is still apparently true that education is an important ingredient in financial independence. For all Canadian women, there is an obvious positive relationship between educational level attained and income. In 1993, the average income of women with university graduation was $41,000, twice that of women who had not graduated from high school ($20,000). The income of college and technical-school graduates and high-school graduates fell between the two extremes. While Canadian women working full-time still earn only approximately three-quarters of what Canadian men do, the gap is greatest between women and men without high-school graduation and smallest between those with university educations. Yet, compared to single fathers and mothers and fathers in two-parent families, single mothers are the least likely to have graduated from university and even from high school (Statistics Canada, 1992). Parker (1994) cites Mauldin, Rudd, and Stafford's (1990) finding that, for single mothers, "economic progress is elusive without a postsecondary degree" (p. 171), yet only 8% of Canadian single mothers have university degrees (Statistics Canada, 1992).

Conclusion

Considering these demographic statistics and the research findings which are presented in Chapter II, it can be argued that, for many single-mother families, welfare is not an acceptable long-term answer and that this issue is a serious social concern. It also seems clear that post-secondary education can offer a "way out" of poverty and dependence for single mothers and their children. It makes sense then, for policy-makers, administrators and service-providers to learn more about the situation of single-mother students. The present study represents a small-scale, tentative step towards

understanding more about the needs of and issues faced by single mothers in post-secondary education.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As previously stated, relatively few published research reports exist regarding the needs of and issues faced by single-mother students. Therefore, it was appropriate in the present study to take a broad, exploratory stance. Because a "discovery orientation" (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, p. 179) had been adopted, it would have been premature to approach this study with one particular theoretical orientation. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was a practical, more than theoretical, one: to discover, from the participants' own viewpoints, more about the issues with which single mothers in college are faced. The research question, necessarily broad, was formulated thus: What are the types of incidents that facilitate or hinder the progress of single mothers attempting to obtain a college education? Specifically, the question I posed to the participants in the study, all of whom were enrolled in two-year programs at a community college, was: What critical incidents have facilitated or hindered your progress through school?

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY

Certain assumptions underlie any research methodology. The assumptions that formed the basis for the present study are as follows (adapted from Larsen, 1987):

- Certain incidents exist which facilitate and hinder single-mother students' progress through college.

- Participants in this study were able to accurately recall and relate incidents experienced as a single-mother student.

- Participants in this study were able to accurately discriminate between facilitating and hindering incidents and will be able to relate the significance of those incidents.

- There is a pattern of shared experiences among single-mother students in college which can be identified.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

As Hanson and Sporakowski (1986) note, "no one term perfectly describes all variations" (p. 3) of this social phenomenon of families with only one parent present. The terms in the literature include *single-parent family, one-parent family, lone-parent family, single-mother family, single-father family, mother-only family, father-only family, motherless family*, and *fatherless family*. These variations in terminology all refer to a similar phenomenon — families with non-adult children in which the custodial parent does not live with a partner.

For reasons discussed in the next section of this chapter, the scope of this study was limited to single-*mother* students. Therefore, the terms *single mother, single-mother family*, and *single-mother student* are used almost exclusively. For the purposes of this study, a single-mother student is defined as a woman who: has full or joint custody of at least one child under the age of 16 years; is separated, divorced, or widowed, or has never been married; and is not currently living with a partner. More information about participant selection criteria is provided in Chapter III.

To define public financial assistance, the term *welfare* is used. Its history of negative connotations is outweighed by it clarity and familiarity: terms such as *social assistance* can include other social programs besides welfare and are therefore too confusing.

The term *post-secondary education*, which is used several times in this study, is defined as education offered by community colleges, technical institutes, and universities. Adult basic education and short-term training programs are not included in this definition.

Community college refers to a publicly-funded educational institution which offer some combination of: vocational/trades training; technical training; adult basic education; university transfer programs; and continuing education (non-credit) courses (Dennison and Gallagher, 1986). The term is often shortened to *college* in the following chapters.

Another area where there are several variations in terminology is in describing students who do not fit the traditional description of being a young, white, single, childless adult. The terms used include *adult learner*, *mature student* and *nontraditional student*. The latter term has been chosen for this study. Chartrand (1990) defined a nontraditional student as one who holds "*two or more* [emphasis added] major life roles (i.e., employee, partner, or parent) in addition to the student role" (p. 68). However, this defines the term from a specific theoretical perspective, that of role theory. As well, this definition effectively excludes many single-parent students, and all the participants in the present study. Bean and Metzner (1985) offer a much different definition of a nontraditional student, as one who "is older than 24, or does not live in a campus residence . . . . or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors" (p. 489). Alternately, the thesaurus of descriptors for the Educational Resources Information Center's (ERIC) computer database defines nontraditional students most broadly, as "adults beyond traditional school age (beyond the mid-twenties), ethnic minorities, women with dependent children, under-prepared students, and other special groups who

have historically been underrepresented in postsecondary education" (Houston, 1995, p. 206). The latter definition has been adopted for the present study.

Finally, the term *participant* — rather than *subject* — has been chosen to refer to the ten women who were interviewed for this study because it more accurately reflects the active role they played in the research.

THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Several factors limiting the scope of the present study were identified *before* the data were collected. First, the study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. While descriptive studies are important in areas where little research has been conducted, it is important to consider the limits of such research when interpreting findings. Results and conclusions must be viewed as preliminary and inconclusive.

The second delimitation is that only single-mother students were interviewed. There were two reasons for this decision. First, over 80% of all single-parent families are headed by women. This figure has remained stable for several decades (Statistics Canada, 1992). Therefore, there are presumably also many more single-mother students than single-father students, although no statistics are available to verify this. Second, the literature and the statistics show that there are perhaps as many differences as commonalities between single fathers and single mothers. Single fathers and single mothers may represent distinct sub-populations within the larger population of single parents, and should perhaps be studied separately, or in a study where comparisons between the two groups are possible. Considering the small number of individuals being interviewed, combining single fathers and single mothers in this study could potentially have confounded the findings. The results of this study therefore do not necessarily

apply equally to single-father students. (Chapter II contains a section on the differences between single mothers and single fathers.)

The third delimitation on the scope of the study is that only college students were studied. The experiences of single mothers attending universities and technical schools may differ significantly from those attending community college in ways that are at this point unknown. Therefore, findings from this study may not be equally applicable to single mothers in other forms of post-secondary education.

Finally, all of the participants in this study were attending the same community college. Colleges differ considerably in their organizational cultures (Cameron and Ettington, 1988); therefore, the experiences of single-mother students at this college may differ from those of single-mother students at other colleges. Results and conclusions from this study may not apply equally to single-mother students at other colleges.

CHAPTER II - REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, literature related to the problem of the present study is reviewed and critiqued. Because little published research exists regarding the issues faced by single-mother students, the population of interest in the current study, it has been necessary to also review the literature on two related populations, single mothers and non-traditional students. It can be assumed that single-mother students represent a sub-set of each of these two populations and an intersection between them.

Single-Mother Students
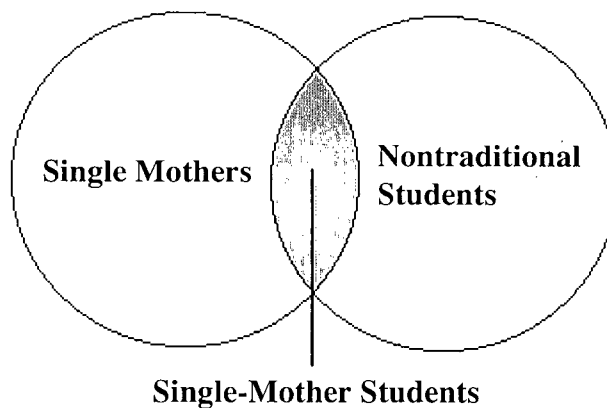
Figure 1: Single-Mother Students in the Literature

The first section in this chapter deals with research findings and general literature about the issues faced by single mothers in general. Literature pertaining to the impact upon children of growing up in a single-mother family is not reviewed. The second section contains a review of studies and models concerning the needs of and problems faced by non-traditional students in general. The third section presents academic

writings regarding single-mother students, the issues faced by them and programming

developed for them. In the final section, a brief summary is presented.

SINGLE MOTHERS

Differences Between Single Mothers and Single Fathers

Single fathers and single mothers differ in terms of income, educational

attainment and employment, and may differ in psycho-social ways as well. In 1993,

while the average single-father family's income ($35,400) was still far less than the

average for a two-parent family ($59,700), it was far more than that of single-mother

families ($23,300). Similarly, in 1993, 60% of all single-mother families lived below the

poverty line, while only 31% of single-father families did (Statistics Canada, 1995).

Single mothers are also less likely than single fathers to be employed. In 1991, 52% of

single mothers with children under the age of 16 were working, compared to 71% of

single fathers. In terms of educational level, single mothers are less likely than single

fathers to have graduated from university and even from high school (Statistics Canada,

1992).

Another difference between single mothers and single fathers regards social

support. Campbell and O'Neill (1985) cite Ferri's (1973) finding that single fathers tend

to have more social support than single mothers. Echoing this is Burden's (1986) report

that, in her study, "single male parents. . .tended to have the largest support networks

while single female parents had the smallest" (p. 40). Richard (1982) repeats this notion,

and also notes that most single fathers are already employed and are therefore not faced

with the prospect of entering or re-entering the work force.

Sociological and Financial Perspectives

Single mothers on welfare are often doubly stigmatized, for being single mothers and for relying on welfare. Beck (1984) describes a common stereotype of single mothers — that of a defeated woman on welfare with too many runny-nosed children. Further, single mothers sometimes have to deal with a societal belief that their families are pathogenic to their children (evidence for and against this viewpoint is not presented here). Worrell (1988) has addressed the sources of social stigma against single mothers and their families, and the effect of those stigma. She argues that single mothers are stigmatized on the basis of: morality (single mothers are seen as immoral); sex-role violation (single-mothers are seen as non-feminine); and victimization (single mothers are seen as responsible for their own predicaments). Writers such as these view many psychological problems associated with single motherhood (e.g., depression, low self-esteem, powerlessness) as caused, at least in part, by society's negative perceptions.

We often hear about the "welfare mentality" that accompanies long-term welfare use. Druga's (1986) study of single mothers on welfare challenges this notion. She found no difference in terms of locus of control in long-term and short-term users of welfare. (However, her distinction between on long- and short-term users seems relatively minor and could partially account for the lack of differences.)

Two oppositional views exist regarding whether or not the rise of single-mother families *per se* represents a social problem. "Those who view the traditional two-parent family as a primary source of gender inequality and women's oppression" (McLanahan and Booth, 1989, p. 569) see this increase as a sign of societal progress, while those who focus on the breakdown of the nuclear family and the economic deprivation and other

negative consequences for single-mother families and for society interpret the rise as a sign of the decline of our society.

Whether or not the continued increase of single-mother families constitutes a social crisis, few would argue that the economic situation of these families is indeed problematic. Not surprisingly, considering the previously cited grim statistics, money problems are stressed over and over in the literature as central to the plight of single mothers (e.g. D'Ercole, 1988; Hanson and Sporakowski, 1986; Mednick, 1987; McLanahan and Booth, 1989). Few writers fail to mention it. Morrison, Page, Sehl, and Smith (1986) state that "financial hardship [is] one of the greatest difficulties for single mothers" (p. 39). Money represents more than just access to physical needs and comforts: it increases options and the sense of personal power and it allows single mothers to "'buy time' in the form of convenience goods and services that help the mother cope with time demands" (Campbell and Moen, 1992, p. 208). Mednick (1987) cites several studies showing that depression, a very common problem for single mothers, is not only linked to, but often apparently caused by "impoverishment and powerlessness" (p. 189). She also cites Bould's (1977) finding that a sense of control in single mothers is related to income.

McLanahan and Booth (1989) see the poverty of single-mother families as due to three factors: the low earning capacity of the mother; the lack of child support from the father; and meager welfare rates. They see the resolution of the problems of poor single-mother families as depending upon social changes such as job equity programs to increase women's earnings, better child-support policies, and increased government

benefits, including child care subsidies. Although they are American writers, these potential solutions are surely applicable to Canadian single mothers, as well.

Work versus Welfare

Apparently, working, as opposed to relying on welfare, can be beneficial to single mothers, irrespective of financial reasons: although single mothers who work will likely experience more role strain, they also will likely feel more competent, satisfied with their life, and powerful. Furthermore, they can do good work: in one study, no differences were found between supervisors rating of single and married parents (Mahler [1987], cited in Mahler [1989]) and Burden (1986) found no differences in absentee rates between the two groups.

If mothers can find adequate child care, have reasonable levels of social support, and find ways to cope with role strain, it appears that working can be a good thing. Mahler notes that "work increases a single mother's sense of independence and self-esteem and is a way of having social contacts, even though the job may be low paying" (1992, p. 179). Mednick (1987) cites a study showing that working single mothers have a stronger sense of personal control than those on welfare; this appears to be true even when income levels are similar. Burden's (1986) study of 293 employees of a large American corporation found that while "single female parents are at high risk for high levels of job-family role strain and decreased physical and emotional well-being. . . .[they also] reported among the highest levels of job satisfaction" (p. 39). Mednick concludes that "single mothers can benefit from meaningful work even though their daily life may become more complex and strained" (p. 194) because of role conflict and role

overload and Beck (1984) argues that, despite the role strain, "work may prove to be the glue that holds [a single mother's] life together" (p. 582).

On the other hand, long-term reliance on welfare is seen by most authors (e.g. Mednick, 1987; Young, 1976) as having definite negative effects on single mothers, adding further to their sense of powerlessness. Some researchers have explored the factors associated with reduced welfare reliance and increased financial self-sufficiency in single mothers. For instance, Parker (1994) followed 851 American single mothers on welfare for three years. She found that greater workplace support (i.e., whether the employer provides paid sick leave, paid health insurance, paid or subsidized child care; and whether coworkers are supportive) was the best predictor of decreased reliance on welfare — better even than educational levels, which has been found to be an important factor in other studies. She also found that greater personal control and social support (especially the former) led to greater financial independence. She suggests that social policy reform should focus on creating better jobs with more benefits for women and that educational programs should concentrate on empowerment strategies, and she views the facilitation of single mothers in affecting the political process as an important role for helping professionals.

Psychological Issues

Many researchers point to single mothers' increased risk for depression and other emotional and physical problems (e.g. Burden, 1986). Some writers point to the stress associated with the changes that often occur after a relationship breakup as a partial cause: families will often have to move, which is in itself a stressful event, and important social support networks may be lost as a result. Looking at the Holmes and

Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale (life change units), Beck (1984) argues that "at least 50% of all single mothers may run into health problems following the necessary readjustments they must make in their lives on becoming single mothers" (p. 579). Burden (1986) points out that single mothers suffer the cumulative effects of three separate risk factors in decreased emotional well-being: being single; being female; and being parents.

Propst, Pardington, Ostrom and Watkins (1986) found that four groups of variables discriminated between divorced or separated single mothers who were well-adjusted and those who were less well-adjusted. First, a longer time period since the marital separation was identified with less depression, less anxiety, and greater perceived coping; finalization of divorce also was related to lower anxiety and higher perceived coping. Second, having younger children was associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety and greater perceived coping. Third, emotion-focused coping was found to be related again to less depression and anxiety and better perceived coping. Finally, and most pertinent to this study, "greater education was a significant predictor of both less anxiety and a subjective perception of more optimal coping." (p. 52).

Single mothers apparently often do not consider themselves to be particularly powerful or competent (except, perhaps, as parents; e.g. Kazak and Linney, 1983). For example, O'Neill, Duffy, Enman, Blackmer, Goodwin & Campbell (1988) compared 30 single mothers with 97 other adults and found that the former scored the lowest of all groups on a scale measuring perceived personal power. A sense of competence in the role of self-supporter was found by Kazak and Linney (1983) to be the best predictor of

47 single mothers' life satisfaction, but overall, it was also found to be the role of lowest perceived competence.

Social Support Theory

This is a large area in the literature on single mothers. Researchers in this area believe that strong social support networks can reduce stress and buffer its effects in single-mother families. Campbell and O'Neill (1985) tested 45 single mothers on measures of social adjustment and general well-being. They found that subjects who were receiving the services of the volunteer agencies Big Brothers or Big Sisters (a formal form of social support) showed better social adjustment and higher general well-being than subjects who were on the agency's waiting list (assignment was not random, however).

Apparently, the *kind* of social support also makes a difference: A surprising finding by D'Ercole (1988) indicated that "supportive relationships with friends and coworkers contributed more to the well-being of single mothers than did task-related support provided by family and neighbors" (p. 50). Similarly, McLanahan and Booth (1989) cite several studies showing that the quality of a single mother's social contacts is more important than the quantity. Support from and contact with family members can be positive in providing practical assistance and material support, but negative in interference and obligations. Friends, on the other hand, provide emotional more than practical support and are less likely to interfere or criticize single mothers.

Role Theory

This is another important topic in the literature on single mothers. Role conflict refers to roles that are oppositional, irrespective of time demands. Role overload refers

to having too little time and energy to adequately meet one's obligations. Role strain subsumes both of the former, and refers to the sense of not fulfilling one's roles adequately (Campbell and Moen, 1992).

Writers in this area recognize that single mothers, especially working single mothers, experience increased role strain (e.g. Burden, 1986; Jones, 1984), as different aspects of their life compete for their time and energy. One repercussion of this is that single mothers have less time for themselves. Sanik and Mauldin (1986) collected data from 210 women in two-parent and single-mother families and found that "it is the single employed mother alone who sacrifices time in personal care activities, including sleep and rest" (p. 56).

While working does add another role, it can also be beneficial, as discussed earlier. It may be that role strain depends, not so much directly upon the competing demands of job and motherhood, but upon a number of intervening variables. For instance, Campbell and Moen (1992), found that the role strain experienced by the working single mothers of preschoolers was moderated by the number of hours worked, the mother's attitude toward employment, the mother's satisfaction with her job, and the degree of control over her work schedule. They conclude that working single mothers "most at risk of job / family strain are those who work long hours, have little control over scheduling those hours, are not satisfied with their work, and have the attitude that mothers with young children should not work" (p. 208). In addition, they found that having more children, having older preschoolers, being younger and having an inadequate income were associated with higher role strain.

Similarly, Goldberg, Greenberger, Hamill and O'Neil (1992) studied 76 single mothers working full time and found that a mother's satisfaction with child-care arrangements was associated with her view of her children and her own level of depression and less role strain was associated with more social support, especially from neighbours. Time and energy demands from both work and family obligations were not associated with depression; however, the degree of stability in her life and the amount of resources upon which she was able to draw were linked to depression and how positively she viewed her children.

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

General Findings

The faces of post-secondary students are changing. Whereas three decades ago, students were predominantly young, male, single and living on campus, now, 45% of all American college (university) students are over 25 years of age, and 60% of those are women (Hirschhorn, 1988, cited in Mercer, 1993, and Chartrand, 1990). Further, in the United States, from 1970 to 1985, the growth rate of post-secondary students over age 25 years was 114%, compared to a 15% increase in the number of traditionally-aged students. (Look who's coming to school: The nontraditional student is the new student, 1994). Metzner and Bean (1987) comment on the "spectacular growth in nontraditional student enrollments" since the 1960's.

Nontraditional students bring both unique barriers and unique strengths with them. Cleveland-Innes (1994) notes that "on the negative side, nontraditional-age students report difficulty in integrating into student life, while on the positive side, they report a strong sense of commitment to the goal of obtaining a postsecondary education"

(p. 423). However, the literature regarding this population has tended to focus more on the negatives than on the positives.

Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) view the adjustment of nontraditional (adult) students from a transition perspective, identifying three stages: moving in; moving through; and moving on. They explore the challenges associated with each stage, and emphasize the importance of "mattering" throughout the process. Mattering is likely crucial to all students, but perhaps especially so to nontraditional students. They define the concept, originally developed by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981, cited in Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering, 1989) as "the beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else's attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them" (p. 21). The individual components of mattering are: attention (I have the interest or notice of others); importance (others are concerned about me and care about me); dependence (others depend upon me); ego-extension (others are a part of my successes and failures); and appreciation (others appreciate who I am and what I do and have done).

Students who feel valued by their institution may very well be more likely to persist and complete their programs (Look who's coming to school: The nontraditional student is the new student, 1994); however, surprisingly little research has been conducted to test the relevance of this concept. Certainly, from an intuitive level, it would seems to be an important component of student success in post-secondary settings.

The following section deals with models and research explaining nontraditional student retention and attrition. It is important to note that comparing studies is difficult

because "nontraditional student" is such a broad term, means different things to different writers and subsumes many potentially-heterogeneous sub-groups.

Attrition, Retention and Student Success Issues

A complete review of student attrition and retention issues and research findings is beyond the scope of this literature review: literally hundreds of studies on the topic have been conducted (Bean and Metzner, 1985). However, several prominent models are described here, and research findings on this topic related to nontraditional students are reviewed. Metzner and Bean (1987) point out that most of the research and theories in this area "have focused on explanations of attrition for traditional students" (p. 15), even though "these [nontraditional] students show a higher rate of attrition from college than their traditional counterparts" (p. 16).

Perhaps the two most familiar names in the area of student attrition and retention are Astin and Tinto. Astin (e.g., 1975, 1984) sees student persistence as hinging to a large degree on how involved, physically and psychologically, the individual is in the role of student. He has found that factors such as living on campus, being involved in extra-curricular activities, working on campus, identifying with one's educational institution, and interacting with faculty are related to a student's retention. However, several authors (e.g., Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989) have pointed out that Astin's theory is far less relevant to nontraditional students, because they are likely to be more involved in more roles and activities outside of school.

Tinto (e.g., 1986, 1987) views student retention as involving an interaction between the characteristics of the student and the characteristics of the educational institution, such that "the interpretation and meaning that individuals attach to their

experiences within the institution" (1986, p. 366) is a crucial factor. According to him, when a student leaves under negative circumstances, it is likely due either to incongruence, where "individuals perceive themselves as being substantially at odds with the institution" (1987, p. 53), or to isolation, where individuals experience inadequate social interaction in the institution.

Tinto has not specifically addressed the differences between traditional and nontraditional students in terms of their reasons for leaving post-secondary schooling; however, Ashar and Skenes (1993) did find some preliminary support for Tinto's theory in regards to nontraditional students. They studied 25 classes of older, working students attending a business college and found that more students persevered in smaller and more socially-integrated (cohesive) classes. As well, Cleveland-Innes' (1994) study comparing traditional-aged (22 years and younger) and nontraditional-aged (23 years and older — a rather liberal definition compared to those used by other researchers) students found that "Tinto's model actually seems to fit better for nontraditional-age students" (p. 440). According to her research, academic integration, although not social integration, and commitment (congruence) are important factors in the persistence of these students.

Chartrand (1990) notes that traditional theories of student departure such as Astin's and Tinto's do not " fully capture the potential difficulties experienced by nontraditional students" (p. 65). She has developed a causal model of personal and academic adjustment of non-traditional students based on role theory. She states that "nontraditional students must. . .deal with the difficulties of being committed to the student role while simultaneously being committed to other important life roles" (p. 65) and "under circumstances where roles are incompatible, the most salient role is likely to

be satisfied first" (p. 66). She further cites several studies that have found that, in general, the more roles a student has, the lower that student's commitment to school (e.g., A.W. Astin, 1975; H.S. Astin, 1976; Mischler, 1983; Gerson, 1985). Central to her model are the concepts of student role commitment (how important the student role is to the individual) and student role evaluation (how well the individual thinks s/he performs in the student role), which together and in turn lead to self-good student role congruence (the individual's assessment of how well his/her qualities fit with the requirements of the student role). These three concepts are central to her model: student role evaluation and commitment to the student role are seen to determine self-good student role congruence. The latter is then seen to affect both academic achievement and psychological adjustment. She tested her model with data from 179 nontraditional undergraduate students, both women and men (see Chapter I for her definition of nontraditional students) and found considerable support for it. She recommends that counsellors "[bolster] students' evaluations of themselves and their commitment to being a student" (p. 72) through orientation programs, workshops, and support groups for non-traditional students.

Diametrically opposed to Chartrand's finding are those of Fortune (1987). She found that, for 486 graduate social work students, being married, being a parent, and being an employee were all associated with *lower* stress levels and *greater* psychological well-being. This amounts to support for the "expansion" model of multiple role impact (the more roles one has, the more status, support and self-esteem one has) as opposed to the "scarcity" model underlying Chartrand's study (the more roles one has, the less energy one has to devote to each role, resulting in more stress). Fortune and Chartrand's

samples were quite different, however. Fortune was studying graduate students and Chartrand, undergraduate students, and their definitions of nontraditional students were different. Further, Fortune does note the importance of social support in mediating the impact of multiple roles.

Metzner and Bean (1987; Bean and Metzner, 1985) have developed a rather complicated model attempting to explain attrition in nontraditional students. Their model incorporates 26 independent variables in four groups: academic variables; social integration variables; background and defining variables; and environmental variables. Two outcome variables, academic outcome and psychological outcome, are included, but psychological and institutional factors seem to be ignored. In a study of 624 part-time, first-year, commuting students (61% "stayers" and 39% "leavers") they found mixed support for their model. Academic variables, including grade-point average (GPA), predicted dropout; environmental and social integration variables did not. "Commitment to the institution and its academic process", including "the priority that students assign to attending the university relative to other choices that occupy their time, energy, and resources"(p. 30) was found to be crucial. This finding is similar to Chartrand's results.

Mercer (1993) looked at older (than 25 years) female students, comparing 38 dropouts with 194 graduates. She focused on various "dispositional" variables, hypothesizing that "well-adjusted older female students would be more likely to persist and would get better grades than would those with poorer psychological health, despite variable stressors and sociodemographic variables" (p.155). However, she found that only one variable, the ability to cope with crises, discriminated between the two groups.

This does point to the importance of coping skills in dealing with the stresses associated with role conflict and role overload.

Authors such as Ellis (1994), Gardner and Jewler (Gardner, Jewler, and Robb, 1995; Jewler, 1989) view the issue of student retention from the other side of the same coin: student success. They have developed student success and orientation programs and handbooks that focus on a wide range of both academic aspects (study skills, research skills, etc.) and personal aspects (communication skills, career decisions, health information, etc.). These books and programs are geared primarily to young (traditional) students.

SINGLE-MOTHER STUDENTS

Issues and Needs

A thorough search has uncovered few research reports addressing the issued faced by, the needs of, or characteristics of the specific population of single-mother students. Even anecdotal and editorial articles are rare. Danowski noted in 1983 that "statistics on the attrition rate among single parent students are not readily available. . . . here is a student population at risk and in need" (p. 280) Little additional information has been gathered since then. The paucity of research may be due in part to the fact that single-mother students may constitute a very small percentage of post-secondary students. Gorlick (1988, cited in Gorlick, 1992) found that, in Ontario, "the female single-parent student is numerically a member of a small minority, both as a social assistance recipient in a post-secondary setting (4.3 per cent) and as a post-secondary student in a social assistance setting (5.8 per cent)" (p. 55).

Single-mother students may differ in many ways from other nontraditional students (for example, visible minorities, the physically disabled, or married mothers) in many ways. For instance, Swift, Colvin and Mills (1987) found that "displaced homemakers" (single mothers who are separated, divorced or widowed, as opposed to being unwed) returning to college had, on average, roughly half the income of other mature students.

In terms of the role of social support, Stenson (1988) conducted a questionnaire study of 76 single-mother college students and found that social support from several sources (relatives, friends, neighbours) had a positive impact upon several measures of well-being. Similarly, Lynds Colbry (1989) received completed questionnaires from 51 single-mother college students and reports found that social support systems, as well as self-esteem, were associated with their general well-being. Surprisingly, however, she discovered no such association between social support and self-esteem and the academic success of the students.

One study looking at 28 single-mother students' attributional styles and their academic success has been conducted by Boutsen and Lynds Colbry (1991). However, they conclude only that "single-parent students who are more successful make different causal attributions in regard to their GPA than do those who are less successful" (pp. 364). However, because they did not explore how the students' attributions differed in terms of attribution theory's three dimensions (internal versus external; controllable versus uncontrollable; and stable versus unstable), this is hardly an enlightening or helpful finding.

The needs of single-mother students have been investigated in a few studies. Swift, Colvin and Mills' (1987) displaced homemakers ranked their need thus: career guidance; financial assistance; full-time employment; return to school; schooling to get a job; improve skills to get a job; career change; life direction counselling; build self-confidence; retraining; academic information; and networking. These authors argue in a rather patronizing vein that "displaced homemakers seem to regress to prior [developmental] stages" and that, therefore, "counselors should take a cognitive approach to working with them" (p. 348). They recommend that counselling be "done by individuals who are knowledgeable about the specific problems faced by this population", providing "career and employment information that can be applied quickly, help in securing financial assistance to support a family, and directions for finding services including child care, transportation, and legal support" (p. 348).

Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994) interviewed 46 single-mother university students and asked them to indicate from a prepared list which psychological and sociological factors had been important to their academic success. Participants pointed to the following factors (in decreasing order of frequency of reporting): the support of other students; university services; the support of family; the support of faculty (all sociological factors); personal ambition; prior knowledge and experience; effort and discipline; and self-confidence (all psychological factors). The authors note, however, that "a more open-ended interview process might have resulted in a different set of findings" (p. 582).

In their anecdotal article, Hooper and March (1980) state that the most common issues facing single mothers attending university are: having sole responsibility for

children; dealing with stigma and the perception of single-parent families as deviant and pathogenic; struggling to survive on woefully inadequate finances; adapting to an environment geared to 18- to 22-year-olds with few responsibilities other than school; and juggling the conflicting demands of their roles as parent, student, and sometimes, worker. They argue that "some female single parents returning to school fail, not because of their own faults, but because of lack of support, institutional and personal" (p. 144). Institutional support, they suggest, can take the form of: special counselling; day care on campus with priority given to single mothers; expansion of external degree programs (correspondence courses); and education of faculty members regarding this group.

In spite of the many barriers challenging single-mother students, it appears that they can and often do succeed academically. One research project two decades ago looked at welfare mothers (85% were single mothers) attending college (Young, 1976). She believes that "higher education offers a viable means for ending welfare dependency and for making more women productive members of society" (p. 38) and asserts that "the success in college of these women indicates a much greater accomplishment than does the success of other high risk students" (pp. 38-39). Young studied 144 women and found that 59% achieved passing or better grades. Older women had higher grade point averages, despite also having more children and more reported interference from personal problems. A more recent, Australian study (Burns and Scott, 1990) reported a similar but far more positive finding in their study of 185 students who were mothers: "both married and single mothers obtained [academic] results well above the average for all mature age students and much above that for all students" (p. 58).

Services and Programs

Yarris and Kidder noted in 1983 that there is "little indication that programs [are] being developed or implemented to address the special needs of students who are single parents" (p. 470). They describe a workshop for single-parent students organized by a university counselling centre. Input during the planning of the workshop was solicited from both experts and members of the target population. Presentations included information and skills training on issues related to being a single parent in general and a single-parent student in particular, and information on community and university resources. Child care was provided for participants.

Danowski (1983) has found that discussion/support groups and workshops for single-parent students are usually not well-attended, often because they are "not cost effective when balanced against other commitments and demands" (p. 280). Discussions with single-parent students have lead her to believe that what is needed is "general support in both personal and practical terms; a brief and convenient time block; an opportunity to get something useful; time to share ideas and problems" (p. 280). What is not wanted, she finds, is "therapy (sounds too self-indulgent and too much like another drain or commitment); lectures; a social club" (p. 280). "A key", she says, is that "the solution not be part of the problem" (p. 281). She describes how a group of single-parent students met, with a facilitator, one noon-hour per week with an informal, drop-in format and a "pragmatic orientation" (p. 281). The name "Single Parent Network" was chosen over "Workshop" or "Support Group" to avoid negative perceptions. Members exchanged children's clothing, baby-sitting, information, and advice, and a lawyer spoke about family law.

Eastern Washington University in Cheney, Washington, is the site of the Single Parent Project, a program for single parents on welfare who are attending the university (Van Storne, Nelson and Niemann, 1994; Single Parent Project Annual Report, 1990). The project offers: "direct services (academic screening, assistance with resources, mentoring, and professional internships), support services (social activities, support groups, interest groups and a drop-in centre), and special programming (orientation to campus life, enrichment activities for families, workshops and classes supporting academic excellence, and advocacy)" (Van Storne, Nelson and Niemann, 1994, p. 574).

Mangen (1990) reports on a progressive program at Texas Women's University in Denton. There, a residence hall has been converted to house 30 single mothers and their families. Services include: low-cost, after-school care; a playground and recreation room; access to nearby day care; family counselling; and weekend field trips.

Closer to home, Vale (1993) reports on the University of Toronto's Transitional Year Program, a full-time course of studies for adults who have been away from school for a time and want to attend university but do not have the academic qualifications. Although the program is not specifically for single-mother students, many of the participants are. In addition to academic upgrading, the program offers "lots of counselling and support" (p. 11).

Finally, Gorlick (1992) reports on barriers to single-mother students erected by student loan and welfare programs. Although she studied systems specifically in Ontario, she argues that single-mother students in other provinces may have comparable experiences. In interviewing single-mother students, she found the following systemic problems. First, student aid does not take into account the extra responsibilities of

single-mother students or allow them much extra time to complete a program or degree when determining grant-versus-loan amounts. As a result, these students often graduate with a heavier debt load than other students. Second, both welfare and student aid underestimate the real cost of daycare. Third, application processes for the student loan program are complicated and confusing and sometimes, arbitrary and humiliating. Fourth, when dealing with single-mother students, front-line service providers in both the student loan program and welfare agencies are often unencouraging — and sometimes worse. She concludes by arguing that "there has been a clear indifference in policy to assist single mothers attempting to complete post-secondary education" (p. 56) and by asking challenging questions.

SUMMARY

Single motherhood brings with it a host of challenges. Besides dealing with negative societal perceptions, single mothers must usually cope with very inadequate incomes, whether they work or not, and with role strain, especially if they work. They often must deal with psychological problems such as high stress levels, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and competence — not surprising considering the aforementioned stigma, poverty and role strain. On the positive side, coping methods, social support, whether informal or institutionalized, and (for some single mothers) employment are important means of dealing with these challenges.

Nontraditional students represent a rapidly growing population in post-secondary institutions. In general, they bring with them more complicated lives. Yet, they also bring more maturity in their ability to deal with their challenges and more motivation to succeed. Few models of student attrition and retention that apply to these students have

been developed; however, it does appear that commitment to the role of student may be an important factor in the retention of nontraditional students.

In terms of single-mother students, the main conclusion appears to be that few research findings regarding the factors important in their success or failure and virtually no models attempting to integrate these factors exist. Single-mother students often seem to be considered by researchers to be part of the larger population of nontraditional students, yet they may differ in important ways from other types of students in this group. Clearly, this is an area in need of further study.

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides detailed information regarding the methods used to gather and analyse data for the present study. First, the rationale for using the critical incident technique is provided. Second, a description of the technique, including its history, reliability and validity, are presented. Third, the college at which all of the participants were enrolled is briefly described. Fourth, detailed information is given about the participants and how they were selected. Fifth, the means by which the data (in the form of critical incidents) were collected is reported. Finally, the data analysis process is recounted, including information on validity and reliability checks.

RATIONALE FOR THE METHODOLOGY

This study was concerned with exploring the factors that make the process of college education easier or more difficult for single-mother students. Because there is a scarcity of research in this area, the present research was viewed as a "first step". The aim of this exploratory study was to directly elicit "the participants' perspectives" (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, p. 14) and it was decided that an interview format employing the critical incident technique would effectively do so. This approach is somewhat similar to an ethnographic interview in that it uses "open-response questions to obtain data of *participant meanings*" (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, p. 405).

Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique is very appropriate in exploratory research. Woolsey (1986) states that:

> The [critical incident] technique can be used for foundational and exploratory work, opening and clarifying a new domain for further research . . . . Critical incident studies are particularly useful in the early stages of research because they generate both exploratory information and theory or model-building . . . . The critical incident method is entirely consistent with the skills, experiences and values of counselling psychology practitioners (p. 252).

Further, McMillan and Schumacher (1989) point out that "the ability to empathize and to recognize the subtle meanings in a situation is important in most qualitative research" (p. 76). These are skills at which counsellors are adept. Thus, it appeared that this methodology is well-suited to the exploratory nature of the present research question and the perspective (counselling psychology) from which the problem was studied.

THE CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

Introduction

As originally conceived and employed, the critical incident method falls somewhere in the middle of the continuum between traditional quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, combining a data-gathering technique based on quantitative underpinnings with a data-analysis method based on qualitative, inductive reasoning. Giorgi (1975) has argued for a convergence of traditional quantitative and qualitative methodologies; it can be argued that the critical incident technique represents such a convergence. Travers (1958) notes that "it is, in essence, a method of observation" (p. 265) with subjects reporting on either their own or others' behaviours. It employs an interview format that is more structured than ethnographic interviews and less structured than quantitative interviews which will later be statistically analysed. As Borgen and Amundson (1984) describe it, "the interviewer elicit[s] reports of concrete

and specific observations from people who are in a position to determine what helps or hinders the functioning of some process" (p. 12). In this case, that process was the successful passage of single-mother students through college, and participants were reporting self-observations.

History and Applications

First described by Flanagan (1954), the critical incident technique was originally used during World War II to assess pilot performance. Soon thereafter, it was used in industrial psychology as a means of studying the job requirements and performance of, for example: auto workers, dentists, industrial foremen, bookkeepers, psychology instructors, air-traffic controllers (all cited in Flanagan, 1954); grocery store managers (Andersson and Nilsson, 1964); and teachers (Jensen, 1951). Its use has since been extended to the study of social and psychological phenomena such as, for example: life satisfaction (Flanagan, 1978); unemployment (Borgen and Amundson, 1984; Klein, 1989; Patterson, 1990); moving (Broughton, 1984); divorce (Proulx, 1991); and scholarly activity (Cochran, 1985). Woolsey (1986) also cites several other studies using this approach.

In the process of adapting this technique to the study of psychological and social issues, the emphasis on factual, objective description by observers has lessened, and the emphasis on experiences, perceptions, memories, and meaning of self-observers has increased.

Five Steps

Flanagan (1954) has described five stages in the process of research using the critical incident technique. The **first step** is to functionally describe the general aims of

the activity being studied. In this case, the activity studied was that of attending college as a single mother, and the general aim of the activity is to complete the college program with an adequate academic standing.

The **second step** is to outline plans and specifications. In its traditional applications, the critical incident technique uses observers to describe and record the behaviours of others. As it has been used more recently (Borgen and Amundson, 1984; Broughton, 1984; Cochran, 1985; Harder, 1986; Larsen, 1987; Klein, 1989; Patterson, 1990; Proulx, 1991; Young, 1991), the procedure requires participants to retrospectively observe incidents critical to their own situation. As Flanagan (1954) originally developed the procedure, clarifying plans and specifications involves: specifying what situations are to be observed or reported; deciding whether or not incidents are truly relevant to the general aim; determining the extent of the effect, positive or negative, of the incident on the general aim (how significant the incident is); and deciding who is to make the observations (in this case, the interview subjects themselves). This step was adapted somewhat for the present study and was achieved by reading a context statement at the beginning of every interview and by asking probing questions during the interview (see Appendix C for the context statement, adapted from Young [1991]).

The **third step** is to collect the data. Flanagan (1954) discusses how to increase the accuracy of memories, stating that "if full and precise details are given, it can usually be assumed that this information is accurate. Vague reports suggest that the incident is not well remembered and that some of the data may be incorrect" (p. 340). Accordingly, several incidents were discarded due to the lack of sufficient detail (further information about this is provided in the section on data analysis). Woolsey (1986) suggests letting

subjects know what the questions will be before the interview so that they have time to reflect upon possible incidents. Again, this was done in the present study. As well, Flanagan states that, in interviews, the researcher should outline the sponsorship of the study, the purpose of the study, the reason the observer has been chosen, and the anonymity of the data. This portion of the step was accomplished via the reading of the context statement and the consent procedure preceding every interview.

The **fourth step** outlined by Flanagan is to analyze the data. This step includes: determining the frame of reference (the proposed use of study results); forming the categories; and determining the level of specificity of categories (developing sub-categories). This step is addressed in the section on data analysis.

The **fifth and final step** in the process is interpreting and reporting findings. Flanagan (1954) states that "in many cases, the real errors are made not in the collection and analysis of the data but in the failure to interpret them properly" (p. 345). A balance must be sought so that faulty inferences and generalizations are not made on the one hand, and yet the results are not devalued on the other hand. Flanagan (1954) points out that, if the participants in the study do not constitute a representative sample of the group being studied, the participants "must be described as precisely as possible" (p. 345). As will be discussed later, there is no way to know whether the sample in this study was representative of a larger population of single-mother students attending college; however, the results of a demographic questionnaire describing the participants are provided in the section on participants and sampling procedures.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity as they relate to the critical incident approach have been understood to mean different things by different people, likely because, as previously mentioned, this methodology lies somewhere between traditionally-defined quantitative and qualitative spheres.

Travers (1958) has criticized the usefulness of this technique, stating: that it "often provides samples of rarely occurring behavior. . .[which] minimalizes [sic] their usefulness" (p. 267); that, because of the selective recall of unusual events, incidents are often difficult to classify; and that it is an "extremely laborious" (p. 268) technique.

Andersson and Nilsson (1964), on the other hand, argue that the "information collected by this method is both reliable and valid" (p.402). They found that "the number of subcategories increased very rapidly at the beginning of the process of collection. The increase soon became slower and when about two-thirds of the incidents (there were 1847 in all) had been classified "95% of all subcategories had appeared" (pp. 399-400). They found that when students reclassified a randomly chosen subset of the incidents, 75 to 85% of the incidents were placed in the same, original category. This addresses Travers' concern that categorization is difficult. They also found that only five of 86 subcategories were rated as rather unimportant by four different groups of raters, refuting Travers' argument that unique, unusual events are remembered because of selective recall and are therefore unreliable.

However, both Travers (1958) and Andersson and Nilsson (1964) are applying quantitative definitions of reliability and validity to a methodology which is not, especially as it has recently been adapted, quantitative. As McMillan and Schumacher

(1989) point out, "reliability. . . is immensely difficult to researchers interested in a naturalistic event or unique phenomena, present or past. The qualitative process is personalistic; no investigator observes, interviews, or studies documents exactly like another (p. 188)". They also point out, however, that validity may be qualitative research's "major strength" (p. 191), although again, not in the same sense as in quantitative methodologies, because random selection and random assignment are not a part of this study.

In the present study, validity and reliability checks were conducted. The validity check involved assuring, both during and after the data collection process, that my understanding of the content, meaning and significance of the incidents related to me by the participants was accurate and complete. The reliability check, implemented after the data analysis process was completed, involved a second person sorting the incidents into the categories developed by me. These checks are both described in greater detail later in the chapter.

SETTING - THE COLLEGE

The community college the participants were attending is located in a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia. The college is fairly large by BC standards, with a combined full- and part-time student population of approximately 8,000. According to a 1992 institutional self-study, 57% of the college's students are women. The college's curriculum closely matches the community college model described by Dennison and Gallagher (1986, pp. 70-72)). The following curriculum components are offered:

- Vocational training programs.

- Career, technical and para-professional programs.

- University transfer programs.

- General academic programs.

- Personal interest and community development programs (non-credit).

- Pre-college level or upgrading programs.

- Contract programs.

The only curriculum dimension described by Dennison and Gallagher and not offered by the college is that of apprenticeship and trades training programs.

The college adheres to an "open-door" admissions policy, whereby all applicants are accepted as a student and issued a student identification number, regardless of previous academic experience. Admission to certain programs is restricted, however. Students are often tested to determine the academic levels at which they are functioning and then advised to take academic upgrading offered by the college before attempting college-level courses.

SAMPLING PROCEDURES AND PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

This section describes how 10 participants were selected for the present study and provides detailed demographic information about them. As was previously discussed in Chapter II, the term "participant"—rather than "subject"—was chosen because it more accurately reflects the role these 10 women played in the research process.

Selection Procedures

Random sampling was not possible in this study; instead, "convenience sampling" (Ray and Ravizza, 1985) was utilized. Woolsey argues that "because the critical incident technique is descriptive and exploratory, sampling requirements are much less stringent

than for traditional methods of research" (1986, p. 245). However, it is important to recognize that the present sample is not necessarily representative of the larger population of single mothers attending college. The exploratory nature of this study and the non-random sampling procedures involved require that results be interpreted carefully. Strictly speaking, the findings may not apply equally to any other single-mother students outside the group of participants.

Participants were solicited in several ways:

- An information meeting was held in the women's centre on campus. One participant was found in this manner.

- Colourful posters (see Appendix H) advertising the study were placed in many, conspicuous locations around the college. This resulted in one participant coming forward.

- The study was introduced to several large sections of core courses in the general nursing program, a largely-female population. In this way, almost all of the second-year nursing students learned of the study. Eight potential participants were identified, and seven subsequently took part in the study.

- The study was also introduced to several large sections of general arts courses and core courses in the psychiatric nursing program, but these attempts did not yield any participants.

- At the time of her interview, each participant was asked to inform any other single-mother students she knew about the study ("snowball" or "network" sampling; McMillan and Schumacher, 1989; p. 183). This technique located one participant.

In total then, 11 prospective participants were identified, and of those, 10 agreed to participate in the study. As many researchers have found (e.g., Sanik and Mauldin, 1986), time is at a premium for single mothers: it may be that other single-mother students heard about the study but were unwilling to participate due to time constraints. Alternately, it may simply be that there were very few single-mother students in attendance at the college, an idea supported by Gorlick's (1988, cited in Gorlick, 1992) finding.

Participation Criteria

I interviewed only women who met the following criteria:

- Were over the age of 18 years.

- Had full or joint custody of at least one child under the age of 16 years.

- Were single (never-married), separated, divorced, or widowed and not currently living with a partner.

- Were attending a two-year college program full time (at least 60% of a full course load).

- Had completed at least one full year of the program.

The final criterion ensured that: (a) participants had been immersed in the experience of being single-mother students for some time and were still immersed in it at the time of the interview; and (b) participants had been successful enough academically to have remained in the program up to this point. (While a comparison of successful and unsuccessful single-mother students and their experiences would be informative, it was beyond the scope of the present study.)

In most cases, subjects had been enrolled full-time for no more than approximately one-and-a-half years and were therefore recalling incidents that had occurred no longer ago than that. Woolsey states that "the more recent and direct the observations, the better" (1986, p. 246). (However, in a qualitative study, biases of memory are not as feared. The assumption is that, if participants recall certain incidents and forget others, it is likely because the remembered events are more meaningful to or had a greater impact upon them.)

A participant information and criteria check form was developed (see Appendix B) and administered over the telephone before meeting with the participants for the interview. All of the prospective participants met the participation criteria.

Description of Participants

Because no demographic statistics exist regarding single-mother students, it is impossible to ascertain how representative of other single-mother students the participants in the present study are. The following can be said of all of the participants. They were Caucasian. They were mature women, the average age being 36 years, who had been married and were now either separated or divorced. The average age of their youngest child was almost eight years, and none had a child younger than age five years. Thus, none of the participants was a young, never-married woman with pre-school-aged children. It appears that these 10 single-mothers may represent a sub-set of single mothers, perhaps best described by the out-dated and potentially offensive — yet evocative — term "displaced homemakers". Table 1 and Table 2, on page 44, provide more information about the participants.

	Mean	Range
Age	36.2 Years	31 - 43 Years
Time as a Single Mother	5.2 Years	2.5 - 10 Years
Number of Children	2.0	1 - 4
Age of Youngest Child	7.8 Years	5 - 12 Years
Time as a Full-Time Student	19.6 Months	11 - 33 Months
Yearly Income	$19,290	$13,200 - $30,200

Table 1: The Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

It is also noteworthy that three participants were in the university-transfer program and seven, in the registered nursing program. There are many differences between these two courses of study, and, correspondingly, the experiences of the single-mother students in each of them may be quite different. It would perhaps have been

Course of Study	**# of Participants**
University Transfer	3
General Nursing	7
Total	**10**
Sources of Income Mentioned	
Student Loans	9
Support/Maintenance Payments	7
Welfare	5
Bursaries/Scholarships	2
Rental/Boarder Income	2
Home Equity/Savings	1
Part-Time Work	1

Table 2: The Courses of Study and Sources of Income of the Participants

preferable to have studied a more homogenous group of participants in terms of their

course of study; however, as previously explained, participants were in short supply.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Introduction

The data collection process was in the form of an interview that was semi-

structured in terms of the process (an interview guide, with standardized probes was

employed) but unstructured in terms of content. Participants alone determined the

incidents to be discussed.

When subjects were first contacted via telephone, they were told the purpose of

the research and the question to be discussed during the interview (Woolsey, 1986). At

this time, as previously mentioned, pertinent information was collected to check that they

did indeed meet the previously-mentioned selection criteria. Two participants were

interviewed at a neutral and private location in the college; the remainder were

interviewed in their homes.

The Interview Process

At the beginning of the interview appointment, before beginning the actual

interview, I would spend a short period of time (approximately 15 minutes) chatting

informally with the participant and meeting her children if they were present. McMillan

and Schumacher (1989) note that it is crucial that the "participants see the researcher as

an interested, respectful, non-judgmental observer who maintains confidentiality" (pp.

394-395). Apparently, this was accomplished, because all of the participants readily

shared information, insights and feelings, and several commented on how comfortable

they had felt. One participant said: "You're very easy to talk to. You're very — you can tell right away — very accepting, non-judgemental. And also not intimidating".

First, the general aim (Flanagan, 1954) was explained, and the information being sought was specified by reading the context statement (see Appendix C). The basic research question was posed in as specific a way as possible in order to make later categorization easier (Woolsey, 1986); however, it must be noted that the research question was an usually broad one. Next, the consent form (see Appendix A) was explained and completed. It was stressed that the interview could be discontinued at any time with no explanation if the participant so desired and that all information gathered would remain anonymous.

The audio-tape recorder was then turned on and the interview itself began. The participant was asked to think back to when she had first started college full-time and to recall an incident that had made it easier or more difficult for her to be in school. After she had recalled the first incident and briefly related it, she was asked to indicate where it should be placed on the lifeline (see below). Then, the following probes, adapted from Young (1991) were used, when necessary, to elicit more information:

- What exactly happened?

- What led up to the incident?

- How did the incident affect you in terms of your thoughts, feelings, or actions?

- What was the meaning or significance of the incident to you, in terms of your progress through school?

- How much of an impact did the incident have on you?

- Was this impact positive (facilitating) or negative (hindering)?

- How long did the impact last?

The interview guide and the probes mentioned above were used consistently; however, the interviews, like ethnographic interviews, were "relatively conversational and situational" (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, p. 405).

After each incident, I paraphrased it and asked the participant if my understanding of the event was accurate. The participant would either indicate that it was, or offer further clarification. After the first incident was recalled, related and recorded, I would again ask the participant if she could recall any further incidents in that semester. When she was satisfied that all incidents in that semester had been related, we would move to the next semester. The process was repeated, working through each semester in which the participant had been enrolled, until the she had no further incidents to report.

Finally, the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) was completed, for use in describing the sample.

The interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to three hours, depending on the length of time the participant had been a full-time student, the number of incidents she recalled, the loquacity of the participant, and the number of distractions and interruptions (from children, pets and telephones).

The Lifeline Technique

Young (1991) has used a common counselling technique, the *lifeline*, in a previous critical incidents study in order to facilitate subjects' recall of incidents; it was similarly employed in this study. A life-line is essentially a chronological summary of a certain time period in a person's life. In the present study, a horizontal line was drawn

on a piece of paper, with the date that the participant entered college at one end and the interview date at the other end. The participant then told me where to place incidents upon the lifeline. I asked the participants to relate incidents in chronological order whenever possible, but I also encouraged them to go back if they remembered other incidents later in the interview. The participants also rated each incident as to how much of an impact it had had on their progress through school, from very much to very little, and whether it was positive (facilitating) or negative (hindering). The purpose of this rating was to check that each incident included was, indeed, important: any incidents which a participant deemed to have had minimal impact were excluded. (Appendix E contains the lifeline form.)

Comments on the Interview Process

It is important to note that, although the interviews were structured as to their focus and reasonably standardized as to their procedure, the data collection took place in the context of a human interaction between the researcher and the participant. Throughout the interview, I used basic counselling skills to encourage, summarize, and clarify participants' responses, but I was vigilant about influencing those responses as little as possible. At the beginning of the interview, I would always warn participants to tell me if I was directing their responses in any way.

Many participants were initially concerned that they would not have any valuable information to offer, or that they would not be able to remember many incidents. However, once the interview process commenced, most participants had little or no trouble: in fact, the average, final number of incidents recalled per participant was over 25. Said one participant: "At first . . . I sort of thought 'Oh, I hope I can think of some

things' . . . . But then, once you get going, yeah, you can see many things." Another participant exclaimed, "Things are coming up everywhere!"

Participants were given little direction as to what to relate, but were given three guidelines. First, they were encouraged to consider all aspects of their life for potential incidents: it was pointed out that an incident need not have occurred within the walls of the college to have had an impact on their progress through school. Second, they were asked to be as concrete and specific as possible in describing an incident. Third, they were instructed, when unsure of the relevance of an incident, to err on the side of mentioning it, rather than of not mentioning it: the determining criterion for inclusion or exclusion of an incident during the interview process was its relevance to the participant's progress through school.

When there was any doubt about an incident's relevance, I would challenge the participant, via the use of probing questions, to clarify for herself and to explain to me the impact of the incident on her progress through school. The participants' abilities to explain the significance and/or meaning of an incident to them varied. If she was able to construct that connection, sometimes with some assistance from me in terms of paraphrasing and empathic statements, the incident was included. If she was unable to do so, the incident was excluded from the lifeline.

Sometimes, the significance of an incident and its ultimate effect were not immediately obvious to the participant, yet she would be convinced that the incident was, indeed, central to her experience. In these cases, I employed a counselling technique called *laddering* (Hinkle, 1965, cited in Cochran, 1987). Laddering is described by Cochran as:

a rich way to elicit deeper, more central constructs, a way to move from subordinate to superordinate issues . . . . Laddering continues until the elicited construct is so self-obvious that the client cannot imagine further justification is necessary (pp. 268-269).

In the present study, I used laddering by asking the participant "Why (or how) was this incident important?" After she had given an initial, more superficial response, I would again ask "And why was *that* [echoing her previous response] important to you?" I would ask again and again, until the participant reached what she believed was the ultimate significance or effect of the incident. In these cases, I was always tentative and exceedingly careful not to "put words into her mouth".

If two or more incidents were similar but clearly separate, each was recorded on the lifeline. For example, one participant mentioned a particular instructor who was helpful and supportive, but in different ways, on two separate occasions. Each was entered on the lifeline as a separate incident. On the other hand, if one incident was essentially a continuation of a previous incident, it was only entered once. For example, one participant reported her father buying car insurance for her at the beginning of each semester. This constituted only one incident.

Pilot Interviews

The first three participants also served as pilot participants. After their interviews were completed, I asked them the following questions:

- **Was the context statement leading in any way?** None of the pilot participants believed that the context statement influenced her responses. Said one participant of it: "Heartily endorsed. One hundred percent agree. It's what single moms talk about all the time. All those things are very true."

- **Did my comments at any point influence your responses?** Again, none of the pilot participants reported any influence on my part. One participant commented: "Not at all. No. If you said something, you said it sometimes in a better way than I can say it, or you put into words what the thoughts are".

- **Was using the life line helpful to you?** All three pilot participants found the lifeline very useful in recalling events.

- **Did knowing you were being taped influence your answers?** None of the pilot participants found that being tape-recorded made an impact on their answers.

- **Can you think of anything that should be added to or deleted from the demographic questionnaire?** One pilot participant suggested adding a question asking participants to rate the amounts of social, emotional, and financial support they received. Although this was an excellent suggestion, it was beyond the scope of this study and I did not proceed with it.

- **Do you have any general comments or suggestions on how to improve the interview process?** All three pilot participants found the interview process straight-forward and enjoyable. None suggested any changes.

Because no changes were made to the interview process as a result of the feedback from the pilot interviews, the data from these interviews were included in the analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Introduction

In qualitative research, "inductive analysis means the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis emerge from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to data collection and analysis as done in verification [quantitative] research" (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, p. 415). Analysis of the data was an "ongoing cyclical process integrated into all phases" (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, p. 414) of this study. The process began during the data collection period, when I began noticing and noting recurrent themes from one interview to the next. Data analysis continued during the time I was extracting information about the incidents from the audio-tapes and the lifeline graphs and during the three attempts at categorization and the periods of refinement between those attempts.

Extraction of the Data

After the interviews were completed, data about the incidents were carefully extracted and recorded from the audio-tape and the lifeline, using an incident form. This initial phase of the data analysis process was crucial because, during it, commonalities and possible categories began to become apparent. Large segments of the audio-tapes, particularly the participants' words, were transcribed verbatim and included on the incident forms. See Appendices F and G for two completed examples of the original incident forms.

Two hundred and twenty-nine incidents appearing on both the lifeline and the audio-tape were originally extracted and recorded on incident forms. Five more incidents which appeared only on the audio-tape, but were related in sufficient detail to

be included, were added. Six incidents were then discarded, two because they occurred well before the time period covered by the interviews, and four because they lacked sufficient detail. Seven incidents were added at this point by splitting one incident into two. This was done only when the incident had both a positive and a negative impact upon the participant. An example of this can be seen in an incident where the participant had decided to drop a course to lighten her work load. On one hand, the impact was positive, because she felt much less anxious and had more time to spend with her children. On the other hand, there was also a negative effect, in that she "felt like a failure" as a student.

Validity Check

Researcher bias is always a potential problem in research, especially in qualitative studies (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989). Although I had made every effort to remain non-directive during the interviews, it was none-the-less crucial to verify that my influence on the data collection process had indeed been minimal and that the data collected validly reflected the participants' experiences. Validity checks were therefore conducted. First, during each interview, I carried out an on-going validity check (as previously mentioned) by paraphrasing each individual incident after the participant had related it and then asking if my understanding was accurate. If it was inaccurate or incomplete, the participant would clarify her experience and I would again paraphrase it, until she was satisfied that I had fully grasped the event and its significance. Second, as previously mentioned, I also asked the three pilot participants whether I had influenced the types of incidents reported or the interpretation of those incidents. All three indicated that I had not.

For the third phase of the validity check, participants were contacted after the data collection and extraction processes were completed. Nine of the ten participants were subsequently contacted (the tenth had moved and I was unable to locate her). Of the nine contacted, eight participants took part in the formal validity check. I sent each participant a packet of incident forms for all of the incidents she had related to me, gathered from the audio-tape and the lifeline form. I also included instructions asking each participant: to read the incidents carefully; to note any inaccuracies in the way I had summarized and recorded the incidents; and to include any important incidents they had forgotten to mention during the interview.

The changes made to the data as a result of the final validity check were minimal. Two participants noted several typographical errors, which were duly noted. Another participant wanted to substitute more formal language in her direct quotes for her original, casual language. (These substitutions were not made, as this was not the intent of the check.) One participant reported two new incidents, but because they had both occurred after the time period covered by the interview, they were not included in data analysis. Finally, one participant gave further information about two incidents, and this information was included. Thus, very few changes were made to the data as a result of the validity check.

Given the precautions taken during the interviews and the results of the validity check, it seems reasonable to suggest that the data collected were valid and reasonably unbiased, in that: I did not unduly influence the types of incidents reported during the interviews; and my understanding of the incidents related to me and their meanings was, overall, accurate and complete.

Categorizing the Data

Because the present research question was unusually broad, the ensuing incidents were broadly scattered. As a result, categorizing the data was a challenging task. After several trial-and-error attempts at creating a taxonomy, two modifications were made to aid in the data analysis process. First, a shorter incident form was devised, eliminating information that was not absolutely necessary to the categorization process, and modifying slightly the description of many of the incidents to make it more conceptual and less specific. (See Appendix F for a before-and-after example of how the original incident forms were modified.) Second, several incidents were split into two (or, on two occasions, three) separate incidents: 23 new incidents were added this way. (On one occasion, two incidents were combined into one during this stage as well.) Splitting was done only in cases where: the incident could easily and clearly be broken into two smaller and related, but separate, incidents; and not splitting the incident would have made it difficult to categorize. Again, before-and-after examples appear in Appendix G.

Table 3, on page 56, provides detailed information on the final number of added and discarded incidents, including the instances mentioned in the sub-section called "Extraction of the Data" as well as the ones described here.

Essentially, incidents were categorized by a system of "constant comparison" (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989): each incident after the first was scrutinized to determine if it was similar enough to the preceding one to be grouped with that one, or different enough to be placed in a separate category. Several ambiguous incidents, representing less than 5% of the total, were set aside until all of the other incidents had been categorized. Nine bipolar (including incidents with both positive and negative

Participant #	Original # of Incidents	# of Incidents Added	# of Incidents Discarded	Final # of Incidents
1	25	2	1	26
2	24	5	0	29
3	30	2	3	29
4	34	4	2	36
5	24	2	0	26
6	14	2	1	15
7	23	1	0	24
8	18	4	0	22
9	18	5	0	23
10	19	3	0	22
Total	**229**	**30**	**7**	**252**

Table 3: The Original and Final Number of Incidents

impacts) categories were identified, named and defined. I then used those definitions to help me to place the few, remaining incidents into the most appropriate categories. Next, the original nine (minor) categories were organized into three supra-ordinate (major) categories. Chapter IV contains a detailed description of these major and minor categories.

Reliability Check

After the categorization process was completed for the final time, a reliability check was conducted. The purpose of this check was to verify that the classification system developed by me was sufficiently explicit, systematic and unbiased so as to be replicable by a second sorter.

The second sorter was a woman with a degree in the social sciences (a double major in psychology and sociology) who had worked in the field of recreation and

gerontology for several years. The sorter was given all of the 252 incidents in their short form on index cards, as well as the names and brief descriptions of the nine minor categories and the three major categories. She was first asked to sort the minor categories into the major categories. She placed eight of the nine minor category categories into the same major categories that I had. She was next asked to sort the incidents into the minor categories. She placed 232 (92%) of the incidents in the same categories that I had, well exceeding the 75% minimum recommended by Andersson and Nilsson (1964) and the 80% target set for the current study. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that: 1) the categories were sensible and not so idiosyncratic as to be incomprehensible to another sorter; and 2) researcher bias was minimized during the data analysis process.

SUMMARY

This chapter has detailed the data collection and analysis procedures employed in this study. First, the rationale for choosing the critical incident technique as the methodology was explained, emphasizing that the technique is well-suited to exploratory research, has a history of use in the field of counselling psychology, and would be likely to elicit the type of information that the present study sought. Second, the technique was described, including an overview of its historical and present uses — from military personnel selection to various pyscho-social issues — and its strengths and weaknesses. Third, the college the participants were attending was described. It is fairly typical of community colleges in British Columbia in terms of its structure and programs, but it is one of the larger ones in the province. Fourth, the processes by which the study participants were obtained was explained and the participants themselves were described.

The majority of the participants were obtained when I presented my study to large sections of nursing courses. The sample is not considered representative of other single-mother students. Fifth, the data collection procedures were outlined. A semi-structured interview using a lifeline technique to aid recall and structure information was employed. Finally, information about the data analysis process is given. Incidents were first extracted from the audio-tapes of the interviews and from the lifelines and then recorded on incident forms. Then, using a method of constant comparison, nine minor categories were developed. These were organized into three major categories. Procedures to check the validity of the incidents and the reliability of the major and minor categories were completed.

The next chapter, Chapter IV, relates the results of the study, focusing on the contents of the major and minor categories.

CHAPTER IV - RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis and categorization process.

First, some general information regarding the results is given. Next, the actual results, in

sections based upon the three levels of categories that have been constructed, are

presented. Finally, a brief summary of the results is provided. Throughout the chapter,

several tables and figures that summarize information are included.

As reported in the preceding chapter, a total of 252 incidents were extracted from

the audio-tapes of the interviews, an average of 25 per participant. Of these, 140 (56%)

were positive, or facilitating, in their effects and 112 (44%) were negative, or hindering.

Table 4 shows the number and percentage of positive and negative incidents contributed

by each participant.

Participant #	# (%) of Positive Incidents	# (%) of Negative Incidents	Total # of Incidents per Participant
1	18 (69%)	8 (31%)	26
2	17 (59%)	12 (41%)	29
3	16 (55%)	13 (45%)	29
4	20 (56%)	16 (44%)	36
5	19 (73%)	7 (27%)	26
6	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	15
7	13 (54%)	11 (46%)	24
8	8 (36%)	14 (64%)	22
9	6 (26%)	17 (74%)	23
10	14 (64%)	8 (36%)	22
Totals	**140 (56%)**	**112 (44%)**	**252**

**Table 4: The Number and Percentage of Positive and Negative Incidents
Contributed by Each Participant**

The proportion of positive to negative incidents reported varied among participants, ranging from approximately one-quarter positive and three-quarters negative to the reverse. Eight of the participants reported more positive than negative incidents. It may be the case that the proportion of positive and negative incidents reported by a participant is indicative of the overall positivity or negativity of her experiences as a single-mother student.

Nine minor categories were first created. Then, three major categories were developed which subsumed the former. The three major categories are Intrapersonal, Interpersonal and Situational. Figure 2 shows the relative sizes of the major categories.
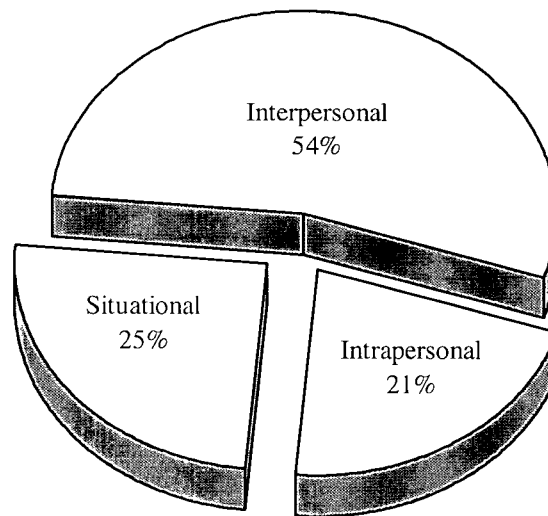
Figure 2: The Relative Sizes of the Major Categories

The major categories varied strikingly in the proportion of positive to negative incidents in each. Intrapersonal contained the most positive incidents and Situational, the least. Table 5, on page 61, provides the exact number and percentage of positive and negative incidents in each of the major categories, while Figure 3 highlights differences

in the major categories in terms of their proportion of positive and negative incidents.

Major Category	# (%) of Positive Incidents	# (%) of Negative Incidents	Totals
Intrapersonal	40 (74%)	14 (26%)	54
Interpersonal	80 (59%)	55 (41%)	135
Situational	20 (32%)	43 (68%)	63
Totals	**140 (56%)**	**112 (44%)**	**252**

Table 5: The Number and Percentage of Positive and Negative Incidents in Each of the Major Categories
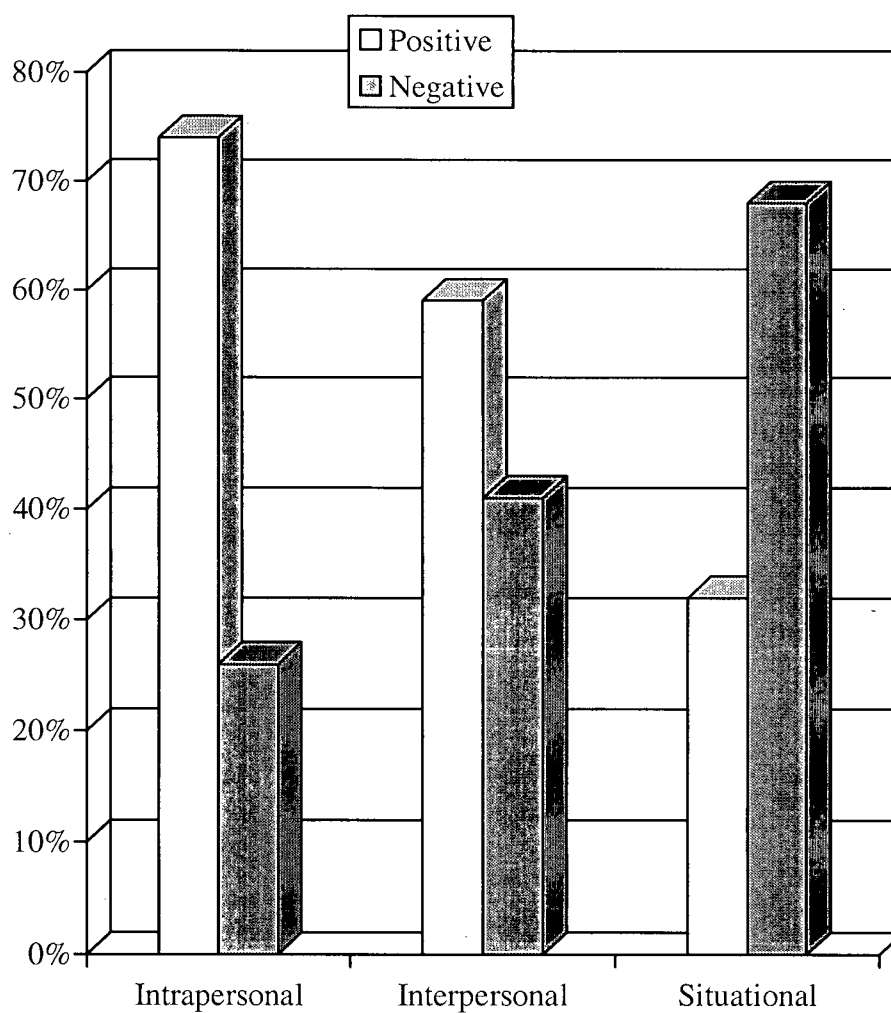
Figure 3: The Proportion of Positive and Negative Incidents in Each of the Major Categories

The nine minor categories are as follows, in descending order of size in terms of the number of incidents in each: Instructors; College Administration and Policies; Coping Strategies; Children; Friends and Family Members; Academic Issues; Other Students; Ex-Husbands; and Government Agencies and Programs. Figure 4 shows the relative sizes of the minor categories.
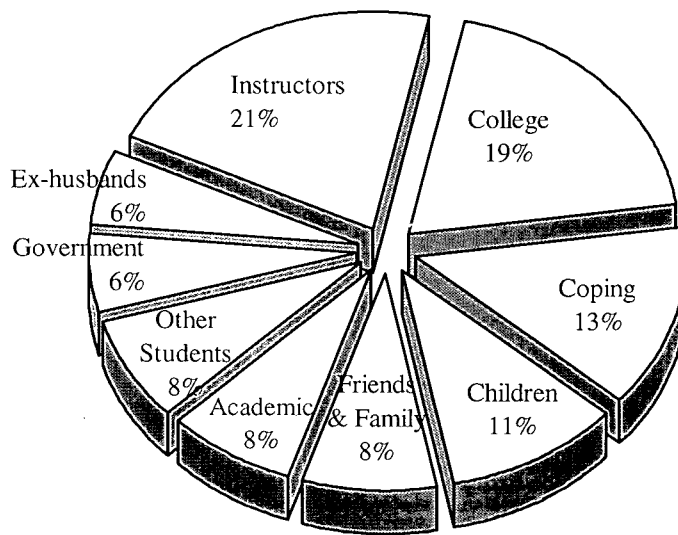
Figure 4: The Relative Sizes of the Minor Categories

All of the minor categories are bipolar in that they contain both facilitating and hindering incidents. The minor category containing the most positive incidents is Coping Strategies. The minor category containing the most negative incidents is Government Agencies and Programs. Table 6, on page 63, provides the exact number and percentage of positive and negative incidents in each of the nine minor categories, while Figure 5, on page 64, highlights the differences in the minor categories in terms of their proportion of positive and negative incidents.

Minor Category	# (%) of Positive Incidents	# (%) of Negative Incidents	Totals
Instructors	33 (61%)	21 (39%)	54
College	16 (33%)	33 (67%)	49
Coping Strategies	27 (79%)	7 (21%)	34
Children	11 (41%)	16 (60%)	27
Friends & Family	13 (65%)	7 (35%)	20
Academic Issues	13 (65%)	7 (35%)	20
Other Students	15 (79%)	4 (21%)	19
Ex-Husbands	8 (53%)	7 (47%)	15
Government	4 (29%)	10 (71%)	14
Totals	**140 (56%)**	**112 (44%)**	**252**

Table 6: The Number and Percentage of Positive and Negative Incidents in Each of the Minor Categories

To all but one minor category, eight or more of the participants contributed at least one incident. Although it may be incorrect to interpret this as meaning that the experiences of the 10 participants were similar, it does support the contention that there was a reasonable consistency among participants in the types of incidents they reported, especially considering the non-directive nature of the interviews in terms of content. It also lends credence to the assertion that the present categorization system is not spurious and validly summarizes the experiences of the participants. Table 7, on page 65, provides the number of participants represented in each of the nine minor categories.

The body of this chapter, detailing the results themselves, is organized into three main sections, one for each of the major categories. In each section, a brief description of the major category is first given. The minor categories contained within the major category are then presented, beginning with an overview of each minor category, including general observations and comments regarding both the types of incidents that
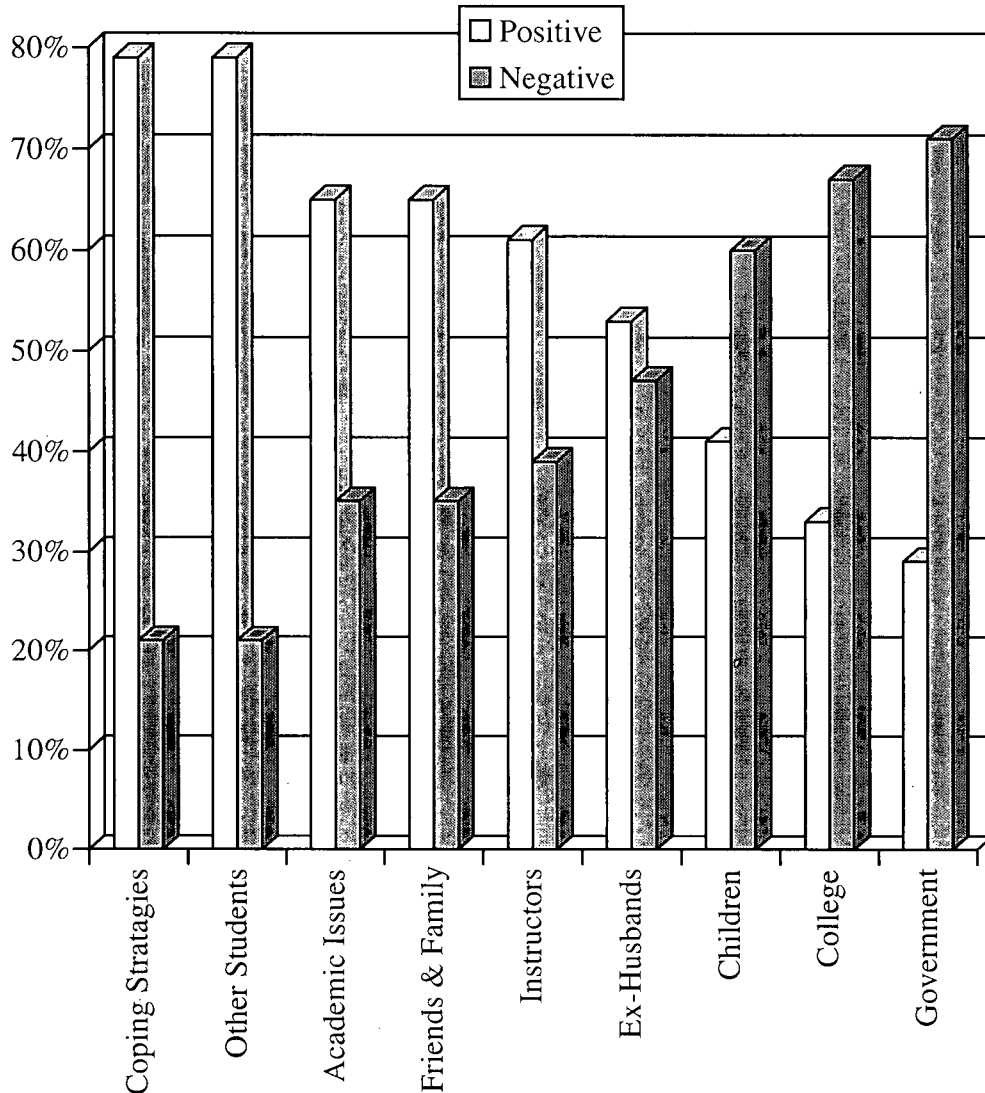
Figure 5: The Proportion of Positive and Negative Incidents in Each of the Minor Categories

were reported and, more importantly, the meaning or significance of those incidents to

the participants. Then, examples of incidents within the category are given, and, to

convey the richness and nuances of the information gathered, selected verbatim quotes

from the participants are presented. The quotes are not meant to be exhaustive in

portraying every type of incident reported, but rather, illustrative of the meaning or

significance of the sub-category. It is important to note that, although each incident has been placed in only one minor category, there is some degree of overlap among categories due to the complex nature of the data and the imposed structure of the classification system.

Minor Category	# of Participants Represented
Coping	10
Academic	9
Instructors	10
Children	10
Friends & Family	8
Other Students	8
Ex-Husbands	8
College	9
Government	6

Table 7: The Number of Participants Represented in Each of the Minor Categories

MAJOR CATEGORY ONE: INTRAPERSONAL

This major category includes incidents that primarily involved the participant's own thoughts, feelings, or behaviours. Although another person may have been peripherally involved, the incidents described occurred primarily *within* the individual participant; it is the participant herself who was central to the incident. Participants' internal processes in dealing with the challenges, both personal and academic, faced by them are the focus of this major category. It consists of 54 incidents (21% of the total) and contains two minor categories: Coping Strategies; and Academic Issues. Of the 54 incidents, 40 (74%) were positive, or facilitating, and 14 (26%) were negative, or hindering: this major category contains the highest proportion of positive incidents.

Minor Category One: Coping Strategies

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved cognitive, emotional, behavioural and practical coping strategies or issues or problems in this area. This category consists of 34 incidents (13% of the total). Of these, 27 (79%) were positive, or facilitating, and seven (21%) were negative, or hindering, in their effects. This category is dominated by positive experiences: participants reported many more instances of strengths than problems in terms of their coping abilities. All of the participants contributed incidents to this category.

Participants used a remarkable variety of thinking-, feeling-, and action-based methods to cope with the stresses and demands faced by them on a daily basis and reported many more strengths than problems in this area.

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Reframing a negative experience as a positive one.

- Minimizing the importance of school and school work, thereby reducing pressure and anxiety and, paradoxically, making it possible to perform the work.

- Realizing and accepting, or even embracing, one's priorities, limitations and responsibilities.

- Maintaining an attitude of personal power and "agency" (DeCharms, 1968).

- Increasing one's self-awareness and self-knowledge through reading and course-work.

- Discounting negative comments from instructors through positive self-talk.

- Creating a positive attitude through taking complete responsibility for one's own decisions and actions.

- Dealing with anxiety and other negative feelings about school by expressing them to others.

- Resolving past emotional issues that would have otherwise interfered with school work.

- Becoming more assertive with friends and family members in regards to their expectations of the participant.

- Reducing one's academic workload and role strain by working ahead during the summer break.

- Engaging in physical activity to manage stress.

- Dropping a course and / or limiting one's course load.

- Budgeting one's money carefully.

Selection of Positive Quotes

> The more you're trapped, the harder you fight, the further down you go. You can't let go of the anxiety to actually do the work. So if you say to yourself "Okay, it doesn't matter. Forget the essay". As soon as you can say that to yourself, you relax, you take a night off, you watch t.v., the next day you're much better.

> I think people create their own worlds . . . . Everything I do, I've chosen to do, so I'm responsible for my own actions. I'm not a victim, or I'm not at the mercy of anybody. I've decided to do this. It's like accepting the result of my actions, really accepting them.

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Putting excessive pressures on oneself through unrealistic expectations and / or perfectionism.

- Worrying obsessively about something beyond one's control.

- Letting past emotional issues interfere with one's functioning.

- Having a difficult time setting priorities and organizing oneself.

Selection of Negative Quotes

> The further I get along in the program, the more I feel like if I don't make it, I'm going to let a lot of people down. It's like, "Yeah, see? Single mom, she couldn't do it" . . . . I can have the ex-husband saying, "Well, see, you couldn't do it. You have to have me". And people that know that I'm doing it, you know, it's almost humiliating to say that I couldn't do it. And one of the things my doctor's asking is "Is it really important for you to get A's?" Because along with getting A's comes all the stress of pulling off A's . . . . It's almost like I'm trying to prove something, that I can get A's and I can be a mother. But with that comes a cost.

> It was really hard to get into studying again . . . . Trying to make out a schedule to have study time . . . . It was really stressful in the beginning . . . . I wasn't prepared for the [nursing program]. With all the classes, you have so much homework to do. I'd come home, and I'd do the things around the house that I normally did, and you can't do that. You have to work on your studies and leave the house a mess, and then clean it when you've got the time . . . . And I had to have a spot for everything, which I didn't in the beginning. I had to organize my books, and where am I going to put everything? . . . . I guess it was just settling down to studying without all these other things interfering . . . . It just made it really stressful.

Minor Category Two: Academic Issues

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved academic issues.

This minor category consists of 20 incidents (8% of the total). Of these, 13 (65%) were

positive, or facilitating, and seven (35%) were negative, or hindering, in their effects.

Nine of the 10 participants contributed incidents to this category.

Not surprisingly, succeeding academically was very important to participants.

(They reported amazing success overall in terms of academics: only three mentioned

failing an examination or an assignment, and none mentioned failing a course.) Most of

them had been away from school for many years and many were uncertain of their

abilities upon their return. Getting good grades provided important reassurance and

boosted self-confidence; getting poor grades was discouraging and threatened their tentative self-confidence.

Participants frequently expressed the sense that they simply could not afford to fail or fall behind. This was especially true for the nursing students, because there is a policy in the nursing program whereby, if a student fails a skills mastery test (described in more detail later in this chapter) three times in a row, she is required to leave the program for a semester. Participants, stressing the importance of succeeding without delays or setbacks, saw themselves as distinct from younger students in this matter. One participant explained that:

> If [younger students] don't make it, they don't make it, you know. Life isn't going to end; they'll just figure out something else they want to do or they'll wait the year and re-enter [the nursing program] or whatever they're going to do. But for me, to have to re-enter the program is just something I don't even want to have to deal with, because I'm on that time schedule and I can't keep this up forever, you know. 'Cause it's taking a chunk out of my life and my family's life, too.

As mature women, participants brought valuable previous life experiences to their studies. These often proved helpful, especially to the nursing students who were dealing with patients, because their comfort level and self-confidence were higher due to being on familiar ground. On the other hand, adjusting to a new and inferior role—that of student—after operating for many years as an autonomous adult could be trying. As one participant put it, "you have to learn how to go back to school".

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Getting a high grade or positive evaluation from an instructor.

- Liking the content of a course.

- Having previous personal experiences, such as having given birth and raised children, which helped them in their clinical placements, especially the pediatric and maternity rotations.

- Feeling comfortable with a subject matter due to previous life experiences and failing an assignment are two examples.

- Having previous professional experience and training, such as being a licenced practical nurse.

- Having taken part-time courses beforehand and therefore being familiar with and comfortable in the college.

Selection of Positive Quotes

> I guess I thought . . . "I did it! This was a tough course and I did it. So, maybe I'll take another one and see if I can do a little bit better". And so everything is just one little baby step, right? "Well, I managed to get through that, I'll try this!"

> [Speaking of having been a Licensed Practical Nurse before entering the nursing program] [It was] really positive . . . . I knew the routine and I just kind of helped out. And the instructors could see that, so it was more like I assisted the other girls and helped them. They'd come and watch me. And the instructors could see that so they weren't on my back all the time, which really decreases the stress level.

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Failing an assignment or an exam.

- Having to drop a course.

- Being unfamiliar with how to deal with instructors and what to expect from them.

Selection of Negative Quotes

> I got [an assignment] back and it was out of 25, I think, and I got something like two. And I thought I had done really good on it and everybody's going "Well, what did you get?" and I didn't want to talk about it . . . . It was a biggie I

thought I was going to fail the program . . . . It was really stressful. It had a really big impact on me.

[Of dropping her clinical placement] "It was a hard decision. I wasn't happy about it at all . . . . It felt like it was a setback. And then I felt like the goal was getting so much further [away] . . . . It made me have doubts about myself".

MAJOR CATEGORY TWO: INTERPERSONAL

This major category includes incidents that primarily involved either: a relationship or interaction between the participant and a specific person; or an action, verbal or behavioural, by a specific person that had a significant impact upon the participant. Participants' relationships with the important people in their lives are the focus of this major category. It is the largest both in terms of the number of incidents and the number of minor categories contained therein. It consists of 135 incidents (54% of the total) and contains five minor categories: Instructors; Children; Friends and Family Members; Other Students; and Ex-Husbands. Of the 135 incidents, 80 (59%) were positive, or facilitating, and 55 (41%) were negative, or hindering: this major category is in the middle in terms of the proportion of positive incidents.

Minor Category Three: Instructors

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved either: a relationship or an interaction between the participant and a specific instructor; or the action of a specific instructor that significantly affected the participant. This minor category, the largest one, consists of 54 incidents (21% of the total). Of these, 33 (61%) were positive, or facilitating, and 21 (39%) were negative, or hindering, in their effects. All of the participants contributed incidents to this category.

The majority of incidents in this category refer to the interpersonal, rather than instructional, issues. Throughout the study, participants frequently repeated that, for better or worse, the quality of one's instructors was of paramount importance. As one participant explained, "the instructor is everything" and, hyperbole aside, this sentiment was expressed by virtually all of the participants. Certainly, although the data are not quantitative, the large number of incidents offered by participants would seem to attest to the great impact instructors had upon the participants.

Instructors facilitated or hindered the progress of the participants in many ways, and participants could not praise many of their instructors enough. Well over half of the incidents reported regarding instructors were positive. Said one participant: "I guess the thing I remember most . . . is having excellent teachers. And that had an impact on my desire to learn". In general, participants reported four major effects that were directly related to their experiences with excellent instructors: their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities increased; they enjoyed school more; their motivation to persevere and succeed in the program increased; and they actually achieved better academic results.

Negative experiences with instructors were, unfortunately, every bit as powerful as positive ones. The major effects that these experiences had on participants were, not surprisingly, the exact opposite of the effects of positive experiences with instructors: their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities decreased; they enjoyed school less; their motivation to persevere and succeed in the program decreased; and their academic achievement suffered. One participant commented that an instructor had "just about destroyed me in her own way". Another noted that "if I don't respect them, I'm not learning much from them, [and] then I think I'm wasting my time".

Many of the participants had returned to college with a fair amount of apprehension and doubt about their intellectual abilities and about their importance. For most of them, instructors who were able to offer reassurances and encouragement and convey a sense of caring about their students had a striking effect on participants' self-confidence and their motivation. One participant explained how important some degree of emotional support from an instructor can be to a single-mother student, saying that "you need that emotional attachment to the teacher, almost . . . You need the nurturing because it's so hard to do it on your own". Participants who described having instructors who were emotionally indifferent did not receive that reassurance and sense of having someone who cared about them or of "mattering" to the instructor. Many participants also related incidents about instructors who either went beyond being warm and caring to being validating and empowering, on the one hand, or beyond being indifferent and impersonal to being destructive and even cruel, on the other hand.

Another important aspect of this minor category is instructors who showed their understanding of and appreciation for the unique situation of single-mother students. For most participants, having instructors who simply conveyed that they understood and appreciated the enormity of what single-parent students face was just as important as practical issues such as flexible deadlines. Several participants mentioned avoiding instructors who had reputations for not being single-mother friendly, and seeking out those instructors recommended by other single-mother students.

Being treated as an equal — sometimes almost as a friend — versus as an inferior was also an important issue for participants. It was important to participants to be able to, "talk to [instructors] as people, not just as the God up there", as one explained, because

they were mature women with considerable life experience and wanted to be respected as such. On the other hand, not being treated with this respect was frustrating and even humiliating for the participants.

It was similarly imperative to participants that their instructors have positive expectations of them. The effect of this was unmistakable: it increased participants' motivation and self-confidence. Being trusted and given independence by their instructors (especially for nursing students, due to the "hands-on" nature of their clinical training) was also important for much the same reasons. Negative expectations or assumptions had the opposite effect: participants felt indignant and sometimes their motivation decreased.

For this minor category, more quotes than usual are presented to convey the wide range and large number of incidents in this minor category. The examples given are in terms of instructors' actions or attitudes.

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Acting warm, friendly and approachable.

- Disclosing personal information and encouraging students to do the same.

- Making encouraging comments.

- Giving a great deal of positive feedback, sometimes even in front of other students.

- Providing a degree of emotional support during participants' personal crises.

- Recognizing and respecting participants as mature adults with valuable life experience.

- Making comments that validated the difficulty of participants' present reality.

- Being flexible about deadlines and class schedules.

- Being organized; providing clear directions and expectations; using humour.

Selection of Positive Quotes

> She didn't mind if I cried or not. And she was very, very encouraging. Throughout the semester, she would say 'Well, you always do well. Don't worry about it'. And she would give me incidents out of her own university career . . . and that she had also had the experience of crying when she was under pressure, and teachers not understanding what's going on . . . And that really, really helped. I did really well . . . . She always made me feel respected and valued . . . . It always helped me value myself.

> [Speaking of her reaction after an instructor asked her to share her experiences of being on welfare with the class] Yeah, it's important what I have to offer. My opinion counts. Because for a lot of years, and especially from being on welfare, you feel like you're a victim, and you're not very important . . . You're lumped in with everybody else and you're not seen as an individual.

> You knew that there would be someone there to talk to who would understand . . . that you had more on your plates than other students who didn't have to go home and cook dinner for three other people and pick them up from day care, and take them to the doctor . . . . They understood that you have all this extra stuff that the other students didn't have . . . without help . . . . And it was very helpful when the teacher understood that. Sometimes they would actually make allowances, say if there was a thing that you had to be at and it was extra time. If you would say "I need my appointment first or else the kids will miss their lessons" . . . . They would help you then. And that makes a big difference, knowing that they're willing to go a little ways. And just the fact that they're mentally supporting you.

> [Telling of how an instructor arranged a luncheon for her students] It was not so much that we went out for lunch. It was that she joined us; it was her idea for us to all do that. Sort of showing respect to us . . . instead of just students respecting instructors . . . . It was kind of motivating. I think there's a lot of attachment to being a student that you don't know, you're just learning. And this was sort of like she was saying, "You guys know it and you're just as important as the nurses" . . . . I think it's instructors like that that make it easier to learn to work within a health care team.

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Acting cold, distant and unapproachable.

- Withholding positive feedback or giving negative feedback in a disrespectful way.

- Making judgemental, sarcastic or sexist statements.

- Showing a lack of understanding of the needs of single-mother students and being inflexible.

- Being disorganized; not explaining things at a level understood by students; giving unrealistically high grades.

Selection of Negative Quotes

> [Relating the impact on her when an instructor made a judgemental remark about some personal information that the participant had disclosed in an assignment] That was really negative, because I was not willing to make an awful lot of effort in class after that . . . . I took that very personally, as a judgement of me . . . . My mark dropped a whole grade point from the beginning of the semester . . . . It was a conscious decision. I thought that, here I had made a genuine effort, and that was the result, so I wasn't going to put any more effort into contributing to the class, or letting her see any more of who I was than I absolutely had to.

> [Reporting the instructor's response when she approached him for help in a subject with which she was having difficulty] "I just couldn't seem to do it . . . He's a very nice man, but he also turned to me and said 'You're still young and attractive enough; you should find yourself a man and get married.' That was hard. That was striking at me and everything I wanted to do".

> We didn't find out our schedule until three days before we started . . . . And you've got to constantly be phoning the college, you know, [asking] "Is the schedule up? Is the schedule up?" . . . . And you know, they would ask us, like, "Why do you have to know your schedule?" And this was a male instructor. Well, we have daycare . . . . We have jobs. We have a life. We have to know what we're doing . . . . He just kind of shrugged his shoulders . . . and walked away . . . . [He was] just not aware of the consequences of a parent going to school, and scheduling.

> She didn't treat me like an adult. Her whole thing was "these are little students out of high school and I'm the big boss . . ." So I didn't have respect for her. I give her a [minus] ten; she just about destroyed me in her own way.

Minor Category Four: Children

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved either parenting issues or child care issues. Problems with or help from one's children, conflicts between the roles of parent and student, and having or not having adequate child care are

examples of the types of incidents in this minor category. This category consists of 27 incidents (11% of the total). Of these, 11 (41%) were positive, or facilitating, and 16 (59%) were negative, or hindering in their effects. All of the participants contributed incidents to this category.

Participants were extremely passionate on the subject of their children, and of the clash between the demands of motherhood and the demands of student life. Said one participant, "I am forever in turmoil. On a *good* day when I'm at school, I can forget about my kids. You have to weigh all the time, this is just a paper, and these are my children . . . . My first job, my reason for being here, is to look after my children". Another explained that "it's not practical for me to think in terms of what other people do when they go to university or college".

This category is perhaps the most homogenous of all: almost all of the incidents in it relate in a positive or negative manner to the sense of being torn between the demands of being a mother and the demands of being a student, and the guilt that often accompanies that conflict. The positive and negative incidents are mirror images of one another: facilitating incidents related to experiences that reduced this role strain and guilt, and hindering ones, to experiences that increased it.

In conjunction with the competing demands of motherhood and student life and the guilt associated with giving precedence to the latter, participants described a sense of precariousness and unpredictability (like "walking a tightrope" in one participant's words) in their lives. This seemed to be due to shouldering sole responsibility for their complicated lives: when so many aspects of one's life are so delicately balanced, it takes only a slight breeze to bring everything tumbling down. One participant explained that

"when you're a single parent, I think, you go along and you almost wait for a catastrophe to come. And it usually comes the night [before] a paper's due".

Finding excellent child care was crucial to participants for two reasons: first, on a practical level, it gave them time to attend classes and get their school work done; and second, knowing their children were being looked after well reduced the guilt they experienced about being away from them. Whereas good child care reduced participants' stress levels, role strain and feelings of guilt and allowed them to focus their attention on their school work, having problems with their child care situation produced, not surprisingly, exactly the opposite effects. Nursing students often had an even more difficult time finding child care due to the long hours and early morning associated with clinical placements.

Participants reported several types of problems with their children. Again, there were two issues: interference with their schedules (as one participant explained, "they never get conveniently ill, ever!"); and the guilt that came with sometimes putting their student role ahead of their mother role. They also mentioned a few incidents where there was a lack or resolution of problems; however, the majority of incidents were hindering rather than facilitating.

Finding the time and the means to have fun with their children and to make their children's lives as much as possible like they were before mother had returned to school was important to participants. A common concern among participants was that the decision to return to school meant depriving both oneself and one's children of a "normal" life and its pleasures. Participants reported a sense of wanting to compensate

for the long hours away from their children and for their pre-occupation with school work; however, this was not always possible.

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Finding adequate child care.

- Children maturing and / or becoming more helpful and less demanding.

- Finding ways to have fun together as a family.

- Sharing what one was learning with one's children.

- Continuing the children's lessons and other activities.

- Older children leaving home.

Selection of Positive Quotes

> Any time from 6:00 [a.m.] on she would take them, so I had plenty of time if I had to drive out down the valley or if I needed to go to Vancouver . . . . So that was really, like, highly positive . . . . If a child got sick at any time, I wouldn't have to worry about them being able to go there. She told me far ahead of time when she was not available . . . . so I had time to make [other] arrangements . . . . It made me relieved that I didn't have to worry [about child care]. I knew that the children would be in a safe place . . . . No matter what, I knew that the children would be cared for . . . . It made my life so much easier; it was like a stress taken off me.

> I always used to practice my [nursing] skills on [my daughter]. She used to laugh. I would be a nurse every night and she'd always pretend that she was a bad child on a pediatric ward who wouldn't go to bed . . . unless she was tucked in. She was really interested. And then when I got a stethoscope they all wanted to try it . . . . They enjoyed the fact that I was learning all these different things, the new skills I was learning. They can take blood pressure and pulse and stuff . . . . I always showed them my marks. I told them everything, like what I was writing and what it was about . . . . I think what it was is that I felt like I was role-modeling something. That I was teaching them that anybody can do anything at any time in their life. I thought, what a wonderful lesson I'm teaching them . . . that moms have brains.

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Losing or having difficulty finding adequate child care.

- Children getting ill.

- Children having academic problems.

- Children having behavioural and / or emotional problems at school or home.

- Children expressing resentment about and / or sabotaging their mothers' studies.

- Not having time to have fun with one's children.

Selection of Negative Quotes

>I had to take the kids to [two different baby-sitters]. And I had them split—two went one way, two went the other way . . . . and it was like Grand Central Station around here. . . . We all had to be out of the home so early . . . . Two days a week, we had to be up and out of here by six [a.m.] . . . . It was stressful. I felt it more at night time. If you try and move children in the morning, they're not really the greatest. And they have to be fed. You have to get them dressed . . . They're going to be going to school so everybody has to look presentable. And they don't want to eat at six o'clock in the morning cause they're still tired and they're cranky and they're crying because they want to stay in bed. They don't want to be up and out the door. And that causes a lot of tension, because you're on a schedule and I gotta be out of here . . . And you've got you're full day ahead of you and you come home and it's the same thing, only in reverse.

>She got sick and I ended up getting somebody to look after her, but it was very worrisome and hard to get somebody. To get her up at 6:00 in the morning, sick, and to take her to a sitter . . . that's awful. . . It took a lot of my time and worry, and plus you feel like a crummy parent, because you think, "This person, this daughter of mine, is sick. I don't want her to dump her onto somebody else. I want to stay home and take care of her." But you can't . . . you have an obligation to go [to school]. Again, because it's not looked upon highly to miss clinical days. . . You start to have maybe a little doubt there. Like, oh, "This is awful. I should be raising her first". Or, "Why didn't I do this before I had her?" You start thinking negatively. . . And then I'd think, "How does she feel that she's sick and I'm trying to get someone else to look after her? Mommy should be looking after her".

>After I started school, I find out that [my daughter] really needs academic help. And I'm going, "Well, is it worth it [to go to college] if I have a child whose life is ruined?" . . . . She's in grade four and she can't read . . . . When I sit down and explain things to her it really helps. And the schools aren't able to do this. So I know I could help her. But then I'm going "Should I quit school and just help her?" But then I may not have another chance to go to school and I don't want [my children] to be raised on income assistance, because you don't have enough money to exist, never mind having extras . . . . But then I'm going, well, that's

nice, but is it worth it if they fail school and they can't have a life because of [me attending school]? . . . . It's like I'm not being a parent to my children while I'm going to school because I don't have much time . . . . You're just always worried about "Am I doing the right thing?" and is this going to help the kids, with the trade-off between helping them now or helping them later and will it be too late later?

Minor Category Five: Friends and Family Members

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved either: a relationship (or the lack of a relationship) or a specific interaction with a non-school friend (including boyfriends) or a family member; or the actions of a friend or family member that significantly affected the participant. This category consists of 20 incidents (8% of the total). Of these, 13 (65%) were positive, or facilitating, and 7 (35%) were negative, or hindering, in their effects. Eight of the 10 participants contributed incidents to this category.

In general, this category is about social support and role strain, and the inverse relationship that often exists between the two: usually, the more social support participants received, the less role strain they experienced, and vice versa.

This is another instance where positive and negative incidents are mirror images of one another: facilitating incidents are about receiving emotional support and practical help and about the lack or reduction of social expectations and obligations; hindering incidents are about *not* receiving support and about the role strain that comes with expectations and obligations that interfere with school work.

Practical help was important to the participants for an obvious reason—it provided them with more time and "breathing space" and reduced their workload, role strain and, therefore, stress levels. A less obvious, but equally important function of

practical support was the unspoken message it conveyed to participants that others believed in and cared about them and what they were attempting to do—it was a stamp of approval or a vote of confidence. One participant commented that succeeding as a single-mother student "comes down to support systems".

Emotional support, in the form of encouragement, reassurance, advice, a ready ear, etc. was vital to the participants as well. Said one participant:

> I have learned to surround myself with people who only encourage me, that the negative [people] I've got to push aside, because they'll drag me down . . . . And being the nurturer in your family for so long . . . you have to have people nurture you to the point where you can do it on your own.

Several participants related incidents where there was a conflict between the participant's role of student and her friends' and family members' expectations of her. Sometimes, friends and family members did not understand or support their new priorities and responsibilities. A few facilitating incidents were about the reduction of these expectations and obligations, usually because of a relationship ending.

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Friends or family members providing practical help with child care, housework, or school work (having papers typed, being quizzed) or transportation.

- Friends or family members providing a loan or a gift of money or things (computers, cars, etc.).

- Friends or family members providing encouragement, praise or validation.

- Friends or family members being understanding of one's work load.

- Reducing social obligations and expectations by ending a relationship.

Selection of Positive Quotes

I have a lot of support. My mom lives just next door here. So my kids can go there when I have a lot of homework . . . They sleep there when I have to have an early class . . . Not just that. She helps me with my homework. If I have an exam, she'll quiz me on the test. And my dad's there too, so he takes the kids out a lot . . . . [Otherwise] I wouldn't have time to study, I don't think. My mom spoils me. Sometimes I'll come home and she'll have the house cleaned up for me. She knows when I'm under stress. If I have an exam coming up, she'll take the kids out and let me study. And the kids know, if I get in a bad mood, it's time to go to nanny's house. Let mom do her homework. Actually, I'm really lucky . . . . I don't have to worry about them in the morning, either, 'cause they can sleep there and I can get up and go and I don't have to take them to daycare. My mom drives them to school and if I can, I pick them up . . . . They're really close to my mom and dad, and so that helps a lot [with the guilt of being away from them so much].

[Describing her friendship with a retired nurse] She was really interested in knowing about me. [She told me about] her difficulties [in nursing school] and how hard it was, and that what I'm doing is a really hard thing. If I sometimes felt, like, really drained, and so if I felt like I couldn't do I didn't feel so bad about it. If I felt like, "it's too much", I could understand it. It sort of made me feel like I have a right to feel this way. It relieved stress and made me want to continue.

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Losing or not having practical support from friends and family.

- Not having emotional support; being lonely.

- Friends or family members not understanding one's work load and / or being

  demanding.

- Resenting or feeling guilty about social obligations.

Selection of Negative Quotes

[Describing her loneliness and lack of a romantic relationship] Boy, I'd just like to be close to somebody . . . . I mean you can have your sister come over, or your friend, but it's not the same . . . . You start to get insecure feelings. There's a need, right? It's one of the needs. If it's not fulfilled, you really feel like something's missing in your life and your not as healthy as you could be, mentally . . . . What's wrong with me? Why don't men approach me? To touch somebody . . . . I'm only 31, you know, and when you haven't had sex for a year

. . . Someone to talk to and communicate with . . . Someone who makes you feel important . . . I think I was depressed . . . Less enthusiasm, definitely . . . Less self-confidence, I would say . . . You don't do as well as you could do. Your grades go down. Your attitude changes. You think, oh, whatever, you know.

[Describing how she found herself caught between roles when told that her ex-father-in-law was dying of cancer] It was getting to be too much, and I was starting to not be able to concentrate as much . . . . It was also another role. I didn't have as much time to devote to studying, or doing home work, because I was running back and forth to the hospital and still being mom.

Minor Category Six: Other Students

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved either a relationship (or the lack of a relationship) or an interaction between the participant and another student; or the action of another students that significantly affected the participant. This category consists of 19 incidents (8% of the total). Of these, 15 (79%) were positive, or facilitating, and 4 (21%) were negative, or hindering, in their effects: this category is dominated by positive experiences. Eight of the 10 participants contributed incidents to this category.

While participants' experiences with other students were mostly positive, there was a sense of being different and apart from other students and having to overcome that. One participant pointed out that "that is one way [single mothers] don't fit in, because we don't socialize with the rest of the students" due to being older and having less time to socialize. It is interesting to note that three of the four negative incidents in this category were related to other students' reactions to the fact that the participant was a single-mother student.

Many of the participants had been away from school for a long time before returning to college, and they brought with them trepidation about their academic

abilities and about having to compete with students many years younger than themselves. They tended to initially see themselves as very different from other students, so for several participants, discovering that they could fit in to the college scene was truly a revelation. One participant commented that had she not made contact with other students, the odds are "overwhelming" that she would have dropped out. "The interpersonal stuff", she explained, "gives you the confidence to stick with it". It seems that, for these participants, identifying with other students and the student role and feeling that they had a place within the college community were crucial. For some participants, that meant finding and connecting with other mature students; for others, it meant building on commonalities between themselves and younger students.

Another reason that interactions with other students was important to the participants was for the emotional and practical support they provided. Knowing that other students understood — and cared — tended to help these participants relax and feel more confident. The end result was usually better performance.

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Other students giving practical support, such as help with school work.

- Other students giving emotional support, such as encouragement.

- Having a group of students with whom one felt a connection and to whom one mattered.

- Discovering that one could "fit in" with younger students.

Selection of Positive Quotes

> The first couple of semesters, maybe it was me not feeling comfortable . . . . I would just go to my classes and then go home. I didn't stick around. I guess I felt old. And now the age gap is shrinking. Actually now I don't feel any older than those students. Whereas before I felt like I could be — well, I *could* be their

mother, 'cause I *have* a twenty-four-year-old — I almost felt like "Oh God,
they're young enough to be my kids. And that's sort of narrowing now, [so that]
I'm feeling more like a student . . . . I guess you want to fit in . . . to your
environment . . . . [Now] I'm quite comfortable with most of the kids in the class,
as well as the instructors . . . . So now I go in [to the college] and it's fun. I mean
I don't find classes a chore. It's much easier, much easier. And I find that I will
speak out more. I'm losing some of the shyness.

Everybody worked together to help everybody else out. And that started
probably within the first two weeks of school. And you could see where bonds
were being formed quick so to speak . . . . And you get very very close to your
clinical group because . . . you're working together and you're thrown in a
hospital and you're doing things you've never done before . . . . It took a lot of
the stress away, you know . . . . When you were really frustrated with an
assignment, or you had a big test coming, up you had someone to talk to.
Because your friends outside of nursing . . . they don't understand the pressures
that you have . . . . It didn't take away the stress of "Am I going to make it?" but
it took away the stress of dreading going to school . . . so you could relax.

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Other students having preconceptions about single-mother students, or single mothers

  on welfare.

- Not connecting with other students.

Selection of Negative Quotes

When you have to get together and meet it's like, "oh, you've got your kid" and
"I don't know, it's got to be up to you when we get together". And that kind of
attitude . . . I didn't appreciate. She's great, she's a good friend of mine, but . . . .
that's not true. It was wrong to say that. It made me feel like I'm a burden.

Minor Category Seven: Ex-Husbands

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved either: a

relationship (or the lack of a relationship) or an interaction between the participant and

her ex-husband; or the action of an ex-husband that significantly affected the participant.

(The term "ex-husband" is used whether the participant was divorced or separated.) This

category consists of 15 incidents (6% of the total). Of these, eight (53%) were positive, or facilitating, and seven (47%) were negative, or hindering, in their effects. This category was one of the two smallest; nonetheless, eight of the 10 participants contributed incidents to it.

This category, like the category of Friends and Family Members, is primarily about social support and role strain. Several participants described supportive relationships with their ex-husbands. In these cases, ex-husbands did more than just adhere to court-ordered agreements; they provided practical help and sometimes even emotional support. Having this degree of support from ex-husbands was facilitative because it decreased the time demands, role strain and stress levels experienced by the participants and, in some cases, increased their determination to succeed.

As two participants reported, living apart from an ex-husband was sometimes also facilitating, again, by decreasing role strain: the participant had one less role to which to attend. One participant stated that "A lot of people think that . . . if you have a husband, then everything should be all right, that you're working together. But in fact most of the married people I know in school find [being married] more of a hindrance".

At the opposite end of the spectrum from these helpful and supportive ex-husbands were those who harassed their ex-wives. Two participants explained how their success at school threatened their ex-husbands, increasing the harassment directed their way. The ways in which that turmoil hindered participants' progress through college — essentially, by taking time, attention and concentration away from school work. Another way in which ex-husbands affected participants' progress through school was either by respecting or by ignoring or challenging legal agreements. (One participant commented

that "you always have these [custody and access issues] in the background, hanging over your head".) Again, the underlying issue was of increased or decreased role strain: having an ex-husband who met his obligations meant that the participant could focus more on her school work without these kinds of distractions. On the other hand, having an ex-husband who did not meant that the participant had less time and attention to devote to her studies.

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Ex-husbands making child-support and / or maintenance payments regularly and sometimes even providing extra money.

- Ex-husbands reliably adhering to visitation agreements.

- Ex-husbands providing emotional support and encouragement.

- Ex-husbands providing practical assistance with housework.

- Ex-husbands staying out of the way and leaving the participant alone.

Selection of Positive Quotes

> He understands how I'm feeling, kind of . . . . And that makes it easier for me to just put in that effort and just keep going. And then of course, he's jumped in and helped with the kids. I guess it sort of relaxes me, and it makes it easier to keep going . . . . I guess when I talk to him, it's like, well, at least he knows how I feel about the kids. *He* knows what I want for them, and *he* knows that I'm a good mother. And having that, like an ally, helps me to carry on.

> Actually, it's easier for me, being a single parent, going through this, than if my ex-husband lived here, because he was a bigger kid than the kids . . . I don't have to answer to him and he has no choice in what I'm doing . . . Let's just say he's not a very reliable person, so I don't have the added stress of "Is he going to pick the kids up from school?" and all that kind of stuff . . . . I had to worry a lot more and the stress level was a lot higher [when he was around].

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Ex-husbands threatening and / or harassing the participant.

- Ex-husbands refusing to pay court-ordered child support.

- Ex-husbands being unable or unwilling to uphold visitation agreements.

Selection of Negative Quotes

> I'm working towards a goal here, and he doesn't really like to see that because I'm showing that I can make it on my own. And he basically really acted up. A lot of harassment. And we had to go into court [to get a restraining order] . . . . He totally, totally went off the deep end . . . . That [the harassment and going to court to deal with it] was really, really hard, because you're going through that emotional toll . . . . But having an ex-husband who is harassing and not taking the kids when he was supposed to take the kids and when I'm counting on him taking the kids and he would know that. Actually, I call them mind games. Knowing when I should be in mid-terms and picking that time to totally act up or totally be harassing when he knows I'm trying to get ready for mid-terms or finals . . . . It added a lot of stress and a lot of anxiety and we had to move really quickly in court to get the restraining order . . . So I'm trying to deal with school and trying to get into court, and always having to tell your story to somebody . . . . The stress level has been right at maximum . . . . Then you start questioning "Am I doing the right thing? Should I be putting my children through this?" . . . . The more advanced I'm getting, the more he's trying to be a needle in my side.

> He used to take the kids on Sundays before he had these drug problems . . . But for a little while, I was just starting to depend on "the kids will go to Daddy's every Sunday and I have Sunday to work on my homework". And that came crashing down just before mid-terms . . . . I'm having to deal with the fall-out. For an eight- and a nine-year-old to find out their dad is a coke addict is not easy . . . . I used to have from 9:00 [a.m.] to 7:00 [p.m.] on Sundays and I got a lot of homework done, and all of a sudden, I'm not getting any homework done because, first of all, my kids are traumatized and I am too.

MAJOR CATEGORY THREE: SITUATIONAL

This major category includes any incidents that primarily involved an action, decision or policy that had an impact upon the participant but upon which the participant had little impact. It is the "system" or the "situation", rather than a specific person, that was central to the incident. The impact upon participants of the policies and practices of administrative systems is the focus of this major category. It consists of 63 incidents (25% of the total) and contains two minor categories: College Policies and

Administration; and Government Agencies and Programs. Of the 63 incidents, 20 (32%) were positive, or facilitating, and 43 (68%) were negative, or hindering: this major category contains the lowest proportion of positive incidents.

Minor Category Eight: College Administration and Policies

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved an action, decision, or policy undertaken by the administration of the college or of programs within the college that significantly affected the participant. Although a specific person (e.g., an instructor) may have been peripherally involved, it is the college *system* that was central to the incident. This category, the second largest, consists of 49 incidents (19% of the total). Of these, 16 (33%) were positive, or facilitating, and 33 (67%) were negative, or hindering, in their effects. Nine of the 10 participants contributed incidents to this category.

Nursing-program participants often mentioned how positive it was to have a clinical placement near their home. This greatly simplified their lives and reduced their time demands, role strain and therefore, stress levels, especially considering that clinical days begin at 7:00 a.m. On the other hand, having a distant placement was negative for exactly the opposite reasons: more travel time meant earlier mornings, grumpier children and less time for sleep, domestic chores and studying. Similarly, many participants (five) mentioned semester breaks, either at Christmas time or during the summer, as being important positive incidents. All of them described the significance of having some time to "re-charge their batteries" after the stressful end-of-semester crush and of having time to spend with their children after being pre-occupied with school work. The sense was that they were redeeming themselves as mothers in the eyes of themselves and

their children. These two types of incidents constitute the bulk of the positive incidents in this major category

On the negative side, participants complained that college administrators often did not seem to understand or appreciate the complicated life of the single-mother student and her need for predictability and stability, or at the least, reasonable lead time when a change was necessary.

Many of the participants, both nursing and university-transfer students, mentioned heavy academic work load requirements as negative incidents. These incidents overlap somewhat with some in the category of Children: both are primarily about the conflict between the roles of mother and student. The distinction between the two depends upon which aspect — the demands of going to school or the demands of being a mother — the participants emphasized more. A heavy workload meant increased time demands and therefore, increased role strain and guilt, especially *vis-à-vis* one's children, increased stress levels, with physical and emotional consequences, and sometimes, decreased commitment to one's education and long-term goals.

This nursing program, according to the participants, is infamous for its extremely heavy work load. This was exacerbated by the fact that, at the time of the interviews, the nursing program ran for ten months, rather than the more-common eight months.

However, the university-transfer participants also related incidents about work-load issues. Students mentioned only negative incidents regarding work load.

Skills mastery exams have been mentioned several times previously in this chapter. The nursing program at this college evaluates students' clinical nursing skills through repeated skills mastery exams, whereby, in a clinical setting, students

demonstrate their competence in a specific nursing procedure (for example, administering intravenous medication). Students have three opportunities to pass each test; if they have not passed after the third trial, they fail the psychomotor skills course and are obliged to withdraw from any other courses for which the psychomotor skills course is a pre-requisite. Essentially, this means that completion of the program is delayed by one semester. As well, only one course failure is permitted for re-entry into the program. [This information has been verified by an administrator of the program.] Five of the seven nursing-student participants reported negative incidents involving skills mastery tests. ("On mastery days" said one participant, "nobody wanted to go to school".) One participant also mentioned the positive aspect of these exams, noting that "you really learn those skills. They get imbedded. They really do". These incidents were significant to the nursing-program participants for three reasons. First, because passing them was crucial to remaining in the program, they were simply inherently "nerve-wracking" and participants often had difficulty coping with the high stress levels. Second, vicariously experiencing the failure of other students or, even worse, seeing other students being obliged to leave the nursing program, at least temporarily, was not only sad but threatening, because, as one participant explained, "It seems to me they're all excellent students so if it can happen to them, you know, it can happen to me". Third, some participants felt deep resentment regarding these tests which, in their estimation, were intentionally designed to be extremely stressful. They saw the tests as evaluating not only students' nursing skills, but also their ability to withstand high-pressure situations, and they bristled at the perceived indirectness and dishonesty about the purpose of the tests.

Several nursing-program participants reported negative incidents regarding what they perceived as the prevailing attitudes among administrators and instructors in the nursing program. It is important to clarify that an evaluation of this (anonymous) nursing program is *not* the purpose of the present study, and it is beyond the study's scope to present a rejoinder by administrators of the program. Examples of incidents are provided here as part of participants' experiences. In essence, some of the participants believed that one could not always take things at face value when dealing with the nursing program. The significance of these incidents was that, as a result, participants felt resentful, guarded and mistrustful of the program and their commitment to it sometimes suffered.

As in the category of Instructors, more quotes than usual are provided here due to the large number and wide range of incidents in this category.

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Having a semester break at Christmas or in the summer.

- Having a clinical placement close to home (nursing program).

- Receiving a bursary from the college.

Selection of Positive Quotes

> [Speaking of the importance of having a clinical placement located close to home] I didn't have to worry about [it] if I couldn't get a ride. I had a friend living close by going that way with me, same time, same day . . . . Or if I had to I could have even taken a cab . . . . It decreases the stress level . . . . It's faster to get home, so that means less baby-sitting and more hours at home . . . . You have more time to get the laundry done and get to your studying.

> [Describing why having a long break at Christmas time was so significant] I'd been working really hard for the whole semester and I wasn't really used to homework every night, you know? [My son] hates it when I go to school full time. He says I'm crabby, which is probably true. So, I knew him [sic] and I would get along better while I was on my break . . . . [I] built up a reserve

strength so that I could start over again in January . . . . And then, when I went back again in January, then I sort of had my energy level built up again and things were a little smoother at home and I could concentrate a little better.

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Undergoing high-pressure evaluation procedures, specifically skills mastery tests (nursing program).

- Class schedules repeatedly being changed on short notice (nursing program).

- Not being informed of the class schedule until three days before the beginning of the semester (nursing program).

- Not holding an orientation session until three days before the program began (nursing program).

- Hypocrisy in instructors' and administrators' actions (nursing program).

- Being made to "jump through hoops" unnecessarily, for example, by completing arduous "study packets" on one's own (nursing program).

- Being subjected to unnecessarily-high stress levels (nursing program).

- Indirect methods being used to "weed out" students who were deemed unsuitable (nursing program).

- Being given incorrect information that affected eligibility for a student loan.

- Being subtly stigmatized for being a single mother.

Selection of Negative Quotes

> [Speaking of not knowing her class schedule until the last moment] We basically knew nothing about what was going to happen . . . . It was very stressful . . . . And I just thought it was kind of an unfair way to go about it, especially being a single mom . . . . It threw me off . . . . When you're shuffling kids off to school and day care and evening care . . . everything has to roll. And I had, you know, a baby-sitter on hold, too . . . . I just thought it was really hard doing it that way . . .

. It was a negative right from the beginning and I did, I carried that through the program so far.

[Speaking of attending an extra two-month semester in the nursing program] I just found it an incredible stress on me. I was tired all the time, I didn't do housework anymore . . . . I swear there was one month—a whole month—my rugs never got vacuumed. See, I had to compensate . . . . I wouldn't know what time I was going to have with the children, even. It felt like I had no time to breathe . . . . In the last semester, it was me [saying] "Oh, Lord, I don't know if I can do this" . . . . It meant that my kids had to go lower [on my priority scale] and I found that stressful, too.

[Speaking of study packets] It's really a long, arduous process of looking up the answers in the textbooks, for hours and hours . . . . To me, that's a waste of time. Why don't you just . . . . tell us the chapters you'd like us to read in the textbook, and be done with it? . . . . It was hard to ever know what I really needed to know. I would read reams of material in the textbook, trying to figure out what I would be tested on, because I wasn't quite sure . . . . It took valuable time that I felt could have been with my kids or my life, you know? . . . . It's a game they're playing. I don't like games . . . . Now why would a school want to make it harder for you? Don't you want to facilitate learning? . . . To me that's ridiculous. Why would you want to make the mastery so stressful? You want to bring out the most positive attitude towards education, not make it so hard that people had to drop out.

Somebody just failed the program because of a mastery. That's when it started— I had a little hint . . . that there was some craziness in the program. If you don't . . . think [a student is] going to make it, then you . . . talk to them about it, but you don't flunk them on something like that. I didn't like the way they went [about] it . . . . It had a big effect on me . . . . I didn't trust the administration and the faculty . . . . I lost respect for the program . . . . It was her attitude, really, that was the problem, not the skill. They were indirect about it.

Minor Category Nine: Government Agencies and Programs

This minor category includes incidents that primarily involved an action, decision

or policy undertaken by a government agency or program (primarily the Student Loan

program and Ministry of Social Services) that significantly affected the participant.

Although a specific person may have been peripherally involved, it is the governmental

system that was central to the incident. This category consists of 14 incidents (6% of the

total). Of these, 4 (29%) were positive, or facilitating, and 10 (71%) were negative, or hindering, in their effects. This category was one of the two smallest; nonetheless, six of the 10 participants contributed incidents to it.

This category was dominated by negative experiences. Although 9 of the 10 participants reported receiving a student loan, at least for part of their expenses, only one participant mentioned this as a positive incident. Similarly, five of the 10 participants indicated they were receiving benefits from the Ministry of Social Services, yet only two positive incidents regarding the Ministry were offered.

The participants who contributed negative incidents to this category often echoed the same complaint: that their situation as single-mother students was not understood and no allowances were made for it. The rules meant for more traditional (i.e., young, single and childless) students did not take their unique needs into account, they argued. This was true for them in their experiences with both the Ministry of Social Services and the student loan program. Said one participant of the Ministry, "What makes me angry is that single parents [students] aren't recognized as being unique. We are students, but we're also parents. We're straddling two worlds, and there's not enough recognition for that".

Several participants talked about the indignities and powerlessness of being on welfare. For those participants who had been living more autonomously on student loans during the school year, it could be especially difficult to revert to the Ministry of Social Services' program — with all its rules, regulations and requirements — as a source of income. Nevertheless, there were two positive incidents regarding the Ministry as well.

Given the well-known statistics regarding welfare rates and poverty levels, it is not surprising that, especially for those participants relying on welfare as opposed to student loans, several participants related incidents regarding inadequate income and how it increased their time demands, role strain and stress.

Examples of Positive Incidents

- Having job-search requirement during the summer break waived by the Ministry of Social Services.

- Receiving financial assistance, whether welfare or student loans.

- Having an encouraging and respectful Rehabilitation Officer (in the Ministry of Social Services).

Selection of Positive Quotes

> [Describing her dealings with the Ministry of Social Services, and in particular, her Rehabilitation Officer (a now-defunct position)] He was really great! . . . . He's just wonderful. I'd have to put him [at the top of the scale.] . . . . It took away a lot of the negative feelings about having to ask for help to do this . . . . It wasn't degrading. He told me what they could offer. He helped me out. He had other clients that went through the program, and he was very positive that I would be able to make it. He linked me up, actually, with a girl that had just graduated . . . And she called me, and it was the one and only positive thing I'd heard about [the nursing program]. She was a single mom with two kids . . . . He doesn't stand over me and watch . . . . . He doesn't keep track of me through the school or anything.

> They're wonderful. I'll give them a big card when I'm finished. You know, thank you for helping me through . . . . Knowing that I could go day to day with food and having the bills paid.

Examples of Negative Incidents

- Being required by the Ministry of Social Services to look for work during the summer break in order to be eligible for benefits.

- Being pressured to take a full course load instead of the 60% minimum required by the student loan program.

- Discovering that the student loan program is not flexible enough to accommodate people (such as single mothers) who want or need to take more than one extra year to complete a program.

- Being ineligible for a student loan due to a technicality regarding the sale and purchase of houses after a marital separation.

- Experiencing powerlessness in dealing with the Ministry of Social Services.

- Not being allowed to keep more that $100 per month from bursaries or earnings.

Selection of Negative Quotes

[Speaking of the Ministry of Social Services' job-search requirement when she applied for welfare during the summer] It's a real negative, because they're saying "Being a student isn't enough. Being a mother isn't enough. You're supposed to also bring in an income" . . . . What makes me angry is, okay, I've been encouraged, and I know that it's right to be doing this, but there's no practical support within the system . . . . They [MSS] delayed me and delayed me . . . . Having to wait for the money, having to justify that I needed the money, having to go through it all over again to become the victim, with the power authority telling you what to do . . . . It made me want to go back to school real quick. Like, I had already got so much confidence that I felt I was coming out of this trap, where you can't move as a welfare recipient, where they're telling you what to do.

Income assistance is not enough to live on in the first place, if you want to lead a normal life . . . . The lack of money was a constant worry. It was a stress. I had to worry about whether the car was going to keep up—I needed the car to go to clinical and to drive the children to day care—and I was always worried about whether it was going to break down, and whether I'd have money. And it did break down, and it was really stressful because it was like trying to scramble enough money [together] and then we would have to go without [other things] . . . . You're always kind of just on edge. And it's hard to sit down and concentrate when you're constantly worrying about "Oh my God, how am I going to be able to manage this month—or this week, even—and try to put food on the table?" . . . . It hit all aspects of my life . . . . I had to spend more time and energy, like picking through clothes at the second-hand store and stuff to make sure that [my

kids] did look nice. And so it was more energy and time, which took away from my studies . . . . If you want to shop cheaply, it takes time.

You know what one welfare counsellor said to me? "Why don't you just take five courses, treat it like a full-time job, put your kids in daycare — we'll pay for [daycare]. Just treat it like a full-time job". I was furious. I said "You don't understand. Three courses and two kids IS a full-time job!"

SUMMARY

This chapter has presented the results of the present study, focusing on the categorization structure developed to encompass 252 critical incidents related by 10 participants. The first level of the hierarchy contains three major categories. These are: Intrapersonal, involving incidents that occurred *within* the participant herself; Interpersonal, involving incidents that occurred *between* the participant and another, specific person; and Situational, involving incidents that occurred *outside* the participant's sphere of involvement.

The second level of the taxonomy contains nine minor categories. The first major category, Intrapersonal, concerns the participants' internal processes in dealing with the challenges, both personal and academic, faced by them, and contains two minor categories: Coping Strategies; and Academic Issues. The second major category, Interpersonal, concerns the participants' relationships with the important people in their lives and contains five minor categories: Instructors; Children; Friends and Family Members; Other Students; and Ex-Husbands. The third major category, Situational, concerns the policies and practices of administrative systems and contains two minor categories: College Policies and Administration; and Government Agencies and Programs.

As well as the three levels of categories that have been presented in this chapter, several *themes* that weave through more than one minor category have become apparent and are presented here. In slightly varying forms, participants repeatedly stressed the fóllowing, overarching themes:

- The saliency in their lives of the often-agonizing conflict between the role of student and other important life roles, especially that of mother.

- The importance of being committed to the role of student and having an identity as a student.

- The importance of receiving sufficient emotional and practical support, including adequate child care.

- The frustration of not having their special needs and unique situation understood and respected, whether by instructors, college administration, or government agencies.

- The importance of having adequate skills to cope with the personal and academic pressures faced by them.

- The importance of having a sense belonging and "fitting in" to the college scene — of mattering — both to other students and to faculty.

The results of this study, including these themes, form the basis in Chapter V for a discussion *vis-à-vis* the existing literature, directions for future research and tentative implications for counselling and for policy.

CHAPTER V - DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This final chapter is divided into four main sections. In the first part, the results of the current study are compared with the literature reviewed in Chapter II. Then, a simple model integrating the finding of this study and the literature is presented. In the third section, the limitations of the study are discussed. Finally, tentative implications for future research, for counselling practices and programs, and for social policy are described.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of this study are compatible with the existing literature on single-mother students and, to a lesser degree, nontraditional students in general.

The participants in the present study often commented on how anxious and unsure of themselves they were when they first returned to school and how important it was to them to receive encouragement and positive feedback from instructors. Chartrand (1990) states that

> Several writers . . . have noted that nontraditional students, particularly female students, are more prone to underestimate their abilities and to lack confidence in their ability to succeed in college. Low self-confidence in academic settings may create psychological distress and place nontraditional students at risk for prematurely dropping out of school (p. 65).

Despite their trepidation, the participants all did well academically. Informal follow-up contact with the participants produced this encouraging report: of the nine I was able to contact, all had completed their programs of study at the college. Of the three university transfer students, two were still completing the education program at a local university

and one had completed an additional program at another community college. Of the six

nursing students I reached, five were employed as Registered Nurses and the other was

looking for work as a nurse. This supports the findings of Young (1976) and Burns and

Scott (1990) that single-mother students can be and are successful in post-secondary

education. Extraordinary levels of motivation likely played a part in their success: many

expressed the sense that they had to do well, because the future of themselves and their

children was depending upon their success in school. Having other people financially

dependent upon them, and therefore, having a sense of urgency to obtain an education

and find employment are likely important distinctions between single-mother students

and other non-traditional students.

     Role theory — in particular, the concepts of role strain, role conflict and role

commitment — are very pertinent to the data from this study. Over and over,

participants spoke of the terrible pull between the role of student and that of mother.

Chartrand (1990) notes that according to role theory, people seek to "meet the

expectations of [the] salient role" (p. 66) in their life, and that, in so doing, they achieve

self-role congruence — a sense that they are living up to their obligations and doing what

they ought to do. The problem for these participants was that they were caught between

the two competing, primary and nearly-equally salient roles of mother and student. Both

roles demanded a great deal of time, effort and attention, and there were serious

repercussions when either role was neglected. So the participants tended to exist in

constant, uncomfortable state of conflict, always doubting their decisions, feeling guilty

about depriving their children, or enduring the perceived disapproval of instructors if

they were unprepared.

Chartrand's emphasis on role commitment, role evaluation, and self-role congruence may explain why it was so important to participants to have a connection with other students and to identify with other students. Many of them reported initially perceiving themselves as very different from other (younger) students, and feeling as if they did not belong in college: it was likely crucial to them to overcome this isolation and develop an identity as a student. This is somewhat similar to Astin's (1984) emphasis on student involvement, but for these participants, the focus was less on activities, except for the occasional party or luncheon (external), and more on identity (internal). This also echoes Metzner and Bean's (1987) finding that commitment to the academic process and placing a high priority on being a student are crucial factors in the success of nontraditional students.

Another factor that participants mentioned repeatedly was social support, whether formal — from government institutions — or informal — from instructors, friends and family members, other students or ex-husbands. This finding fits with those of Stenson (1988), Lynds Colbry (1989), Ashar and Skenes (1993) and Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994) that social support is crucial to single-mother students and other nontraditional students.

Another important factor mentioned by participants was their ability to *cope* with the role strain associated with dual identities of mother and student. Similarly, Mercer (1993) found that nontraditional students' abilities to cope with crises was important to both their psychological health and their academic success.

The importance of instructors, especially the quality of the relationship participants had with them, was stressed by all 10 of the participants in this study. It is

extremely surprising that the literature on single-mother students and other nontraditional students hardly mentions the role of instructors in providing social support, reassurance, encouragement and a sense of mattering. Cleveland-Innes (1994) does note that "nontraditional-age students bring an experiential history to their learning and do not necessarily grant the teacher the same authority as younger students do" (p. 425). Certainly, one aspect of their relationships with their instructors on which participants focused was the importance of being recognized as and treated as an equal adult.

Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering's (1989) concept of mattering seems exceedingly relevant to the experiences of the participants in this study. Aspects of it appear in incidents regarding instructors, other students, college policies and government policies.

Gorlick's (1992) review of the impact of welfare and student aid policies regarding single-mother students, although written from an Ontario perspective, resonates with many incidents related by participants recounting their experiences in dealing with those agencies in this province. This is discussed further in the following section on social policy.

As was mentioned in Chapter IV, there are striking differences in the proportion of positive to negative incidents in the three major categories (see Figure 3 on page 61). While it must be stressed that the present data are not quantitative, it does suggest an interesting possibility. Presumably, the intrapersonal sphere is the area over which the participants had the most control, and it was this major category (Intrapersonal) that contained the highest proportion of positive incidents. Similarly, one would assume that the participants had the least control over the policies and practices of the institutions that

had an impact upon their lives (the college, the welfare system, and the student loan program), and this was the major category (Situational) that contained the highest proportion of negative incidents. Presumably, the relationship sphere would fall in the middle in terms of the degree of control participants had over it, and the major category of Interpersonal did indeed fall between the other two in terms of the proportion of positive and negative incidents. This tentatively suggests that intrapersonal factors may be the greatest source of strength for single-mother students, and that educational and social policies may be the source of the most obstacles for them. Yet no theory of nontraditional student retention has adequately incorporated the impact of social policies. This suggestion is contrary to Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994)'s finding that psychological (intrapersonal) factors were less likely to be mentioned by single-mother students as contributing to their success than sociological (interpersonal and situational) factors. However, this may be reflective of the fact that participants in the Van Stone et al study were involved in the Single Parents Project (described in Chapter II), and had many supports and services available to them.

To conclude, I have compiled the following portrait of the needs of single-mother students based upon the findings of the present study and the review of literature. In terms of the intrapersonal sphere, single-mother students require a reasonable level of self-esteem and self-confidence, some combination of cognitive, affective and practical coping strategies and stress management skills to deal with the incredible role strain that seems to inevitably accompany being a single-mother student, a positive attitude and sense of personal power, and adequate academic preparation.

In the interpersonal sphere, they need: a social network to provide emotional and practical support; adequate child-care arrangements; instructors to whom they matter and who will reassure them of their abilities, encourage them to continue, and respect and treat them as the mature adults they are; a sense of belonging and connection with other students and an identity as a student; and the interpersonal skills to deal with their relationships.

In the situational sphere, they need educational policies that keep in mind their complicated lives and that convey a sense of mattering and social policies that support them in their efforts to become financially self-sufficient.

LIMITATIONS

After the data were gathered and analysed, several potential limitations as to the validity of the present study became apparent. A strong argument has been previously made for the internal validity of this study: a semi-structured interview guide was used; the interviewer remained non-directive in terms of the types of incidents reported; validity checks ensured that both the content and significance of the incidents were accurately understood; and a reliability check ascertained that the categorization structure was reproducible. However, the fact that three of the participants were university-transfer students and seven were general nursing students may be somewhat problematic to the study's internal validity. These two programs differ significantly and, correspondingly, the experiences of students enrolled in each likely differ somewhat. There is a possibility that this may have affected the results of the study to a degree. However, it appears from the present data that there were more similarities than

differences in the incidents reported by these two groups of students and that the study's internal validity is not seriously compromised.

Three limitations regarding the study's external validity, or generalisability, are apparent. First, because random or representative sampling was not employed and because no demographic statistics regarding single-mother students exist, we cannot know with certainty if the 10 participants interviewed were representative of single-mother students in general, or even of other single-mother students at the same college. Second, the study utilized a relatively small number of participants, even for a quasi-qualitative study. Third, the participants, in ways other than their programs of study, were a rather homogenous group. All were mature white women who were separated or divorced and had school-aged children. The experiences of single-mother students who: are younger; have never been married; have younger children; or identify with an ethnic minority might be substantially different.

Taken together, these factors suggest that the generalisability of the study may be limited and that no definitive conclusions should be made. However, many of the findings in this study are supported by pre-existing literature. It is sensible then that some generalizations and recommendations be made, but in a cautious and tentative manner.

TENTATIVE IMPLICATIONS

For Future Research

The present study has provided a description of the types and significance of incidents that may facilitate or hinder the success of single-mother students. Descriptive

studies are a natural starting point for topics about which little research exists. Future studies examining the issues faced by single-mother students need to go beyond this descriptive framework. The following suggestions for future research are made:

- Studies, whether qualitative or quantitative, comparing successful and non-successful single-mother students.

- Quantitative studies examining the relative weight or importance of the factors identified in the present study.

- Studies comparing the needs and issues of single-mother students with those of other non-traditional students.

- Research to develop a comprehensive model of academic persistence in single-mother students that includes intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and societal factors.

For Counselling Practices and Programs

The following section deals with the role of the counsellor — in particular, the role of the counsellor in the community college — in working with single-mother students. Many college counselling centres are based on psycho-educational, rather than therapeutic, models of helping, and this approach is seen to be consistent with the needs of single-mother students. However, the role of the counsellor in dealing with single-mother student may need to extend beyond its traditional scope.

Certainly, helping single-mother students to develop intrapersonal (self-management) skills, such as cognitive, affective and behavioural coping skills, stress management skills, and academic skills (such as note-taking, managing test anxiety, etc.) in the vein of student success curricula (e.g., Ellis, 1994; Gardner, Jewler and Robb, 1995) should be a crucial component of the counsellor's functions. Similarly, facilitating

the single-mother student's growth of interpersonal (relationship-managing and relationship-building) skills such as communication skills, parenting skills and assertiveness skills will empower her, as will helping her to identify and strengthen supportive networks. Encouraging her to nurture relationships with other students and with faculty may be one way of helping her to boost her commitment to the role of student and her identity as a student, even if she is does not have time to participate in many extra activities, as Astin (1984) would recommend.

These psycho-educational goals can be achieved through traditional venues, such as individual counselling sessions, workshops, support groups and orientation programs. Innovative ideas include, for example, incorporating into an orientation program a session for the older (verbal) children of single-mother students to help them adjust to the changes in their family since mother has returned to school. However counsellors deliver these services, they need to remember that the single-mother student's time is at a premium, and services need to be perceived by single-mother students as beneficial in practical and tangible ways in order to attract and retain them. Whenever possible, offering child care during programs would be a boon to single-mother students.

Over two decades ago, Warnath (1973) argued for the college-counsellor-as-advocate role. Indeed, post-secondary counsellor may need to also step beyond their traditional role and act as advocates within the college system for single-mother students. For instance, they could be involved in educating administrators, faculty and staff as to the needs and issues of single-mother students and as to how to best accommodate them. They could also set up mentoring programs (see Hulse and Sours, 1984, for description of such a program), with female faculty or female professionals outside of the college.

These types of programs would likely have a positive effect on single-mother students' perceptions of whether they "matter" to the institution and its personnel. Finally, another aspect of counsellor advocacy could be facilitating the empowerment of single-mother students who wish to undertake social action. Parker (1994) argues that "family professionals must recognize that improving the circumstances of single mothers in transition from welfare to employment requires policy level changes" and states that "those who utilize their skills to facilitate the direct participation of low-income single mothers in the political process are making the most significant investment in positive change for individuals and the institutions that shape their lives" (p. 173).

For Policy

Community colleges, if they are serious about attracting and retaining nontraditional students, including single-mother students, may need to take a look at the institutional barriers they may be (unwittingly) erecting. For instance, the nursing students in the present study pointed to the need for predictability in their schedules[1]. Providing affordable (i.e., at the subsidy rate paid by the Ministry of Social Services) on-campus daycare would be a big help to single-mother students. All of the participants emphasized the importance of instructors who understand and respect the needs of single-mother students. Again, perhaps colleges could consider institution-wide workshops for administrators, faculty and service staff to raise their awareness of the needs and issues of nontraditional students such as single-mother students. In short, colleges need to be

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[1] Interestingly, an administrator in the nursing program at this college explained that vast changes to the program will take effect in September 1996. The emphasis will be much more on the students as "independent learners". Instructors will be seen as "co-learners", and power imbalances will be reduced to a minimum. For many mature students, including single-mother students, this may represent a welcome change.

creative in discovering and enshrining actions to convey to *all* their students that they do indeed matter.

Province-wide social policy regarding single-mother students, namely under the Ministries of Social Service and of Education, Skills and Training, currently seems to be regressing rather than progressing. The following information regarding policy was provided by V. Fawkes[2] (personal communication, March 29, 1995). To understand policy regarding single-mother students, it is necessary to first understand the Ministry of Social Services' policies regarding the employability of single mothers. According to Ms. Fawkes, the employability of single parents (i.e., whether they are required to be searching for work in order to maintain their eligibility for benefits) has been the area in which there has been the most flux in British Columbia's welfare policy. In the 1970's, single parents on welfare were considered unemployable until their youngest child reached the age of 19 years. In the late 1980's, the then-Social Credit government, amid heated debate on both sides, changed the policy such that single parents on welfare with one child over the age of six months or two or more children over the age of seven years were required to seek employment. Then, when the New Democratic Party (NDP) regained power in 1991, they quickly changed the policy so that single parents with children under the age of 12 years were excluded from job-search requirements. Currently, the NDP is in the midst of revamping its social services policy to "level the playing field" between welfare recipients and the working poor. The full extent of these changes is beyond the scope of this discussion; however, one result of this is that, in the

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[2] Val Fawkes is a former Rehabilitation Officer for the Ministry of Social Services and is now an (acting) Skills BC Coordinator in the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training.

fall of 1995, the policy regarding the employability of single parents changed again, lowering the cutoff age of the youngest child to seven years. The significance of these policies in regards to single-mother students, or would-be single-mother students, is as follows. In recent years, for a period of time between approximately 1992 (just after the data for the present study were collected) and the present, single mothers who were considered unemployable due to the ages of their children generally were able to attend the educational program (including university-degree programs) of their choice and remain on welfare to cover their living expenses. Student loans covered books, tuition and other education-related expenses. As of September 1996, however, that policy will change. At that time, *any* single mother attending post-secondary education (excluding short-term training programs authorized by Social Services) will be ineligible for welfare, regardless of the age(s) of her child(ren), and will be required to rely solely on student loans for her source of income. The following information was provided by P. Lewis[3] (personal communication, April 3, 1996). In general, for the first two years, 40% of the award will be in the form of a non-repayable grant. However, if the student has previously received a student loan, the grant portion will be reduced or eliminated. After that, single-mother students will be responsible for repaying the full amount of the loan. Students attending part-time (less than 60% of a full course load) or those taking primarily upgrading courses will be ineligible for student loans. The loan remission program has always allowed only one extra year for the completion of a program and this policy will continue. As a result, single-mother students and other students who cannot

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[3] Patty Lewis is the manager of the financial aid office in a community college in the lower mainland.

manage to attend full time (i.e., 100% course load) will be graduating with much larger debt loads than other students. According to Ms Lewis, there are "a lot of questions that haven't been answered" and "things are changing daily". However, in effect, it appears that single mothers who choose to stay home with their children will still be able to rely on welfare until their youngest child is seven years old, while single mothers who want to attend post-secondary education will not receive any welfare, no matter how young their children may be.

Considering these recent changes in policies, it appears that, for all intents and purposes, we as a society are making it increasingly more difficult for single mothers to obtain a post-secondary education. Consider the following quote from Gorlick (1992):

> Any adequate educational and social welfare policy should develop an empowering approach — facilitating, fostering and supporting the choices single mothers have already made . . . . Is there a systemic bias in the social assistance agency against welfare recipients engaged in post-secondary education? Is the policy indifference explained by the perception that the number of single parent welfare recipients attending post-secondary institutions is insignificant? Is the political will directed towards short-term and cheap [training] alternatives for removing single parents from social assistance? What is the role of post-secondary institutions, and how might they be more accountable to this student group? (pp. 56-57).

It seems undeniable that Canadian society as a whole is in the midst of re-writing its social contract and entering an era of reduced social programming. But, considering the statistics regarding education, income and welfare dependence provided in Chapter I, one must wonder whether creating further hurdles for single mothers motivated and able to attain a post-secondary education makes sense on either a fiscal or a humanitarian level. We need to take a close look at the social policies that have an impact upon single-mother students and the hurdles those policies may be creating for these students.

I conclude this section with the eloquent and powerful words of one of the

participants in this study:

> You're wrong. I deserve this welfare. My children deserve it. I am doing
> something for myself. I am doing the right thing. I am going to be a teacher, and
> I deserve your help.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Single Mothers' Experiences of Community College Education:
A Critical Incidents Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand what it is like for single mothers to attend community college, and what factors help or hinder their progress through school. (Very little is currently known on this topic.) You will be interviewed a maximum of two times about your experiences as a single mother attending college. All information gathered from you will be kept completely confidential and anonymous. Any direct quotes used will be disguised so that it is impossible to identify you. The interview(s) will be tape recorded and transcribed; at the end of the study, both tapes and transcriptions will be destroyed. The time required of you is approximately one to two hours for the initial interview, and possibly, approximately one-half hour for the follow-up interview. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without explanation and without fear of any negative consequences. You may ask and expect to have answered any question regarding the study at any point. A copy of the transcript of your interview will be provided to you if you so desire, as will results of the study.

I,_____, have read and understand the above, and I give my consent to participate in the study. I have received a copy of this form.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Telephone

_____   _____
Signature of Wendy Belter, Researcher   Date

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584-6496

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM AND CRITERIA

CHECK

Basic Information

Name _____

Address _____

Phone number _____

Identification number assigned _____

Date contacted _____

Date interviewed _____

Follow-up interview? _____

Criteria for Participation

Single, separated, divorced, or widowed? _____

Over the age of 18 years? _____

Attending college <u>full time</u> (minimum 60% course load)? _____

In a two-year program? _____

In the program for at least one year? _____

Full or joint custody of at least one child under age 16? _____

Not living with a partner? _____

APPENDIX C: CONTEXT STATEMENT

[The following statement was read to the participant before the interview.]

As you know, I am studying what helps or hinders single mothers in successfully completing a two-year college program. Single-mother families represent a considerable and growing percentage of the Canadian population, and they are the most likely of all major family types to have low incomes. There is a demonstrated link for all Canadians between educational level and income, and relatively few single mothers have post-secondary education. I have chosen this topic for my thesis because there is almost nothing written about single mothers in higher education.

During this interview, I will be asking you about specific incidents which have occurred while you have been in college. By sharing your experiences to date, you will be helping me to identify possible positive and negative factors affecting single mothers' progress through college. You are an expert, since you are in this situation yourself.

Please think back to *specific* incidents that have helped or hindered your progress through college so far. I am interested in concrete events, your feelings about them, and their meanings to you. These might be things that you did or thought, things that other people or institutions did or said, or things that just happened. Try to think of incidents from all aspects of your life, not just incidents that occurred within the walls of the college. It's better to mention something than to not mention it if you're not sure.

I am going to ask you to place each of these events on a chronological time-line, called a life-line. At one end, we will put the month and year you started college, and at the other end, we will put this month and year. As you talk about each incident, I will ask you to place it on the life-line as accurately as you can, and to describe *how much* of an effect it had on your progress through college, from very much to very little, and whether that effect was positive (helpful) or negative (hurtful). We can go back and forth if you remember another incident later in the interview.

Do you have any questions at this point?

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Age _____

Marital status (Never Married, Separated, Divorced, Widowed) _____

Length of time as a single mother _____

Number and ages of children _____

Percentage of the time in custody of child(ren) _____

Date began this program _____

Program of study _____

Approximate yearly income _____

Source(s) of income _____

APPENDIX E: THE LIFELINE FORM

Date of interview

Date Entered
College

Great Effect
(Positive)

Great Effect
(Negative)

APPENDIX F: AN EXAMPLE OF AN ORIGINAL AND SHORTENED

INCIDENT FORM

THE ORIGINAL INCIDENT FORM

Incident #: 3-20

What Happened: Her parents, who had been away for her first year of school, came home. Whereas previously it had only been her brother living in the upstairs part of the house (she had a suite in the basement), now the house was much busier at seemingly all times of the day and night.

When Incident Occurred: Fall 1990

How Long Effect(s) Lasted: Ongoing

Effect(s) on Thinking, Feeling, Behaviour: She got less sleep and even missed more days of school than she might have otherwise.

Positive or Negative: Negative

Quotes: [Referring to getting less sleep] It's a big thing, when time is at such a premium already . . . . I'd say that it's sometimes made me miss days, or miss mornings or whatever . . . . When you've got a lot of things to do and you're worrying about—and I mean, I'm looking at the clock, like, I have to be sure I get to bed by this time because I need that sleep. Like, I'm really watching that. And then when I know that I've been woken up, you know, you kind of get tense about it and you can't get to sleep at all.

THE SHORTENED INCIDENT FORM

Incident #: 3-20

What Happened: Her parents, with whom she and her children lived, returned home after being away for a year.

Positive or Negative: Negative

Significance and/or Effect(s): Her living arrangements deteriorated because the house was much busier and noisier. She got less sleep and missed more days of school as a result.

APPENDIX G: AN EXAMPLE OF SPLITTING AN INCIDENT INTO TWO

THE ORIGINAL INCIDENT

Incident #: 4-26

What Happened: She served as her sister's maid of honour and had to ask for a day off from her clinical placement. She resented the response she received from her clinical instructor, who made unfounded assumptions.

When Incident Occurred: January 1992

How Long Effect(s) Lasted: Until well after the wedding, which was in February 1992

Effect(s) on Thinking, Feeling, Behaviour: It cost her a lot of money. It took a lot of her time away from her school work. It caused her a lot of anxiety and stress which detracted from her focus on her studies. She felt very uncomfortable because she had to ask for a day off from her clinical placement. She felt indignant because her instructor made an inaccurate, negative assumption about her.

Positive or Negative: Negative

Quotes: I had to ask if I could take that day off to be her maid of honour. And that was two weeks before [the wedding] but the theory instructor still said I should have told my clinical instructor sooner and it wasn't looked upon too well. And she kind of said, "Well, no matter what I say you're going to go anyway" and I didn't like that because that was putting words in my mouth and that's not true. If she said . . . "I'm sorry, that's not a legitimate reason and you have to go [to your clinical placement]" then I would have said to my sister, "I'm sorry, I can't make your wedding" . . . . I felt indignant. I felt like I just had no say, you know? The say was said by her [the instructor]. It wasn't a big deal or anything, but I didn't like it. I was upset . . . . It was very negative because it was very expensive—I had to do all the flowers—and it was very time-consuming. It was negative. Sorry, [apologizing to her sister]. It was very bad timing. February. All exams starting. Just starting off in clinical, you've been there a couple of weeks, and then you're already taking a day off.

APPENDIX G CONTINUED

THE FIRST SUBSEQUENT INCIDENT

Incident #: 4-26a

What Happened: Her sister asked the participant to be maid of honour at the sister's wedding and the participant agreed.

Positive or Negative: Negative

Significance and / or Effect(s): It cost her a lot of money. It took a lot of time and attention away from her school work. She had to ask for a day off from her clinical placement and she worried that this would be viewed negatively by her instructors. [This incident was placed in the category of Relationships with Friends and Family Members.]

THE SECOND SUBSEQUENT INCIDENT

Incident #: 4-26b

What Happened: When the participant asked for a day off from her clinical placement to be maid of honour at her sister's wedding, her instructor made the assumption and comment that the participant would go whether she had permission or not.

Positive or Negative: Negative

Significance and/or Effect(s): She felt angry and indignant that the instructor had made this unfair, negative assumption about her. She felt powerless.
[This incident was placed in the category of Instructors.]

APPENDIX H: ADVERTISEMENT

A Study Exploring
SINGLE MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE EDUCATION

I am a graduate student in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. For my Master's thesis, I am interviewing women about what it is like to be a single mother attending college. I am currently looking for participants.

Who can participate in this study?
Women who:
- are over the age of 18 years
- are single, separated, divorced, or widowed and not living with a partner
- have primary responsibility for at least one child under the age of 16 years
- are enrolled full-time in a college program of approximately two years length
- have completed at least one full year of their program

What would participating in this study involve?
- Meeting with me at a time and place convenient to you once for approximately 1-1/2 to 2 hours
- Talking with me by phone for approximately half an hour as a follow-up to the initial interview
- Candidly discussing specific aspects of your experiences since you have been in college
- Completing a brief demographic questionnaire at the time of the interview

What are the benefits to you?
- You would contribute to research on single mothers in higher education, a topic about which little has been written
- You would get a chance to talk openly to another woman about what it is like to be a single-mother student
- You would receive a copy of the results of the study

I will meet you during the day, evening or weekend at your home, the college, or another mutually agreeable and appropriate place. If necessary, I will arrange for child care during the interview. Confidentiality and/or anonymity will be strictly upheld. You would be able to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without fear of negative consequences. If you are interested in participating, know someone else who might be, or simply would like to learn more about this study, please contact me:

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