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Apple Sauce & Academia:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Student-Mothers' Experiences in Graduate School

by

Jane Allison Fix

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN
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Abstract

Despite extensive research on the impacts of stress on the traditional student body in higher education, the presence of mothers in graduate school and their unique experiences and contributions have all but gone unnoticed. Specifically, the emotional and physical impacts of gendered role integration in graduate school remain largely unknown. In this study, I explore the lived experience of six Canadian graduate student-mothers. All of the participants were married, residing with the biological father of their children, and were between the ages of 30 and 41 years during their time in graduate school. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a guide, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of the student-mothers' multiple-role experiences. Five over-arching themes emerged (a) power of values, (b) socio-ecological system, (c) experience of role integration, (d) coping strategies, and (e) reflections of meaning. A better understanding of the experience of graduate student-mothers can help inform treatment protocols for medical and mental health professionals, provide recommendations to current and prospective students, as well as foster compassion and systemic change within the academe.

Keywords: mother, graduate school, role integration, values, coping

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I want to acknowledge the tremendous impact that doing this study has had on me. I struggled against a strong current to get to where I am now, both personally and academically. However, in immersing myself with other student-mothers and their stories I have felt my own guilt loosen its grip upon me. I feel empowered and less alone in choosing a difficult yet remarkably rewarding path.

I would like to first thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Sharon Cairns at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, for her encouragement, support, and unshaken belief in me and my ability to finish this project. Thank you for sharing not only your knowledge and experience, but also your compassion and amity. You helped me accomplish a manuscript that I can be proud of, and that other mothers and parents can look towards to feel less alone in this often-isolating process.

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Dedication

To my dearest two children, Paige and Nathan.

You always have and always will be part of my journey. I love you.

Love, Mom

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Epigraph

"What is to give light must endure burning."

— **Victor Frankl, Mans Search for Meaning**

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"It is a roller coaster ride, but it is worth it" – Laura

The will toward meaning is a truly human experience; it is argued that individuals function best when they feel that their life has meaning and purpose – that it makes sense, has a coherent direction, and inherent value (Frankl, 1969; Martela & Stegar, 2016; Stegar, 2012;). People have discovered boundless ways to hope, dream, and overcome adversity, just to find their life's purpose (Martela & Stegar, 2016). For many, becoming a mother is one of the most life-affirming, purposeful, and meaningful experiences they can ever have (Mamabolo, Langa, & Kiguwa, 2009). For others, they desire to grow further, to broaden their depth of knowledge, being drawn to more than one purpose (Mamabolo et al., 2009), and with that, might choose graduate school as their medium. The courageous choice to combine graduate school with parenting can be exceptionally rewarding yet can also be disheartening. The vast amount of research in this area is limited to the more 'traditional' graduate student or to the professional experiences of women working in academia. By qualitatively exploring student-mothers' experiences of value development, motivation, role integration, distress, and coping strategies, their invisibility and unique experiences in higher education can be more thoroughly addressed through systemic changes and therapeutic interventions. The intent of this chapter is to further illuminate the purpose and the rationale of this study surrounding the experience of mothers in graduate school. It begins with a brief summary of the topic literature, then describes the rationale and significance of the study, the methodological approach used to conduct the research, as well as the researcher's assumptions and relationship to the subject matter and concludes with the organization of the thesis.

Literature Review Summary

Graduate school is not something to be taken without absolute seriousness. Even students without children report occasional feelings of resentment towards their programs, have feelings of displacement, and question their competence (Nyquist et al., 1999). Conversely, there are some who make necessary sacrifices, discover efficiencies, and manage to find balance and achievement in higher education (Nyquist et al., 1999). Mothers, when faced with the same intense pressures of graduate school, may feel pressured towards accomplishing it all, feeling as though they must disengage from their role of motherhood to embrace a more assertive, autonomous, academically committed persona. Our culture glorifies the archetype of the fully committed, idyllic student and employee, one who is willing to work beyond full-time hours and participate in social events and networking functions, over those who require flexible hours or a part-time commitment (Evans & Grant, 2008). This ideal is traditionally associated with men[1], while the pragmatic worker who contributes less to the workplace but looks after the home and family is often coupled with women and mothers. Despite feminist movements and cultural advances intended to improve the lives of women by dampening the oppressive system, women continue to retain the bulk of the family burdens and responsibilities (Arendell, 2000; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005), while men experience disapproval and stigma if they request

[1] Please note, many people have a gender that is neither male nor female or who do not identify with the idea gender at all (Richards et al., 2016). I do not wish to perpetuate the impression that only binary gender exists although I do acknowledge that this manuscript engages in the use of binary gender terms. This is due to binary gender language being depicted within the relevant literature as well as by the participants who participated in this study.

flexibility for childcare (Gould & Lovato, 2019). Additionally, women's value, identity, and achievement of adulthood have been socially constructed by the evaluation of the practice, success, and perceived natural enjoyment of nurturing and caring for children (Arendell, 2000; Mamabolo et al., 2009; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Women have been found to put their physical and mental health off in order to meet the demands of home, work, or school life, yet have been vilified as selfish if they work outside of the home (Gillies, 2006; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). The distress and guilt that results from challenging this demanding mothering model can cause conflict for women as mothers, wives, and within themselves (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Sutherland, 2010). In observing how some of the literature on conflicting roles was reflected in my own experiences as a mother in graduate school, I became interested in gaining further understanding about the lived experience of other graduate student-mothers.

Rational and Significance

Personal Perspective

Being a graduate student-mother myself, I noticed that my experience appeared to differ from that of other, more traditional graduate students. I wondered if other parents in graduate programs experienced similar challenges and triumphs in their multiple roles. When exploring the literature on the topic, there were several studies regarding women in professional academia; however, very little research came to light regarding the student-mother's lived experiences in Canadian graduate school. With my own journey being so profoundly impactful, I felt that gaining a better understanding of the experience of other student-mothers would benefit and inform future prospective student-parents, their families, and the academe.

For myself, post-secondary education was significantly delayed; this was predominantly due to one lacking high school credit. I erroneously assumed that overcoming this deficiency

would not be possible without going to get a Graduate Equivalency Degree. I experienced feelings of shame and supposed I had let my family, and myself, irreparably down. After some time passed, I came to the realization that I needed to go back to school to prove to myself and others that I was not a failure. With humility, I wrote the registrar and discovered that there had always been a simple solution, if only I had been courageous enough to inquire sooner. I felt both relief and some disappointment in allowing unchallenged limitations to stand in my way for so long. I began taking university courses soon after I was married and continued with night school when my children were born.

As a mother of two small children, I was consumed with learning how to do everything a mother should do and how to do so in the best possible ways. I adored them; I felt self-assured and comfortable as a parent and, for a time, content in my chosen role as a conventional mother and a part-time student. However, as my time at the university intensified, I became increasingly passionate about research and psychology. I came to revere the knowledge I was gaining and the close relationships that I had built in my small university setting. My early plans of merely pursuing an undergraduate degree soon changed as my desire for academic growth grew more intense. I felt like my identity began to split as the demands for my presence at home and at school began to increase. Emotionally I became divided as well; getting the necessary grades to get into graduate school became an obsession, while also trying to be the best possible mother and wife to my family. I was unaware of how hard I was attempting to balance both worlds; nevertheless, I recall feeling guilty for choosing to be immersed in my studies instead of providing healthy dinners, attending extracurricular events, and making sure the house was always clean. Thus, when the day came for me to accept my Bachelor of Arts degree, I accepted with a divided heart. I was intensely proud of my achievement and yet also felt traces of regret.

From that time, the journey has been a long one, from striving to meet impossible expectations, subdue the accompanying guilt, and again, challenge my perceived limitations. Despite the immense challenges, I feel I have arrived at a place of acceptance, meaning, and purpose.

Reflecting on my own experience has given me a keen interest in the experience of other graduate student-parents and the resiliency required to strive for meaning and purpose despite the obvious challenges that it presents. Yet after investigating the existing research, I observed that there is little to be found in the literature on the emotional experience of mothers in graduate school and became curious to understand how the experience of other mothers compared or differed from my own. Therefore, I hope this study will shed light on an underexplored topic.

Research Perspective

Evans and Grant, (2008) suggest that woman stereotypes continue to extend from the home and workplace, and into the academic world, where mothers feel torn between the expectations of the 'good mother' and the 'successful academic'. Related literature has focused on the experiences of women in professional academia, those who are vying for tenure or other positions of power traditionally held by men. The few studies that have looked specifically into graduate school parents focused on the exploration of demographics and attrition rates, as graduate student mothers are much less likely to complete their programs, and the causes of distress within the academic system, such as lack of flexible study programs or the high costs of childcare (DeClou, 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Trepal, Stinchfield, & Haiyasoso, 2014). Notably, there were a few non-Canadian studies that explored mental health and coping strategies student-parents employed to reduce emotional discomfort and distress (e.g. Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Sallee, 2015).

Therefore, Canadian studies that focus on mothers' motivation and value development as well as the emotional and physical impacts of holding conflicting values while pursuing higher education are lacking. Thus, this research looks at the overall interpretation of the values and meaning making of graduate student-mothers. There is value in the knowledge of high attrition and gender imbalances; however, there is a need for a wholistic approach to understanding the underlying experience of value conflict and impacts of graduate school distress. This can provide a better foundation for recommendations for student-parent therapy, treatment protocols, and support, as well as suggestions for systemic and administrative change that could benefit the health and well-being of non-traditional students.

Overview of Methodology

In the past, the majority of research on graduate school-parents has employed quantitative methodologies to explore demographics and graduate student attrition. The limited research on the experiences of graduate student-mothers using qualitative methods have mainly focused on how these studies were related to reporting on the experience of role and time conflicts. Yet, less attention has been given to the emotional and physical experience of distress that value and time conflicts can invite. This is especially important for medical and mental health professionals' in deepening their understanding of the unique lived experience of student-mothers to better tailor their interventions. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen over a quantitative approach for this study as it provides the opportunity for deeper perspectives of the experienced emotions, values, and attitudes of graduate student-mothers (Barnham, 2016; Slevitch, 2011). IPA methodology accomplishes this by guiding the researcher through the following steps (a) capturing of the subjective experience of each participant, (b) interpreting how they themselves make sense of participant experiences through

their own subjective lens, and (c) proposing an interpretation of participants' accounts of their experiences (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is a reverent research approach that resonates with my value of using empathy to help view participants' worlds through their eyes, while keeping in mind that my interpretation of their accounts are influenced by my own experiences, biases, and assumptions (Smith et al., 2009; Wertz, 2005). Thus, choosing IPA was a fitting way to combine the researcher's desire for authenticity with the potential for a novel interpretation of participants' revelations (Smith et al., 2009), hence adding to the limited body of literature on mothers in graduate school.

Organization of the Thesis

After the conclusion of this introductory chapter, Chapter Two provides an in-depth look into the literature surrounding women in history, the performance of motherhood, and experiences of professionals and students in academia, for women with and without children. Chapter Three describes the rationale, philosophical underpinnings, and overview of the IPA methodology, as well as the research procedures, participant recruitment, eligibility, and data analysis. Subsequently, in Chapter Four, I present the findings of the described experiences of the graduate student-mothers' thoughts and emotions, as well as their identified challenges and successes throughout their programs. In the final chapter, Chapter Five, I begin with a discussion of the findings in conjunction with my interpretation of how those findings compare with the other relevant and previously known literature regarding mothers in graduate school. In the chapter's conclusion, I discuss the considerations and limitations of the current study, the implications for mental health practitioners, educators, and students and conclude with considerations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the attempt to understand the experience of mothers in graduate school, there is a need to understand and appreciate where some of the inherent ideas and assumptions about women originate and how those past ideologies continue to impact graduate students. Historically oppressed yet evolving to find their individual purpose and meaning in life, many women and mothers have walked out of the family home and into the male dominated workplace or educational establishments, in the attempt to prove their value and worth. In Part I of this chapter, I investigate women's subjugation, roles in history, and how they have evolved up until now. In Part II I explore the demographics, experiences, and coping strategies of post-secondary and graduate students. Finally, in Part III, I discuss the most current and relevant research on mother's experiences in professional academia and as students in graduate school. The chapter concludes with a short summary of how the existing literature has informed this study, as well as the need for further understandings of the experience of graduate student-mothers.

Part I: Women's Role in History

The power relationship between men and women, as well as the prevailing patriarchal system, has had a long history of obstructing the autonomy of a women's body as well as her right to move freely in the world (Weitz & Weitz, 2015). Over time, both overt and clandestine practises of women's oppression have evolved into several distinctive forms such as gendered role expectations and inequity of pay or career prospects (Monroe et al., 2008; Öhrn et al., 2009).

Early religions, philosophers, and esteemed scientists have influenced the thinking that women were inherently lesser, placing women and other demasculinized males under the rule and subordination of the "real man" (Weitz & Weitz, 2015, p. 28). Male virility is equated with the power they hold over others whom they perceive as weaker. Aristotle believed that adequate heat

created the human form, all else resulted in the "mutilated male" – the female (Horowitz, 1976, p.184; Weitz & Weitz, 2015). He also contended that the male alone provided the soul to the child, and that the mother played only a passive role in giving basic nourishment (Horowitz, 1976).

In religion, women were almost universally excluded from access to scripture as they were considered too inferior to be allowed to meddle with something so significant. Therefore, many women lacked exposure to the development of reading and writing that men were often allotted through the study of written canon. The thinking was that this regulation would protect the family from the disaster that would befall them if a woman were to hold a book, while also serving to maintain women's ignorance and inferiority (King, 1987). The Christian church largely withheld education from women through the middle ages, with the exception of aristocratic women in convents (King, 1987). The fall of man, according to Christianity, was the responsibility of a women; Eve, through her feeble intelligence and innate susceptibility to temptation cursed all mankind. This feminine inability to resist the passions of the flesh and biddings from the devil, required that women be subjugated for the protection of themselves and greater society (Weitz & Weitz, 2015). In addition to Christianity, many other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism also reinforced the inferior status of women, emphasising their commitment to chastity, sexual obligation, subservience, and family honour (Franiuk & Shain, 2011). By extension, early 18th century marriage meant that a woman would relinquish her existence by becoming one with her husband. She would lose any and all rights to ownership of land, custody of her children, or the right to keep any monies she may have or would earn in her future. At the founding of the United States of America, husbands were permitted to beat their wives and demand sexual services (Weitz & Weitz, 2015). To protect land from creditors, women in Canada and the United States were permitted to retain their pre-nuptial land and were allowed to earn wages around the middle of the

19th century. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, some states and provinces began allowing women to vote and even to go to school (Altschul & Carron, 1975). This threat to male power was met with scientific backlash that was heavily influenced by the ideology of the time (Hubbard, 2003; Weitz & Weitz, 2015). For example, Darwin argued that because men need to compete for sexual access, whereas women do not, males are naturally more evolved; he said this of men's superiority in his 1896 book, *The Descent of Man and the Selection in Relation to Sex*:

> The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man's attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can women—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands…

Additionally, Darwin stated that the expended energy of childbearing leaves women without the necessary resources for further mental or physical development, forcing them to fall victim to their emotions (Weitz & Weitz, 2015). These revelations appeared to prove, through biological determinism, women's inferiority. However, critics of the time pointed to the cultural influences on scientists' conclusions (Murphy, 1998). Doctors began to warn women that education and study would impact their beauty, reduce their libido, cause painful menses, and increase the size of their unborn child's head, causing immense pain at childbirth (Weitz & Weitz, 2015). Despite these warnings, women continued to enter the workforce and even into higher education.

Women in Canada were ultimately declared "persons" (p. 482) under the law in 1930 (Altschul & Carron, 1975). However, in 1944 mothers in Quebec did not receive family allowance cheques as they were still theoretically under the legal capacity of their husbands (Altschul & Carron, 1975). In 1953 (1971 in the United States), Canada passed a law ruling that it is illegal to discriminate based on biological sex for employment and two years later Canadian women were theoretically to get equal pay for equal work by law (Altschul & Carron, 1975). In 1967, a

commission was launched to “ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society” (Altschul & Carron, 1975, p. 486).

Throughout the 1960s through 1980s, waves of feminism attempted to achieve social equality between the sexes, for example, by having men take on more child care responsibilities and questioning the classifications of men and women and their assigned roles in society (Weitz & Weitz, 2015). However, other forms of feminism challenged the idea of equality and the minimization of gender differences. In an attempt to revalidate traditional feminine attributes, they suggested that women are in fact superior to men in that they can give birth and are therefore more moral, nurturing, creative, and life-sustaining than their male counterparts (Alcoff, 1988; Weitz & Weitz, 2015). Nevertheless, this line of thinking has been used in rhetoric suggesting mothers are instinctively more adept at childcare and should therefore remain in the home and be the main caregivers of their children, influencing values and beliefs even to this day (Weitz & Weitz, 2015).

Considering Motherhood

Are mothers born or made? As with most arguments regarding nature vs nurture, Hrdy (1999) suggests there is more than one contributing factor. First, evolved physical processes such as genes, lactation, and hormones such as oxytocin and dopamine facilitate mother-child bonding and provide instinctual motivation and reward in motherhood (Fisher, Burch, & Sokol-Chang, 2017; Von Mohr, Mayes, & Rutherford, 2017). Second, the arrival at the interpersonal stage of adulthood brings with it the orientation of love, affection, and need for belonginess (Kegan, 1982). This stage is further augmented by the influences of family, culture, and the greater social environment (Fisher et al., 2017: Kegan, 1982). Motherhood can be thought of in various ways, as form of oppression in the inherent expectations, obligations, and humble responsibilities of childcare, or as a beautiful and uniquely feminine experience that biology has prepared them for

(Smart, 2013).

Motherhood instinct. The instinctual interaction and signals given by the child to the mother also profoundly impact parental motivation and behaviours (Fisher et al., 2017; Mamabolo et al., 2009). Attachment theory, developed in collaboration by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in the late 1960s, suggests that each human child is born with an attachment system that responds to threats or stressors. This system prompts behaviours that safeguard them from danger by ensuring that they seek proximity to protective caregivers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The child-mother bond is a dynamic system in which maternal behaviours and rewards complement the child's and vise-versa (Ahnert, 2005; Mamabolo et al., 2009). The attachment behavioural system is directly related to infant survival rates and is crucial in early life when it has the largest impact on the child's development and ongoing feelings of emotional security (Ahnert, 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Although Bowlby and Ainsworth's classic exclusive-caretaker model of attachment has been favoured and has constituted what "good-enough mothering" (p. 481) looks like in modern child rearing practices (Mamabolo et al., 2009), humans did not evolve to have only one individual raise the children (Ahnert, 2005). Although human babies require significant care and cost for many years and the need for ongoing nutritional care and protection continues long after the birth of additional siblings (Bogin, Bragg, & Kuzawa, 2014; Fisher et al., 2017), the role of fathers is rarely mentioned in early attachment theories (Mamabolo et al., 2009). The idea that every woman is meant to be a mother and is biologically capable or naturally inclined to raise children on her own is socially constructed and inaccurate and can, therefore, be challenged and changed through social progressions (Hrdy, 1999; Mamabolo et al., 2009).

Developmental model of motherhood. As mothers themselves move from infancy into

adulthood, they understand their identity differently at each developmental stage (Kegan, 1994). Psychologists, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Abraham Maslow did substantial studies on lifespan development; their sociological models of development investigated a child's progression from an egocentric to a sociocentric way of associating within their worlds (Beilin, 1992; Carlsen,1988; Kegan, 1982). Kegan (1982) extended their work through the conceptualization of moral meaning-making and a developmental model of consciousness that runs parallel to other developmental models, such as the ones mentioned above. He conceptualized a model that embraced the relations between *subject* and *object*, or rather self and other. This model of moral development contained five distinct stages or *orders* that humans strive to evolve through (see Table 1).

The *first* and *second* stages of consciousness development are when children begin to understand their ability to gain control over their reflexes and realize that the objects in their environment are independent from themselves, thus experiencing their first glimmer of independence (Kegan, 1982,1994). Eventually children learn to construct stable categories and learn who they are as individuals. Additionally, they are beginning to learn what they want and value through the observation of others, such as their own mothers, and meaning-making begins to occur (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Stage three is the *interpersonal* mind, when role consciousness and mutual empathy appears. During this stage, individuals begin to evaluate themselves through the eyes of others, and the feelings of social connection and acceptance become critically important (Kegan, 1982). Many mothers would fall within Kegan's stage three of the consciousness development model. In being a mother at this stage, it would be difficult for her to distinguish herself from the role of motherhood that was co-created by herself and her socio-ecological world, as she is not yet able to see herself as the author of her inner mental life

(Kegan, 1982).

Table 1

Kegan's (1982) Developmental Model of Adult Consciousness

Kegan's Stage/Order	Subject	Object	Maslow's Orientations
Stage 0 – Incorporative	Reflexes	None	Physiological Survival
Stage 1 - Impulsive	Impulses, Perceptions	Reflexes	Physiological Satisfaction
Stage 2 - Imperial	Needs, Desires	Impulses, Perceptions	Safety
Stage 3 - Interpersonal	Interpersonal, Empathy	Needs, Desires	Love, Affection, Belongingness
Stage 4 - Institutional	Authorship, Identity	Interpersonal, Empathy	Esteem, Self Esteem
Stage 5 - Interindividual	Interindividuality, Interpenitrability of Self-Systems	Authorship, Identity	Self-Actualization

Note. Depiction of the five stages of Kegan's (1982) adult developmental model of consciousness, the corresponding subject/object relations for each stage, and how they compare to Maslow's (1969) lifespan development model.

As underlying structures of subject moves to object, there is an "emergence from embeddedness" at the transition between each stage (Kegan, 1982). For example, as an individual moves from the third stage to the fourth – although not all individuals do – they go from "I am my relationships" to "I have relationships". This process does not generally happen effortlessly. As women experience pressures to conform to the expectations of motherhood, as well as to meet society's ideals for prosperity and success, many are placed in an unbearable dichotomy (Kegan, 1994).

Having a healthy understanding of the transition from the third stage into the fourth can

help minimize the distress that is inherent in mothers' attempts to meet social and societal expectations (Kegan, 1994). The fourth stage, or order of consciousness, allows for abstract thinking and self-authorship giving an individual the freedom to prioritize, control, and construct values and beliefs that come from within rather than from the numerous social contracts that multiple roles can demand (Kegan, 1994; Smith, 2008). Kegan reasoned that in order to create meaning and reduce the significant distress characteristic of a mother's possession of conflicting roles, fourth order thinking is required (Kegan, 1994, "The Growth and Loss of the Interpersonal Self," para. 10).

Childcare strategies. Historically, mothers did not raise children independently (Fisher et al., 2017). Humans evolved flexible care strategies to give their lineage the best chance at survival despite their significant demands. For example, a*lloparenting* is the cooperative parental care provided by other individuals towards non-descendent young; this is said to reduce the reproductive and physical effort of each women by approximately 14-29% (Bogin, et al., 2014; Kenkel, Perkeybile, & Carter, 2017). This mutual arrangement, traditionally shared between women, allows for the exchange of support, shared resources, and childcare burdens (Fisher et al., 2017). In a 1991 study involving foraging societies, infants and young children were held by individuals other than their mothers 20-60% of the time and mothers would often nurse the child of another if the child's mother was not available (Fisher et al., 2017). Wet-nurses of the 18th and 19th centuries commonly aided mothers in boosting nutrition and helping with the physical demands of childcare (Hrdy, 1999). This exchange of care and deep bonding between women happened culturally rather than merely through biological kinship, thus protecting women in the group through shared means and mutual defence in the event of a threat. This increased the odds of survival for both mothers and their children (Fisher et al., 2017). Alloparenting does not come

at the expense of the attachment bond necessary for children's emotional and cognitive development (Fisher et al., 2017). If additional empathetic adult caregivers make a child feel safe, loved, and stimulated, multiple adaptive attachments can develop as children's social memories are capable of bridging even long separations from their primary attachment figure (Ahnert, 2005).

Despite mothers' extensive and successful history of seeking child-rearing help from others in their family and greater community, a dominant modern philosophy of motherhood in Western culture is *intensive mothering*, first described by Hays (1996). The intensive mothering ideology is the belief that mothers should appropriately provide a child-centric atmosphere of parenting through complete devotion to their children's emotional and intellectual development (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017; Hays, 1996). The maintenance of this expectation and the ongoing assumption that mothers are better inclined towards childcare continues to uphold the patriarchal social arrangement at the cost of mothers' own leisure time, paid work, and/or educational pursuits (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017; Hays, 1996; Lynch, 2008). Whomever has more control over their own time has more power in their relationships at home and in their work life – that is, *time is power*. When women's time characteristically belongs to others, they remain subordinate (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Hays (1996) and other feminist scholars agree that the expectations and roles of motherhood are socially and politically constructed to maintain an oppressive social structure that benefits those with privileges associated with gender, class, or race (Connell, 1985; Walls, Helms, & Grzywacz, 2016). The insinuation that any other caregiver would be less competent, implies that 'good mothers' of young children would not be employed outside the home (Walls et al., 2016). Intensive mothering ideology also includes the notion that familial devotion that supersedes a mother's own needs or desires be an entirely emotionally rewarding experience, as being a mother is the most important

role a woman can have (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017; Walls et al., 2016). However, repeated studies have confirmed this is not the case. In addition to Hays' 1996 study, recent qualitative studies, including Mikolajczak, Raes, Avalosse, and Roskam's 2018 study, suggest that mothers continue to consistently neglect their own self-care and well-being in the name of being a 'good mother', leading to recurrent parental burnout (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017; Lynch, 2008). Rather than promoting attachment behaviour and closeness with children, overwhelming exhaustion associated with burnout creates depersonalization, emotional distance, and a reduction of parental effectiveness (Mikolajczak et al., 2018; Roskam, Raes, & Mikolajczak, 2017). Both new and long-time mothers who endorse and practice intensive mothering behaviour have been found to report many positive emotional experiences related to motherhood. However, they also experience elevated depressive symptoms, negative affect, mental health issues, and lower overall levels of life satisfaction than parents who take on the mothering role in a less demanding manner (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017). Additionally, there are the emotional impacts of feeling like an inadequate mother. For many women, being a mother is morally a fundamental part of their identity and any intentional time spent away from their children can lead to intense feelings of resentment, guilt, or the shame of being a 'bad mother' (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017; Lynch, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Mothers' guilt and shame. Mothers in general are thought to experience guilt and shame to a far greater extent than fathers do, even when sharing the role of child-rearing equally (Sutherland, 2010). Although mothers often describe feelings of guilt along with experiences of inadequacy, exhaustion, fear, and anger, several theories suggest that they are experiencing shame rather than guilt (Sutherland, 2010). *Shame* involves the negative evaluation of the self in either character, intelligence, or competency. Shame is stable in that it fosters feelings of lack of control or autonomy over one's behaviours (Lewis, 1971). *Guilt,* conversely, is an uncomfortable feeling that stems from

thoughts, feelings, or behaviours that are evaluated as negative, but are seen as choices or behaviours that could be done differently (Lewis, 1971; Sutherland, 2010). Thus, guilt is believing behaviour is within one's control versus shame, which is believing it is not within one's control. The experience of shame is linked to Kegan's third level of consciousness, in which the self remains the subject (e.g. "I am my relationships"; The Institutional Balance [stage 4], para.1) and remains an unchallenged part of the identity (Kegan, 1994). When shared identities conflict, the inability to reconcile one shared reality with another can be disorientating and emotionally painful (Smith, 2008).

Mothers in the Workforce

Women often face a struggle between the roles of mother, professional, and individual; society has socially constructed their identity to be defined by the practice of nurturing and caring for dependent children (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). The concept of femininity, womanhood, and the successful achievement of adulthood continues to be synonymous with motherhood and the imbedded roles that accompany it, despite any inborn desires to strive for greater meaning or purpose in their lives (Arendell, 2000; Frankl, 1969). As with other mothers, women in the workforce opt out of self-care, leisure activities, and travel in an attempt to balance their family and vocational goals. This leads to distress, health issues, and reduced opportunities for networking and collaboration with colleagues (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005).

To fit comfortably into society, individuals learn the expectations and values from the roles they assume or transition into as an adult. Being a parent, student, or employee requires commitment to different expectations and values, as well as an expectation of adherence to those obligations (Kegan, 1994; Walls et al., 2016). In viewing each role as an unchallengeable part of their identity individuals are unable to view them subjectively (Arendell, 2000). Sex role theory

proposes that, through social determinism, individuals learn from birth the stereotyped expectations or "role norms" (p. 262) for their gender, be it either for men or woman, from their surrounding social structure rather than biologically predetermined instincts (Connell, 1985). Women are characterized as being more emotional and intuitive and are associated with domestic life; men are portrayed as more rational and analytical and are more connected with public life (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). This theory underpinned 1960s and 1970s liberal feminist movements and challenged social power with the idea that women were at a disadvantage because of long held sexist stereotypes and role expectations (held by both men and women alike). They believed a redefinition was both possible and required to confront the discourse and create more agency, equal power, and opportunity within women's lives (Connell, 1985).

After the movements of the 60s and 70s, mothers, and women in general, are still more likely than men to take on the responsibilities of childcare, housework, and food preparation (Richardsen, Traavik, & Burke, 2016). This is in spite of changes in cultural attitudes and increased education that sees them entering the male-dominated workforce (Kray, Howland, Russell, & Jackman, 2017). Working mothers have discussed these expectations as the *second shift,* coming home after work to housework and dinner preparation, and the *third shift*, needy children and spouses desperate for their attention (Christopher, 2012; Lynch, 2008). According to Statistics Canada (2017a), in 2015, 82% of women within the working age of 25 to 54 years were in the labour market compared to only 21% in 1950. Of dual parent families with at least one child under the age of 16 years, 69% of parents were both working, up from 36% in 1976 (Uppal, 2015). However, occupational segregation still exists. Women remain underrepresented in high status positions, have higher workloads, less power, and are underpaid in the workforce

compared to their male colleagues (Kray et al., 2017; Richardsen, et al., 2016). This continued discrepancy and the ongoing fight against gender discrimination have been shown to increase the incidences of stress-related illness and hopelessness in women (Richardsen et al., 2016). Furthermore, for the mothers who successfully work outside of the home, they are often seen as egocentric or negligent, as the proper attachment and successful outcome of children is seen as their responsibility (Gillies, 2006; Walls et al., 2016).

Competing roles can also cause significant distress or intellectual discomfort such as c*ognitive dissonance*, an uncomfortable feeling of pressure that occurs when individuals hold two inconsistent values or behave or think in ways that go against a held belief or value (Bem, 1967; Kegan, 1994). Individuals often seek to minimize their distress by adjusting either their behaviour or beliefs to align with their belief systems or behaviours, respectively. In light of this, full-time working mothers might be expected to denounce intensive parenting beliefs (Walls et al., 2016). However, research suggests mixed results; Walls (2016) found that many working mothers still endorsed intensive mothering and reported ongoing feelings of guilt for time spent away from their children, while others fully rejected the notion of intensive parenting practices. Upon further investigation, when the background of the mothers was considered, Black and single mothers were much more likely to dismiss the intensive mothering ideology, while other mothers, often from the younger generation, found ways to reconcile competing values between motherhood and full-time employment (Christopher, 2012; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015). For example, rather than intensive mothering, they employed *extensive mothering* – parenting behaviours in which they felt they remained child-centered, without needing to be at home (Christopher, 2012). They accomplished this by being fully involved in the organization and delegation of their children's activities and the planning of their care (Christopher, 2012; Walls

et al., 2016). This sacrifice sometimes led to feelings of jealousy of the loved caregiver, rather than the guilt associated with not being there with their children (Christopher, 2012). Additionally, they choose to discard the "ideal worker" (p.75) model that sanctions overtime as proof of being a valuable employee, a model traditionally imposed on men that is becoming more prevalent for both genders (Christopher, 2012). Employers of working mothers may then assume women will always and automatically put the responsibility for their children before their job, resulting in women being placed on the *mommy track* – a career path that offers fewer opportunities for advancement, further education, or promotion (Lynch, 2008). As a result, even mothers who have found a balance between work and family values are considered less-desirable hires relative to working fathers or employees without children (Lynch, 2008; Trepal et al., 2014).

The distress and possible conflict that arises from challenging the status quo can also lead to the experience of immense guilt or shame for both men and women (Sutherland, 2010). Despite the clear advantage men continue to enjoy professionally, especially if they have children as they become even more respected, fathers who approach the idea of prioritizing their parenting over work duties are confronted by disapproval or even contempt (Gould & Lovato, 2019; Munsch, 2016). Even in 2019, there is still a pervasive stigma that taking time for childcare or requesting flexibility in work duties is a distraction or nuisance that is reserved for women (Gould & Lovato, 2019).

Despite the distress caused by having many roles, studies have determined that multiple roles are advantageous for both mothers and fathers (e.g. Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Individuals with more than one role experience higher levels of subjective well-being and overall health over those who participate in linear roles (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Women's well-being specifically

appears to benefit from being married with children if they also hold high status positions. Moreover, mothers reported that taking the extensive in-charge role of parenting while working full-time, following their calling or providing for their family, led to feelings of accomplishment and greater self-fulfillment (Christopher, 2012). Feelings of competence and effectiveness, within varying contexts, can lessen the undesirable effects of multiple roles and conflicting demands (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Subsequently, it is often the guilt or shame that becomes debilitating, not always the physical demands of multiple roles (Sutherland, 2010).

Section Summary

Power over women and her autonomy has a long, sordid history. Religion, science, politics, and even loved ones impose their judgement, authority, and control over the movement and expectations of women. Women were, and often still are, considered lower than men in all possible connotations, including intelligence, strength, ability, and class. This sexist influence extends into beliefs about motherhood. Women were thought to be biologically meant for the humble work of child-rearing and many women found themselves in a stage of adult development where they felt they were no more than their roles as mothers. Thus, challenging motherhood roles and expectations often lead to guilt and sometimes shame. Additionally, the movement away from the mutually supportive model of alloparenting and into the intensive mothering ideology created more judgement and loss of independence. Despite the vast movement of women into the workplace and the waves of feminist movements that followed, women are still feeling inadequate, guilty, and torn, not only as mothers, but as contributors to society as employees, professionals, and as students in academia.

Part II: The Dream of Higher Education

Bachelor and graduate level studies, such as master and doctoral degrees, are meant to

prepare students for enlightening employment and citizenship roles that command critical thinking and problem-solving skills, cultural knowledge, and educated dialogue (Smith-Norris & Hansen, 2018). However, not all students choose a path of higher education.

Motivation

Students go on to post-secondary education for many reasons, including family background, personal attributes, financial resources, personal or financial goals, external commitments, and/or the academic experience (DeClou, 2016). Understandably, members of families with positive attitudes towards graduate school are also more likely to apply to the higher levels of academia (Ingram, Cope, Harju, & Wuensch, 2000). Student accounts in the United Kingdom (UK), United States, and Canada consistently report employment prospects, training for a specific career, or for a higher salary as the main reason to attend university (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016). Gaining intellectual stimulation or knowledge was also considered very important to many students. Furthermore, many students mention becoming a role model for their family as a specific goal for going into post-secondary education (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). The education of a parent impacts the possibility of children attending post-secondary school (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; DeClou, 2016). Interestingly, the higher the education of a student's father, the more likely the student attended university to appease family members; whereas, the higher the education of a student's mother, the more likely the student attended university to advance their career, increase their salary, satisfy an employer, or to fulfill personal growth needs (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011).

Demographics

In Canada, four in ten women between the ages 25 and 34 had attained a university

degree; this includes bachelor, masters, and doctoral level education (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Forty to fifty years ago, women's decisions surrounding their career or educational pursuits were guided by gender expectations as well as their value of prioritizing family over all else. This pattern has evolved and women's ideas about career and education have significantly shifted (Battle & Wigfield, 2003). Women are entering traditionally male-associated professions and career paths, striving for higher salaries, increased status, and superior goal attainments (Battle & Wigfield, 2003). To achieve these ambitions, women make up over 57% of both bachelor and graduate students in Canadian universities (DeClou, 2016). Additionally, a Statistics Canada study executed by Frenette and Zeman (2007) suggested that an additional reason for the academic enrollment gender gap can be traced to young women having: (a) overall better grades in early high school, perhaps reflecting higher motivation or maturity; (b) higher performance on standardized reading tests, indicative of cognitive abilities; and/or (c) higher parental expectations.

Performance and Attrition

At the graduate level, students are more likely to be working part or full-time, have family responsibilities, and be enrolled in school on a part-time basis. This often occurs several years after the completion of their bachelor's degree (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Although the demographics vary between each degree, there are some common experiences between all levels (DeClou, 2016). For those who enter graduate school, many do not complete their programs. In fact, more than half of all doctoral students drop out, a trend that is consistent across Canada, UK, and Australia (DeClou, 2016; Smith-Norris & Hansen, 2018).

Males, parents, and individuals who are married were the most likely to leave their programs (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Support from others, expressly from spouses, children,

and parents, were reported as the most significant in helping students finish their degrees (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; DeClou, 2016). First generation students are also found to struggle with program completion; even if they have the support of their family and communities, they are often unable to acquire the same level of advice and guidance regarding graduate school as those who grew up in an academic family (Lunceford, 2011). Sheard (2009) found that women and mature students tend to fair much better in academic performance. Older students, over the age of 21 years, seem to demonstrate superior achievement motivation due to increased pressure to succeed, as it is possibly their last chance at career advancement. They have also been shown to be high-scoring on their internal locus of control, critical thinking abilities, and conscientiousness, which is correlated with competence, hard work, and determination (Sheard, 2009).

Women. Women significantly outperformed male students in both grade point average and overall *hardiness* – a personality dimension that consists of: (a) commitment, investment in something worthy; (b) manageable control; and (c) challenge, practicing increments of development (Maddi, 2004; Sheard, 2009). Hardiness provides the courage to strive towards an uncertain future, overcome ontological anxiety, problem solve, and find resilience and creativity under pressure (Maddi, 2004; Sheard, 2009). Student-women also appear to also adapt easily to high academic learning expectations and express higher levels of desire to complete their university programs (Sheard, 2009). Notwithstanding the success and perseverance women have demonstrated in post-secondary programs, women tend to withdraw or take longer to complete their programs than males. Additionally, they are not employed in high ranking academic positions at the same frequency as the men in their cohort, nor have they escaped from conforming to jobs traditionally dominated by women as higher paying positions and prestigious

professions are still held by men in greater proportions (Battle & Wigfield, 2003; Smith-Norris & Hansen, 2018).

Race. Race similarly contributes to student post-secondary attrition; Hispanics and Blacks have some of the lowest rates of completion, while those of Asian backgrounds have some of the highest graduation rates. Canadian studies from 2009 have shown that international students have some of the highest levels of educational achievement in Canada (Boyd, 2009; DeClou, 2016).

Finances. Financial concerns play a role in who can and does apply to post-secondary school as well as for those who have to leave due to the lack of ongoing financial aid or support (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Zahniser, Rupert, & Dorociak, 2017). Families with means can mitigate some of the burden for students without significant savings or for those who cannot sustain a living on scholarships and loans alone. Notably, Canadian students fair better with lower tuition costs than their American counterparts (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; DeClou, 2016;).

Personal factors. Personal factors are less discussed in the literature yet play a significant role in graduate level attrition. There are some students who report scheduling conflicts or personal issues with their academic advisors, yet it is the personal distress that has even greater implications. Cohen and Greenberg (2011) found that numerous students in their study had to manage family life and workplace simultaneously with their academic responsibilities (Zahniser et al., 2017). As adult students, many have already acquired multiple roles (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). As with sex role theory, *role identity theory* proposes that exposure to the social structure and expectations of high-level academia does not simply result in the attainment of applicable knowledge and skills, but also becomes an integrated part of their

emerging professional identity (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). Goode's (1960) theory of role strain expands on role theory, proposing that in addition to role acquisition in more than one social structure, each role has a time and location that often requires an active decision that can cause significant clash of responsibilities (Sallee, 2015). If individuals feel their roles are in conflict, that their compliance with one role would compromise the other role, or if their behaviours or abilities are not consistent with the expectations of their faculty, cohort, or themselves, they may experience high levels of isolation, identity distress, or fragmentation (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso 2008; Jazvac-Martek, 2009). The cost of trying to reconcile multiple roles without adequate institutional or social support often leads to departure from the program (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011).

Mental health. In addition to their family's many health concerns that came up through the duration of their programs, at least half of the students in several studies also discussed their own significant struggles with physical and mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and burn-out, as well as low life satisfaction and well-being (perception of stress, experience of affect, and flourishing), leading many to at least consider withdrawal from their programs (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Colman et al., 2016; Zahniser et al., 2017). In a study conducted by the American Psychological Association, over 70% of graduate level students considered their level of stress high enough to impede their daily functioning (Colman et al., 2016; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Consistent reports of poor or insufficient sleep was prevalent among students, as well as increased alcohol use and suicidal ideations.

Coping strategies. Various studies have touched on the academic and self-care strategies students have employed in order to cope with various competing responsibilities, finances, discrimination, and the significant physical and mental health impacts of going to post-secondary

school (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Sladek, Doane, Luecken, & Eisenberg, 2016). Coping refers to thoughts or actions that are used when faced with a threatening or distressing situation (Bonneville-Roussy, Evans, Verner-Filion, Vallerand, & Bouffard, 2017). Men and women tend to respond to and cope with stress differently; women are inclined to rate some events as stressful where men would not; women also engage in the use of coping strategies more often than men do (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017).

(Dis)engagement strategies. There are two main diverging strategies that are often used to cope with stress. First, there are *disengagement-orientated strategies* – maladaptive, avoidant behaviours such as procrastination, denial, blame, and some forms of substance use activity. Second, there are *engagement-orientated strategies* – positive, goal directed behaviours such as seeking social support, establishing suitable study habits, thoughtful planning, or finding effective stress assessment methods (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). These coping strategies have been linked with *motivation* – an internal feeling of need or desire that can activate behaviour and give it direction (Maslow, 1955). Two well-known paradigms of motivation, first coined by Maslow (1955), have been discussed in different, yet analogous, ways in the psychological literature, *deficiency motivation* and *growth motivation. Deficiency motivation*, linked to Self-Determination Theory's (SDT) *extrinsic motivation,* is doing something because it leads to a desired separable outcome, such as external validation or financial security, perhaps stemming from an unmet physiological, safety, social, or esteem need (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Maslow, 1955; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Growth motivation, linked to SDT's *intrinsic motivation*, is doing something because it is inherently enjoyable or to satisfy the desire to realize personal potential, such as the joy of learning or finding life's purpose (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Maslow, 1955; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Bonneville-Roussy and

colleagues (2017) confirmed past study findings; students who have intrinsic or growth motivation go to university to enjoy gaining new knowledge, achieve for the sake of growth and purpose, and are more likely to use engagement-orientated coping strategies when faced with stress. This results in the achievement of higher grades, positive affect, well-being, and engagement with their studies. Conversely, students who have extrinsic or deficiency motivation go to university to appease others or to increase salary. They are more likely to use disengagement-orientated coping strategies when faced with stress and experience higher levels of distress and isolation as a result (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017).

Self-care. Self-care is another form of coping that, in addition to engagement-orientated strategies discussed above, promote personal and holistic well-being (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Colman et al., 2016; Zahniser et al., 2017). This can include, but is not limited to, healthy eating habits, exercise, mindfulness, spirituality, leisure time, social support, and adequate sleep (Colman et al., 2016; El-Ghoroury, 2012). A 2016 meta-analysis combining results from 17 separate studies found that self-care does not necessarily reduce overall stress. However, self-care positively impacted student outlook, improving self-compassion, anxiety, life satisfaction, and reduced some of the damaging effects of stress (Colman et al., 2016; Zahniser et al., 2017). Some studies report that no one form of self-care provided better results than any other form implying that there is not a one-size-fits all solution for all graduate students (Colman et al., 2016). However, in other studies, the unique role of reliable and supportive interactions with family, friends, and specifically faculty stood out as especially important along with the cognitive awareness of stress (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Zahniser et al., 2017). Notably, mental health therapy, employment assistance programs (EAP), and/or self-help groups are absent from the commonly listed strategies utilized by students when in distress; they were discussed only

sparingly within psychology graduate programs where self-care is commonly encouraged (El-Ghoroury, 2012; Zahniser et al., 2017). The most commonly noted barriers to consistent and effective self-care practices were the guilt and shame associated with the stigma of seeking help and the time constraints placed on the students by their high expectation graduate programs, creating a tension between meeting inflexible deadlines and time for themselves (Zahniser et al., 2017).

Section Summary

Individuals enter into higher education for many reasons; for some it is for more external motives such as advancing their career or increasing their salaries; for others, the thirst for knowledge and intellectual challenge beckons them to apply. Motivation aside, there are also varying successful completion rates among different ages, races, and genders, with women attending and outperforming the men at a higher ratio. Financial concerns also contribute to students' withdrawal from their programs. There has been significant research suggesting that graduate students experience substantial pressures and distress leading to anxiety, depression, burn-out and program surrender. Moreover, specific coping strategies used by students have been identified and associated with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Self-care has been shown to increase healthy responses to stress. Parents in graduate school, most often women, experience all of the same distress as other traditional students, yet have the added responsibilities, expectations, and obligations to their families. This will be discussed in the next section.

Part III: Mothers & Academia

The lack of existing literature on mothers in graduate school necessitated the inclusion of mothers in professional academia. Many of the experiences of time demands, health impacts, and negative emotions are similar between academic professionals and students, as are some of the

gendered politics; however, there are some distinctions which will be considered below.

Mothers in the Academic Workplace

There is limited research throughout various western cultures, including Canada, surrounding the impacts of working in an academic environment on mothers, especially those trying to achieve tenure. Although overt discrimination seems to have waned somewhat, similar to the rest of society, gender continues to have a significant influence on the experience of academically employed parents (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Monroe, Ozyurt, Wrigley, & Alexander, 2008; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). The social change towards gender equality, despite feminist advances and discourse, is no longer moving as fast as it once was (Acker & Armenti, 2004). Just as many women feel their motherhood is not just an act of care, mothers in academia often see their profession as a part of their identity (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Being in academia is associated with flexibility in work hours that are not usually obtainable within other professions (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). However, the flexible hours that are meant to add balance to academic parents' lives, in practice, often reinforce traditional gender roles (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). Women more often than men, accept the flexibility in hours option to do housework and childcare, rather than focusing on working or researching from home as they may have planned (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Öhrn, Petra, Gustafsson, Lundahl, & Nyström, 2009; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). For mothers, home time so often becomes 'other's time' (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Moreover, there are times during the semester when the workload increases or long working hours become necessary, something that is becoming more common with growing institutional demands (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). In the United States, nearly one out of every five university instructors experience *burn-out*, a state

of complete mental and physical exhaustion after being exposed to an emotionally demanding situation for a long period of time (Lackritz, 2004; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Burn-out can lead to mediocrity or dissatisfaction at work and eventually teachers may leave their positions with the university (Lackritz, 2004). Reports from universities in the United States, Canada, and the UK also describe instructors' negativity regarding work, low work-life balance, and low work satisfaction (Horton, 2006; Lackritz, 2004; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013).

University teachers that are women, like their graduate student counterparts, often get very little sleep. High levels of stress, extreme fatigue and exhaustion all accompany raising children whilst building an academic career (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Additionally, women report higher levels of isolation and emotional exhaustion while men report having the experience of depersonalization, or feelings of being detached (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Lackritz, 2004; Monroe et al., 2008). Coping by working harder and sleeping less negates self-care and illness is often the result for tired mothers, an experience their male colleagues do not endorse (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Some mothers felt guilty for complaining about their role conflicts when they love and choose to have children; conversely, academic fathers did not mention their heavy workload at home or complain about the sacrifices they have had to make for their children (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Fathers for the most part felt they were in control of their own time both academically and at home (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013).

Mothers in academia said they habitually work sporadically in the vicinity of their family rather than in a separate room, even if they had a personal office available. This reduced their guilt and gave the sense that they were still being supportive of their family. Men did not report feelings of guilt or that they needed to justify their work habits to their partners or families

(Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). This may be in part due to the 'male breadwinner role' abdicating them from feeling responsible for family duties, even if their partners contribute equally or more to the collective family income (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Unlike fathers, mothers are more likely to make promises to their family to make up lost time if they have had to work outside of expected work hours, making it more difficult to get the research points, extra pay, and the professional accolades that men often enjoy for publishing multiple articles (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013).

Despite the appearance of attempts at gender equality from university administrations, many women report feeling it is for show. They feel that universities prefer to retain the traditional *linear male-dominated model* and life patterns – full-time, career focused, with little evidence of family duties (Monroe et al., 2008), with women simply fitting themselves into it despite the family demands for which they tend to feel responsible (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). Other studies suggest it is the resistance to change in the area of work/family culture that is reinforcing the barrier to gender equality (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). It is important to note that there are some studies that have found no difference in levels of work/family conflict between genders, suggesting that men can also experience distress related to their multiple roles; however, it has been shown to be experienced very differently (Byron, 2005; Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008).

Positions with a lot of money, power, and status are generally assigned to men; male academics are more likely to be on the tenure track and to be promoted to tenure or full professorship with higher salaries than women of the same years of experience (Monroe et al., 2008; Öhrn et al., 2009). When women do attain higher level positions their authority or power within that held position is frequently diminished and experiences of marginalization and

discrimination increase with tenure (Monroe et al., 2008). Remarkably, women make up 57% of the doctorate degrees awarded, yet only 20% of tenured faculty are women and make approximately 80% of the typical man's salary (Monroe et al., 2008; Öhrn et al., 2009). This effect might be partially augmented by the lack of *homosociality* for women in academia – other women in power positions encouraging additional women to apply, a common practice among males; finding success is difficult in academia without support (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Öhrn et al., 2009). Women also may be self-selecting out of higher academic positions as academia is seen as barrier to competent parenthood (Trepal et al., 2014; van Anders, 2000). However, as the older, mostly male generation in academia retire, this trend could change. Younger women, raised with the expectation of both professional success and mutually shared home responsibilities, may push for more equality legally and socially (Acker & Armenti, 2004).

Current women in faculty stated that they feel legal and political action is ineffective and instead accept individual responsibility by attempting other ways to change power dynamics within their workplace (Monroe et al., 2008). Many women opt to postpone families despite the feeling of passing biological time until after they have achieved tenure or other high-level positions in academia (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Trepal et al., 2014).

Having some understanding of the reported experiences of mothers in academic professions provides some insight into the challenges of working within a university setting; however, there are some key factors that differ for graduate student-mothers. The limited literature on the topic will be discussed in the following section.

Graduate Student-Mothers' Experience

Recent research that has explored the combined experience of motherhood and graduate school is extremely limited, especially in Canada. Notably, most of the studies focus on both

mothers and fathers collectively rather than the unique and divergent experience of student-mothers, despite acknowledging that most graduate school parents are, in fact, women (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Mothers' presence in graduate school is "invisible" (Moreau & Kerner, 2015, p. 218) or frequently reduced to a demographic variable in the rare occurrence that family status is recorded, rather than a defining experience of resiliency and identity formation (Lynch, 2008).

Enrollment and attrition. Women outnumber men in graduate school in Canada, as they also do in the UK, Denmark, and in the United States (Brooks, 2012a; DeClou, 2016). DeClou (2016) looked specifically into the attrition rates in Canada in 2016. This study determined that over 57% of graduate students are women and that only 3% are parents, including mothers and fathers. Parents are 57% less likely to complete their graduate program than other graduate students, ratios that are somewhat consistent with American universities (DeClou, 2016; Lynch, 2008). Like mothers in faculty positions, many non-mothers state that they have delayed or may choose not to have children because of the conflict with their academic goals; men do not reflect similar planned sacrifices (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal, & Kilkey, 2008). Part-time graduate programs are rare in Canada; therefore, the financial and temporal cost of full-time studies may be too high for some families with children to bear (DeClou, 2016). Other limited studies focus on the graduate student experiences from United States, UK, and Denmark and are discussed herein.

Role and time conflicts. Students experience similar challenges to academic faculty parents, with the difficulties of balancing two very "greedy institutions" (Moreau & Kerner, 2015, p. 220), graduate school and parenthood (Lynch, 2008; Sallee, 2015). However, the exemplar of a graduate student is consistent with that of a carefree student, young and light-hearted, with the ability to apply full-time hours to their program of study. This comes in addition to the unencumbered, white, middle class male ideal from the not so distant past, which still persists across many contexts

(Brooks, 2012a, 2012b; Estes, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Time-related difficulties, such as discordant schedules with school, children, or spouse, as well as an overall lack of time, plague graduate-student parents and are often the most discussed issues among this group (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Sallee, 2015). Parents remain cognisant of the time being given to one role at the cost of the other; these "role bargains" (Goode, 1960, p. 483) are analogous to time transactions that are critically limited in supply (Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, & McFarlane, 2013; Sallee, 2015). As an academic extension of the previously discussed notion of *intensive parenting* that is still endorsed in Western culture, parents feel pressured to also be educated and are constantly made aware that there is always room left for improvement in their roles; they can always sacrifice more of themselves to be a 'better parent' or a 'better student' (Brooks, 2012a: Estes, 2011; Lynch, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009; Walls et al., 2016). Student-parents report feeling that there is an expectation that they will automatically fail at one or both of these roles (Estes, 2011).

Graduate students are expected to not only complete their coursework and internships, they are also expected to attend conferences, participate in or lead research projects, become teacher assistants (TAs), participate in cohort or faculty meetings and events, and/or perform administrative duties; all things that can further conflict with unpredictable parenting obligations and the lack of engagement in these activities can be seen as lack of commitment to the program (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Springer et al., 2009). Additionally, men and women with children are perceived differently, impacting their rates of success in the often-competitive environment of higher education (Trepal et al.,2014). As with study findings on women in the workplace, students with children are more likely to be seen as warm and nurturing rather than competent in their area of study, versus men who retain their apparent competence but gain perceived attributes of warmth

(Trepal et al., 2014). Mothers acknowledge that society reinforces the overt and covert messages that children present a barrier to higher level degree attainment (Trepal, et al., 2014).

Consistent with research on all mothers, student-parents, mostly women, found the constraints on their time often resulted in domestic duties suffering or not getting done at all, as the responsibility of the housework still rested upon them, as was most of the childcare; this was compounded by the perception of graduate school schedule flexibility (Brooks, 2012a; Kray et al., 2017; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Conversely, student-fathers report benefiting from having stay-at-home mothers ease their family obligations, with many not endorsing family-school role conflicts at all (Brooks, 2012a; Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Financial. Parents in graduate school discuss the increased financial pressures and the subsequent anxiety they experience while undertaking their programs (Lynch, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Trepal et al., 2014). Their limited ability to bring in full-time salaries does not negate the need for expenditures for their families and students often incur significant debt (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Additionally, childcare is an added expense for academic families and not all programs support maternity leave (Brooks, 2012b). Using a Statistics Canada report drawing from data collected in 2011, the cost of external childcare such as nannies, daycares, and/or preschool centers, are inconsistent across Canada; they range from $152 per month in Quebec, where they have subsidized childcare, to $677 in Ontario. Before and after school care costs approximately $200 per month in provinces outside of Quebec, whereas Quebec parents generally pay less (Statistics Canada, 2011). Some parents have access to grants and loans that are specific to their family situation; however, they are not always well known, they are limited in number, and can often be delayed (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Mothers planning to go to graduate school often opt to wait until their children are of school age to help mitigate childcare costs (Brooks, 2012a).

Mental and physical health. Mental and physical health came up for some students in studies from the UK and the United States. As Lynch's (2008) study was conducted in the United States, there was a considerable focus on the concerns around healthcare and insurance for the students and their families while in graduate school; however, there was no mention of physical or mental health impacts related to school or parenting stress. Conversely, in the UK, Moreau and Kerner (2015) found that some student-parents attributed the physical and mental illnesses they had experienced to their student-parent status; this falls in line with the literature reporting the high rates of sleep deprivation and depression within the student-parent demographic. Additionally, they found that academic parents felt guilty and as if they did not fit neatly into either role if they were unable to comply with both family and program expectations (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Coping. Haynes and colleagues (2012) found that many graduate level students who are women struggled to find effective coping strategies for time management, goal setting, and maintaining social support. However, Sallee (2015) found that consistent with Goode's (1960) role strain theory, many graduate students in general employ four types of coping strategies to deal with their normal experience of role conflict, such as (a) *compartmentalization* – focusing on one role demand at a time, (b) *role elimination* – rejection of certain roles, (c) *delegation* – passing responsibilities onto others, and (d) *role extension* – the taking on of additional roles, acting as a justification for failures to meet role expectations (Sallee, 2015). Additionally, parents also found ways to *merge roles* when possible (Sallee, 2015).

Compartmentalization. Sallee (2015) and Brooks (2012a, 2012b) suggested that many parents in their studies felt comfortable sharing their positive childrearing experiences with their academic peers and that of all their roles, they identified most with parenting. Yet discordant research found that parents frequently demonstrated compartmentalization to deal with demands on

their time (Estes, 2011; Sallee, 2015). For example, at school, several studies have found that student-parents would downplay their parenting role, concealing their exhaustion, and would be encouraged to do the same at home by diminishing their academic student identity (Lynch, 2008; Pillay, 2009; Sallee, 2015). Pillay (2009) argues that this separation of intellect from motherhood erroneously presumes that reason and logic cannot co-exist with nurturing and love, effectively eroding mothers' wholeness of self. Additionally, student-parents considered that the negative experiences or struggles they faced were a direct result of their own personal failures, and habitually resorted to handling parenting role conflicts on their own and rarely sought out special treatment or requested support from their faculty or program administrators (Brooks, 2012b; Sallee, 2015). Strict adherence to boundaries, schedules, and superior time management skills played a critical part in keeping roles separate, allowing parents to focus on one task at a time to the exclusion of all else (Sallee, 2015; Trepal et al., 2014). Decisions about where to spend time on each role was a perpetual battle and feelings of guilt and dissonance often resulted, especially if time with children was forfeited (Brooks, 2012a; Sallee, 2015; Trepal et al., 2014). To stay close, but maintain physical boundaries between roles, graduate student-parents sought out separate office space in their homes in order to continue to perform childcare and domestic chores (Brooks, 2012a). Leisure, lunch, and sleep time often become the most easily sacrificed to avoid feelings of remorse for missing important family or school obligations (Brooks, 2012a; Sallee, 2015). Mothers sometimes felt their schoolwork was analogous to leisure time and they had chosen to use it on school (Brooks, 2012a; Sallee, 2015). Parents in Sallee's (2015) and Brooks' (2012a) studies in the UK said that despite the equal pull from their multiple commitments student-mothers still chose to prioritize their parenting and identity as parents above school, marriage, and work responsibilities, as well as above their own needs (Brooks, 2012a; Lynch, 2008; Martinez et al., 2013; Sallee, 2015).

Role elimination. Role elimination is another common strategy used by graduate school-parents to reduce time conflicts (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Sallee, 2015). Through the reduction of roles, and therefore, tasks and responsibilities, parents can find more time to devote to family and school (Sallee, 2015). Commonly, the roles that were chosen to be dropped were their own hobbies, personal interests, or professional growth. Additionally, wellness practices related to self-care such as time for themselves, exercise, and time with friends also lost precedence (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Sallee, 2015).

Delegation. Graduate student-parents reported that they delegated some parental responsibilities to spouses who were willing to help and spend more time with their children (Sallee, 2015). Student-parents who felt supported by their partners or families in childcare and domestic duties said they managed much better in handling their other obligations related to school (Lynch, 2008). However, as already discussed, childcare and domestic responsibilities often stayed with the mother (Lynch, 2008).

Role extension. Role extension is used by some parents to ease feelings of failure, for example, adding even more responsibilities onto an already accepted role reduces expectations and provides valid reasons to not be able to meet obligations (Goode, 1960; Sallee, 2015). For example, a mother might say that volunteering for the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), an extension of the parenting role, got in the way of completing an assignment or forced a less challenging topic choice in class (Sallee, 2015). This strategy has obvious limitations and can eventually lead to even more demands and distress (Goode, 1960).

Identity and merging roles. Whenever possible, parents attempted to combine responsibilities by doing schoolwork from home or using experiences as a parent to compliment school assignments (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Sallee, 2015). This facilitated increased

positive feelings towards having multiple roles and improved graduate success (Sallee, 2015). Graduate student-parents also reported feeling motivated by their children to go to and persevere in graduate school, stating that sharing their university experience and being a role model was incredibly important to them, thus helping to reconcile feelings of guilt for being a 'bad parent' (Brooks, 2012a; Lynch 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Additionally, parents came to frame their ambition as 'doing it for themselves', that there was honour and pride in striving for their dreams, and finding and fulfilling their purpose despite the adversity or sacrifices that face student-parents (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Trepal et al., 2014).

Relationships. The transition of identity for parents through graduate school can either be beneficial to relationships, increasing respect and status, or come at some expense to friendships, family, or spousal relationships (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Trepal et al., 2014). Student-parents who felt emotionally supported by their family, and especially from their partners, were more likely to finish their programs because emotional support mediated the damaging effect of anxiety and isolation that can lead to program withdrawal (Lynch, 2008). Additionally, the realization that dissident identities can merge with favourable results, that there are 'good student-parents', brings tremendous relief to parents and is effective in helping to amend the attitudes of parents, families, and academic administrators regarding the competence of student-parents in higher education (Estes, 2011). There are some academic models in Scandinavian countries that have shown to be less harmful to relationships and mental health, models that encourage and support gender equality allowing both parents to flourish in graduate school (Brooks 2012a, 2012b).

System. Experience of faculty support varied among graduate student-parents, some stated they felt very supported and encouraged to stay the path, while others felt they were discriminated

against for their parental status, much as faculty members in academia frequently reported (Monroe et al., 2008; Trepal et al., 2014). Other parents felt they were intellectually supported by their faculty or advisors, yet noted that they believed their feelings of depression and anxiety were not always taken seriously; their sense of disconnection or guilt from being away from family, or for unfinished coursework, further exacerbated feelings of incompetence and isolation (Lynch, 2008; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Springer et al., 2009; Trepal et al., 2014). As was mentioned earlier, student-mothers often felt that their difficulties in managing school and parenthood were a result of their own failures rather than the system letting them down (Brooks, 2012b; Sallee, 2015). However, Brooks (2012a, 2012b) found that the experience of mothers in graduate school in several other countries, differ from that of Canada, the United States, and many parts of the UK. There are small pockets in Europe where there are reorganization efforts being made to emulate Scandinavian social policy, for example (a) the expansion of childcare and education services, (b) promotion of work/family balance, (c) emphasis on men's performance as fathers, and (d) financial assistance to those with care obligations (Daly, 2011). Brooks (2012a) discusses how Denmark has engaged in an *adult worker model*– a social policy in which it is expected that each individual, either man or woman, has the potential to be a worker or possesses an equal choice to do so (Daly, 2011). This exists in contrast to the *male breadwinner model* – in which roles and responsibilities are differentiated for men and women by the internalization of gender roles during socialization (Pfau-Effinger, 2004). The male breadwinner system, still associated with many Western societies (Lynch, 2008), has historically resulted in a patriarchal and male-dominated society in which women take care of childcare and domestic duties, while men work outside the home (Pfau-Effinger, 2004). Conversely, the Danish gender discourse included the notion of partners 'taking turns' in their academic and professional endeavors (Brooks, 2012a). Parents in

Denmark enjoy state-funded or low-cost childcare and both mothers and fathers confirm that they feel comfortable in taking either the full, flexible, or maternity leave options for work and graduate school. These choices are nationally mandated rather than at the discretion of the faculty, like in many Canadian, UK, and United States universities (Brooks 2012a, 2012b; Springer et al., 2009). Graduate student-parents also did not feel they were evaluated as lesser by faculty or program administrators in the Danish universities that were studied (Brooks 2012b). Both mothers and fathers described a balanced sense of role identities as parents and as students. Consequently, Danish student-parents did not endorse any feelings of guilt about combining their parenting roles with that of higher educational pursuits, believing that time with other kind and empathetic caregivers is good for children's well-rounded development (Brooks, 2012a; Estes, 2011).

Section Summary

Mothers working in academia face many of the same gender inequalities as other women in school. As academic professionals, they do enjoy some flexibility in their work schedules; however, their free time easily deviates into 'others' time as they continue to uphold the bulk of the domestic and childcare duties. Academic fathers, conversely, do not tend to report experiencing a lack of control over their time. As a result, academic mothers state high levels of sleep deprivation, burn-out, and feelings of isolation.

The literature on graduate-student mothers is very limited, especially in Canada. The literature that does exist focused more on the high attrition rates and the physical and temporal conflicts of multiple roles, rather than the emotional and physical burden of being a student with children. Additionally, several studies looked at the combined experiences of parents rather than focusing on the unique experiences of mothers in graduate school. To date, research has placed a greater emphasis on the reasons for academic persistence as well as how student-parents solve

time limitation problems, rather than student-mothers' emotional and physical experiences of value conflicts.

Chapter Summary

It is apparent from the literature that the long-held power discrepancy between men and women continues to persist despite hard fought efforts to dispel inaccuracies in female biology, aptitude, role assignment, and overall value of women in relation to men. Thus, women's challenges to beliefs in mothers' natural propensity towards lone nurturing and care for the children and home has led to conflict, confusion, guilt, and shame. Moreover, the movement away from alloparenting towards the Western acceptance of intensive mothering has left many mothers wanting to pursue their own growth and autonomy feeling inadequate or selfish. However, women have pushed the boundaries, entering the workplace, higher education, and the academe in greater numbers than ever before (DeClou, 2016).

There is abundant literature regarding women in academia and their continued experiences of gender imbalances at home and at work. Additionally, there is substantial literature about the experiences of traditional graduate students and their feelings of pressure, time conflict, and distress. Conversely, qualitative research concerning parents in graduate school is limited, with Canadian mothers' expereinces being the most neglected. Internationally, studies have touched on the numerous challenges that student-parents have faced in managing multiple roles, focusing mainly on time conflicts and the common strategies chosen to cope with the distress. Additionally, there has been quantitative research that investigated Canadian attrition rates in higher education that noted high rates of program incompletion within the student-mother sub-group with suppositions that role conflict is a contributing factor (DeClou, 2016). Markedly, the emotional, relational, and physical experiences of Canadian graduate

student-mothers is, to my knowledge, all but absent from the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of graduate student-mothers within a Canadian context, by utilizing IPA methodology that allows participants to openly share their experiences without limitations.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the qualitative methodology chosen for this study and the rationale behind the selection. I begin with a thorough description of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), its philosophical foundations, and the specific relevance of IPA methodology to the research question: What is the lived experience of mothers in graduate school? Additionally, study procedures including ethics approval, recruitment, and data collection and security, will be presented, followed by the processes of analysis, reflections on reflexivity, and the soundness of data quality.

Research Approach

As a young researcher in my undergraduate degree, I was solely exposed to quantitative methodology and statistical analysis. The rhetoric surrounding qualitative and quantitative research was that the latter provided a "better" (p. 839), more objective and factual result through the use of various statistical tools to determine and ensure reliability and credibility (Barnham, 2016). However, my experience during my Counselling Psychology degree allowed me to develop an interest and an appreciation for the exploration of the lived experience and the relativist idea that there can be many interpretations of the same observation (Harper & Thompson, 2011). We so often take our own knowledge of reality for granted by remaining ignorant to the impacts of social context on 'knowledge' and 'reality'. For example, what a Tibetan monk knows to be true about capitalism might be quite different than what a Western businessperson knows to be true (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). These differences in ontological positions, or what we consider the nature of reality and all relationships between what exists in that reality, affects our theory of knowledge, or epistemology. I had been exposed to the assumptions of reality from only the quantitative perspective, leading me to believe in what was

important to study and how. I had to revaluate my assumptions of reality and knowledge (Slevitch, 2011). I came to understand that the use of qualitative research methodology does not limit what can be learned from research; it merely provides the opportunity for additional, deeper perspectives that offer a different theory of knowledge to quantitative research methodology (Barnham, 2016; Slevitch, 2011). Utilizing a qualitative approach for the exploration of the key elements in the experience of mothers in graduate school, sanctions the participants' freedom to consider and present their unique perspectives of performing within at least two of their demanding roles, that of mother and graduate student.

Rationale and Overview of IPA

Although there are clear methodological differences in the epistemological assumptions and techniques of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, there are also significant distinctions between qualitative methods themselves (Harper & Thompson, 2011). Although there are other possible variations and labels for these categories, three main epistemological frameworks underlie researchers' assumptions: (a) realism, assumes a direct relationship between observation and reality; (b) phenomenology, interest in the subjective experience; and (c) social constructivism, interest in how knowledge is generated (Harper & Thompson, 2011). The choice of qualitative methodology must be compatible with the assumptions of the researcher, the nature of the data, and what the research question seeks to uncover (Wood, Giles, & Percy, 2012). As my research interest lies in trying to understand the subjective experience of participants from their perspective a phenomenological approach will allow for a rich, in-depth, exploration of emotions, values, and attitudes. While phenomenology may seem relativist for these reasons, it also requires the realist assumption that participants' accounts will correspond with their experiences (Harper & Thompson, 2011).

IPA, one of the phenomenological methodologies, was chosen for this current exploration of the lived experience of mothers in graduate school because it not only guides the researcher in capturing of the subjective experience of each participant and how they, themselves, make sense of their experiences, but also proposes an interpretation of participants' accounts of their experiences (Harper & Thompson, 2011). IPA is a rather new methodology, yet has developed quickly and is being embraced by many sub-disciplines in psychology and other human sciences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008). IPA is a humanizing research approach that resonates with my theoretical perspective of counselling, my value of upholding the client-therapist relationship, and using empathy to help view participants' worlds through their eyes (Wertz, 2005).

Philosophical Foundations of IPA

IPA is built on three core philosophical foundations (a) phenomenology, (b) hermeneutics, and (c) ideography, each with their own history and influential contributors that come together to form a cohesive and distinctive methodological approach (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology. *Phenomenology* is the philosophical study of direct experience (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenologists contemplate what it is 'like' to exist and consider how we can come to understand this experience. Four prominent philosophers, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, each influenced the practice of phenomenology in their own distinct ways (Smith et al., 2009).

Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher and mathematician, is remembered as the founding father of the phenomenology movement (Carr, 1987). He contemplated the distinction between appearance and reality, the existence of an inner world that occurs concurrently with the outer world (Carr, 1987). He argued that the basis of the phenomenological inquiry should

be the examination of this inner world experience through the identification of the essential qualities of that experience, particularly, features that can transcend predetermined categories that have been hidden by assumptions, culture, and circumstance (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). In order to achieve this, Husserl indicated the necessity of two actions. First, there must be an intentional turning-in of attention, a disengagement from our "lifeworld" (p. 15), the everyday, taken-for-granted objects in our environment, to an inner reflection of the experience of those objects (Smith et al., 2009). Second, objects of reflection need to be "*bracketed*" (p. 13), or separated out from the anticipated perceptions, values, and judgements of the outer world in order to be perceived in their own (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, Husserl maintained that each bracketed experience can be further reduced, bracketed, and repeatedly looked at from different perspectives and lenses, ideally arriving at the core essence or "*eidos*" (p. 14) of an experience (Smith et al., 2009). Although phenomenological research tends to emphasize the experience of others, Husserl's focus leaned towards the phenomenological inquiry of his own experiential processes, ideally, to isolate the content of consciousness itself. Nonetheless, Husserl's work inspired the careful examination of the inner experience and how the process of reflection and bracketing can illuminate previously taken-for-granted phenomena (Smith et al., 2009).

Martin Heidegger, a student of Edmund Husserl, attributed a great deal of his knowledge to Husserl, yet diverged in his own approach to phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). Where Husserl focused on the theoretical transcendence of each bracketed experience from the outer-world, Heidegger felt that our experience of existence was more interrelated and temporal, as our time here is limited (Dostal, 1993; Smith et al., 2009). He contended that experience cannot be removed from the context, that "*Dasein"* (p. 16, Smith et al., 2009),

human existence, depends on history, language, and culture, as well as the meaningful behaviours and relationships in which we engage (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Engagement with the world is a shared and deeply interpersonal experience and our "*intersubjectivity"* (p. 17) is what enables us to communicate and connect with one other (Smith et al., 2009). The key take-away from Heidegger is that experience cannot be reduced into isolation; each experience is always "in-relation-to" (p. 17, Smith et al., 2009) something and can never be fully bracketed or separated from its context or temporality (Dostal, 1993; Smith et al., 2009).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a notable French philosopher added to Husserl and Heidegger's work with his own humanistic phenomenological viewpoint (Fusar-Poli & Stanghellini, 2009). He felt that an additional focus is needed on the relationship between consciousness, the physical person, and the outer contextual world, referring to it as *embodied-subjectivity* (Fusar-Poli & Stanghellini, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, the experience of that connection is utterly unique to each individual and wholly accessible only to them (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, we can attempt to understand the experience of another through thoughtful probing and empathy, however, a complete and true experience can never be fully shared or understood (Smith et al., 2009).

Jean-Paul Sartre, a twentieth century French philosopher focused, as did Heidegger, on the existential quality of phenomenology in that we each have an active and ongoing engagement with the world. However, Sartre also emphasized the ongoing self-conscious formation and meaningful development of becoming rather than a discovery of a pre-determined self (Smith et al., 2009).Thus, Sartre's greatest concern was with what *will* or *could be* rather than *what is*, an acknowledgment to the importance of the *nothingness*. He also

contended that the absence of others in our world has as much significance as their presence (Smith et al., 2009). We are mutually shaped by the experience and perception of others – both positive and unfavourable – as well as impacted by our own overlapping projects of becoming (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre famously quoted "Hell is other people" (as cited in Haslam, Reicher, & Levine, 2012, p. 21) at the end of his 1943 play *No Exit*. He was not suggesting that our connections with others is corrosive but that we need others to truly understand ourselves; it is the in the corruption of our relationships that we find hell (Haslam et al., 2012). Sartre's contribution to the phenomenological inquiry was to re-emphasise the importance of contemplating personal context and the substantial influences of social relationships (Smith et al., 2009).

The combined work of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre presented the practice of the phenomenological inquiry to the world. Specifically, Husserl's introduced the transcendental richness of the inner experience by disengaging from the outside world and turning in (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger and Sartre extended Husserl's work by focusing on the interpretation of the *situated* inner experience that occurs while engaging with both the outer world and each other, while Merleau-Ponty emphasized the deeply personal nature and uniqueness of each individual's lived experience (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The phenomenological practice of IPA can be used to help understand inner experience through a process of uncovering the unique perceptions, interpretations, and meanings by prioritizing the participants' world view and their relation to the rest of the world (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). When using IPA however, one cannot focus solely on the participant's viewpoint; the researcher must also endeavour to make meaning of

the participants' experiences and interpret them in a way that may provide answers to the research question – leading us into hermeneutics (Reid et al., 2005).

Hermeneutics. *Hermeneutics*, the second tenant of the IPA methodology, is the theory of interpretation; it originated as a way to understand biblical text, eventually evolving philosophically into the interpretation of other historical and literary works (Smith et al., 2009). Three major contributors to the practice of hermeneutics were: Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Smith et al., 2009).

Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German philosopher and New Testament scholar, felt that a holistic interpretation of the spoken or written word occurred in two ways (Ricoeur, 1977). First, through a technical or "*grammatical"* (p. 21) interpretation that focuses on the precise and unbiased meaning of the words explicitly provided by the author (Ricoeur, 1977; Smith et al., 2009). Second, through a "*psychological"* (p. 21) interpretation that integrates the detailed analysis of the original text, the researchers' experience with the larger data sample, consultations with current psychological theory, and their own intuition (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, this can allow for the unique individuality of the author to shine through, as well as lead to perceptions and powerful insights of which the author may not have been aware of (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger was aiming for a hermeneutic phenomenology, believing that our access to the lived experience is always through interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger broke down the word "*phenomenology"* (p. 23) into its two Grecian root words, "*phenomenon"* and "*logos"* (Smith et al., 2009, p. 23). "*Phenomenon"* (p. 23) means to appear suggesting a state change from not being present, into something that allows its presence to be known, yet still with the possibility of deception of its true meaning (Smith et al., 2009). Although there are

things in this world that would exist even if we humans did not, Heidegger contended that nothing can be revealed as real or un-real until we encounter it (Larkin et al., 2008). Alternatively, "*logos*" (p. 24) uses logical reasoning to communicate the presenting phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, in bringing the perceptual and the analytical back together, Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology is the investigation of that which comes forward from the darkness, in whatever form, and the understood meaning, or *interpretation*, of that newly presented form (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, interpretation and genuine understanding, Heidegger reminds us, can be occluded by the listener or reader's own "*fore-conception"* (pp. 24-25; prior experiences and assumptions) that are accessed and reflected upon once a text has been read or heard (Smith et al., 2009). Although Heidegger diverged with Husserl on the priority of the phenomenologic inquiry, he acknowledged the value of continual bracketing of experience, not for the purpose of a presuppositionless interpretation, but to recognize the pronounced impact of individual situated perspectives on interpretation (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Larkin et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2009).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, another hermeneutic philosopher, further emphasized Heidegger's argument about the significance of the persistent intrusion of fore-conception on understanding (Byrne, 2001; Smith et al., 2009). Each reconsideration of fore-conception reveals a new projection of meaning, thus creating cyclical interactions between previous fore-conceptions and the new text (Smith et al., 2009). The text, Gadamer asserts, must determinedly break through the persistent preconceptions with a voice loud enough to be heard, and even then, is ever impacted (Smith et al., 2009). In order to combat this effect, the interpreter must continuously question their resistance to openness, and carefully consider both their prejudices and the perspectives of the author (Byrne, 2001; Smith et al., 2009).

Alternatively, Gadamer challenges Schleiermacher's claim that a reader's interpretation may provide a better understanding of the author than the author themselves (Smith et al., 2009). He distinguishes between understanding the author and understanding the text, stating that the primary goal is to learn from the text itself, situated within the light of present day knowledge and experience, yet with the understanding of the author's cultural, traditional, and etymological history (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Nevertheless, IPA researchers today tend to have real-time access and conversations with their interviewees, thus the insights from both Gadamer and Schleiermacher are valuable within contemporary research studies (Smith et al., 2009).

Hermeneutic Circle. The "*hermeneutic circle"* (p. 27) describes the interdependent, or circular, method of understanding both the whole and its parts (Smith et al., 2009). For example, the meaning of a sentence is derived from the meaning, order, and structure of the words within it, while the meaning of each word is reliant on the context of the whole sentence (Kinsella, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). This can operate within many levels, such as an excerpt (a part) from within an interview (the whole) or a single incidence within a whole life, each is contingent on the other for context and meaning (Smith et al., 2009). This interdependent relationship is indicative of the process of an IPA analysis. IPA does not always progress in a step-by-step linear fashion, but rather as an iterative process of recurring variant analyses, interpretations relying on other interpretations, that allow for many opportunities for self-reflection of one's assumptions and connections to the data (Kinsella, 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

To summarize, Heidegger's concept of hermeneutic phenomenology and his understanding of the importance of fore-conception in interpretation are central theoretical components of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger and Gadamer offer significant insights into

how fore-conception affects the understanding of an etymological phenomenon, while Schlermacher's longstanding thoughts on how novel revelations of the author can be brought forward through interpretation. Each unique contribution is valuable within today's IPA research study (Smith et al., 2009).

Idiography. The final philosophical foundation of IPA is *idiography*, the study of the particular (Smith et al., 2009). Idiography exists in marked contrast to *nomothetic* studies in psychology, which are foremost concerned with arriving at general claims for human behaviour through the collection of information from a large samples (Smith et al., 2009). Nomothetic studies tend to be quantitative in methodological approach, transforming human behaviour into measurable numbers in order to utilize inferential statistics (Smith et al., 2009). In doing this, the individual is lost, leaving generalizations and probabilities that can no longer fit with any one person (Smith et al., 2009). Alternatively, the case study methodology is truly idiographic, involving meticulous attention to detail and elaborate investigation of unique phenomena and individuals. Case studies have the potential to reveal rich, unanticipated results or even discredit long held assumptions and theories (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is committed to the details of the person-in-context, focusing on unearthing the depth of experience for each particular individual through careful iterative analysis of a very small sample (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Although hermeneutic phenomenology has exposed the complexity of the individual lived experience, experience itself remains a worldly and shared phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, by meticulously examining each single case and likewise evaluating the cases as a whole, identification of themes and cautious generalizations can be made without losing distinctive critical elements – a true exemplar of the hermeneutic circle in practice (Smith et al., 2009).

The three philosophical foundations of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography come together to guide the qualitative researcher in the interpretation of meanings in the discovered phenomena (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Furthermore, this meaning-making occurs through the interpretation of participants' unique interviews, in part, in their entirety, as well as all of the interviews interpreted together as a whole (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA Research Procedures

As IPA methodology is concerned with the in-depth examination of the unique lived experience, I deemed it to be the ideal methodology for exploring how mothers' portray their experience in graduate school (Smith et al., 2009). In choosing IPA, I followed its guidelines for recruitment, small sample size, eligibility, and flexible, yet rich, interview procedures (Smith et al., 2009).

Participant Recruitment and Eligibility

Once the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) approved the submitted ethics application (REB16-1287), participants were recruited through digital and printed posters describing the research and inclusion criteria (see Appendix A). The digital posters were posted on my personal Facebook site with public access, and printed posters were placed at various locations at the University of Calgary. An email address was included for potential participants to make initial contact. Sampling was consistent with the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009), with the purposeful selection of three to six parents who each had the perspective of being a parent while in graduate school. Initially, the intent was to include all genders and divide the sample by those who identified as fathers and those who identified as mothers. This was in the hopes to understand the phenomenon of parenthood in graduate school from both perspectives; however, despite some initial interest, no fathers

followed through with contacting me by email for an interview. Therefore, after conducting five interviews with mothers, it was decided that the value of a homogenous sample could be maintained by including an additional mother as the sixth participant. Nine individuals in total sent an email with an interest in participating, and of those, six were included in the final sample. One participant resided a distance too great to do an in-person interview and, therefore, chose to withdraw. One interested participant had already taken part in the pilot study and due to concerns of contamination she was deemed ineligible as she had already been exposed to a similar interview and in-turn, may respond differently than those who had not experienced it before (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Additionally, a family member showed interest in participating, however, due to concerns around dual roles, my pre-existing knowledge of her family-school-life, and the possibility of social desirability or demand characteristics it was decided that participants with a pre-existing relationships could not to be included in the current study (Mcconnell-Henry, James, Chapman, & Francis, 2009).

Once participants reached out to me via email to express their interest in participating, each was contacted and screened for eligibility. Each potential participant was asked through email to confirm (a) her ability to read, understand, and speak English; (b) her status as a parent, adoptive parent, or caregiver of at least one child that resided with her at least 50% of the time; and (c) current status (or within the last 5 years) as a full-time, on-campus, graduate student. The University of Calgary (University of Calgary, 2018) designates a full-time graduate student to be a student in a Master's or Doctoral program, who would normally work an average of 40 hours per week on program-related activities including course work (at least three full courses or equivalents per annual registration), program related reading, research work related to thesis proposals and/or defence, practicums and/or internships, and exam

studies. For the purpose of this study, “on-campus studies” (see Appendix A & B) required that the student be physically present on her University campus for at least three full courses or equivalents per annual registration. This decision was made in order to compare similarities and differences between a homogenous sample of parents that might need to make scheduling arrangements around their family life (Smith et al., 2009). Once participant eligibility was confirmed and verbal consent was given to continue, a mutually agreeable in-person interview time was scheduled. All participants in the sample were married mothers between the ages of 30 and 41 years who resided with the father of their children during their time in graduate school.

As a small token of appreciation for their time and contribution the interviewees were given their choice of a $10 CAD gift card to Starbucks, Tim Horton’s, or Amazon.ca.

Interview Procedures

Interviews were conducted between November 2017 and April 2018, in a private room at the University of Calgary or within a private booked room at a Public Library closest to their residence.

Upon meeting each participant, they were provided with a printed consent form before commencing with the interview (see Appendix C). The consent form was written in modest language at approximately an 8th grade reading level as advised by the CFREB at the University of Calgary. The form included information regarding the possible risks to emotional well-being, as well as the limitations of privacy and the precautions taken to secure their personal information and privacy. The participants were informed that the interviews had the potential to reveal information that is required by law to be reported to a law enforcement or other agency (e.g., child abuse), and that I was legally required to report any instances of abuse,

harm to self, or harm to others. Resources were included for counselling if feelings of distress were experienced during or after the interview. Time was provided for the participants to review the form, ask any questions they might have had, and provide their signature giving consent to continue with the video recorded interview. Participation in the interview or any part of the interview was completely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time without penalty. Additionally, participants were informed that any collected information could be withdrawn for up to one month after data was collected; this option was not utilized.

The semi-structured interviews were between 67-80 minutes in length and were video recorded for ease of transcription and to carefully observe and take note of body language, facial expression, pauses, laughter, tone, and fluency (Smith et al., 2009). In order to allow flexibility to the content of the interview, and to the individuals themselves, the structured interview questions were limited to seven short demographic questions and one broad opening question regarding their experience of being a parent while attending full time graduate school (see Appendix D). I let the participants know that for memory purposes, I may write brief cue words during the course of the interview that would remain in view and could be read by the interviewee at any time. As per IPA protocol, participants were given the opportunity to share their stories freely, express emotions and concerns, and reflect upon the full range of their experiences at some length (Smith et al., 2009). Subsequent follow-up questions and prompts were asked depending on their answers, comments, or body language and I frequently came back to previously noted topics to provide further depth of disclosure. My training in the MSc Counselling Psychology Program at the University of Calgary afforded me the skills necessary to provide empathetic and sensitive responses to emotionally latent topics. Three participants demonstrated some levels of emotional distress during their interview, but all elected to

continue and were encouraged to seek out the resources provided if they felt they needed further support.

After each interview, a few moments were used to reflect on my own personal reactions, challenge any assumptions, and gain an overall impression in order to help "contextualize [each] interview" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 72).

Data Security and Storage

All interview recordings were made using iMovie software on a secure, password protected laptop, and exported to two identical (for back-up purposes) encrypted USBs. All recordings were deleted immediately from the laptop once the transfer was confirmed. The encrypted USBs were kept in a locked cabinet that was only accessible to myself. All interviews were transcribed by me personally using Nvivo and Dragon dictation, and all identifying names and places were replaced with pseudonyms. Once the recordings were fully transcribed and the analysis was complete the video files were deleted. In addition, printed consent forms, non-identifying paper transcriptions and notes were also kept in a securely locked cabinet with access only to myself. At the completion of the study, all printed documentation and remaining digital data stored on the encrypted USBs, will be stored in a locked cabinet with access to only myself and my supervisor for five years, at which time, will be permanently shredded or erased.

Data Analysis

Smith et al. (2009) recommends a series of procedures that moves the researcher from a descriptive type analysis of participants accounts to the interpretation of their lived experiences. I elected to creatively follow their counsel on the use of the subsequent six steps with the analysis process.

Step 1: Immersing Myself in the Data

IPA requires that transcriptions be chronicled verbatim (Smith et al., 2009); I chose to transcribe all six of the video-recorded interviews, using NVivo, to get as familiar with the participants' narrations as possible. I elected to video-record for several reasons. First, I received feedback from collogues that sometimes audio recordings could be unclear. Having the addition of visual cues did aid in avoiding this difficulty. Second, I accurately presumed, based on my own experience as a mother in graduate school, that there may be silent, yet valuable, communication of emotion or discomfort through body language or facial expressions that would not have been relayed through audio. Finally, I was able to re-watch the videos and re-experience the interview as an objective observer while recording my early impressions, a suggestion by Smith and colleagues (2009). This helped to keep the participant as the main focus in subsequent playbacks and facilitated my ability to bracket my own experience as a mother in graduate school.

To maintain precision and accuracy through the transcription process, as well as become exceedingly acquainted with the accounts of the participants, I replayed the videos three additional times. First, I slowed the videos down and repeated what I heard into voice transcribing software called Dragon dictation. I found this greatly enhanced the speed of initial transcribing. Second, I replayed the videos again while proofreading the initial transcription. Finally, after an initial conceptualization of the emerging patterns in the data, I watched the videos one last time to further enhance my greater understanding. Hence, this facilitates the emergence of a hermeneutically circular way of understanding, exploring first the parts, then all of the interviews as a whole (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 2: Initial Noting

Smith and colleagues (2009) suggested printing out the transcriptions with large margins to record detailed notes. However, they also stated that if working on a computer is a regular part of your workflow, that it is a viable option (Smith et al., 2009). I chose to work within the NVivo software program to closely analyze the shared experiences, emotions, and meanings line-by-line, as per Smith et al. (2009), and capture the exploratory and complex initial noting. When first acquiring the practice and knowledge of the IPA analysis technique, I appreciated the ability to organize and manipulate information, as my understanding of the process evolved. With NVivo, I used: (a) coding techniques, selecting sections of text and allocating it to differing categories or nodes, such as descriptive content or specific use of language; (b) annotations, selecting sections of texts to engage in interrogative and conceptual commentary; and (c) memos for thoughts or reflections that can be linked to interviews or nodes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Smith, 2009). The NVivo coding technique was very versatile in that I could categorize anything, such as attitudes, exaggerations, contradictions, or emotional reactions and each time I reviewed a transcript I could look at it with a slightly altered lens, grasping different nuances each time. As Smith and colleagues (2009) predicted, I found that I used annotations to reflexively engage with my reflections of my own experiences as a mother and student, my theoretical knowledge, and challenged my preconceived notions and understanding of the student-mother phenomena. For example, as I have grown older, my focus has shifted from the attempt to live a goal driven life to a more value driven life. This emphasis on values has led me to see the world through a valued lens. Thus, I am likely primed to see the experiences and choices of others through that same valued lens. Additionally, I conceded that I held assumptions around the act of role allocation and partner conflict;

however, I realized that not all partnerships and marriages would resolve these challenges in the same way. I wavered between the empathetic stance that came so easily to me, to questioning the motivations and meanings that emerged from the data; however, I understood that my subjectivity, creativity, and flexible thinking was a part of the spirit embodied in the IPA process and that the end result would be a unique interpretation of how I thought the participant was interpreting their experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes

Once an interview is coded and annotated multiple times, the researcher must begin the process of developing emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009). The NVivo software that was used in the analysis of this study made the effort of shifting away from the manuscript analysis and into the codes and annotations seamless, yet additionally more complex due to limitless interpretations of the data. The software automatically groups coded notations together into nodes that can reviewed and combined further into hierarchies or be searched in conjunction with other nodes to deepen their meanings. However, as the researcher, I still upheld the responsibility of painstakingly conceptualizing developing patterns, taking note of convergence, divergence, interactions, and relationships while also maintaining a record of reflections throughout this process (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 4: Connecting Emergent Themes

Once the exceedingly numerous emergent themes were fully identified within NVivo, a number of strategies were used to organize and frame them. I utilized "*numeration"* (p. 98), recognizing the number of times certain concepts or words were mentioned (Smith et al., 2009); however, this strategy was used with caution to investigate already emergent themes more comprehensively. I chose to use organizing some codes by "*abstraction*" (p. 96), or

concept and "*subsumtion*" (p. 96), series of themes requiring sub-ordinate headings (Smith et al., 2009). Clear "*polarization*" (p. 97) emerged between attitudes and behaviours that also served as particular "*functions*" (p. 98) within the manuscript. With each step in this process further overlapping experiences and ideas became evident and many could be reduced or collapsed again into much fewer nodes. This task was ideal within NVivo, as groups of nodes could be manipulated or placed under other higher order headings without having to immediately combine them. Additionally, it became evident that there were several types of nodes that could fit into more than one theme, for example, one statement may have been suitable for various themes such as emotional latency, time line, or impact. Consistent with Smith and colleagues (2009), it was challenging to hold the meaning derived from each node and overall interview, while also partitioning and regrouping experiences into my interpretations and themed understandings.

Step 5: Looking for Patterns Across Cases

Once all of the interviews had been coded, and emergent themes developed and connected, the next stage involved searching for patterns across all the cases (Smith, 2009). I chose to use NVivo further by creating mind maps to visually represent the relationships between nodes for each participant (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). It was at this point that I seized the opportunity to collaborate with my supervisor regarding my analysis thus far and gained further insight. At first, working with and manipulating the digital boxes seemed like an efficient way to organize the numerous themes; however, when all the themes were placed side by side on one document, it became apparent that working digitally was no longer ideal. I chose to use colored sticky notations to denote each participant and the corresponding themes. The flexibility in moving physical sticky notes proved advantageous as various patterns

emerged as themes were continuously reconfigured or re-labelled. I remained mindful of the dialogue between myself, my psychological understanding, and the coded data, allowing it to guide and develop my interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Eventually, a coherent and connected configuration of sub-ordinate themes came to light and was recorded in an initial master draft of themes.

Step 6: Written Findings

As per the recommendation of Smith (2009), I moved directly from the large visual depiction of themes and list of hierarchies to writing the descriptions of the over-arching, subordinate, and emergent themes. The written analysis was intended to develop the participant's narrative, included detailed commentary, and relevant, meaningful quotes. Additionally, several visual info graphics were included to aid the reader in understanding the multiple and complex levels of meaning. The writing process itself also provided several opportunities for revisions and reflections upon the process, deeply impacting my own personal perceptions and interpretation of the experiences of these six mothers.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, reflexivity is the reflection upon oneself as a researcher, the preconceived assumptions, judgements, and how they can impact research decisions – an "ethnological self-consciousness" (Finley, 2002, p. 210). Additionally, it is the acknowledgment of the bidirectional relationship that exists between the researcher and respondant(s) (Hsiung, 2008). As IPA methodology guides meaning-making through the researcher's interpretation of the participants' experiences, it is imperative that the they reflect on their role at each juncture in the research process (Smith et al. 2009).

Reflexivity as introspection. Qualitative research can be deeply personal for both the researcher and the subjects of interest; the social position and life experience of the researcher plays a fundamental role in the outcome of the study (England, 1994). I felt it was particularly important for me to discuss how my own co-occurring experience as a mother in graduate school impacted the exploration of the experiences of other graduate student-mothers. Prior to choosing the study subject matter, I noticed that being a mother in graduate school set me apart from the rest of my cohort. I reflected upon that realization with both sadness and curiosity and wondered if others experienced the same conflicting feelings of ambitious passion, and at times, debilitating guilt. This was a pivotal part of forming my research question. As Moustakas stated (1990), "The task of the initial engagement is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher" (p. 27). Moustakas' own research on loneliness was inspired by his personal experience of despair. I similarly had personal insights into the student-mother culture and it would have facilitated the participants' ease and cooperation knowing that I also had children while attending graduate school (Berger, 2015). Before conducting the research interviews, I began a journal to capture other such moments of contemplation, something that was recommended by Smith (2009). A small example of my thoughts were as follows:

> I am sure it must be this difficult for all mothers in school. Do they feel guilty when their kids ask for them to do something with them? Do they also feel frustrated and then also sad?

In reading some of my journaled reflections, I understood how important it would be to remain curious and open to the graduate student-mothers' shared experiences and revisit my assumptions at each stage of the study.

As the interviews began, I experienced my own vulnerability by being fully integrated into the research; yet in doing so, I felt I relinquished some of the unequal power dynamic that frequently exists between researcher and participant (England, 1994). However, having shared similarities in gender, marital, and graduate student-mother status did not eliminate the possibility of prejudices; having my own values, personal history, and preconceived expectations removed the chance of objectivity (England, 1994). The unique opportunity to look at the experience of other student-mothers from within the group, while experiencing my own version of the student-mother phenomena, produced some thought-provoking dichotomies. For example, I sometimes noticed I felt the apposition of performing the role of compassionate colleague while also the role of curious observer (England, 1994). Thus, in order to help uncover the lived experience and meaning of the participants accounts, my role alternated between the "hermeneutics of empathy" and the "hermeneutics of questioning" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36). At the conclusion of each interview, I would sit in the room for a short time and write down a few of my thoughts about the interaction, our rapport, and any first impressions about their lived experience as graduate school parents. I noticed a pattern of suppositions, first if the participant and I had a good connection; and second, if I felt that their overall experience of being in school with children was positive or negative. I viewed this documentation as a valuable way to capture my first impressions immediately and not have them skewed by other interviews or the transcription process. In addition, I reflected on my own emotional reaction to their stories; at times I experienced what they were feeling and alternated between heartbreak and joy; however, I remained mindful in attending to the participants voice over my own. Indisputably, maintaining reflexivity is about upholding the balance between excessive subjectivity and cautious description (England, 1994).

Soundness of Data Quality

It is important to assess the quality and validity within any research study; however, as the criteria for evaluating a qualitative and quantitative study differ significantly, there have been misgivings about the value of qualitative research (Smith et al. 2009). In response to this criticism, a number of guidelines have emerged to address perceived shortcomings and enhance the soundness of qualitative studies, such as, *sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence,* and *impact and importance*. Each of these assessment approaches will be addressed herein.

Yardley (2000) reasoned that sound qualitative research would demonstrate a *sensitivity to context*. A few examples of evaluative criteria for this philosophy are the theoretical applications, relevant literature, empirical data, participant perspectives, and awareness of ethical issues. Theoretical context-sensitivity is demonstrated within the current study through the comprehensive literature review that touched on identity, role, and feminist theories used in past studies as well as the current relevant literature on mothers in graduate school (Yardley, 2000). Additionally, the interpretation of the findings from the first-hand interviews utilized Kegan's theoretical model of moral development. Yardley (2000) emphasized the importance of loyalty to methodology. IPA guidelines profoundly respect the perspectives of the participants and encourages continued reflection of researcher biases, assumptions, and ethical considerations throughout the duration of the research process. Extensive measures were taken to remain aware of my impact on the study as a researcher through regular journaling and to maintain an ethical commitment to participant confidentiality in light of the use of social media for recruitment. After the analysis and within the discussion,

pseudonyms were used, unique identifying details were omitted, and schools and programs remained unmatched to the participants.

The achievement of *commitment and rigour* occurs through comprehensive engagement with the topic of focus, with the demonstration of methodological and data collection competency, and the meticulousness of analysis (Yardley, 2000). These guidelines are intrinsic to the IPA methodology. With a counselling background and being graduate student parent myself, I was able to create respectful, empathetic relationships with participants, and remained fully emerged and committed to the research topic, while also maintaining loyalty to methodological guidelines that demanded continuous reflection of preconceptions and assumptions. Moreover, rigour was further demonstrated by the profound openness that resulted in the interviews, the depth of the analysis and interpreted findings (Smith et al., 2009).

Yardley's (2000) characteristic of *transparency and coherence*, demands clarity and descriptive influence within the stages of the research process, as well as transparency in the undertaken methods and data presentation. Within this study, the acknowledgement and transparency of researcher reflexivity was paramount. To accomplish this within an IPA study, reflections, challenges, and thoughts, were recorded in a journal throughout the entire process of the study and were used to both bracket and enhance final interpretations (Smith et al. 2009).

According to Yardley (2000), *impact and importance* are the final essential qualities of a worthy qualitative research study. The impact and importance of a study are evaluated by the value, usefulness, and theoretical understanding gained from the contribution of the research study to the socio-ecological and mental health community. The current study had virtues in that it looked at the experience of the customarily invisible and quiet mothers in graduate school and revealed their challenges and success in order to generate supportive policies in

academic setting and provide better informed treatment plans for mental health counsellors who work with student-mothers in distress.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I provided an overview and rationale for choosing IPA as a qualitative methodology and a thorough portrayal of IPA's philosophical foundations, guidelines, procedures, and how they related to the research question: What is the lived experience of the graduate student-mother? Additionally, study procedures were outlined including, ethics approval, recruitment and interview procedures, data security and storage, followed by the processes of analysis, reflections on reflexivity, and the soundness of data quality. The findings of the analysis are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: STUDY FINDINGS

The purpose of an IPA study is to try to understand the various intricate meanings of the participants' experience. In this study, I aimed to capture the inherent meaning of the student mothers' psychological and social experience of parenting while in graduate school by deeply involving myself in an interpretive relationship with each individual's transcript (Smith & Osborn, 2004). To share these findings, I first describe participant demographic information (see Table 2) and provide a brief introduction to each of my participants. Finally, I describe the overarching, super-ordinate, and emergent themes that surfaced during analysis.

Part I: Participant Backgrounds

I interviewed six mothers, all with children under the age of 13 years, who were either in the midst of their graduate programs or had completed their programs within the past two years. All six women were White and were between the ages of 30 to 41 years old at the time of their interviews. Five of the six women spoke English as their first language and one woman spoke Polish. The range of time it took for participants to finish their program, including those who were in a thesis-based degree, ranged from 1 to 7 years. Participants' graduate degree programs were from four different universities in Alberta, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia. Areas of specialization included Psychology, Social Work, Nursing, Conflict Analysis, and Management.

Adele

Adele was 41 years of age and recently completed her master's degree. This degree was her second attempt at graduate education. She first began a master's program 12 years prior before finding out she was pregnant with her first child. However, after the birth of her daughter, she was diagnosed with severe post-partum depression and after some time decided she was unable to continue her program. Not wanting to take on any more, she chose to focus on being a

Table 2

Participant Identifiers

Participants	Marital Status	Number of Children	Ages of Children	Program of Study within Canada	Program Length
1) Adele	Married	3	8 years 11 years 13 years	Masters	1 year
2) Holly	Married	1	11 years	Masters	2 years
3) Katherine	Married	2	8 years 11 years	PhD	6+ years
4) Laura	Married	2	13 years 12 years	Masters to PhD	3+ years
5) Rhianna	Married	1	9 years	Masters	3 years
6) Tori	Married	3	4 years 5 years 13 years	Masters	2 years

mother. At the time of our interview, Adele was married with three children between the ages of 8 and 13 years and spent much of her children's young lives providing home-schooling to each of them. She stated that she felt that she waited long enough for her children to reach ages that she felt comfortable that they all could attend regular school. Adele asserted that she "knew that she needed to go back to pursue this further," despite the daunting complications she faced. Originally, she planned to go back part-time so she could continue home-schooling, however, the program no longer allowed that option and she was required to do full-time studies. Adele found the experience of graduate school very rewarding yet also challenging. The family often struggled with health issues stemming from entering the public-school system. Additionally, she

found there were various difficult moments to work through within the relationships with her children as she was not as available to them as she had been previously. She credits her husband, mother, and family for taking on a lot more work in times of need.

Holly

Holly was 40 years of age and married with one 11-year-old daughter at the time of the interview. She worked full-time in a demanding position with a first responder organization. Many of her peers possessed high-level graduate degrees and she felt in order to continue to compete and grow, both within the organization and for herself, she needed to attain a master's degree. She secretly applied to her graduate studies program and was able to quietly save the necessary funds. When she received notice that she was accepted she tentatively broke the news to her husband. Holly was unsure of the level of support she would receive since returning to school would affect the whole family. The funds she had secured and her forward-thinking plans removed some of the barriers to which her husband would have objected. With his blessing, she began her two-year, full-time master's program while still working full-time. Almost immediately after the start of her first year her daughter became mysteriously ill, her life in serious danger. Holly questioned her ability to remain in the program as her family's well-being has always remained her top priority. After taking five weeks off of work, and taking life day by day, the doctors diagnosed her daughter with an autoimmune disease. Holly's family advised her to hold off quitting school and, in the end, she remained in her program. Holly found that keeping as busy as possible was in fact, the best way of coping with her stress. Ultimately, Holly found her graduate experience lacking; she thought it was too prescribed and confined. At the same time, her experience solidified her belief that modelling lifelong learning for her daughter was extremely important. She was considering another degree not too far into her future.

Katherine

At the time of the interview, Katherine was 41 years old. She finished her master's degree in research in 2002, two years before she got married. Since that time, Katherine and her husband have had two boys that were aged 8 and 11 years at the time of the study. Katherine decided to embark on her PhD journey over six years ago after consulting with her husband and eldest son regarding the complete family commitment it would require. In addition to her studies, Katherine taught as a sessional instructor at a local University. She faced tremendous personal challenges while trying to complete her PhD. Her husband was diagnosed with cancer early in her program and then again when it returned two years after going into remission. Her extended family was unable to give support due to their own personal and health demands and her own health has suffered tremendously through her time as a graduate student-parent. She mentioned how instrumental her friends have been to her continuing her program. Katherine expressed tremendous guilt about having to choose moment to moment between prioritizing family versus school and work commitments, and stated that there is almost never a win-win situation. However, through all the anguish she expressed, Katherine asserted that the pursuit of her passion has ultimately been worthwhile and has made her a better person and mother.

Laura

Laura, a mother of two active boys aged 13 and 12, was 35 years old and married at the time of the interview. She worked as a clerk for years before she had her children. When Laura experienced debilitating post-partum depression after having her second child her concerned husband sat her down and encouraged her to make a five-year plan. She knew she wanted to work in a hospital and to eventually teach, so she set out to do her nursing degree with plans to continue onto grad school shortly thereafter. Although Laura credited her commitment to school

as a valuable part of maintaining her mental health, she also experienced agonising guilt when considering moments that she may have missed with her sons. Additionally, her overall physical and mental health was seriously impacted by the competing demands offered by the roles of being a mother and a graduate student. Conflicting messages from extended family and friends, self-judgment, and lack of balance were ongoing challenges for Laura through her program. Additionally, she struggled with celiac disease, further limiting her food options for optimal health while working within a tight, busy schedule. Nevertheless, Laura conveyed great pride in her accomplishments and her demonstrations of commitment and drive to her children. She described her experience as a constant roller-coaster of emotion, energy, and fluctuating priorities.

Rhianna

Rhianna was 38 years old, married, and had one boy, who was 9 years old at the time of the study. Rhianna was in a neuroscience graduate program prior to the birth of her son, but she felt the program was oppressive and not the right fit for her. She decided that she would either apply to medical school or, having already been married for a few years, that it might be a good time to start a family. When she did become pregnant, she chose to put her ambitions and career aside and left graduate school to become a full-time parent. Her pregnancy was very difficult and her son was born nine weeks early with high needs and many vulnerabilities. When he was ready for full-time kindergarten, she included her son in the decision to go back to school. She soon learned that she needed to be meticulously organized and plan far ahead in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed. She found the multiple roles challenging yet they often complimented each other. Her schooling provided information that helped her with her son and her home routine helped with school organization. Despite her efforts, she experienced burn-out with

symptoms of anxiety and depression at least twice during her program. Additionally, Rhianna failed to attend to a sprained ankle for months by underestimating the severity of her injury and focusing on other priorities. She still asserted that being a parent and a graduate student is doable, but she would caution future graduate school parents to determine when is the right time for their family.

Tori

Tori was married and 34 years old while she attended graduate school and her children were 13, 5, and 4 years old. In 2013, Tori, a stay at home mom at the time, considered going back to graduate school after a fervent conversation with her mentor/professor. Unfortunately, one month later, she and her husband were in a serious car accident. Her husband's injuries left him with a severe concussion and permanently retired from the work that he had previously enjoyed. Considering this, Tori thought about how she could quickly develop her career in order to help provide for her family. She took a temporary job until she heard whether or not she was accepted into her master's program. Initially, her husband was resistant to the idea. Her program was in another province far away from the suitable medical support he had been receiving in their hometown. Notwithstanding the family's concerns, Tori moved one month ahead of her family to settle in and get reacquainted with student life. It was a massive change for her whole family; school for her children in Alberta was drastically different from the unstructured experiential learning, learning through parent bonding, and *unschooling* – a radically different educational approach to which the family had grown accustomed. They had to try a couple of programs until they found something that fit with their family values. Tori's husband continued to experience difficulties with migraines and her children found it problematic finding friends in the beginning. As a parent, Tori felt torn between valuing the traditional model of parenting

(always having at least one parent at home and a consistent connected family lifestyle) and developing her career. At first, she told herself that going back to school was to secure family finances, but she conceded that she also felt "an inner urge to go out there as a courageous woman and try something different", something that "doesn't fit into the traditional model of what a mom should look like..."

Part II: Overarching, Super-Ordinate, and Emergent Themes

Five overarching themes surfaced through the analysis of the six interviews regarding the experience of being a parent in graduate school: (a) Power of Values: Pre-Role-Integration, (b) Socio-Ecological System, (c) Experiences of Role-Integration, (d) Coping Strategies, and (d) Reflections of Meaning. To make the complexity of the overarching themes simpler to understand, I first list the five overarching themes with their super-ordinate, and emergent themes in an infographic (see Figure 1). All of the participants described experiences that fall under each overarching theme, however, not all the sub-ordinate themes or the emergent themes were experienced by all of the participants, as they each had unique situations.

The overarching theme, the *Power of Values*, depicts student-mothers' *early childhood* memories and later life experiences that moulded their values and ultimately impacted their *motivation* and *decision to go to graduate school.* The second overarching theme, (b) *Socio-Ecological System*, describes the complex *mother & student roles* and the *system communication* that occurs between the student-mothers and their families, friends, peers, organizations, and society. Third, the overarching theme, (c) *Experiences of Role Integration,* describes the impacts of role-integration on *relational bonds,* the experience of *value juxtaposition*, and the resulting

Figure 1. Overview of Overarching, Sub-ordinate, and Emergent Themes.

health impacts. Fourth, (d) *Coping Strategies* describes the methods student-mothers employed to reduce or negate the negative experiences of role-integration while also finding ways to enhance the benefits. Specifically, *engagement strategies*, *disengagement strategies*,

overcompensation, and *delegation and role elimination* were employed to reduce distress and maintain or improve relationship connections, balance, and physical and mental health. Finally, (e) the overarching theme, *Reflections of Meaning*, focuses on participants' thoughts about what *advice* or considerations they would express to other parents if they were considering graduate school, as well as their *final thoughts* regarding their experience as a graduate student-mother.

These themes do not stand alone, they are each interconnected and influenced by the others. I have created a model (see Figure 2) that visually depicts the symbiotic process of the participants' experiences.

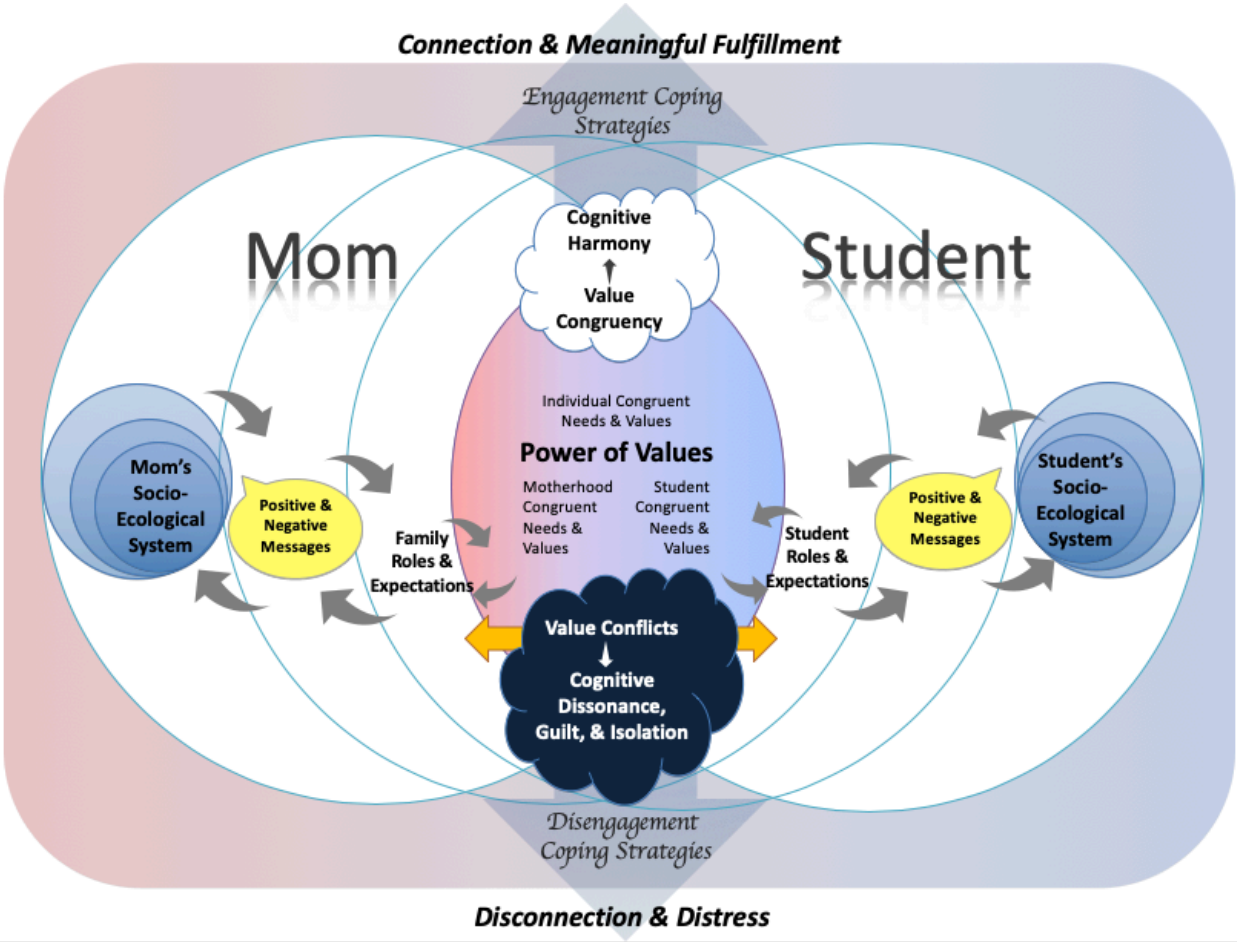

Figure 2. Experiential process of student-mother role-integration.

Overarching Theme I: Power of Values

It became very clear to me while listening, re-reading, and interpreting the interviews that values play a key role throughout the experience of being a mother in graduate school. Every other overarching theme is affected by the fundamental foundation of the student-mother value system. There are three sub-ordinate themes in this category (a) *shaping of values*, (b) *motivation*, and, (c) the *decision to go to graduate school*.

Shaping of values. Stemming from fundamental beliefs, *values* can be defined as what a person finds to be important, desirable, and worthwhile or what they idyllically want to strive towards being (Rohan, 2000). The sub-ordinate theme, *shaping of values*, refers specifically to how participants arrived at the values they held prior to going to graduate school. Value development begins in *early childhood* and *evolving values* occurs throughout adulthood.

Early Childhood. This emergent theme described the experiences that student-mothers remember as young children, in addition to the moments and behaviours they observed of their own parent's role performance, thus shaping their initial understanding of what a mother/woman should be. For example, five of my six participants (Adele did not mention her childhood) discussed how experiences and observations in their childhood impacted what they value in the role of a mother but in differing ways. Katherine, Laura, and Rhianna all reported having memories of having a stay-at-home mother, influencing what they thought a 'good mother' would behave like. Rhianna reflected on where her early expectations of a mother came from:

> I think growing up, I had a stay-at-home mom. I really benefited from having a parent home in a lot of ways, just knowing that my mom was always there, somebody at home. She always had home-cooked meals there [for us]…if we needed, which was appreciated.

Rhianna expressed the appreciation she felt that her mother was there for her both in her physical presence and through the nurturing gesture of home-cooked food. Rhianna experienced this as comforting memory and that being home, always available to your children, and providing home-cooked meals was a gesture of love and valuable part of being a mother in her childhood. Laura shared a similar sentiment, "I think so yeah, [when] I grew up, my dad was the worker, my mom stayed home, so very old school. So, when I first had our babies, that's what I did." Laura's experience depicts how childhood experiences can lead to the foundational belief that witnessed role performance at home is just how it is 'supposed' to be. Conversely, Tori and Holly's childhood experiences were with mothers who worked outside the home. Holly described her parents as hard working entrepreneurs who did not value education and Tori discussed how her mother was "very career and money focused" and that it had the opposite effect on her values as a parent, "…maybe just being raised by [my mother] made me want to try different kinds of parenting, just being with my children in a different way…".

Evolving values. Life experiences as we enter adulthood can modify long held beliefs. As time passes, individuals tend to shift and adjust their values to better suit changing situations and belief systems (Kegan, 1994). The emergent theme *evolving values* was demonstrated when participants discussed later life events or contemplations that further shaped their values. Holly described when she experienced a shift towards valuating her own self-interest. She discussed the painful experience of moving out of her family home at 14 years of age. When she decided to share this experience with others in her program, her mother became very angry for humiliating her and chose to cut Holly out of her life. Holly said this forced her to challenge her value of unconditional respect for parents and her need to avoid conflict in the name of family harmony:

> I was self-sacrificing. I always took her shit over and over again and I did it to my self-detriment… I just decided if I'm going to have a relationship with [my mother], it has to be done in a different way.

In addition to Holly, all of the other participants described various moments or realizations that their values had evolved. For example, Rhianna discussed how with time, she reflected on the experience of motherhood. Even though she had a stay-at-home mother, she found that her values have evolved into something more personal to her, "I think as I grew older, I've developed my own sense of what I wanted to be as a parent through some of the things I didn't get from my parents, or my siblings didn't get."

Motivation. *Motivation* is an internal feeling of need or desire that can activate behaviour and give it direction (Maslow, 1955). Even for ambitious participants that value both family and education, the motivation to be both a parent and go to graduate school can be complex and may differ greatly between each graduate student-mother. Notably, the words "I need" are often used in the student-mothers' narratives to describe what they need, value, and/or desire. Needs might be distinguished as something that is thought to be essential for life with desires being superfluous. However, the use of the word 'need' in place of 'want' emphasized the level of importance or the experience of intensity to the participant. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, there will be examples of narrative using the words 'need' and 'want' to describe and illuminate participant values, needs, and desires.

I have broken motivation into the two previously discussed paradigms, *deficiency motivation* (or extrinsic motivation) and *growth motivation* (intrinsic motivation; Maslow, 1955; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Deficiency motivation. The motivation to satisfy a desire for an external outcome can originate from a deficiently met physiological, safety, social, or esteem need (Maslow, 1955; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Holly, Katherine, Laura and Tori all alluded to a sense of having at least one of these unmet basic needs. Holly expressed her need for esteem when considering her motivation to go to post-secondary school despite being raised by a family of entrepreneurs:

> I don't even know where the desire for education came from other then you know, desperate attempt for recognition or status because I work in government. I work for so many people who have master's degrees and PhD's that if I wasn't in those environments, I don't think that [pursuing a graduate degree] would've mattered at all.

For Holly, the deficiency was influenced by her work environment. Katherine and Laura spoke about the internalized negative messages regarding their intelligence as children that they both felt would be resolved (meeting their need for social connection and/or esteem need) when they were successful in academia. Laura lamented:

> I grew up where I was told that only smart or rich girls could go so, I better save my money, even though I was on honours…So that's part of my inner strength is that I feel like I am looking at all of those people that had doubted me and I'm proving them wrong and it's not only them but trying to prove it to myself.

Tori also initially describes her financial need (a physiological or safety need) as her reason to go back to school despite her desire to stay home with her children (need for social connection):

> I need to provide for them, going to school to me meant a better job and more money and so that's what school represented to me. And so, by going to school, I was working towards that goal. It was tough having to leave them when I would rather… that's where the pull of the traditional kind of parenting, it pulled me so much.

Yet later she reveals a growth-oriented motivation stating:

> [I have] this innate kind of urge to try new things, so part of me is like, why does it say here to do this? (referring to traditional model of parenting) You tell me I need to be different but…I have to respond to this [urge] because I can't somehow let it go. Maybe at that time I used money as an excuse, because it just seemed kind of convenient way to explain it… but there was this pull to do this, from a place inside, this yearning to try this totally ridiculous radical thing that doesn't fit the traditional model of what a mom should look like or a wife.

Growth motivation. Tori's above statement is an excellent introduction to *growth motivation*, the motivation to satisfy the desire to realize personal potential (Maslow, 1955; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Adele, Holly, Katherine, Laura, and Rhianna also described many examples of growth motivation throughout their interviews. Each participant expressed some version of their deep need for lifelong learning. For example, Adele had attempted to attend graduate school previously but having a new baby and a diagnosis of post-partum depression prevented her from continuing her program at the time:

> I was not able to do both things at the same time successfully. I wasn't successful at either, so I terminated that program and that kind of stuck with me and I knew I wanted to go back, no I knew I needed to, I wanted to go back and pursue this further, but it was very… it was very daunting and complicated.

Adele's statement highlights the high levels of tension she experienced between the roles of motherhood and student when she initially attempted the return to school. Her choice of the words "wanted to go back…" and then specifically adding the more poignant words "needed to…" underscores the strength of her conviction to one day return to graduate school. All of the

participants also described that they found deep meaning and purpose both as parents and as academics. Katherine tearfully shared her experience of doing her PhD:

> I do I love what I do, for all of the challenges, for all of the sleepless nights and the worry and the anxiety, I really do love what I do. I love teaching, I love research, I love the conversations that that invokes and what it brings out in people.

Decision to go to graduate school. All of the participants discussed the decision to go back to school and the value placed on both family and education powerfully shone through each of their narratives. They took into consideration *timing*, *finances*, and *involvement of children* in their decision. In almost all areas of discussion their sense of being pulled between being at home and needing to go back to school was palpable.

Timing. Adele, Holly, and Rhianna all discussed how timing was very important in their decision to go back stating that the age and developmental maturity of their children was a big factor, waiting until they thought they were old enough to mitigate the negative impacts of being away from them. However, each participant had their own ideas of what "old enough" was, ranging from kindergarten age to the teenage years. Adele discussed her initial plan to wait longer to go back to school and how she eventually changed her mind:

> Ten years of trying to figure it out, figuring out when and how and, you know, often thinking that "no I don't think I can", "I'll have to wait till they're done with me, until they are teenagers", but I was feeling antsy and so I finally decided to apply and got in, so that would be the beginning.

Conversely, Katherine stated, "Don't wait until you are older to start your graduate programs thinking it will be easier then, it's not. In fact, I found it easier when [my son] was two."

Finances. All of the participants discussed finances in their interviews, yet Tori and Holly mention it specifically regarding their decision to go back to school. Tori said that even though she felt pulled to stay home, going back to school would ultimately help her family financially. Holly took significant measures to remove the barrier of finances from the equation. Holly was very nervous about her husband's reaction concerning her desire to return to school:

> My husband is very focused on the family unit and thinks that that's a priority in our life above and beyond everything else and so I thought that that would be very difficult. So, I actually went through the whole applying for my master's without telling him. I also saved $30,000 over the last eight years without telling him.

Holly's deep commitment to her family is evident in that she removed the financial barrier in order to mitigate damage to the family's resources, yet in hiding it from her husband, she seemed to initially feel ashamed of her academic ambition.

Involvement of children. Katherine and Rhianna both consulted their children in the decision to go back to school. Katherine said of this:

> …before I even submitted the application, I said, this is a family commitment, this is not just me going back to school, this has an impact on each of us in different ways…I said if anybody has any concern about this then this isn't the right time. So, everyone needed to be on board with it.

Laura avowed that her children were the key part of her decision to go back to school because of the experiences she had when both of her children were extremely sick. She wanted to go back to school to learn the same discipline as those who had helped her through her children's vulnerability and help support other parents the way she had been supported. She felt going back to graduate school would best enable her to do this.

Overarching Theme II: Socio-Ecological System

An individual's socio-ecological system encompasses their interrelations, for example student-mothers' family, peers, university, workplace, society and all the connections between them, are all a part of their socio-ecological system (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). This theory was first described by Bronfenbrenner (as cited in Tudge et al., 2009) in 1979, but he adapted it with time to include the key role that the individual also plays within their social system.

Mother and student roles. Each student-mother described the various roles they occupy as a mother, a student, and as an adult woman. It is important to note that although many adult roles apply to adults in general, there are increased expectations associated with those adult roles when one also has children. For example, members of the family may expect to see the children and participate in formal or non-formal visits such as vacations, birthdays, celebrated holidays, etc. Rather than having a lengthy description of each *role* a mother, student, and all the many roles that accompany adulthood, as well as their corresponding *relationships*, associated *expectations* and *responsibilities*, I created a visual chart (see Figure 3) to demonstrate this overarching theme and the level of complexity that exists in the participants lives. It also recognizes the cyclic communication that occurs within each of those relationships, which will be depicted in more detail in the sub-ordinate theme, *system communication*.

System communication. Communication between individuals or groups can encompass positive verbal messages, such as *positive verbal support*, or negative verbal messages, such as *judgemental statements*. Moreover, people communicate their support through *positive action* or their lack of support with more covert *microaggressions*.

Every one of the participants experienced all of these forms of communication at one

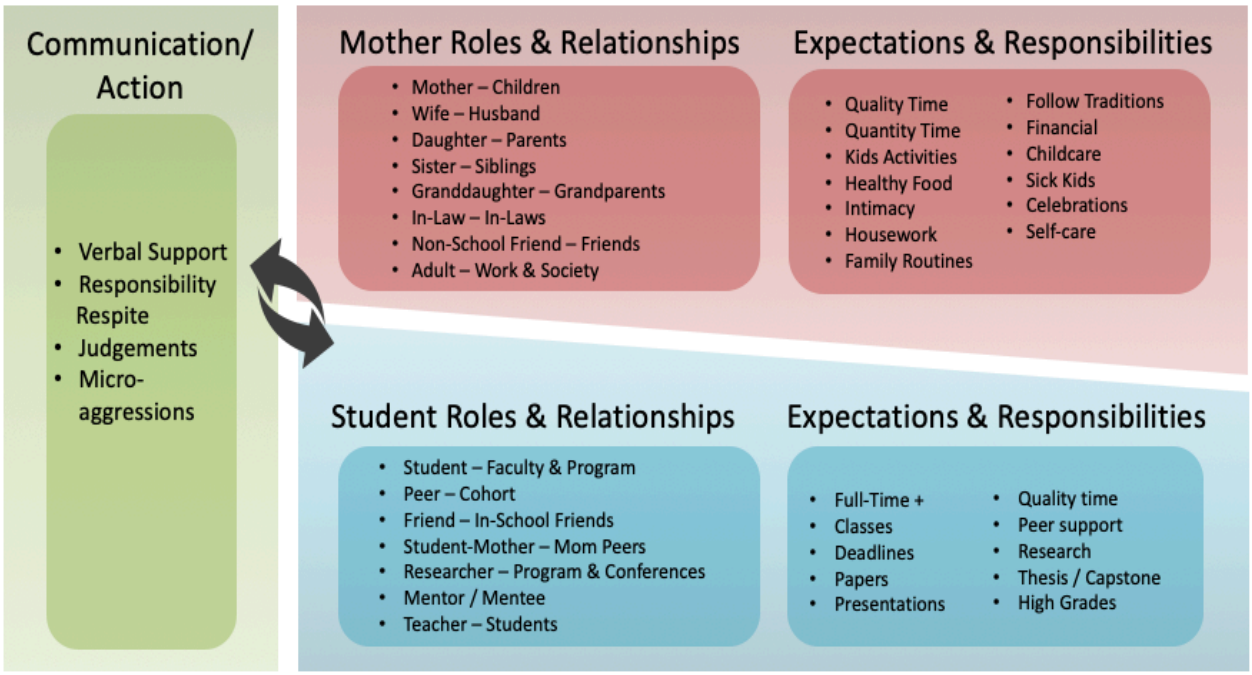

Figure 3. System Communication and the Mother-Parent Socio-Ecological System

time or another through their experience as mothers in graduate school. I touch on each emergent communication theme and describe instances to demonstrate the types of messages that were received by the participants.

Positive verbal support. The participants discussed the various people in their lives that gave them verbal support along the way including their husbands, parents, children, faculty, school, and non-school friends.

Holly, Rhianna, and Tori discussed things their husbands said that provided them with crucial verbal support when it was needed. For example, Rhianna reflected on the reciprocal support offered by her husband, "when I decided to go back to school, [my husband] was extremely supportive and he said, 'you know you supported me in my academics and so I'm here to support you in whatever way'." Holly spoke about her Dad's excitement for her academic journey and both Katherine and Holly spoke about their mother's verbal support. Katherine described a conversation with her mother, which she said resulted in feeling relief and respite

from her mother's role expectations and values that she had internalized as her own. When asked if she somehow felt she needed to maintain the same lifestyle as she had growing up, she said emotionally:

> "Yes, completely…It took that conversation with my mom and for her to say, 'I don't expect this of you, so please stop putting that pressure on yourself.' It was good, it was good to hear that, to let it go."

Laura was also in tears when she spoke of her children's words:

> …my boys went up and talked to people and they just said, "we are proud of my mom", so, you know, I think that that's pretty amazing, and you almost need to frame it and put that on the wall for those days when you feel like, why am I doing this? Or that I'm not smart enough, because I know at home that my little cheerleaders believe in me.

Additionally, Katherine, Laura, and Tori mentioned that they felt supported by some of their professors and felt comfortable to talk openly to a chosen few, especially those with children of their own. Tori expressed gratitude for having many peers in her cohort who were also parents and gave each other tremendous support while Laura and Katherine shared the valuable emotional support they received from their non-school friends. Laura highlighted this when she said, "there's been some core friends that I've been friends with for years and years and years and I know that they'll always be there, and they'll always be my cheerleaders."

Positive actions. Through positive actions of their support system, such as removing the various burdens of responsibility from the participants, the student-mothers felt supported in their decision to go back to school.

Tori's husband was recovering from a severe car accident as she was going through graduate school; therefore, she didn't mention any specific examples of physical support from

him. However, Adele, Holly, Katherine, Laura, and Rhianna all discussed examples of when their husbands took children to activities, cooked dinners, or helped with other responsibilities. Laura said, “I think my husband…he is so supportive. He will take the kids to track and to hockey, he’ll make dinner, he wants me to succeed and he says, ‘you have to get this done’.” Others had help from other family members as well. Adele said this of the responsibility respite her husband, children, and especially her mother were able to offer her:

> I had a lot of help, I mean my husband took on a lot more work, the kids were real troopers, you know… and my mom, who was retired, took on a big role in picking the kids up from school every day and being with them and showing up when the kids were sick. If she hadn’t been able to do that, this would have been very different.

Rhianna expressed similar gratitude for the support her mother-in-law offered:

> [My husband] talked to his mom who was in India and he said, ‘we need your help’ and she came, and she stayed for…one time it was for nine months, another time eight months to help out. She lived with us and she helped out with [my son], at the time he was younger, all of his laundry, getting him ready, spending some time with him, and then she would help out with us, she would keep my husband company because I was busy. For her to pick up her life in India, not for my husband but for me, like that’s amazing! So that, that is something that was a gift to me.

Katherine’s extended family was unable to physically help, her but she credits her non-school friends for their support stating, “It’s the only way I got through any of it.”

Judgemental statements. All six of the participants experienced the verbal message that their choices or behaviour were somehow wrong and shared examples of feelings of being judged by people in their lives. Holly and Katherine talked about things their husbands said

directly that made them feel guilty for going to school. For example, Holly described her and her husband having an argument, "[He would say], 'oh are you conflict analysing me?!' in a mocking voice, it's thrown up in my face that I'm going to school or that we can't do this." Holly, Laura, and Tori had examples of when their parents said judgemental things about their education. Holly said that her sister went out of her way to tell her she was making a mistake, "she thought it was going impact my daughter, the time, that I could never get this time back with my daughter, like ages 9 to 11 was very [formative] years." Additionally, many of Holly and Laura's non-school friends stated their confusion regarding the decision to go back to school because both women were very successful in their careers. Outside of the parenting world, Katherine and Adele reflect on their experience of judgement as a mother and as a student. Katherine tearfully relayed her experience with family and acquaintances when asked to expand on her thoughts about society's impact:

> Yep, definitely part of it comes from that, part of it comes from your family. We were talking about gender diversity, when I first started the PhD program, I had women and men tell me I was a selfish bitch. I had people tell me that my husband would leave me, I was told that I was doing a disservice to my children by presenting this strong female image…[my husband] faced backlash as well when I started the PhD program.

Conversely, Adele felt judgement in the academic environment for her choice to stay home and raise her children, "being a full-time mom felt marginalizing because I hadn't been in the field…I was a stay-at-home mom and that really is not very favourably judged or valued in our discourses of expertise and professionalism. So, it really is devalued."

Microaggressions. Subtle and seemingly innocuous, microaggressions are hurtful statements or actions that may be unintended but can be a covert way of communicating

disapproval or hostility (Ross-Sheriff, 2012). Holly, Katherine, Rhianna, and Tori related clear examples of microaggressions, occurrences that didn't seem to be malicious but hurt their feelings. Holly was talking about her experience of doing her master's degree and speaking with her friends and family when she said, "Nobody ever wants to talk about this and that is what I'm saying, nobody really wanted to talk about school, or your real experience. My husband never read a single paper; never knew what class I was in." She went on to remark that the academic part of her world remained, for the most part, hidden from many of the people in her life for this reason. Laura talked about another small but impactful remark from her spouse:

> There are the odd comments that [my husband] will make, "well so-and-so's wife is a great baker" and even the other day he said to me, "have you ever baked in this oven?" And I was like, "well we've lived here for almost 3 years and I bake every Christmas!" And I bake cakes once in a while, but you know, those little remarks even though he is supportive, there's still that odd little thing that will hurt.

The insinuation that the act of baking, typically associated with the role of a mother, was not happening because of a deficit on her part, was upsetting to Laura, even if it was meant as a joke. Rhianna lamented that she did not get the support that she expected form her own parents. Katherine realized as time went on that verbal support from her husband was one thing but as she said, "that still meant that the burden of cleaning and cooking landed on me." Katherine was the only participant who mentioned a specific negative comment from one of her professors that made her feel ashamed for allowing her life circumstances to delay her progress:

> All of those, and teaching, all of those extend the amount of time that it takes. But there have been some implicit suggestions that if I don't finish it soon, that there, that people will start to question why I'm not done yet.

In each of these example incidences, as well as ones not mentioned, there is a vague message that efforts in managing multiple roles should be the student-mother's problem. Academic propensities should be confined to the student world. Lack of time to bake should not impact the family or the ability to finish a dissertation. Regardless of the reason, it is their responsibility to fulfill the expectations of others.

Overarching Theme III: Experiences of Role Integration

The participants described both positive and negative experiences related to the integration of 'graduate student' into their already existing multiple roles. Role integration significantly impacted their relationships, their emotions, and their physical and mental health.

Relational bonds. Love and belonging are considered fundamental needs in Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1955; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This sub-ordinate theme explores the participants experience of *emotional connection* and conversely, their experience of *emotional disconnection* within their social worlds. All of the participants experienced numerous impactful moments of connection and disconnection within their social worlds.

Emotional connection. Interpersonal attachments, in-group relational bonds, and frequent positive interactions are important for emotional regulation, favourable health and well-being (Colman et al., 2016). The student-mothers particularly emphasised the connection with their *children, husbands,* and *peers*.

Connecting with the children and family. A common theme that emerged was participants connecting with their children through cuddles in the mornings or bedtime. Adele, Katherine, and Rhianna spoke about these quiet moments when they could connect with their children. For Katherine and Rhianna, it was often through reading at night. Adele described her experience, "I tried to maintain some of our structure, like having time and having cuddles in the morning and

protecting some of those important connection times." All of the participants mentioned their value of providing meals for their family. Katherine discussed the moments of connection when she ate with her children, "we generally always eat together and when the kids are eating breakfast in the morning, even if I'm not eating, I am generally in the kitchen visiting and talking with them." Rhianna and Tori highlighted other times when just being with their children made them feel connected to them. Rhianna enjoyed her conversations with her son when she did art with him every Sunday; Adele and Tori relayed that doing fun activities or just being near their families felt very connective for them. Tori explained:

> I didn't want to just be tucked into the corner of the library while my family is at home doing supper and enjoying time together, so it was something about proximity. Wanting to be home, even if I was at the kitchen table, it just felt like a proximity, at least being around my family was a way that I could still feel sane.

Connecting with their husbands. The student-mothers all discussed aspects of support they received from their spouses during graduate school. Adele, Holly, Rhianna, and Tori reflected specifically on their connection with their partners. Rhianna made a point to stay away from social media in order to protect the connective time between her and her husband. Tori's husband began his own post-secondary program in psychology giving them the opportunity to work together, "I worked with my husband, we would chat and talk and [we] had a lot of places where I could connect and talk about what's going on." Holly felt she had a remarkably fortunate experience of graduate school with her husband:

> I was very lucky because I think my marriage actually got way stronger in the two years.

> And for me to actually rely on my husband, ask for help, tell him I needed him to do something or to be there… it increased our closeness because he felt like he was needed more than other times. And my sex life was really good too.

Connection with peers. All of the participants discussed the connection they had with their friends both in and outside of school. Holly, Katherine, and Laura were particularly thankful for their non-school friends. Laura said this of her best friend regarding Laura's complex life, "She just gets it." All of the participants also discussed the friendships they developed while they were in graduate school and the deep connections that were made. For example, Katherine said, "You know some of the great part about being in university, is you find great friends and you find people that they see you at your worst and they help you get through it, like you help each other." Holly hosted monthly dinners for her cohort and said this of her colleagues, "we were just like 'this is my tribe' and… I just really appreciated people and especially all of the opportunities to learn from people in different professions."

Emotional disconnection. The experience of *disconnection* from participants' social support system was described as feeling misunderstood, isolated, and targeted. There were a few key social groups where disconnection was particularly painful for participants such as *parents*, *peers* in both social worlds, *husbands*, and families. The experience of overall disconnection and *isolation* from the outer world was filled with descriptions that align with symptoms of grief.

Parents. Katherine and Laura lamented that they do not have the time they want with their parents due to the demands of school and nuclear family; this has led to feelings of guilt. Holly experienced a more intense disruption in her relationship with her mother when she completed a very personal project for class that her mother did not agree with:

> She started off being super supportive and then… [my project] tore my family apart. I just spoke to her last night and that's probably… I guess the fourth time in two years that I have spoken to my mom when I used to talk to her every other day. So yeah, it's a pretty big deal – that kind of came out of the master's work.

Peers. All six participants had narratives about their friends or peers not understanding their two worlds respectively. They described non-school friends as mainly supportive but that they gave no indication that they understood the pressures of academia nor why they would surrender themselves to the stress of completing another degree. Holly recalled a situation with a co-worker:

> He said, "oh my gosh I have so much respect for that lifelong learner person because that is so far away from where I am!" and so a lot of people just don't even really get it. And I can't really explain it very well, so I say, "don't worry about, it it's just something that I'm doing".

All of the participants also felt a level of detachment from peers in their academic world either because they could not understand or because they simply could not participate in the graduate school experiences to the same extent as non-parents. Rhianna reflected on being a part of a younger cohort without other parents:

> I wasn't fitting into the life stage that they are in, a big part of that was being a parent, but that meant I get less invited and so they would form connections and relationships quicker and stronger and so that affected things like my group work or the peers that I sought for support…. So, it can be a bit isolating.

Husbands. All the participants, save Holly, said there were moments of disconnection with their husbands. For example, Katherine had a situation where she desperately wanted to be with her husband, but felt obligated to be at the University:

> I found out that [my husband's] cancer came back, I had to teach that night. So, I had to pull myself together knowing my husband's cancer was back and teach the class because what is going through my head is, 'I have no idea what is coming up for the rest of the semester'.

Children. All the student-mothers discussed times when they felt disconnected from their families due to lack of time or conflicting priorities. Laura tearfully provided an example of being right there with her family, but still experiencing an overwhelming feeling of disconnection from them.

> I may physically be there but mentally I'm not. Mentally there are times that I am very disconnected and even when I was in undergraduate school, there was times that I don't even remember with the boys because I was so into my studies that I forget about what's going on around me. So even still, he'll ask for his dad to tuck him into bed. He doesn't ever ask me, which is heartbreaking.

Adele also recalls when two of her children pulled away from her," …my son and my middle daughter were kind of becoming closed off. Like they didn't want to tell me if something was not right, it was actually my daughter's teacher who…contacted me and said, 'is everything okay?'"

Social isolation. Social isolation is the lack of contact with other individuals or groups that can lead to sadness, anxiety, and loneliness (Lim, 2018). Rhianna chose to put her career and academic ambitions aside for the first five years of her son's life, but the lack of adult contact and feelings of stagnation took a toll, she lamented, "[staying home] made me very resentful too

because I felt very isolated and just pushed my… I thought I was getting older, but I hadn't started my career." In varying degrees, it has been noted that all of the participants have experienced a disconnection from a person or a group through their programs, however, Katherine's powerful statement described the more intense experience of feeling targeted and not truly fitting into any group:

> You don't really fit in with the stay-at-home mom, you don't fit in with the working moms, and you have all of these people that are saying you are crazy, you are selfish, you must be a bitch. And anybody who knows me, I don't think they would say I was selfish, I don't think that they would say I was a bitch, I try not to. I am not perfect, but you know… but I don't think I am any of those things that society says I am because I'm a woman pursuing higher education.

Value juxtaposition. In many ways, the notion of a student-mother is in itself a juxtaposition with two roles being placed together with contrasting goals. This sub-ordinate theme described the desire to offer the graduate student-mothers' children the most loving, nurturing, and supportive childhood possible while also embracing their own individuality, autonomy, and path to their full-potential. Both roles can, at times, require more than a full-time commitment. The participants described a complex set of values, of which, many were described as existing in conflict with each other, some able to exist side by side in harmony, and others interacting or blending together. I created an infographic (see Figure 4) of my interpretation of the discussed values and the possible congruence associated with each social world based on the narratives of my six participants.

Values conflicts. This heavily discussed emergent theme encompassed the participants' experience of feeling torn between their values for *family commitment, school commitment,* and

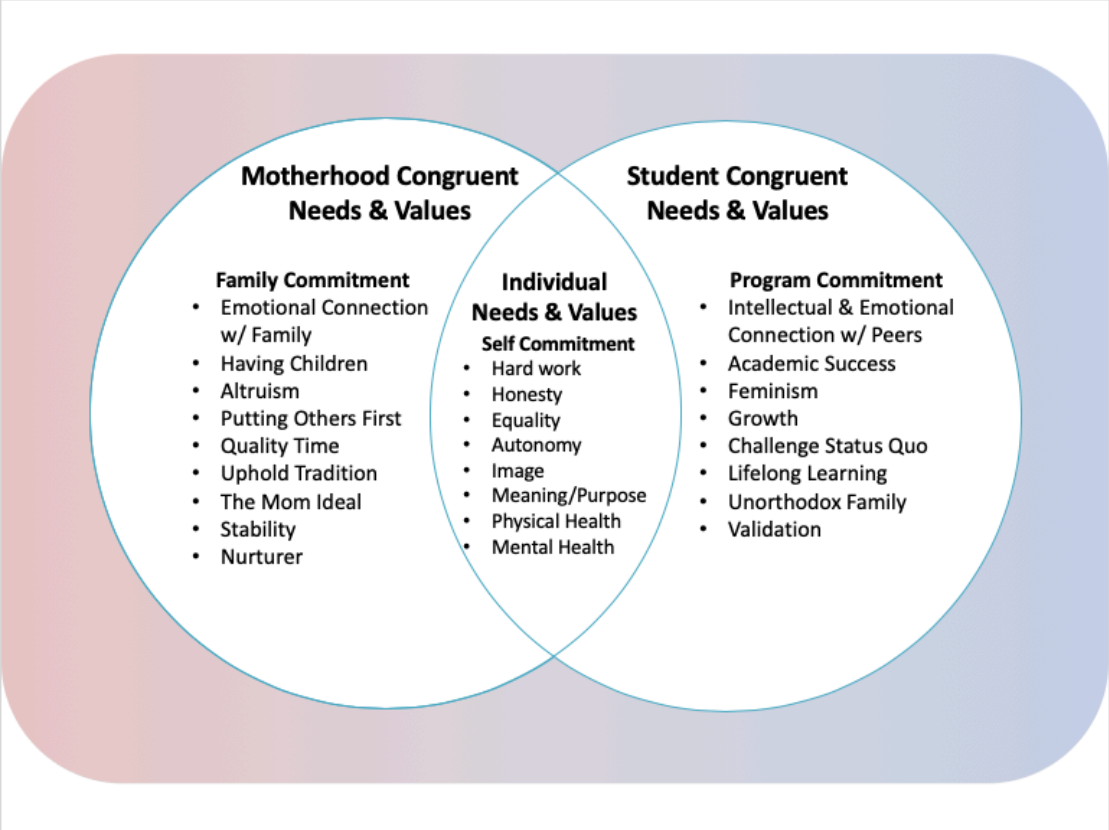

Figure 4. Interpreted Value Congruence in Student-Mothers' Social System.

self-commitment. The value conflict created *guilt, self-judgement,* or the *self-labelling as 'bad mom'* which highlighted the cognitive dissonance brought to their experience of being a parent in graduate school.

Family commitment conflicts. All of the participants felt that their commitment to their family values had a powerful pull on them; the sense that they were choosing school over time with their children came with sorrow, guilt, and for some, even shame. Laura explained how sometimes even when she is home with her family, she doesn't feel present:

> I just have this guilt that they're going to look at me one day and think, "she was never there", even though physically I'm there, it's like mentally some days I'm not there. I

> worry that they think, "well mom you were never there, you were always selfish," is almost how I feel. Even though they are supportive, I still feel like I'm being selfish.

All of the participants also lamented about having to tell their children that they had to leave them to work on school assignments, repeatedly having to put off connection and quality time. Rhianna mentioned her own self-judgement, that was echoed by Katherine and Laura, the idea that they were often "bad moms":

> I've had to push [my son] away and focus on major assignments due, papers, and if I haven't spent quality time with my son, I feel guilty, I feel bad about it. It doesn't make me feel like I'm being a good mom.

School commitment conflicts. The graduate student-mothers also experienced cognitive dissonance when their value of academic success came up against time constraints created by family commitments. Holly and Laura discussed the disappointment they felt when they received grades lower than their expectations for themselves. Holly's statement highlighted the commonality between herself, Katherine, Laura, and Rhianna and their feeling of discomfort in asking for special treatment or allowances from their programs:

> The one time when my daughter was in the hospital, I didn't know if I was going to be able to make the assignment, and they wrote back and said "Of course, you can even take this class at the end," and I'm like, "no, I'll just hand it in". And so, I did, and that was my second worst mark, I think it was like a 79% or something, but whatever. I'm very, again, process orientated, rules orientated, and I don't want to be asking for things. So, I took a hit on that class for my GPA, but I just made sure that I gave all of my attention to my daughter and took care of her.

Tori also mentioned the struggle with maintaining her grades, "[I tried] really hard to keep my grades up because I'm very hard on myself and I have a scholarship that I have to maintain a GPA, so that makes it challenging on top." Katherine and Rhianna discussed the need for boundaries between their home and school-life. Katherine struggled to maintain those boundaries and felt that is why she has not completed her dissertation. Rhianna reported that she took her school "hat" off when she got home, "I know when I come home after school, I have to put my schoolwork away, I have to do the things I need to for the running of my family."

Self-commitment conflicts. This emergent theme, self-commitment conflicts, focused away from motherhood and school, and identified that each individual participant also valued and needed unscheduled time for herself. Holly, Katherine, Laura, and Rhianna talked about their 'me-time' suffering or, as Laura put it, "it just is always being put on the back burner". This is not yet speaking of specific self-care needs, which will be covered later in greater detail. Laura asked when she was even supposed to have time for herself, and Rhianna explained how she struggled to carve out downtime:

> For a long time that has suffered, I didn't get a lot of me time because I would help do the dishes or something like that. So, I didn't have a lot of decompression time, so I felt like I wasn't having time for myself to just sit and rest and not have things on a to do list. So that was affected.

Conversely, Holly stated that she felt anxious with downtime:

> No nothing time. I would make sure that every minute was spent productively. So even if it was a Sunday afternoon hanging out with my family, I had done everything (emphasis) to make sure that I had that Sunday afternoon, and maybe it was relaxing, but it was coordinated, so that was like two hours of relaxing time with my family scheduled!

Value congruency. This emergent theme encompassed the participants' experience of feeling their values coming together, or that the interaction combining of roles had turned out to be beneficial. Participants felt there were some areas within family and school values and commitments that existed in harmony.

Congruency with family commitment. There were various and differing instances when school commitment complimented participants' family commitment. For example, all of the participants discussed trying to best manage their limited time; however, Holly and Rhianna emphasized how being a parent while in school forced them to plan ahead, organize, and prioritize their time in a way that would allow them to do both roles with the least amount of negative impact on their families, which also helped them excel in school. Rhianna said:

> So, my experience being a parent in graduate studies is that I have had to prioritize and manage my time very well. So, plan well ahead of time and it's not just academics, it's accounting for what my family needs, so like cooking food, so I really need to think in advance about that because eating healthy is something that we value as a family…I think I've managed graduate school perhaps better than some of my peers who haven't been faced with that extra challenge. And that's a rewarding piece.

Modelling was also very important to many of the participants; Adele, Holly, Katherine, Laura, and Tori all stated that having their children witness their journey in graduate school was valuable to them. It was a way to link their motivation to grow and their need to connect to their children; it also demonstrated boundaries and the value of life-long learning and fighting for your dream to reach your potential. Laura, through her tears, said:

> …school is something that is very valuable it's very important and my boys… now they talk about going to school. When I'm feeling really down, I think about that. Right? Like

> there's lots of benefits. I know that they know because of what I am doing, they can do it too. You're never too old. And I am always telling them that. I am always saying, don't give up if you want something, go for it.

Katherine talked about her gratitude that she has been able to influence her children's interests in science and inspire them to think about academia for themselves:

> I am making a difference to what my kids think school is, that both of my kids are, even at 8 and 10, saying, "I want to do university, I think this sounds really interesting." I am contributing to my kids' interest in science and I am able to have conversations with them about what a hypothesis is. So, for me it's very fulfilling to see and help spark their interest.

Holly and Laura both said that their children are proud of what they are accomplishing. Holly said, "I recognized over the two years her growing respect for me, that's absolutely the best benefit." Adele, Rhianna, and Laura identified specific examples of when things they were learning at school could be applied within their family lives. Rhianna was able to learn more about her son's learning disability and advocate for him and Laura found she became a better parent for her time as a student. Adele was able to apply learned theories directly to her feelings of conflict surrounding leaving her family:

> I eventually applied some of the theories I was learning to the problem and I actually wrote a paper about that. So, I took my problem quote – unquote, and challenged myself to be my own therapist in a way. To apply what I was learning to that.

Congruency with school commitment. This sub-emergent theme focused on the value congruency between parenting and school commitments, a reflection on how motherhood

benefits being a student. Adele, Katherine, Laura, and Rhianna discussed how their age and maturity gave them perspective and an advantage as a student. For example, Rhianna reflected:

> I guess having been a mom, I've reached a stage where I am further along in some of my adult milestones such as marriage and having children. I think my age, and just by virtue of that I've acquired more life experience and more time to self-reflect, as compared to some of my peers, even in relationship to where I was an emerging adult or even in undergrad. So, that has really help me out in a lot of ways with my studies, just interpersonally being able to be more reflective and bring about my own personal experiences into my studies.

Katherine stated that her son helped her conceptualize what she had to learn, that teaching him helped her, "He would ask what does that mean? So then even though I was still trying to figure it out, I had to be able to re-phrase what I was reading and put it in to simple terms that at the time a five-year-old could understand."

Health impacts. The participants all experienced significant instances of negative health impacts that they related to the distress of managing multiple roles while in graduate school. They often all chose to prioritize others' needs and expectations in place of their own care. This led to experiences of disconnection, cognitive dissonance, and extreme stress that impacts the immune system, mental health, and overall well-being (Draycott & Dabbs, 1998; Pietromonaco & Powers, 2015; Sternberg, 2001). This overarching theme highlights the negative *physical* and *mental health* impacts described by the six participants.

Physical health declines. All six of the graduate student-mothers experienced physical declines through their graduate programs. For many it was lack of *sleep and fatigue*, for others, *illness or injury*, *poor eating habits*, or *lack of exercise*.

Fatigue and lack of sleep. All the participants except for Tori, discussed how sleep was often the first thing to be sacrificed when other priorities became prominent resulting in fatigue and lack of motivation. For example, Laura lamented that she was "so exhausted" while Adele said that being a parent has made her used to no sleep. Holly stated that often sleep was not enough to recover, "I put my head down and I fell asleep instantly. I'd wake up feeling tired…I probably got six hours of sleep maybe 6 ½ typically." Katherine explained that when the house is asleep, that is when she typically gets her school work done:

> I work late, I call those 'parent hours', when the kids are in bed and [my husband] is asleep, that's when I can really get down to the business of doing my work. And sometimes that doesn't start until 10 or 11 o'clock at night. I'm sure it might be variable, but during a particularly stressful time, I always try to make sure I get at least five hours.

Illness and injury. All of the participants, excluding Tori, acquired an illness or injury during graduate school. Katherine and Adele discussed the physical consequences of stress and pressure. Katherine was sure that avoiding her doctor resulted in many health problems, including her kidney stone. Laura refused to quit school despite impeding health issues that she related directly to stress. Holly was diagnosed with "chronic student syndrome" caused by spending too much time with poor posture on her computer. And finally, Rhianna had a severe injury that she did not attend to for months and because of that will likely have lifelong complications:

> I had a big semester with stats in it and I pushed through that, I pushed through my ankle pain. I have an osteochondral injury from my sprain, and I found that out in the beginning of January [I have] early signs of osteoarthritis. So, then that led to having to get injections of joint lubrication, orthotics, referral to an ankle surgeon. I'm like what?! That

> event actually…I'm like, how did I not properly take care of my ankle?! Disappointment in myself.

Poor eating. Most of the participants identified healthy eating or planning heathy meals for their family as a priority; however, when it came to themselves, Adele, Laura, and Katherine admitted that they did not take as good of care of themselves. Adele lost too much weight, Laura gained weight she did not want, and Katherine said, "I don't eat as well as I should. Sometimes I'm eating in the vehicle on my way to work because there's no other time."

Exercise. Adele, Holly, Laura, and Rhianna mentioned exercise during their interviews. Holly continued to lift weights during her program but described them as an "aggressive" outlet and regretted not doing cardio exercises or yoga to stretch and calm her mind. The others also wanted to adhere to previous commitments to exercise but struggled to carve out the time. Laura explained:

> I try and exercise at home, we do have a treadmill and we have a workout room but when you're so tired, it is the last thing that's on your mind. I used to be an avid exerciser, I used to do weight training like I was really, really healthy. That's frustrating too, like that's something that I struggle with because then how do you do it?

Mental health declines. All but one of the participants experienced mental health declines throughout their graduate programs. Tori described moments of frustration and overwhelming feeling; however, she said she really took the time to work on herself through her program. The other student-mothers described the psychological and physical reactions of *stress and anxiety* and most also discussed physical exhaustion or mental distress, symptoms of *depression or burn-out*.

Stress and anxiety. Holly and Laura worried about their competence and had to get past the imposter syndrome they experienced when first beginning their journey into graduate school. Holly said of this:

> I was completely concerned that I wasn't even going to be smart enough to do this. I was worried about that. There was one time, I read an article and I remember being freaked out for about six hours going, "I might not be smart enough to do this". I don't even understand what this whole paper means.

Most of the mothers said that just the pressure of managing their programs and conflicting roles was extremely tiring and stressful. Rhianna said, "Has it affected me mentally, yes absolutely. Has it resulted in anxiety, low mood? For sure, I mean that waxes and wanes of course. Just being so hard on myself."

Depression and burn out. Holly, Katherine, Laura, and Rhianna experienced indicators of depression and burn-out. Holly was an exception to the others in that her depression set in after the program ended; she had kept herself so incredibly busy that it was the let-down afterwards that led her to feelings of loss and grief, "…one day of homework and you're working on things and you're learning things, you're engaged, and the next day, you're not so much. It's just gone…it's almost kind of a depression that you go through."

Despite her attempts at balance and self-care, Rhianna felt she went through burn out at least twice during the program:

> …how is this affecting my meaning of life and my greater family? …I found it ironic that I'm becoming a [professional] to help people with their lives, but in doing so, I stopped exercising, eating as well, and getting burned out. So, my values and priorities have shifted.

Laura sometimes found herself asking why she had chosen this route. Katherine tearfully said this of her experience:

> Am I depressed? Probably. Am I overwhelmed – always. I'm always teary and emotional. I can be very forgetful, there are some days when I don't want to get out of bed, but you do. I probably could be more productive with my time in some ways but some days I just can't do it.

Overarching Theme IV: Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are often the difference between students feeling *eustress* (positive motivating effect of stress) and distress (damaging effect of stress; Nelson, Dell'Oliver, Koch, & Buckler, 2001). This over-arching theme focused on four sub-ordinate themes that participants used in the attempt to reduce their distress during graduate school, (a) *engagement strategies,* (b) *disengagement strategies*, (c) *overcompensation,* and (d) *delegation and role elimination.*

Engagement strategies. Engagement strategies tend to be positive, goal directed behaviours such as seeking social support through *rituals of connection*; establishing effective study habits or thoughtful planning, such as *prioritization & compartmentalization;* and stress assessment and management methods, such as *self-care* (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017).

Rituals of connection. John and Julie Gottman (2015) coined the phrase "rituals of connection" (p. 153) and it accurately depicts what emerged as one of the most used strategies for reducing guilt and feelings of disconnection. A ritual of connection is a way of turning towards loved ones, or other important people in the socio-ecological system, in habitual ways that can be counted on. For example, Adele went for frequent walks with her family and planned regularly occurring fun activities, such as movie nights or tobogganing. Bedtime routines with

cuddles and stories became an extremely important ritual to Adele, Katherine, and Rhianna, who mentioned that it was a key touch point that reduced feelings of guilt from spending time away from their children. Rhianna talked about these snuggles with her young son, "I do spend quality time with him, like I am really committed to reading to him at night, we have long cuddles, he really likes long cuddles and conversations, he's very conversational." Katherine noted:

> It drives [my husband] crazy because they're old enough to read on their own, but I say this is the best part of my day, reading to them whatever story it happens to be, is the best part of my day.

Another common emergent theme was dinnertime routines. Laura, Rhianna, Katherine, and Tori said they made dinnertime together a priority whenever they could. Tori said that together time mitigated her guilt, "I felt like I kind of compromised there by providing meals, it was really important to me that I provided a meal and that we all came together for supper. So that was my goal." Katherine also said, "We do try to have dinner together as often as possible which actually for a busy family, we are able to do most days. So, we generally always eat together."

Tori, Rhianna, and Holly prioritized time with their husbands. Holly audaciously commented that her sex life was really good and that it provided them with a healthy form of stress relief. Tori felt very fortunate that her husband began taking the same program that she was in, giving them countless evenings of long discussions and intellectual stimulation. Rhianna was able to go to her husband when things were getting rough, she said:

> [I was able to] acknowledge that I'm not feeling good about things and, my husband and I have a fantastic relationship, so we really talk about what's kind of going on and kind of

> strategize what we can do and how to tweak here and there so that we can have more of that energy.

Prioritization and compartmentalization. Many of the participants found that taking the time to identify their priorities and to reflect on finding ways to give equal attention to their values helped them to be better, more grounded parents and students. Adele, Laura, and Rhianna described how they tried to arrange their roles and responsibilities in a way that would reduce their feelings of guilt yet prioritized in a way that would still help them to accomplish their goals in the healthiest way possible. Out of necessity Laura felt she eventually became very good at prioritizing. Similarly, Adele began practicing taking time away from the children for the year prior to going back to school so that her family got the sense of what prioritizing and boundaries felt like. Rhianna prioritized and compartmentalized by thinking of her roles as various hats:

> What has worked well is knowing those hats and when to put them on, take them off, put that aside and focus on what you need to do, so being really organized with your time, planning, prioritizing, being efficient with your time. I found that this is really helpful in reducing my grad school anxiety.

Self-care. Self-care can be characterized as behaviours performed by the participants in order to assess, maintain, or improve their physical and mental health or well-being. The words "self-care" were brought up frequently; however, most of the occurrences discussed by participants were related to the lack of time for self-care. Therefore, the actual incidents of successful self-care were rather small. The emergent themes in the self-care sub-ordinate theme were, *sleep, exercise, spiritual, time for themselves, and therapy.*

Sleep. Sleep was heavily discussed through all but Tori's student-mother interviews and most of the others acknowledged that there was a need for more slumber. Laura said she tried so

hard to get enough sleep and would forgo the gym in order to try to get more sleep, however, she was often unsuccessful. It was only Rhianna who said she maintained the habit of getting regular and sufficient amounts of slumber. She said this about her own routine:

> I tend to go to bed at 10. It's really forced me to be conscientious of my own routines and so I make sure that I'm in bed, I'm rested so I get a decent sleep in order to get up early. I do make sure that I get good sleep.

Exercise. The lack of time for self-care was evident through most of the participants interviews. It was only Adele and Holly who used the gym as a means of stress relief during their program. Adele said she would go to the gym twice a week. Holly also maintained her habit of going to the gym for weight training, stating that she "did LOVE weightlifting!"

Spiritual. Rhianna and Adele had regular mindful practices. Rhianna made time for a quiet cup of tea every night, while Adele said, "It meant not a lot of sleep sometimes, but for me I needed my spiritual practice in the morning, which I get up at 5 a.m. to do.

Time for themselves. Holly, Rhianna, Laura, and Tori mentioned their moments to themselves. However, Holly had a rather extreme way to earn her time, "I just did 15 hours of homework the two days before that just to be able to have that time. So, it is like this weird mental sacrifice and reward system that you just kinda do." Tori spent her alone time journaling, "Yes, lots of journaling. I still continue to journal today, and that was a habit I got into during grad school. But continuing to journal, like having to process what's going on for me, it's been important."

Therapy. Of the four participants involved in health or helping professions, only Adele and Tori regularly saw a therapist or a mentor every couple of weeks to discuss their frustrations or things that were troubling them. Tori described her experience:

> I would meet with him and he would give free mentoring on the frustrations I was having related to school, related to my frustrations at home and I was also seeing a personal counsellor at the time who I would pay. So, I had a lot of places to go to talk.

Disengagement strategies. Disengagement strategies include maladaptive behaviours such as *avoidance* and *surrender* (quitting). Procrastination and substance use are also common disengagement strategies but were not discussed by the six participants of this study.

Avoidance. Sometimes individuals use avoidance to escape uncomfortable feelings; however, this can lead to increased distress, disconnection, or feelings of isolation (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017). Rhianna and Holly talked about times they avoided certain activities or conversations such as with family or faculty. Rhianna noticed that when she started to get run down, she began to avoid quality time with her son that she normally treasured, making her feel guilty:

> So, I started to notice that, and I started to notice that I… My son wanted to do more activities and I found myself avoiding that. That's when, like we had our routine set up, like every Sunday we would do art. We have our room in our basement and I just found myself like tired, not wanting to do that and then feeling guilty about that. I just found myself like exhausted and that it took a lot out of me to spend time with an active nine-year-old or do those activities that give him that stimulation.

Holly described her tendency to avoid tough or uncomfortable discussions with her extended family, “I was always just avoiding conflict”; with her husband, “I actually went through the whole applying for my master’s without telling him and I saved $30,000 over the last eight years without telling him,”; and with faculty, “I don’t want to be asking for things.”

Surrender. Although Adele discussed her experience of having to withdraw from an earlier graduate program to focus on her mental health and newborn child, none of the participants had quit their most recent programs. However, the idea of surrendering to the pressure and quitting their programs did come up for Holly, Laura, and Rhianna. Holly spoke about when her daughter was ill:

> So that was a very critical time in my schooling because I had always said that my family would be a priority and I was fully interested and actively looking at quitting because I couldn't imagine [not being there].

Laura had moments when she questioned what she was doing:

> [We were] talking about completing our thesis and the oral presentation they'll have to give, the very beginning of it I just felt like my heart was sinking like I can't do this. What am I doing? I could just be going to work and going home and having my family life and not worry about it.

Initially Rhianna thought she wanted to pursue her PhD; however, the experience of her masters shifted her perspective:

> This program is so crazy intense (without having other things like family). I waffled for a long time about doing a PhD and honestly, those two months made it clear I am NOT going to be pursing more education after this.

Overcompensation. Like the disengagement behaviours, surrender and avoidance, *overcompensation* can be a destructive strategy employed when the other two strategies do not seem to be an option or are ineffective. Holly and Katherine both described examples of overcompensation to meet all their expectations or to reduce feelings of guilt. Although Holly

employed organization as her main coping strategy, she found ways to do absolutely everything, admitting she gave up sleep and self-care to do it:

> I want to be modest, but I did everything I could to make sure that school didn't interrupt my family time or work. So, I worked Monday through Thursday and I would just make sure that I had all of my reading picked out for Monday to Thursday at night at home in bed. And I would just read. Then on Friday when my husband and daughter were out of the house, I would work all day, then I'd wake up really early and try and get all my homework done. Wake up early on Saturdays and Sundays and say that I capped it at 12 p.m. on both days so that we could have the relaxation time unless I had major papers or something, I really did my very best to not impact our family life. I'm scared that if I just stop then it's hard to get motivated again or get moving. [I needed to keep] feeding that demon, I mean, that need for something more.

Katherine felt she had to do more to prove her love to her children despite the exhaustion she described. She admitted:

> Yes, I tend to be a bit of an over achiever in every aspect of my life…I am a parent Council mom, I volunteer for the hockey team, I participate in Cubs and beavers, I can't dissociate myself from those things and I think I probably over participate in some of those things so that I can show my kids that I do care about what they are doing and their activities.

Delegation and role elimination. The most discussed sub-ordinate theme for coping was the ability to delegate and/or let go of some of the roles and responsibilities associated with motherhood. Adele, Rhianna, and Tori exemplified acceptance of role elimination in gracefully

allowing others to step in and give their children extra warmth and love when they could not. Adele said of her children's developing relationship with her mother:

> They kind of connected with my mom and relied on her for the same type of interactions…it didn't feel like a loss so much, was because I homeschooled, and I had all those very intensive years of us, just us four every day.

Rhianna was also very grateful for her mother-in-law:

> I really appreciated it because there was another person in the house to give energy and also to have [my son] connect with, someone other than me, because he was sooo, he is very much like 'everything is mommy'. That actually made me feel really, really good. I feel like I'm giving him those quality aspects that even if I can't, he is still getting them but in a different way. Yeah so that helps reduce my guilt.

Tori found a different way to feel as if her children were getting from a Montessori school program what she wished she could give them herself:

> …the way their values, it just felt like they were just so warm and open and these are things that I was wanting to provide as a mom if I had my kids at home…you could just feel a lot of warmth and love and these were things that were really important to me especially if I wasn't going to be the one taking care of them.

Notably, the expectations and responsibilities to the self were optional tasks to eliminate as a way to cope with reduced time availability. This option that was frequently chosen by the participants and, as highlighted in the sub-ordinate theme described earlier, *Health Impacts*, in which all of the graduate student-mothers discussed examples of physical health declines and all but one participant experienced issues with mental health.

Overarching Theme V: Reflections of Meaning

Advice and final thoughts. Holly, Katherine, Laura, Rhianna, and Tori reflected on their experience of the role integration of student and mother when asked what they would say to another mother considering graduate school. They contemplated what advice they would have liked to have had entering their programs, or what they would tell someone if they were considering doing the same thing, and if it has all been worthwhile.

> ***Holly.*** First of all, I'd probably commend anybody who's looking at continuing education because I think that it is very good for your soul. That was a big part of my self-care, was feeding that demon, I mean (laughter), that need for something more. My biggest piece of advice would be to really research what it is you want to do and make sure that if you're going to make that commitment that it's really what you want to do. And probably, be upfront and honest with your family (more laughter) although it worked out for me.
>
> ***Katherine.*** So, if they are determined to do it, I would absolutely pursue it with all of the passion, energy, and excitement that you have. However, I'm generally very honest with people about what to expect during the process, that there are going to be days when you made some accomplishments and everything is feeling great, you're energized, and those are wonderful feelings and hold on to those sometimes fleeting moments, but that also be prepared for the lows, that this is a roller coaster ride and that there are going to be days where it's rejection and tears and you feel like the world is falling apart. Also, do it for the right reasons. Don't do it because you want to prove to somebody that you are smart enough, don't do it because you want the money, you need to do it for the right reasons otherwise it will be very difficult and that's why so many people I think don't complete the program.

All of the benefits for me have made it all worthwhile, even though I'm not done yet, the people I've met, the experience I've had, the things I've been able to share with my kids, the things that I've been able to share with other people, have all been pretty awesome experiences and so you can get through the stress and the anxiety of the deadlines, and not being sure if you were good enough, and if you can push through all of that, it can be very rewarding.

Laura. I would say that it is a challenge, but that it is worth it. I think that it's a roller coaster and that it really challenges yourself, your kids, mentally, emotionally, physically…everything. I think that it doesn't matter what program you are going through, if you are going to school and you're a parent, I think that's amazing. I sound so conceited. But then I think that it is something that should be honored. I think that people when they look down on it or think it is silly or don't understand it, I think that those are the people that need to be educated and they need to know they are ignorant in not understanding. It's a roller coaster ride.

Rhianna. I would say if they're wanting to go back to school, do what they have always wanted to do in order to achieve their lifelong goal of becoming, whatever field that they are in, and they are a parent, I really (long pause) encourage individuals to really try and make that happen because it is very doable to be a grad student and be a parent. I would recommend that, I'll be very clear, it is not without its challenges certainly and really emphasize if this is a good time for your own family or for you to go back to school? To search themselves if this is a good time.

I think at the end of the day though, I'm gonna look back and even though I've had burnout and had some tough times, there's been good times, but at the end I'm going to

feel really good that I was like in my 30s and I went and did a master's degree and I'm successfully raising my child, so that's an accomplishment in itself.

Tori. I feel like I would just say "yeah go for it!" Being that it is going to be a huge struggle and I think it's something about it being a huge struggle, I feel like is important as part of our process of learning about ourselves and our relationship to our family members. So that being said, it's going to be a huge struggle, but go for it anyways because a lot of learning and growth can come out of it.

And then after all of it now that it's after, it's just like all I can see is a lot of the gifts in it. Yeah. So right now, I feel like that, and that's just because it's all over…(smirk)

Chapter Summary

The purpose of the study was to explore the graduate student-mother's lived experience of multiple roles. Six mothers who were either enrolled, or previously enrolled, in graduate school participated by sharing their experiences of having dependent children at home while also engaging in post-secondary studies. Using IPA methodology as a guide, the participants' narrations were analyzed and five over-arching themes emerged (a) the power of values, (b) the socio-ecological system, (c) experiences of role integration, (d) coping strategies, and (e) reflections. In sum, these themes indicated that graduate student-parents are strongly influenced by their values and social network, which in turn influenced their experiences of role integration and ability to cope with conflicts and distress. The participants also reflected on the meaning of their journey and offered advice for other mothers considering graduate school. In the following chapter, I will discuss these themes in relation to the relevant literature and convey how the findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge in this subject area. In addition, I discuss

study limitations and suggest recommendations for counsellors, educators, and students, as well as for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Previous studies on graduate student-mothers predominantly provided information about attrition, temporal challenges, and distress that individuals from the United States and the United Kingdom experienced while pursuing higher education. The purpose of this study was to further explore the lived experiences of Canadian graduate student-mothers and add to the limited existing literature. Moreover, to my knowledge there have been no existing studies that have revealed the student-mother experiences of value development, value conflict, and the resulting physical, mental, and relational impacts. To that end, the findings presented in the previous chapter have the potential to facilitate further understanding of the non-traditional student-mother.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss my understanding of the five overarching themes that emerged from participants' interviews and how they relate to the current literature on the evolution of motherhood, adult moral development, and the previous knowledge of mothers' experiences in graduate school. Subsequently I discuss considerations and limitations of the current study; the implications and recommendations for mental health practitioners, educators, and students; and conclude with considerations for future research.

Shaping and Evolution of Values

Almost all of the graduate student-mothers reflected upon their experiences of childhood and what they observed from their own parents, thus describing the early shaping of their values and beliefs about parenting (Rohan, 2000). Hays (1996) contended that these observations contribute to the early social construction of the expected roles of motherhood. For a few of the participants, having a stay-at-home mother was their initial working model of how a mother was to spend her time (e.g. being at home with the children, cooking meals, and largely being

available to fill the needs and desires of their children). They said they experienced positive feelings surrounding these comforting memories. Other participants witnessed their mothers working outside the home focused on their business or careers, demonstrating dual roles and a strong work ethic. These performances of motherhood had divergent qualities but were appreciated by the student-mothers. However, as they grew older, some of them noticed that their values evolved as they questioned their mothers' ways of being and considered if they would want to parent their own children in similar ways.

Motivation

Motivation is the internal desire that can initiate behaviour and give it direction (Maslow, 1955), in brief, it moves us to move (Ryan & Deci, 2000). All of the student-mothers discussed their motivations to go back to school; however, not all of their motivations can be considered equal. Motivation can vary both in level and orientation. Similar to Kegan's developmental model of adult consciousness (Kegan, 1982), Maslow's (1955) well known hierarchy of needs theory identifies the human drive to move through stages towards a pinnacle of self-actualization. Maslow proposed that before striving for higher meaning and purpose can occur (*growth motivation*) individuals have physiological, safety, social, or esteem needs that must first be addressed (*deficiency motivation*; Maslow, 1955; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The participants expressed both forms of motivation when discussing their decision to go back to school.

Deficiency motivation. Unmet needs can arouse *deficiency motivation*, or as described in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), *extrinsic motivation* – performing a behaviour because it leads to a desired external outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This motivation orientation was described by some of the participants who felt the desire to prove their friends or family wrong. For example, there were family members who felt the student-mothers could not achieve a

graduate level education because they lacked the necessary intelligence. This increased the pressure on those participants to succeed. Other participants sought out higher education for different extrinsic reasons, such as finances or increased status. Literature suggests that even if motivation levels are high, extrinsic motivation leads to an increased likelihood that individuals will use *disengagement-orientated* coping strategies resembling avoidance or procrastination when faced with stress (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017). Moreover, avoidance based coping strategies are related to higher levels of sadness and isolation (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017). Although all of the participants experienced significant health issues, this study did not find a clear pattern associated with deficiency motivation and disengagement coping strategies. There are two possible explanations. First, this could be due in part to the SDT proposition that extrinsic motivation can be further divided into positive and negative constructs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The negative construct of extrinsic motivation follows the traditional concept that it is a maladaptive form of motivation, associated with feelings of resentment or apathy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, the positive construct of extrinsic motivation carries with it an emerging attitude of enthusiasm and an internal acceptance of the value of the task at hand. In brief, individuals internalize and assimilate extrinsic goals, thereby transforming them into their own values and personal commitments (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is conceivable that the participants adopted these positive attitudes of willingness and engagement despite the desire to fill deficiency needs or others' desired outcomes. A second possible explanation is all the participants also had clear examples growth motivation, having either completed their programs or were continuing to work towards their degree. Perhaps there is not a clear positive relationship between deficiency motivation and disengagement coping strategies in the participants in this

study due to the small size of the sample or because students who were exclusively deficiency motivated may have self-selected out of their programs.

Growth motivation. *Growth motivation* is the will to do something because it is naturally pleasurable or satisfies the desire to realize personal potential (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Maslow, 1955; Ryan & Deci, 2000). As previously stated, growth motivation had significant presence in all of the participants' interviews. Many of them discussed their value and desire for lifelong learning and how much they enjoyed the experience of higher education. Many participants also shared that going back to school was something they needed to do for themselves despite the challenges or judgements that would have to be overcome, further highlighting their wilful conviction. Additionally, participants wanted to share their commitment and passion for growth with their children; they felt that by modelling their ambition they were able to connect their relationship with their children to their academic journey. Growth motivation is associated with higher grades and engagement with coursework in addition to reports of positive affect (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017). The examples of growth motivation in the graduate student-mothers likely contributed to their success; this is supported by their numerous statements that all of the difficulties in going to graduate school were worthwhile.

Decision to go to Graduate School

In addition to the motivation to go to graduate school, all of the participants discussed the logistics involved in deciding to go back to post-secondary education. Graduate student-mothers considered how they attempted to mitigate their family's distress as well as overcome any obstacles that might affect their ability to succeed school while being a parent. This demonstrated their value in efficaciously fulfilling both roles.

Timing. Many of the student-mothers discussed how the timing of going back to school was a critical part of their decision. They wanted to wait until their children were of an appropriate age for them to commit a significant amount of time to graduate school. Many women delay the birth of children to avoid goal conflict in both academic and professional environments (e.g. Acker & Armenti, 2004; Alsop et al., 2008; Trepal et al., 2014). However, among the six participants, there was not a consensus about when the 'right' age would be for a child to have less contact with their mother. One participant stated that she was mistaken in thinking a later age would be easier or work better for the family. This confusion is understandable in light of the uncertainty in literature. For example, Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory states the organized and coherent attachment system is prone to occur around six to twelve months of age (Bretherton, 1985). This might suggest that the student-mothers were correct in waiting until their children were at least one year old. However, it is possible and even likely, that children will have a small hierarchy of central attachment figures despite the expectancy in Western culture for the mother to become the main and consistent attachment figure (Bretherton, 1985). Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory intersects with the rhetoric of *intensive mothering* and thus, increases the pressure to provide the ideal childhood despite other commitments (Faircloth, 2014). This sentiment was repeatedly reflected in the student-mothers' stories.

Finances. Although finances were discussed at some point by all of the participants, only two of the mothers spoke about finances in reference to their decision to go back to school. One student-mother was concerned about where the money would come from as she did not want the burden of her academic ambition to fall upon her family; a concern that prevents many parents from even applying to graduate school (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Reducing the family income

to one earner, in addition to the cost of tuition, can be a significant financial burden (DeClou, 2016). Conversely, the other student-mother saw going to graduate school as an opportunity to increase the family's earning potential. She was also eligible to access substantial government aid to help invest in her family's future. Literature that concentrated on financial pressures of graduate student-parents was generally focused on the liabilities of childcare (e.g. Lynch, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Trepal et al., 2014). This was not applicable to the participants in this study, as their children were of school age and their difficulties and schedule conflicts tended to arise after traditional childcare hours.

Involvement of children. Studies have found that younger children can make competent decisions and feel empowered when included in family decisions (Hein et al, 2015). Two of the parents involved their children in the decision to pursue higher education. They believed it gave them a sense of family cohesion and team spirit going into what they perceived as a potentially challenging time for all of them. The inclusion, support, and communication from family, friends, school mates, and their whole socio-ecological system has an immense impact on the experience of graduate student-mothers.

Socio-Ecological System

The participants all described their complex socio-ecological systems, the theoretical model first described by Urie Bronfenbrenner (Tudge et al., 2009). This model describes the interrelations with their family, friends, university, workplace, and society, including their influence on themselves (Tudge et al., 2009). They may have experienced these relationships in two very distinct ways depending on which stage of Kegan's developmental model of consciousness to which they had progressed. In the third stage, women may reflexively accept traditional roles associated with femininity and motherhood in order to conform to family or

societal expectations (Downing & Roush, 1985; Kegan, 1994). This interpersonal stage of development is when individuals gain internal validation through the commitments and obligations to friends, family, and community, and the perceptions of the family and friends are integral in determining feelings of value (Kegan, 1994). For some women, the acceptance of traditional roles fits very well with their identity and life goals. However, the graduate student-mothers within this study described their social world in relation to their roles as friends, professionals, and graduate students, in addition to their roles as mothers and wives (refer back to Figure 3 for more detail). The empathy and value system that arrives with stage three also comes with the potential for guilt and shame (Kegan, 1994). These are feelings that the participants frequently expressed. This can occur when meeting all of the expectations and responsibilities of being a mother and a graduate student become impossible. It is this distress that provides motivation to evolve towards the fourth stage of consciousness and quite possibly, through a process leading towards a feminist identity (Downing & Roush, 1985; Rohan, 2000). Some of the student-mothers did say they found solace in accepting that they could not do it all, forsaking certain roles and responsibilities to others. This acknowledgement could signify that they were entering or within stage four. These experiences of distress or acceptance, whether from Kegan's stage three or stage four, can be encouraged or impeded by the communication with significant members of student-mothers' social system.

System Communication

Participants provided numerous examples of communication within their socio-ecological worlds. The mixed communication that occurred both in words and in actions within the relationships of the participants ranged from encouraging and positive to undermining and negative.

Positive messages. The graduate student-mothers described many incidents of positive support mostly expressed by their husbands and parents, both verbally and in helping with family tasks. Provided examples included shopping, driving children to their activities, and the many instances of positive statements. Consistent with this, Lynch's (2008) and Sallee's (2015) studies found that student-parents had the most to gain from the childcare and the domestic support demonstrated by their spouses. This increased their ability to handle other demands and school related pressures (Lynch, 2008; Sallee, 2015). Additionally, the overall support from parents and other extended family and friends has shown to increase the chances students will finish their degree (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; DeClou, 2016; Lynch, 2008). This likely played a role in four of the participants having completed their degrees and the other two well on their way. According to the participants, their faculty members were approachable and somewhat supportive but few went to their administrators for accommodations or support when they were in distress. This inconsistency was also found in the literature. Past student-parents have stated that they felt supported on their academic path, particularly intellectually; however, they did not feel emotionally supported and felt frequently judged due to their parental standing (Monroe et al., 2008; Trepal et al., 2014).

Negative messages. All of the participants in this study said they experienced judgemental statements and microaggressions throughout their programs. The most prevalent were the covert messages that were directed at them in small unexpected ways. Notably, these messages were equally distributed coming from both the men and women in their lives. For example, two of the husbands were said to occasionally mock their wives for challenging them with their new knowledge. Another mother felt disappointed that her husband had no interest in the papers she produced. This may not be due to the husbands' disrespect towards their wives' aptitude; men have frequently been shown to prefer long term committed partners to score high

on intelligence (Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2016; Souza, Conroy-Beam, & Buss, 2016). The negative messages could be due instead, to a perceived threat to the educational balance between them. Schwartz, Zeng, and Xie's (2016) study indicated that couples tend to commit to partners who resemble themselves in education and/or social status. Additionally, the student-mothers within this study had to perform their roles as wives and mothers differently than pre-graduate school, in essence, changing the 'choreographed dance steps' to which the couples and the whole family had become accustomed (Pasley, Kerpelman, & Guilbert, 2001). This disruption of the normal balance within a relationship can cause negativity, resentment, and emotional distance, behaviours that can commonly contribute to marriage instability (Pasley et al., 2001).

The gendered expectation that the student-mothers should provide a continuous source of nurturance to their children was reinforced by the judgemental statements and microaggressions made by some participants' parents, siblings, friends or colleagues. For example, some of the participants' family or friends would question their decision to go back to school when they perceived it as not necessary. Moreover, there was a sibling who condemned one mother for forsaking her child for graduate school at a crucial time in her daughters' childhood. One parent experienced cruel backlash for her decision to return to school from colleagues that were both men and women, calling her offensive names and telling her she was selfish. This participant's account relates to Glick & Fiske's (2001) discussion around the notion of *benevolent sexism* that continues to filter through family and social structures. Benevolent sexism, which can be encouraged by both men and women, supports the belief that there is a feminine need to be protected and adored and that women are best suited to conventionally love and support a man and his children (Glick & Fiske, 2001). For those who support this viewpoint, anything that takes away from this main goal is inherently destructive for the family (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Thus, the

individuals within the student-mothers' socio-ecological world who communicated negative messages regarding the student mothers' ambition and independence, may have said things that were seemingly supportive, but were in actuality, taken by the participants as invalidating and hurtful.

Although the experience of judgement and microaggressions sometimes led to the participants' experience of distress and guilt, some had the ability to recognize that the negative messages were fundamentally oppressive, thus helping them to focus on their own values, beliefs, and goals. Moreover, the student-mothers continued to attend school, maintained their dedication to their decision, and possibly pushed the boundaries between Kegan's third and fourth stage (Kegan, 1994). There were many examples of participants challenging gendered roles that no longer suited their situation despite the negative messages they continued to receive. Graduate student-mothers had to manage their many roles, relationships, and the resulting emotions that the mixed communication between them would produce. There are other experiences of having multiple roles that will be discussed in the next section.

Experiences of Role Integration

Within the overarching theme of Experiences of Role Integration, many areas of impact of maintaining multiple roles are discussed, such as effects on relational bonds, experience of value juxtaposition, and impacts on health.

Relational Bonds

To further enlighten the interpersonal interactions between the graduate student-mothers and their social worlds, the sub-ordinate theme of relational bonds explores how individuals can experience deep and healing emotional connections or, at times, painful disconnections.

Emotional connection. Emotional connection emerged as a highly valued and discussed theme. Many of the student-mothers expressed how important it was to them to make time for their families whenever they could.

Family. For many participants, dinnertime as a family became a reliable touch point where they felt they were nurturing to their children and families by providing healthy food and their undivided attention for these short but connective times. Other cherished habits that several of the mothers mentioned were the bedtime stories or cuddles in the morning or evening. These family rituals are analogous to Gottman's (2015), *rituals of connection* – the creation of shared meaning points. This powerful coping strategy is discussed in further detail later in this chapter. Participants also reported that finding ways to make unique family memories were important; for example, seizing the opportunity to go tobogganing, hiking, or celebrating the holidays together. Mothers came to rely on the special interactions throughout the mothers' time in school.

Marriage. The demands of graduate school impacted the connection between all of the participants and their husbands in vastly different ways. For one mother, graduate school was highly beneficial to her relationship, resulting in increased physical and emotional intimacy. The literature suggests that this is true for some students; their relationship changes for the better because they gain more status or respect from their spouse (Trepal et al., 2014). Conversely, one participant in this study gained more respect for her husband due to his outstanding support. Another graduate student-mother found ways to protect time with her spouse by trying to reduce her use of social media, while another reported that she managed to have a significant amount of quality time with her husband when she was in school because he entered a similar program to hers. She felt it brought full equality and comradery to their relationship and gave them frequent opportunities to talk about what was going on between them. The sense of equality between

opposite sex parents, frequently reported in Scandinavian countries, has been associated with reduced guilt and distress while going to graduate school (Brooks, 2012a, 2012b).

Friends. The connection with peers, both in and out of school, was discussed by all of the student-mothers. However, the specific impact of friendship is conspicuously absent from the literature on parents in graduate school. While many of the participants felt like their non-school friends did not understand their motivation and sacrifice for the pursuit of higher education, they also mentioned that many of those same friends were incredibly supportive and integral to being able to manage multiple roles. Additionally, all of the participants felt they developed deep lasting connections with people they met while going to school, with one stating that it was as if she had found her 'tribe'. A study conducted by Bronkema and Bowman (2018) found that women in university tend to have fewer, yet stronger, emotional friendships than male students. Furthermore, this emotional connection to peers is predictive of perseverance and program completion (Bronkema & Bowman, 2018).

Emotional disconnection. The existing literature has little to contribute to the understanding of student-mothers' feelings of disconnection from friends and family despite common admissions of overwhelm and burnout (Bronkema & Bowman, 2018; DeClou, 2016). In this study, the student-mothers all spoke of their experience of disconnection and isolation from faculty, family, and social groups through the duration of their programs.

The participants' in this study avoided speaking with faculty about conflicting schedules and emotions, likely adding to their experience of isolation and helplessness. This disconnect from the academe might be a coping strategy, not unlike that used by many women in professional academia to cope with work and family conflicts. In order to maintain an image of competence, they have been found to humbly adapt to the traditional linear male model, committing themselves to full-time

work and being career driven, while trying to quietly hide or manage their family obligations (Monroe et al., 2008). Had the graduate student-mothers felt sufficiently comfortable in connecting with faculty both intellectually and emotionally, perhaps they may have had the opportunity to explore further options in study flexibility and mental health support.

All of the participants in the study said they experienced moments of disconnection from their families during their programs. However, it was the disconnection from their children that was described as being particularly painful. Some student-mothers stated that even when physically present they continued to feel detached and mentally elsewhere bringing on rushes of guilt and sadness when their children pulled away or sought others for comfort.

Some of the student-mothers mentioned the disconnection they felt from their non-school friends and parents, feeling unable to prioritize time outside of their nuclear family and school commitments. However, they also felt disconnected from much of the extra school or cohort related activities due to feeling pulled to spend time with their families. These repeated experiences of disconnection are strongly related to physical health problems (Eisenberger, Inagaki, Mashal, & Irwin, 2010), something that was experienced by all of the participants. The disengagement that participants felt from their loved ones may have also contributed to the numerous accounts of low mood and depression, a common association discussed by Eisenberger and colleagues (2010). In the extreme, as portrayed by one participant, complete withdrawal from significant people and groups can lead to all-encompassing feelings of social isolation and grief. Humans require connection; it is a fundamental need and without it, pursuing one's goals becomes significantly more difficult (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Value Juxtaposition

Value juxtaposition can be described as the experience of holding multiple values that may or may not be compatible at any given point of time.

Value incongruency. All of the participants had the experience of simultaneously managing being a mother and a graduate student, roles that both require significant amounts of time and frequently present competing values. In the performance of each role, participants often felt it was necessary to choose to act according to one value that conflicted with another. The experience of intellectual discomfort from behaving counter to one's values is the very same cognitive dissonance that is so often associated with working mothers (Bem, 1967; Kegan, 1994). The graduate student-mothers all described how painful it was to turn their disheartened children away when they were busy with important schoolwork, stating that, at other times, they did not feel present even when they were prioritizing their children. Consequently, these participants experienced feelings of self-judgement and guilt and often labelled themselves as 'bad mothers'. Smith (2008) suggested that the perception of others' disappointment in their failure to meet the temporal, intellectual, and emotional demands of being the 'ideal mother' and 'dedicated graduate student' can lead to feelings of incompetence, humiliation, and shame.

Participants also expressed that they felt frustration when time constraints impacted their school assignments, grades, or the ability to complete research. However, the student-mothers did not provide many examples in which they allowed their roles as parents to interfere with their academic success. In fact, many stated that they remained diligent in not permitting this to happen. However, in order to assuage others in both of their worlds, the participants stated that when things became extremely busy, they all but abandoned the responsibility towards themselves and their own physical health and well-being, thus, affecting their mental health and

resiliency.

Value congruency. In going to graduate-school and electing to maintain some responsibilities while forsaking others, some of the student-mothers challenged their families', friends', and society's embedded expectations of womanhood (Downing & Roush, 1985). Consistent with Kegan's fourth order of consciousness, they chose to move from the experience of *being* a mother and a student to embrace a multidimensional relationship with the *performance* of mother and student (Downing & Roush, 1985; Kegan, 1994). Participants still reported feeling disappointed for missed opportunities with their family, yet many understood that this was a temporary measure and that their children were still cared for. The literature suggests that when individuals choose to author their own stories, they can feel empowered by these choices (Kegan, 1994), value the positive ways they can combine roles, and reject that which no longer serves them (Downing & Roush, 1985). Kegan (1994) suggested it is entirely possible to *have* many duties and responsibilities, without *being* them. This autonomy over role performance was further demonstrated by the participants who found ways to combine the responsibilities of motherhood with their academic life. When reflecting and drawing from their unique family experiences, they discovered exceptional knowledge to which many other students did not have the same access. Additionally, participants were able to model their value of ambition and growth to their children. The knowledge that their children were watching them follow their dreams and were proud of their accomplishments was extremely empowering and guilt reducing. Feelings of pride for academic accomplishments can alter cognitions related to guilt, reducing the distressing experience of cognitive dissonance and allow student-mothers to experience their environment in more optimistic and adaptive ways (Freijy & Kothe, 2013; Lyubomirsky, 2001).

Health Impacts

Health impacts can fall into more than one category. Both physical and mental health was impacted by the student mothers' integration of multiple roles and will be discussed below.

Physical health. Physical health declined in various ways for all six of the participants. Most of them attributed repeated bouts of illness and injury to the serious lack of sleep throughout their graduate programs. Notably, reports of poor or insufficient sleep is likewise prevalent among traditional graduate students without children (Colman et al., 2016: El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Sleep was often the first time-consuming activity that mothers gave up in order to meet other expectations. Moreover, many of the illnesses and injuries were related to time-saving attempts. Some participants avoided or delayed doctors' visits despite significant pain because they felt they could not spare the time. Additionally, healthy activities such as exercise, cooking healthy food, and even simply standing up and stretching to avoid the physical damage associated with sitting at the computer too long, were often aborted. Just as is found with mothers in the workforce participants opted out of self-care, social connection, and leisure activities in an attempt to balance their family and academic goals (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Pushing their bodies too hard, remaining stressed for extended periods of time, and feeling disconnected and guilty, all can lead to changes in susceptibility to inflammation and sickness (Sternberg, 2001).

Mental health. Almost all of the participants discussed their experience of mental health declines during their program. Depression, anxiety, and burnout were omnipresent within most of the participants. Burnout is associated with emotional exhaustion, apathy, and perceptions of incompetence (Costa, Santos, Santos, Melo, & Andrade, 2012). These declines were most likely related to the lack of accountability to themselves, prioritizing other expectations and

responsibilities over their self-care. This suggests that under stress it was difficult for student mothers, even those who may have achieved Kegan's fourth order, to divorce themselves completely from the burden of their obligations. They chose to push through, ignoring the messages from their body and mind, choosing to at least temporarily put their well-being on hold. Perhaps they believed that putting off self-care and bringing their performance and stress to a desired peak would not do damage in the long term. For some, this is indeed possible, however, only for those who have the ability to lower their stress response after the task or threat has concluded (Sternberg, 2001). In brief, some stress is beneficial; while too much – that cannot be turned off – is detrimental (Sternberg, 2001). In recent studies, mental health problems, high perception of stress, and the experience of low affect, have all been associated with withdrawal from school (e.g. Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Colman et al., 2016; Zahniser et al., 2017). However, this did not occur with the graduate-student mothers in this study, perhaps due to the numerous coping strategies employed to aid in the reduction of the above mental health challenges.

Coping Strategies

All of the graduate student-parents experienced emotional disconnection, conflicting values, feelings of guilt, pressures to succeed, and poor physical and mental health; they utilized various coping strategies to neutralize some of the damaging effects of role integration. Some of their chosen strategies are considered beneficial, while others are considered maladaptive.

Engagement Strategies

Engagement strategies tend to be positive, purposeful activities that are approach type behaviours (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). The student-mothers all said they managed to find small ways they could maintain their emotional connections with their

children and husbands. The most discussed habits were dinner times as a family and bedtime routines with their children; some participants also found comfort in recurring nighttime discussions with their husbands. These *rituals of connection,* patterns of repetitive interaction, provided coherence, family identity, and meaning, and helped to preserve family values and beliefs (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999). Regular predictable routines such as family dinnertime have shown to have behavioural and emotional regulatory effects for children. They can mediate the detrimental effects of distress and upended routines for the whole family (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999).

Many of the parents said that having children while in school forced them to be extremely organized. They had to prioritize their time in ways that they felt were distinctive from students without children. They saw this as an advantage since the routines of family life aided them in planning ahead and maintaining healthy boundaries from school. Past studies determined that multiple roles can be beneficial to efficiency and subjective well-being over fewer or linear roles (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). One parent spoke of metaphorically taking off and putting on different hats or versions of themselves as they moved from the role of mother to student and then back again. Contrary to many studies suggesting that parents prioritize their children above all else (e.g. Brooks, 2012a: Lynch, 2008; Martinez et al., 2013; Sallee, 2015), participants in this study did not show such a distinction. The graduate student-mothers were very clearly committed to both their families and to their studies. If they felt that either of them slipped, guilt or shame would sometimes emerge. The role most clearly sacrificed by all of the participants was the responsibility to themselves and their own self-care, frequently harming their physical and mental health in the process.

Self-care was a scarcely used coping strategy, most reportedly due to time constraints. However, Connerley and Wu (2016) distinguish between *time-based conflicts* and *strain-based*

conflicts. *Time-based conflicts* arise when time requirements in one role conflict with the time needed in another, whereas *strain-based conflicts* occur when the stress, intellectual, or emotional demands of one role, diminishes the capacity to give to the other role (Connerley and Wu, 2016). The graduate student mothers had examples of each. They all lamented their lack of time yet also discussed the mental exhaustion that frequently occurred when pressure to conform to expectations was high. Sleep, exercise, and time alone are effective ways to recover from strain-based conflicts (Connerley and Wu, 2016). However, despite both being expressly valued, sleep and exercise were rarely prioritized during the student-mothers' most stressful periods. Student-mothers also spoke about time-deficits being the main barrier to taking time for themselves and for formal mindfulness practices.

Despite the significant distress experienced by many of the participants, there were only two that reported regularly seeing a therapist or a mentor throughout their programs. These participants seemed to provide fewer examples of burn-out, depression, and declines in physical health compared to some of the other student-mothers. It is difficult to say if they were in a more secure place to feel comfortable in seeking help, or if the therapy itself was helpful. If the other student-mothers felt their situations were inflexible and that they had no choice in accepting the status quo for the duration of their programs, their self-efficacy and confidence in the effectiveness of counselling may have been quite low (Ryan, Lynch, Vansteenkiste, & Deci, 2011).

Disengagement Strategies

Disengagement strategies tend to be avoidant, often destructive activities, that are retreat type behaviours (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Zahniser et al., 2017). In the short term, they can help to reduce the experience of discomfort related to guilt and anxiety (Mairet, Boag, & Warbuton, 2014). However, they do not tend to be value driven, nor helpful in their long-term

outcomes (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017). There were examples of student-mothers utilizing disengagement strategies to reduce distress. Notably, procrastination – a particularly common student disengagement strategy (Binder, 2000) – was not mentioned; however, the avoidance of difficult conversations, thoughts of giving up graduate school, and overcompensation were discussed.

Avoidance. Avoidance did not appear to be a main coping strategy discussed by the student-parents. However, some of the participants discussed the avoidance of difficult conversations with spouses, family, faculty, and administration to avoid hurt feelings, conflict or perceptions of incompetence. One graduate student-mother evaded conversations with her husband about the financial cost of graduate school leading to comments indicative of mistrust. Other mothers felt they avoided important connective rituals with their children that resulted in increased feelings of guilt. Yet, it was the avoidance of discussing issues with faculty that likely had the greatest impact.

It was possible that student-mothers accepted the academic system as is and believed that if they were to ask for special treatment, they would somehow be proving they were not competent enough for their graduate studies. Instead of embracing their student-motherhood, they chose to hide one role from the other hoping any shortfalls would go unnoticed. This disconnection from faculty, as was previously discussed, was an avoidance coping strategy that may have deprived those student-mothers of the opportunity to explore ways to reduce their workload and distress. Within other social systems like Denmark, student-parents are not required to approach faculty to plead for flexibility in their programs; rather, such flexibility is nationally mandated and mothers do not report similar levels of guilt and exhaustion in their graduate school programs (Brooks, 2012a, 2012b). This suggests that it is possible for student-

mothers and fathers to experience graduate school programs that fit with their family lifestyle and commitments rather than trying to fit themselves into programs that continue to negate student-parent needs in graduate school.

Surrender. Although none of the student-mothers quit their programs before the end, there were moments where they described intense questioning. Some student-mothers doubted their reasons for being there and why they were putting themselves through the extreme stress of graduate school. Perhaps just considering the option to quit gave some solace and feelings of autonomy. Having the option to choose the rules and obligations that fit with your values is a part of residing in Kegan's fourth order of consciousness (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

Overcompensation. Another maladaptive strategy is overcompensation, which has been linked to both the threat response and to unmet emotional needs (Mairet et al., 2014). Overcompensation or *overvigilence* is related to the 'fight' portion of the fight, flight, or freeze response that is engaged when an individual feels threatened or highly vulnerable. Two mothers were engaged so completely into their roles as mothers and students there was little time for anything else, most especially themselves. Although it appears to represent an approach strategy, by attempting to do categorically everything, they may have been avoiding their feelings of insecurity or ineptitude they were experiencing internally. One of the mothers stated that keeping herself as busy as possible helped her keep her "demon" (anxiety) at bay. She may have been using overcompensation to try to escape these intense uncomfortable feelings.

Delegation and Role Elimination

One of the more helpful strategies that seemed to be an ideal demonstration of Kegan's fourth order, was role elimination – the ability to choose to delegate and let go of some of the expectations and responsibilities associated with each role (Kegan, 1994; Sallee, 2015). While

the student-mothers did not often seek changes to their academic programs, at times they were able to delegate childcare, driving, teaching, and meal preparation to other nurturing caregivers. The student mothers expressed that it was helpful knowing someone could give their children the warmth and love they themselves would give. They were able to accept the limitations of *intensive mothering* and embrace instead, the notions of *alloparenting* and *extensive mothering*, knowing that their children were cared for and safe in the arms of others (Bogin, et al., 2014; Walls et al., 2016).

Reflections of Meaning

Almost all of the mothers reflected on their experiences as graduate student-parents and considered the advice they would give to other parents contemplating going back to graduate school. In every account, the participants lamented the significant challenges associated with pursuing graduate studies while raising children; however, they felt that making that decision with a clear understanding of the emotional roller coaster it would present, would better prepare mothers for what they would be facing. Moreover, all of the mothers passionately stated that chasing their dreams was worth the momentous trials and tribulations. There is both growth and loss in the transformation from what Kegan (1982) describes as the interpersonal self, to the institutional self, and like Victor Frankl believed, despite any harsh experiences, hope is never lost when searching for meaning (Frankl, 1969).

Considerations and Limitations Regarding the Current Study

Past studies on Canadian graduate student-mothers provided predominantly statistical information. To remedy this inadequacy, the purpose of the current study was to contribute to the broader understanding of the experience of graduate student-mothers and their multiple-role experiences. I felt this would best be achieved using a qualitative method of exploration. I believe

that following the IPA phenomenological approach using limited and open questioning, permitted the graduate student-mothers to guide their own interviews (Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, each interview was considerably different in structure as prompting questions were evoked from things that were said. This reduction in researcher influence allowed for the subjective experiences, values, and meaning to freely shine through. This did not, however, negate the impact that my own experiences, assumptions, and understandings, had on the final interpretation, as per the intention of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Using IPA facilitated the discovery of numerous associations between the understandings of participants and psychological literature on motivation, role conflicts, coping strategies, and meaning.

Due to the nature of this study, delimitations and limitations did arise. First, the experiences of the six graduate student-mothers are not fully representative of all mothers in graduate schools across Canada. Students from other universities or provinces that did not have access to the social media post, or who opted to not to participate in the study, may have had dissimilar experiences in graduate school than those who did partake. In the attempt to get an adequate selection of graduate school programs, recruitment was open to any university in Canada and this study's participants came from four separate institutions and were in six distinctive programs. However, the purpose of this study was not to generalize about institution or specific programs, but to capture the unique individual experiences of student-mothers with multiple roles. To that end, IPA guidelines restrict the sample size for reasons of detail, depth, and quality (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, I opted to accept participants on a first-come first-served basis. Initially, I chose to recruit for both men and women, yet the first five individuals interested and qualified were women. I then decided to focus solely on the experience of mothers and was able to recruit one more participant. In addition to the participants all being women, the

student-mothers were homogeneous in many other ways as well, something that is encouraged with IPA, but limits the "*theoretical transferability"* (p. 51), the degree to which the results can be transferred to other non-traditional students (Smith et al., 2009). For example, they were all White, married, between the ages of 30 to 41 years and all but one was born in Canada.

A possible limitation in this study was my influence as a researcher. I was and continued to be a graduate student-mother through the entire research process. I have already addressed some of the benefits of my deep involvement and insider perspective when discussing my reflexivity in Chapter Three; however, there is a possible drawback at the interview stage that should also be considered. In my view, my student-motherhood status and familiarity with the graduate school experience was an asset in building rapport and trust. However, I understood that this may have created a social desirability bias, despite my conscientious attempt to maintain an open curiosity and remain quiet when appropriate. Additionally, it is conceivable that my experience may have led me to probe for further information that resonated with my own experience as a graduate student-mother. I worked to minimize this by writing down keys words or phrases that they said during our interview that seemed significant to their experiences and came back and asked probing questions only about those specific topics. I feel this allowed for participants' open sharing of what was particularly meaningful and important to them. There are many empirically validated ways to combat social desirability bias in quantitative research (e.g. King & Bruner, 2000; Nederhof, 1985); however, very little is discussed regarding the prevention of social desirability bias in qualitative research (Collins, Shattell, & Thomas, 2005). Additionally, after Collins and colleagues (2005) examined over 300 pages of interview transcripts, they found little evidence that socially desirable responses were problematic. I maintain that the choice of IPA methodology also contributed to the truthfulness of the

interviewees. When directed to, "*Tell me about your experience of being a parent and a graduate student"*, participants were not led towards believing the researcher was searching for particular information.

Implications for Mental Health Professionals, Educators, and Students

This study explored the lived experiences of Canadian graduate student-mothers and further identified that graduate student-mothers are heavily influenced by their values and social system. This, in turn, influenced their experiences of role integration, abilities, and choices in coping with conflicts and distress. Thus, the counselling and mental health profession has an opportunity to learn from their challenging and often rewarding experiences. Herein, I will discuss implications and recommendations for counselling, future graduate student-parents, and the academe.

Implications for Psychologists and Counselling Professionals

The experiences that led to both distress and resiliency in graduate student-mothers can help inform the treatment interventions and strategies utilized by counselling and health professionals. As with any client, it is imperative to gain trust and build a healthy working relationship to acquire an understanding of the nature of the clients' distress. To help mothers in graduate school, I would offer a few recommendations for counsellors (a) appreciate and understand the unique and often hidden experience of graduate student-mothers, (b) acknowledge the stress associated with student-mothers' multiple roles and declines in their well-being, and (c) recognize the propensity for student-mothers to eliminate their own self-care in order to meet perceived obligations.

First, come to appreciate and understand the unique experience of graduate student-mothers. As was demonstrated within the interpreted findings of this research study, many

graduate student-mothers experience gendered expectations related to their roles as mothers. Additionally, there are very high expectations for graduate students, both from themselves and their drive towards finding meaning and purpose, and from their programs to meet deadlines and academic achievements in coursework or research. Failure to meet these expectations can result in high levels of guilt and shame. Clients who are experiencing shame might be arrested in Kegan's third stage of adult consciousness and feel as if their identity is indistinguishable from their roles. One way to aid this process would be to help the client understand that their shame is not only maladaptive but, in many cases, entirely mistaken. Utilizing Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) as an intervention can facilitate this process, as there are guilt/shame related cognitions or beliefs that can be challenged in therapy (Kubany & Ralston, 2007). Additionally, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is another evidence-based treatment practice that has proven to be highly effective in the treatment of shame (Gutierrez & Hagedorn, 2013). ACT focuses on developing skills for increasing psychological flexibility (Gutierrez & Hagedorn, 2013), a necessary aptitude for helping to relinquish an identity confined by obligation.

Second, it is important to acknowledge the association between multiple role management, emotional stress, and declines in physical and mental health. Long term, consistent stress can cause elevated depressive symptoms, negative affect, mental health issues, and lower overall levels of life satisfaction (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017). Additionally, it can lead to somatic issues as well, such as chronic pain, inflammation, as well as higher incidents of injury (Sternberg, 2001). Implementing a mindfulness practice in session may be extremely beneficial, as would be the introduction of various ways to reduce heart rate, rapid breathing, or other sympathetic nervous system responses to stress. Stress can be helpful but only if it can be reversed when no longer needed for optimum performance (Sternberg, 2001).

Finally, the recognition that a common coping strategy for student-mothers feeling time-limitation distress is to eliminate things such as sleep, exercise, healthy food preparation, and social activities. This affords an opportunity for counsellors to provide psychoeducation around the damaging effects of avoiding self-care, even in the short term (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017; Lynch, 2008). Overwhelming exhaustion and isolation are associated with burnout, depersonalization, emotional distance, and a reduction of parental effectiveness (Mikolajczak et al., 2018; Roskam et al., 2017). Ideally, counsellors will be able to help their student-mother clients comprehend that they are not bound by their roles and that they have the option to step outside others' expectations in order to protect their own health and well-being. For example, they could encourage their clients to request a renegotiation of childcare and domestic duties with their spouse or request further help from family and friends. Additionally, they can urge graduate student-mothers to speak with their faculty or administrators to request flexible study options or deadline extensions when life circumstances demand more of them.

Implications for Educators, University Administrators, and Students

Understanding the impacts of institutional expectations on the emotional health and well-being of graduate student-parents as well as knowing supports that could prove helpful, can inform university policies and programing for students with dependent children. Despite the revelation that mothers are exposed to far more stress in academia then their male counterparts, not many systemic changes have been consistently implemented in Canada (Connerley & Wu, 2016; Turcotte, 2018). In reflecting on this study's findings and the academic status quo in Denmark (Brooks, 2012a), there are at least five possible initiatives that could be implemented in Canadian universities to help reduce student distress and increase well-being. For example, (a) support for flexible study options (Brooks 2012a, 2012b; Springer et al., 2009), (b) establish an

environment that does not stigmatize the need for a leave of absence or extensions (Brooks, 2012a), (c) encourage mothers and fathers to enter graduate school programs through increased financial support (e.g., grants, scholarships etc.; Trepal et al., 2014), (d) increase accessibility to affordable childcare (Brooks, 2012b), and (e) arrangement of academic support groups for parents.

Graduate-student mothers can benefit from recognizing the importance of keeping themselves, their physical and mental health, relationships, and alone time as much of a priority as the many other roles and responsibilities in their lives. Additionally, both mothers and fathers can benefit from family supportive organizational cultures in the academe, workplace, and home. The onus is on women to support women by being supportive of their daughters, sisters, mothers and colleagues, and be role models for others striving for their own meaning and purpose in academia. The onus is on men to support women by embracing their own domestic and fatherhood roles and encouraging other fathers to follow suit (Connerley & Wu, 2016). Gloria Steinem (2009) was quoted as saying to the New York Daily News, “We’ve demonstrated that women can do what men do, but not yet that men can do what women do. That’s why most women have two jobs – one inside the home and one outside it – which is impossible. The truth is that women can’t be equal outside the home until men are equal in it.”

Implications for Future Research

The topic of parents in graduate school, specifically the lived experience in Canada, has been greatly neglected. There are two promising directions for future research that have not been fully explored in the existing body of knowledge. First, it would be beneficial to extend the understanding of graduate-student mothers to a systemic understanding of the impact on her

family; that is to say, what is the experience of her partner and children? Second, what is the experience of multiple roles for graduate-student fathers?

Family Impact of Graduate School

Gilbert (1982), Laosa (1982), and McLaughlin (1985), are among the few studies that explored the impacts of parental schooling on the whole family. Interestingly, they found similar challenges to today's mothers, including time constraints, financial stress, marital and familial concerns, and the lack of interaction with faculty. In all cases, a high level of distress was reported. Additionally, McLaughlin (1985) and Gilbert (1982) found that marriage had a detrimental effect on the success of women in graduate school; whereas for fathers it did not. Laosa (1982) considered the impacts on the whole family, including the parent-child relationship; however, the literature in this area is dated. The findings from the current study suggest that parents were concerned about their timing to go back to school because of the possible detrimental impacts it may have on their children. Therefore, additional research into how a mother returning to graduate school impacts the parent-child relationship is warranted.

Experience of Graduate Student-Fathers

As it was the original intention of this study to include the experiences of fathers in graduate school, I believe it would be of particular interest to compare the accounts of fathers to that of mothers. Estes' (2011) research was one of the few recent studies that focused on both mothers and fathers in higher education. However, Estes predominantly discussed the overlapping experiences of both men and women rather than comparing their experience. Prior to the commencement of this study, a pilot study was conducted using thematic analysis. It was noted that the one student-father interviewed also faced challenges; however, these challenges were experienced quite differently to what has been described by student-mothers (e.g., related to

conflicts between financial security and academic pressures). Clearly a sample of one has no generalizability yet does merits further exploration.

Concluding Thoughts

This study is a reflection of my increased appreciation for the lived experience of mothers in graduate school. I understandably began this project with my own perceptions of multiple cherished roles, ambitions, guilt, and the various ways that I attempted to handle those experiences. I have had the privilege to connect with six graduate school mothers who were willing to share their experiences with me. From their accounts, my experience as a researcher, and the psychological literature that preceded it, an interpretation of the experience of mothers in graduate school emerged. First, this study allowed the exploration of the student-mothers' development of values and their motivations to attend graduate school. This demonstrated that differing motivations can have powerful impacts on coping skills and academic resiliency. Second, the expectations and communication of faculty, friends, family, and even strangers in mothers' social worlds have potent impacts on their emotions, abilities to cope, and physical and mental health. Student-mothers experienced high intensities of guilt and shame; however, finding meaning and acceptance aided them in overcoming penitence and in finding pride in their ambitions and growth. Finally, the understanding that for these six graduate student-mothers, the craving for knowledge and purpose was stronger than the many challenges and impediments that were placed in their path.

Committing to this research study was profoundly difficult for me. It challenged my own feelings of being torn between being a mother and a successful master's student. However, in walking beside my participants on their journey, they helped me on my own. We can choose to shift from a life bound by others' expectations to a life based on the authority of our own values.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Poster: Parent Version

Apple Sauce & Academia:
Parents' Experience of Graduate School

Description:
The objective of this study is to explore:

- The unique lived experience of parents in graduate school
- How parents navigated dual-roles while in graduate school
- How parents make sense of their experiences during graduate school.
- Factors that parents found hindering and/or helpful while in graduate school.

Eligibility Requirements:

- Ability to read, understand, and speak English
- Parent, adoptive parent, or caregiver of at least one child that resides with you at least 50% of the time
- Currently (or within the last 5 years) enrolled in a full-time, on-campus, graduate school program

Interview Duration:

- Audio/Video recorded interview of approx. 60-90 mins
- A $10 gift card will given as a token of appreciation for participation

Researcher: Jane Fix
[redacted]

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Jane Fix, BA(Hons)
Werklund School of Education
Graduate Programs in Education
[redacted]

Supervisor: Sharon Cairns
Werklund School of Education
Graduate Programs in Education

Title of Project:
Apple Sauce & Academia: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Mothers' Experiences in Graduate School

Sponsor: SSHRC

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study is to explore the experience of mothers and fathers in Graduate School.

What Will I Be Asked to Do?

You will meet with an interviewer in person and will be asked a series of semi-structured questions regarding their experience of being a parent while attending full time graduate school. For example, questions will be similar to "Tell me about your experience of being a parent and a graduate student?"

The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes and will audio or videotaped in order to be accurately transcribed for analysis. It is possible that a follow-up interview may be required to address any missing information that becomes apparent. Participation in the follow-up interview would be completely voluntary and can be done either in person or over the phone.

Participation in the interview or any part of the interview is completely voluntary, participants may refuse to participate altogether, may refuse to participate in parts of the study, may decline to answer any and all questions, and may withdraw from the study without penalty.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?
As a result of recruitment, I will have access to your name, email, and phone number. Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your gender, number and ages of children, and academic major and level. The audio or videotaped interviews will not be shown in public. Access to the recordings is limited to the lead researcher, the primary investigator/supervisor, and research assistants.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?
As the interview questions are inquiring about possible challenges you faced during graduate school, there is a possibility that feelings of distress may surface. Support can be found at:

Distress Centre (no cost):
Description: 24-hour Crisis Line support, Telephone: (403) 266 4357
'Online Chat' anonymous support. To use service visit: http://www.distresscentre.com/ and click on 'Confidential Chat'.

University of Calgary Wellness Centre (no cost for students):
Description: The SU Wellness Centre works very closely with other on and off campus services (e.g., Student Success Centre, Career Services, Calgary Counselling Centre etc.) to make sure students are supported for all of their needs, The SU Wellness Centre is open 9:00am to 4:30pm Monday to Friday. Extended evening hours will resume with the start of the Fall 2016 academic term. Telephone: (403) 210-9355

Eastside Family Centre:
Description: Immediate, no-cost, confidential walk-in counselling service for youth and families. Service is available on a first-come, first-served basis with no appointment necessary. Individuals receive up to five 50-minute sessions with a qualified mental health professional, who will provide referrals to other community resources.
Eastside Family Centre: Northgate Mall 255 495 36 St. NE, Calgary, AB T2A 6K3
Telephone: (403) 299-9696
Hours of Operation:
Monday-Thursday 11am-7pm, Friday 11am-6pm, Saturday 11am-4pm, Closed Sunday

The interviews have the potential to reveal information that is required by law to be reported to a law enforcement or other agency (e.g., child abuse), I am legally required to report any instances of child abuse, harm to self, or harm to others.

Each participant will be given a $10-dollar Amazon.ca or Tim Hortons, or Starbucks gift card to participate in the research.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Access to collected information is limited to the lead researcher, the primary investigator/supervisor, and research assistants. Identity will be kept anonymous by employing pseudonyms throughout analysis and the reporting of results.

In the case that you wish to withdraw from this study, all data you contributed to the study will be destroyed unless this is not feasible or there are compelling reasons not to do so.

Participation is completely voluntary and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time leading up to, and during, the interview process. No one except the researcher, her supervisor and her research assistant will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers to the questionnaire or the interview tape. Collected information can be withdrawn for up to one month after data is collected. There are no names recorded on paper outside of the consent form. Only group information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. The audio files are kept on an encrypted USB in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher and her supervisor. The anonymous data will be stored for five years on a computer disk, at which time, it will be permanently erased.

Signatures
Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____Date: _____

Questions/Concerns
If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Jane Fix
Department/Faculty of Education
[redacted]
and
Sharon Cairns,
Faculty of Education,
[redacted]

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at [redacted]

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Interview Guide:

Participant #: _____ Date: _____

Interview Start Time: _____

Contextual Component Preamble: As you know, I am investigating the ways in which parents attending full-time graduate school have handled having dual-roles. This is the first interview, there could possibly be a follow-up interview if necessary. Its purpose is to collect information about your experiences, what they meant to you, and the ways in which you felt you handled them. You volunteered to participate in this study because you identified yourself as being a parent and simultaneously a graduate student or that you have been within the last 5 years.

- What is your program and what is the length of time you've been in program?
- How many children do you have?
- What are their ages?
- What is your relationship status?
- Is the other parent involved?
- Tell me about your experience of being a parent and a graduate student.
    - (I have limited the script to background information and one main open question relating to the experience of being a parent in graduate school. This allows for space and flexibility in participants' responses, which I will investigate in more detail with further prompts and questions relating to their answers. Prompts based on a participant's questions are consistent with the chosen methodology and unpredictable due to the open nature of the primary question.)

2. *Demographics Component if not already known*

i. Country of birth

ii. If not Canada,
(a) length of time in Canada

(b)1st language

iii. Age:

iv. Interview End Time:

v. Length of interview: