Students Who Are Moms: How Do They Do It?

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Rhianna Marie Derscheid for the Master of Science in Sociology were presented February 6, 2009, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Rhianna Marie Derscheid for the Master of Science in Sociology, presented February 6, 2009.

Title: Students Who Are Moms: How Do They Do It?

Women with children are the fastest growing population of students within higher education. Women with children attempt to obtain a college degree for varied reasons, including self-development, social mobility, and to be a good role model for their children. Student moms face several obstacles in their attempts to obtain a college degree including financial constraints, childcare issues, marginalization, time constraints, and isolation. There is a paucity of research on student moms and the factors that contribute to their successful completion of a college degree. More research is needed to understand student moms’ experiences and to develop effective support programs within higher education institutions.

The purpose of this study was to examine how social support affects student moms’ educational experiences. The theoretical constructs that framed the study were group membership, social integration, and social capital. The literature review supported the relevancy of these constructs.

For this study, twenty-eight senior level, undergraduate student moms were recruited from Portland State University to participate in focus groups where they were asked to discuss and write about attending the university while raising children. Participants were asked to discuss and write about positive sources of support,
negative sources of support, sense of belonging on campus, the status of student moms within the institution, and advice for other student moms.

Focus group data were coded and analyzed using qualitative methods. The data showed that social support is important for student moms to be successful in attending university while raising children. The data also showed that the student moms in this study had a narrow pool of support and that most of that support came from participants' immediate family. The student moms in this study reported a lack of connection or sense of belonging on campus; however that did not lead to a dropout decision. As such, it was found that social capital theory was more fruitful than social integration theory for explaining student moms’ experiences. In addition, it was found that a richer, more complete theoretical model was necessary for analyzing the data; therefore the notion of emotional capital was added to the final analysis.
STUDENTS WHO ARE MOMS:
HOW DO THEY DO IT?

by
RHIANNA MARIE DERSCHEID

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in
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Through God all things are possible, one day at a time.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

PROBLEM STATEMENT

For some, the phrase "college student" brings to mind a fresh-faced, eighteen-year-old leaving home to live in a dormitory. The institution of higher education, in fact, was originally designed to serve the needs of elite, young, white males. Today, colleges and universities provide access to social mobility for a variety of students from diverse backgrounds. There is a broad body of work that examines education for traditional students; however less is known about the increasingly common face of higher education: nontraditional students. The problem is that "adult students are often invisible and silent members of the undergraduate community" (Kasworm 1990:366). This is particularly true for women with children who are attempting to obtain a college degree.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of social support on the college experience for student moms. This exploration will provide an opportunity to examine issues of belonging, relationships as resources, and also individual perseverance. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, it is well known that for traditional students the issue of social integration is theoretically and empirically tied to student outcomes in higher education. However, the less explored voices of nontraditional students are largely missing from the literature. We know that social integration is important for traditional students, but how does it affect nontraditional students, specifically a population of nontraditional students who have very different life circumstances than traditional students? If social integration is not important to
student moms, what is? Where do they obtain support to survive in higher education? In other words, how do they do it?

Female students over the age of twenty-five are the fastest growing student population in higher education (Quimby and O’Brien 2006; Home 1998). Many must balance parenting with school. The parental role is relatively more salient for women than men and women are more susceptible to role strain because of their role as primary caregivers (Simon 1992). Essentially, women continue to provide children with more daily care and nurturing than men (McBride and Rane 1997). Moreover, women are more likely than men to perceive daily care giving as their primary responsibility (McBride and Rane 1997).

For women with children, the transition or reentry to college requires internal and external resources, such as perceived social support, in order to balance roles and responsibilities. Quimby and O’Brien (2006) argue that an absence of psychological distress leads to persistence for nontraditional students. However, little is known about what contributes to psychological well-being for nontraditional female students. As such, this study asks: How does social support affect the college experience for women with children? Answering this question will provide further understanding of female students with children and perhaps nontraditional students in general. Moreover, it will point to implications regarding the salience of social support in times of transition and conflicting responsibilities.

Several more specific questions guide this study. Are student moms able to develop relationships with other students on campus and a sense of belonging through
those relationships? If student moms are not able to develop social relationships on campus where are they able to find social support in order to persist in school? How does their sense of belonging on campus affect their education experience? Finally, this study will explore the ways in which social support, on campus or off, is utilized by women with children in relation to attending classes. Do student moms' social experiences affect their persistence? This study is not longitudinal; therefore it will not provide outcome data. The purpose is to gather information about student moms’ subjective experiences and how they relate to psychological well-being and satisfaction, which are predictors of persistence.

A 2007 content analysis conducted by Donaldson and Townsend showed that only about 1% of articles in the top education journals pertained to adult students. The majority of the articles that did feature adult students were in journals related to community colleges and only one article utilized qualitative methodology (Donaldson and Townsend 2007). Clearly, there is a dearth of data regarding adult students. Furthermore, there is little data available pertaining to student moms’ views or their education experiences (Duquaine-Watson 2007; VanStone, Nelson and Niemann 1994; Quimby and O’Brien 2006; Hayes and Flannery 1997). Quimby and O’Brien (2006) offered the following advice for research that could expand on their quantitative study:

Future studies could expand on the current findings using qualitative methods. For example, the diverse and changing factors that contribute to women’s self-efficacy in their roles as a student and as a parent could be explicated in interviews. Also, qualitative investigations focused on the specific provisions of social support and investigation into areas in which women feel that support is not available may help to
determine what nontraditional female students with children need and want from counseling and advising services (p. 457).

This study was conducted to provide some of that missing information. By utilizing qualitative methods to gather data about student moms’ subjective experiences I will attempt to provide a rich description and analysis of those experiences.

**IMPETUS FOR FOCUSING ON EDUCATION**

Attaining a college degree provides numerous benefits to individuals and society. People who possess a college degree are 30% less likely to be unemployed when compared to those who have only graduated from high school (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Sera 1999). In addition to providing career mobility, each year of school beyond high school adds .4% average longevity to a person’s life span. The National Center for Education Statistics (2001) found that people with bachelor’s degrees report better health than people who have only completed high school.

The investment to pursue and achieve a college degree yields great returns in occupational prestige and income. Women with bachelor’s degrees generally earn 85% more than those with a high school diploma and 68% more than those with only a two year degree (2000 census). Moms who attend college are better equipped to relate to their children as students and act as role models in the area of education for their children (Scott, Burns, and Cooney 1996). A recent longitudinal study found that adults whose mothers completed degrees while their children were at home were more likely to complete a college degree (Suitor, Plikuhn, Gilligan, and Powers 2008). Another study showed that 90% of women who were receiving welfare were able to stop receiving it once they obtained a college degree (Huff and Thorpe 1997). These
changes or learning would be possible or even advisable: it was a waste of resources to send an adult to school. In the 1950’s when Carnegie Corporation of New York funded the first general education program for adult women, the idea that housewives could go back to school and earn college degrees was radical, shocking, and even somewhat ludicrous—in their late twenties and early thirties, surely these women were too old to learn. We have lived to see this belief soundly disproved in so many ways they are virtually impossible to enumerate. The college-bound housewives were the first hesitant wave of a floodtide of adults who have since gone back to school. They return for many reasons: to acquire new skills, train for a new career, gain more advanced knowledge, or just simple for the pure pleasure of learning (11).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) predicts that from 2004 to 2014 the enrollment of adult students (25 and older) will increase more than the enrollment of traditional age students. Moreover, women’s enrollment is increasing at a level higher than men’s. Home (1998) states that, “Women with family responsibilities are the fastest growing group [of adult learners]” (p. 85). However, they are also at greatest risk for dropping out (NCES 2004).

Women are flocking to college campuses in an attempt to reap the rewards of higher education. There are several societal conditions that make higher education important for women in particular. For instance, mother-headed households are over-represented among the poor (Haleman 2004). In part, this can be attributed to lack of cultural capital, including higher education (Zhan and Pandey 2004). Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen (2007) argue that “Life chances are much more strongly linked to educational capital than ever before” (p. 87). Single moms particularly need education to stay afloat economically. Divorce can necessitate a return to school to obtain a degree in order to provide for children (Brown 2002). Salary differences between men
and women disadvantage women, particularly those with children (Haleman 2004). Zhan and Pandey (2004) argue that a college degree is crucial for escaping poverty. Education is extremely important for poor, single moms to end the cycle of poverty and develop on a personal level (Sharp 2004).

Married women are also motivated to return to school for economic reasons and developmental reasons. More adults are returning (or beginning) school to increase job marketability. Societal shifts have allowed women to enter occupations formerly the domain of men (Bean and Metzner 1985). Moreover, many families now find that two incomes are needed for financial and personal reasons (Bean and Metzner 1985). The model of the nuclear, one-income family is becoming a modern anomaly. Married women with children are much more likely to participate in the labor force today than they were in previous years. The career life span in contemporary society includes several job changes and increased work years due to increased longevity. Shifting employer practices have resulted in the need to continually update skills and credentials (Brown 2002). Women with children report that they go to school to be a good role model for children, improve economic status, and build self-esteem (Haleman 2004). Previous studies indicate that these women are highly motivated to provide better lives for their children (Rizer 2005; Van Stone et al. 1994; Duquaine-Watson 2007; Haleman 2004).

Education may be the "great equalizer" but it is not an equal access institution. Structurally, it advantages some students over others. Home (1998) states that student moms, "...are vulnerable to role strain due to conflicting demands and constant
overload” (p. 85). Bean and Metzner (1985) state that although nontraditional students are increasing in numbers, they are also more likely than traditional students to drop out of school. In a 2001 follow-up survey of students who began college in 1995, only about 4% of students with dependents had obtained a bachelor’s degree (NCES 2002). The premise of this study is that social support is a salient concept for understanding student moms’ abilities to persist in college due to the fact that they have “conflicting demands and constant overload” (Home 1998:85). It is important to understand the type of support they need to be successful.

Barriers to Student Moms’ Education

Student moms face several obstacles on the road to obtaining a college degree and making life changes. They are more likely to experience “disorderly career pathways” because of gendered cultural expectations surrounding home and child care (Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen 2006). As such, women are somewhat overrepresented in the returning student category. Brown (2002) states:

Institutional barriers may include time limits on obtaining a degree, lack of counseling services, few support groups, and limited childcare service. Personal barriers include financial insufficiency, conflicts between home and school roles, lack of time, insecurity, and problem of identity resulting from divorce (p. 68).

Adult students continue to be marginalized in institutions that cling to the image of the traditional student (Home 1998).

When we look at old movies that portray college students, a common picture emerges: college students are young; they major in liberal arts; they attend school full time; they are supported by their parents; and they are concerned with ideas as well as with success. Students are also portrayed as White, middle-class, and supportive of mainstream assumptions about the meaning of education. This stereotypical
conception of college students has permeated much of the thinking of academics as well; thus when faculty and administrators interact with students, they sometimes make assumptions that are far removed from reality (Baird 2003:599).

Although some institutions are beginning to recognize the need for students to balance school and work, little attention is paid to the issue of balancing school and family (Home 1998). The academy has proven to be resistant to recognizing and addressing the unique learning needs of women (Belenky, et al. 1986). Fried (1994) argues that universities were established by men and reflect the male perspective, including the assumption that students have a domestic support system to take care of daily chores. Male administrators are not aware of the daily duties and responsibilities associated with being a primary caregiver (Fried 1994).

Sharp (2004) offers the following areas of constraint for single student moms:

1. Welfare policies
2. Lack of financial resources
3. Child care issues
4. Discrimination and racism
5. Internalized stigma
6. Negative school experiences
7. Lack of education experience
8. Lack of family support for education (p.115-116).

In addition to external sources of conflict, student moms experience constraints within institutions of higher education. Institutional texts, norms, and images continue to portray the traditional student as a young, childless individual who does not have
responsibilities outside of school (Steck 2005). Steck (2005) argues that, "Students with children are consistently marginalized by the existing organization of postsecondary institutions" (p.1). Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall (1996) point out that women are disadvantaged in college in several ways, ranging from stereotypes to sexist language to unequal practices. For example wives and moms in school might be seen as “bored, middle-aged housewives who have nothing else to do with their lives” (32). Faculty may not know how to interact with these women because they do not view them as serious students (Sandler, et al. 1996). Kasworm (1990) suggests that it is not necessarily the age of the student that is important, but the changed life circumstances that generally accompany the adult age student, including roles as parents and workers.

Many institutions still view the adult student as a strange and out of place entity, even going so far as to operate under the belief that adult students do not belong in higher education. This is illustrated by a situation where a faculty person chided an adult student for “taking up space in a classroom” (Donaldson and Townsend 2007, p. 44). Some believe that an adult student pursuing a degree is depriving a younger student of the opportunity (Scott, Burn, and Cooney 1998). As such, some believe that the institution should maintain focus on the traditional student (Kasworm 1990).

Single moms experience stigmatization. There are several reports in the literature of single student moms being disparaged because of their single mother status. Some single student moms have had negative experiences on college campuses in terms of other students’ views and school personnel as well. They are often looked
upon as poor, deviant, and not serious students (Haleman 2004; Sharp 2004; Duquaine-Watson 2007). Those who are receiving TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) face the additional shame of being viewed as a “welfare mom” (Haleman 2004).

Although student moms face many constraints, this study focuses on learning about their emotional experiences and relationships as they relate to persistence. Home (1998) posits that women drop out of school more than men for non-academic reasons. Furthermore, she states that, “The adequacy of available support can make the difference between persisting and dropping out” (Home 1998:86). Unfortunately, some women may be discouraged by the people in their lives from going to school (Sharp 2004). In that case, on-campus relationships might become crucial. Hayes and Flannery (1997) argue that there is a lack of systematic knowledge about adult women in higher education so that not much is known about their experiences at this point.

STATE OF RESEARCH ON WOMEN’S ISSUES

As stated previously, although women with children are a fast growing population on college campuses, there is little data available pertaining to student moms’ views or their education experiences (Duquaine-Watson 2007; VanStone, Nelson and Niemann 1994; Quimby and O’Brien 2006; Hayes and Flannery 1997; Steck 2005). Prior research on adult development has not included women.

It is easy to see why: in the post WWII atmosphere, in which women were supposed to scurry back to the kitchen and stay there, raising children, the study of a woman’s career or even a woman’s developmental process would have seemed far less interesting to male scientists than the study of men, if indeed they had thought of doing it at all (Bronte 1997:12).
Given that women with children are the new face of higher education, it is important that we understand their unique experiences.

Women and women’s issues are generally missing from scientific research (Belenky, et al. 1986). The present study adds to the body of knowledge that aims to include more women’s issues in scientific research. Given that research is often conducted with male subjects:

We have learned a great deal about the development of autonomy and independence, abstract critical thought, and the unfolding of morality of rights and justice in both men and women. We have learned less about the development of interdependence, intimacy, nurturance, and contextual thought (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986:6).

After we learned a great deal about how college affects the typical, 18-22 year old, residential college student, (see Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1998) influential book How College Affects Student, which is based on years of research on traditional college students) the student population morphed into a heterogeneous body that reflects a wide variety of needs. Researchers must now catch up with that trend and learn about how college affects other types of students.

In sum, women with children are an increasing population in higher education. This is likely due, at least in part, to the fact that it has become imperative for women with children to obtain a college degree to reap financial and developmental rewards. For some it is crucial to survival. None the less, it is a population about which little is known. We know that women with children face many impediments on the road to achieving their goals. We know that social support is important for traditional students. What we do not know is how it affects a group of students who seem to need
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Three theoretical concepts have been useful in framing this study and allowing an examination of the salience of social support at the institutional (macro) level and the personal (micro) level. Emile Durkheim’s broad based theory of societal group membership provides the starting point. Durkheim is well known for presenting social theory that focuses on the ability of the social structure to impact social actors. Vincent Tinto’s interactionalist theory of student departure goes one step closer to this study’s specific group of interest by describing group membership within higher education. It has been included because of its predominance in the literature and also due its focus on group membership within higher education. Like Durkheim, Tinto also places great weight on the ability of the social structure to influence social actors. As such his theory lies on the structure side of the structure/agency continuum. The theoretical tools provided by Tinto and Durkheim will allow for an examination of the role of group membership for the student moms in this study.

The concept of social capital provides additional theoretical tools by outlining the specific benefits and constraints that are associated with group membership. Social capital theory lies in the middle of the structure/agency continuum by describing the constraints of structure, but also the ability of actors to utilize resources as a means to achieve their own ends. While theories of group membership are useful for explaining concepts such as sense of belonging and social attachment, I am also interested in the ability of actors to utilize resources for their individual means rather than as part of a group. Moreover, the theories of Tinto and Durkheim entail a narrow scope by
focusing on group membership within the institution. I am also interested in the role of social connections outside of the institution.

In order to address these issues, Pierre Bourdieu’s broad based social theory is utilized to provide a detailed analysis of how social capital interacts with other forms of capital to influence outcomes. Bourdieu is less inclined than Durkheim and Tinto to focus on the constraining aspects of the social structure and more inclined to allow for an examination of the agency of social actors. Bourdieu’s concepts embed student moms within a greater societal context. They provide an opportunity to analyze the experience of student moms within a framework that recognizes the impact of a myriad of actors while also emphasizing the primacy of student moms’ individual agency.

**DURKHEIM AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP**

Durkheim (1951 [1897]) posits that human beings are social by nature. They need more than physical resources to survive. They need social connection to thrive. There are a number of outcomes associated with insufficient social connection. Durkheim’s analysis focuses on perhaps the most extreme outcome: suicide. In his groundbreaking work *Suicide* Emile Durkheim (1951 [1897]) posits that “suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part” (p. 208). In essence, Durkheim argues that when people lack a sense of group belonging they become excessively individualistic. This individualism leads to a breakdown of the social and collective orientation that marks civilized humanity resulting in the loss of a reason to live. Without a bond to the
entity that we call society, people have no bond to life and the slightest turmoil can lead to suicide. On the broadest level, society is formed by associations and interactions between people. As such, to say that one does or does not have an attachment to society is to say that one does or does not have an attachment to other people.

Durkheim begins *Suicide* with this definition: “The term suicide is applied to any death which is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim himself” (p. 42). Durkheim is referring to passive suicide in addition to overt suicide, meaning that suicide can be accomplished by *not* doing something in addition to explicit acts. This interpretation allows for multiple analogies between the idea of passive suicide and other behaviors that detract from successful outcomes. He spends the first half of the book arguing against then-popular theories about causes of suicide, such as those based on geographical location or biological makeup. He concludes that because suicide is not the result of those factors it must be a social phenomenon, and supports this with an examination of statistical trends in different societies.

The first area in Durkheim’s analysis of the social nature of suicide resides in an examination of religion. He finds that Catholic communities have lower suicide rates than Protestant communities across the board. He reasons that Catholicism vaccinates its members against suicide not because of any particular religious creed but because of the sense of community and cohesion that it provides. He presents evidence of various sorts to show that disintegration of religious ties, via Protestant
individualism, increased literacy, or higher class position increases propensity for suicide. In other words, when the sense of community and collective life are lost people are more likely to kill themselves. "In this case the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching him to society is itself slack" (Durkheim 1951:215).

Durkheim goes on to support his assertion that suicide stems from social causes by presenting evidence that shows that married people are less likely to commit suicide. Moreover, he shows that people who live in larger families are less likely to commit suicide. In addition, suicide rates decrease during times of intense political activity. Durkheim posits that this is due to the solidification that results from political action. In essence, Durkheim uses the realms of religion, marriage, family, and political activity to illustrate the idea that social connection, achieved through these various institutions, can shield people from a proclivity for suicide.

People who are overly socially integrated can be negatively impacted. Durkheim (1951) addresses this issue in the chapter entitled "Altruistic Suicide."

Durkheim argues that those who have a weak sense of their individuality are likely to commit suicide in situations where it is culturally prescribed, such as certain religious practices or in military service. In this case the person is more concerned with obeying social norms than preserving him or herself, which is an extreme case of the impact of the social structure. Social integration can be thought of as a continuum ranging from no social connection, resulting in excessive individualism, to full social connection, resulting in self sacrificial behavior. Altruistic suicide lies on the latter end of the continuum.
Finally, Durkheim (1951 [1897]) reiterates the point that social forces exist outside of individuals to constrain and impact behavior, which is largely related to the actions of others. As such, Durkheim argues, when studying any particular behavior or action of an individual one must consider the social forces impacting the behavior in addition to the individual characteristics. According to Durkheim, interaction among people creates something new and unique, separate from the sum of the individuals, which serves to control and constrain. Durkheim's extensive use of demographics is used to support this thesis. He argues that collective human existence is symbolized through physical objects, such as buildings or documents, and traditions and norms transmitted through the generations. Durkheim calls this the social fact. Durkheim does recognize that there is a constant tension between the individual and society whereby the individual contributes to and recoils from society. The individual creates society and it constrained by it; however Durkheim is ultimately more concerned with how the individual is constrained by society.

Durkheim's (1951 [1897]) answer to the problem of suicide is to develop greater social cohesion. He argues that people need a sense of belonging and connection in order to be content. He is cynical about the abilities of religion, political groups, and family to provide the necessary social cohesion. Durkheim argues that organization by occupation is the best method of providing the social groups necessary to inoculate people against suicide.
The previous section detailed the general importance of social connection, as argued by Emile Durkheim (1951 [1897]). I will now examine social connection within higher education specifically. The major theorist whose work relates student experiences to education outcomes is Vincent Tinto. Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) state, “Tinto’s interactionalist theory of college student departure enjoys near-paradigmatic status, as indicated by more than 400 citations and 170 dissertations pertaining to this theory” (p. 569). Tinto focuses on the issue of integration in his work on student retention. He argues that, “The greater the student’s level of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the focal college or university” (Tinto 1975, quoted in Braxton 2000:3). Tinto’s theory stems in part from Durkheim’s work on suicide (Tinto 1975). As discussed, Durkheim argues that suicide can result from insufficient interaction with the societal social system (Tinto 1975). Along the same line, Tinto argues that students who do not integrate into the social system on a college campus will be likely to withdraw from the institution. Again, this illustrates the power of the social structure over the individual.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Tinto’s full model shows the relationship between students’ pre-college attributes, their institutional and goal commitment, eventual academic and social integration (or lack thereof), and subsequent level of commitment to goals and the institution. According to Tinto’s model, students matriculate with particular background characteristics that affect their initial motivation and commitment levels. Subsequently, their experiences on campus influence levels of
social and academic integration. Theoretically, the level of integration a student experiences will affect his or her commitment to goals and the institution, culminating in the intent to persist or withdraw from the institution (see Figure 1).

This process involves three stages and is inspired by VanGennep’s work on rites of passage (Tinto 1975). In the first stage, students disengage from their communities of origin in order to fully engage with the institution. The middle stage involves transition from the community of origin to the community of the institution. The final stage involves full social integration (Tinto 1975).

Tinto’s work primarily describes the experience of the traditional, residential college student. As such, campus experiences are given theoretical primacy. This may not, however, apply to nontraditional, non-residential students such as those who are the focus of the present study. Tinto does acknowledge that external factors can also affect students’ education outcomes (Tinto 1975); however, these external factors may be more salient for non-residential and nontraditional students. Tinto’s model has been criticized in terms of the need to separate from the community of origin (see Tierney 1999; Guiffrida 2006); some argue that nontraditional students cannot disengage or will be negatively impacted by disengaging with their communities of origin in order to assimilate into campus life. The next section will describe a theoretical perspective that provides an additional tool for analysis that is missing from the theories of Tinto and Durkheim. Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory adds explanatory power to the theories of Tinto and Durkheim by providing a robust framework that allows for an examination of the resources that are produced by social
connections and how student moms utilize these resources in relation to attending the university.

Figure 1: Interactionalist Model of Student Attrition

*Conceptual Schema for Dropout from College*

Source: Vincent Tinto (1975)

**SOCIAL CAPITAL**

The theories of Tinto and Durkheim demonstrate the importance of social connection; however it is important to take a closer look at how individual action interplays with social connection. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has constructed a perspective that allows us to examine the role of human agency. His social theory shifts the focus from the social system to the individual actor. Bourdieu outlined a theory of social life that uses the analogy of a game (Bourdieu 1986). Games are competitive and people are equipped with different chances of being successful within
the game. Within Bourdieu’s view of the game there are different fields of play, which refers to the different spheres where people live and work. People navigate these fields with different types and amounts of resources, termed capital. They utilize these resources to obtain other resources in an effort to create social mobility. Employing the analogy of life as game makes clear the centrality of an actor (player) who is capable of reflection and who has the ability to make calculated moves within the rules of the game (structure of society).

Bourdieu’s (1986) four types of capital (social, economic, cultural, and symbolic) are resources that actors can exploit to achieve targeted outcomes. Social capital will be described in further detail in the following section. Economic capital is simply resources that are economic or related to funds. Cultural capital includes embodied capital, which refers to “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” and objectified cultural capital, which refers to cultural goods (Bourdieu 1986:243). In essence, cultural capital consists of one’s tastes, preferences, and presentation of self in daily life. Cultural capital is cultivated in the family of origin and transforms throughout one’s life (Bourdieu 1986). Symbolic capital includes authority and prestige, along with other attributes that are associated with power positions. The value of all of these types of capital lies in the ability of an actor to transform the capital he or she has into capital that he or she wants. Again, this perspective emphasizes that capital is instrumental for individual agency.

As stated, capital is fungible. One form can be exchanged for another. Bourdieu places particular emphasis on economic capital and the desire to transform other forms
of capital into economic capital (Bourdieu 1998). One’s position in social space (the game) is based on the overall volume of capital and then by the type of capital involved, so for instance a business owner would have a great deal of economic capital (and may or may not have a great deal of cultural capital) and a university professor would have a great deal of cultural and symbolic capital, although he or she would be unlikely to have a great deal of economic capital (Bourdieu 1998).

The act of playing the game (exchanging forms of capital) is generally individual, although Bourdieu recognizes that others influence one’s position by providing cultural and social capital. Actors utilize different sources of capital to make their way within and between fields. As such, people are stratified within and between fields based on their capital.

Bourdieu also introduced the notion of habitus in his social theory. Habitus refers to a person’s dispositions, mindset, values, and lifestyle. The habitus is involved in making, “distinctions between what is good and what is bad, between what is right and what is wrong” (Bourdieu 1998:8). The habitus is formed by cultural messages within the game (social structure) and one’s position (based on capital) within different fields. Essentially, it is a subconscious construct that is ingrained through a lifetime of experiences that guides an individual’s reactions, responses, and ways of being in the world. As such, it provides the link between the individual and the social structure (Bourdieu 1998).

Students make us of various forms of capital in order to attend college. They utilize economic capital when they pay tuition. They utilize physical capital when
they bring pens, calculators, computers, and paper to class. They utilize human capital when they approach a math assignment with prior math skills. They utilize cultural capital when they speak to administrative personnel to resolve problems or to present themselves appropriately in the classroom.

Students also use social capital, which relates to the resources that are provided by contacts with others, in order to be successful within higher education. Social capital allows people to gain access to a network of capital not their own. Membership in a social network enables people to multiply their own capital by the capital available to them through relationships with others (Bourdieu 1986). Social capital is loosely defined as the "actual or potential resources available to an individual due to group membership" (Bourdieu 1986:241). People create or are born into a network of relations that can be used for friendship, support, identification, rights, and privileges. Developing or attaining social capital involves a feeling of protection or sense that members of a social association will provide resources for one another (Bourdieu 1986).

Social capital is a relatively new name for a concept that has existed since the inception of sociology and before. Durkheim established the value of group membership long before the term 'social capital' was developed and Marx looked at the issue of group consciousness (Portes 1998). The utility of the term lies in its ability to describe exactly what is generated through social relationships and interactions.
“In the past two decades, social capital in its various forms and contexts has emerged as one of the most salient concepts in social sciences” (Lin 2001a:3).

The premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace. This general definition is consistent with various renditions by all scholars who have contributed to the discussion. The market chosen for the analysis may be economic, political, labor or community. Individuals engage in interactions and networking in order to produce profits (Lin 2001b:19).

People are able to exchange social capital for other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). Social capital has become a popular independent variable in the past twenty years and has been used to examine an array of outcomes (Dika and Singh 2002). There have been many large scale panel studies using social capital variables and qualitative work has increased recently. Social capital is present in education literature, particularly related to the family and outcomes such as high school graduation and college enrollment (Dika and Singh 2002; Portes 1998; Coleman 1988; Field 2005).

Theorists have divergent views about how to operationalize social capital, whether it is most salient on the micro or macro level, how it is used, and so on. However, in essence the idea is that social relationships can provide resources that are usable by actors to promote favored ends. These resources will vary for different people, but are important for personal growth and development nonetheless (Coleman 1990). Social capital is defined by its function in that it is an asset that “makes possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence” (Coleman 1990:302).
There are four main measurements for social capital: the underlying organization of networks that structure social interaction; processes of exchange that build trust; the presence of associations, which are both a feature of social organization and embody social cohesion and exchange; and, attitudinal measures of social trust or sense of community (Strawn 2003:26).

Coleman (1990) agrees with Bourdieu that social connections are an important aspect of peoples’ lives. He contends that the assertion that people are wholly independent actors is “fiction” (Coleman 1990:300). Economic models of human action have put forth the idea that society is created by individual actors striving for individual aims. Coleman (1990) argues that people are actually embedded in social relations and are impacted by those relations. He points to features such as group membership, trust, common norms, favors, and support networks as examples of social capital. In terms of favors, Coleman (1990) asserts that rational actors help each other because they expect to be helped in return when needed. He likens this type of interaction to an insurance policy of sorts whereby individuals provide favors to incur obligations in the event of their own need. Another type of social capital, information, is related to this idea. People are sources of valuable information for each other (Coleman 1990). For instance, literature on social mobility looks at the instrumental role of social capital in the form of information for gaining access to jobs or starting a business through social network channels (Portes 1998). People may provide valued information to others with the expectation that they will in turn receive valued information or other favors when needed.

Lin (2001b) states that social connections also provide influence, credentials, and reinforcement. Portes (1998) summarizes the literature by arguing that social
capital can be seen as a source of social control, a source of family support, and a source of benefits through extra familial networks. Clearly these definitions illustrate the notion that social capital takes many forms and is both instrumental and affective. In addition to providing instrumental assets, social capital also provides affective benefits in terms of emotional support and enjoyment (Field 2005). Social networks provide a sense of trust and reciprocity that bolster personal and social efficacy (Tett and MacLachlan 2007). The ability to call on a greater pool of support magnifies individual capabilities. In relation to education outcomes, broad social networks affect satisfaction, performance, commitment, and intention (Thomas 2000).

Woolcock (1998) distinguishes three different types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital is derived from close relationships, such as those with family and close friends. Bridging social capital is created through relationships with people who are not necessarily close, but who are engaged in similar activities, such as in a workplace. Finally, linking social capital exists when relationships are formed between people who are dissimilar, loosely connected, and engaged in divergent activities. By accessing all three types of social capital people can cast a wide net for resources.

Field (2005) argues that the norms associated with bonding social capital will affect the individual’s orientation and motivation toward school positively or negatively depending on the norm, which is an example of the ability of social capital to constrain or abet. Bridging and linking social capital are more related to the outcomes of education (Field 2005). From a social network perspective, including ties
outside of the immediate peer group provides greater benefits for students (Thomas 2000). Moreover, developing relationships with others who also have diverse social networks is beneficial to the individual (Thomas 2000). Social connections with people outside of one’s immediate circle create a strong supply of bridging and linking social capital.

Although social capital has generally been portrayed in a positive light, Portes (1998) asserts that social capital can be negative as well. For instance, close social networks often exclude outsiders. In terms of social mobility this can create an obstacle by barring some people from jobs that they may be qualified for simply because they do not have the right social connections. In addition social ties can create excess claims on group members, creating a liability rather than an asset. Individual freedom can be constrained in terms of norms and rules. As previously discussed, Durkheim (1951 [1897]) addresses that issue through his discussion of altruistic suicide and self-sacrifice. Finally, there is the possibility that downward leveling norms are perpetuated, such as when families do not value a college education (Portes 1998). While communities with positive norms regarding educational attainment can benefit those who are attending classes, communities with low aspiration norms regarding educational attainment may negatively impact those attempting to attend classes (Field 2005).

The preceding section has presented two related, but also divergent theoretical conceptions of human action. Both recognize the importance of social connections, but social integration theory, represented by Durkheim and Tinto, places more
emphasis on the controlling aspects of social connections. Durkheim and Tinto focus on how group membership impacts and potentially constrains the individual. This perspective allows us to examine group dynamics and leads to the hypothesis that lack of group membership results in negative outcomes for the individual. However, it does not provide an explanation of how individuals manage to survive when they are unable to obtain group membership, particularly when it is context specific, such as within a college campus.

Bourdieu and other social capital theorists focus on group membership by describing the resources that arise from social connection, but social capital theory also points to the ways in which individual actors make use of different types of social resources in an effort to impact outcomes. Social capital theory differs from social integration theory by granting more attention to actors' agency and also by embedding social capital within a web of multiple forms of capital. Bourdieu's social theory also provides an explanation of the individual cognitive and emotive processes that allow an actor to make use of capital and "play the game."

In the following section, the literature review will provide some support for the theories of Tinto and Durkheim, but it will also show that the theoretical tools that they provide are somewhat problematic for the population that is being examined in this study. There is some debate about the applicability of social integration theory for nontraditional students. As will be discussed, other factors may be more important for student moms.
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

OVERVIEW

Strauss and Volkwein (2004) suggest four focal areas in the literature regarding education outcomes:

1. Pre-college characteristics affect education outcomes, such as attrition and persistence. These characteristics include the student’s background and personal characteristics.

2. Student-institution fit affects student persistence. This includes the social aspects of the education experience in addition to practical concerns such as financial resources.

3. Campus climate also affects students’ educational experiences. Discrimination and safety issues are key components of this model, particularly for marginalized groups.

4. Organizational features of the institution also shape education outcomes.

Student-institution fit, which includes the social aspects of the campus environment, is most central to the present examination of student moms and will be the main focus of the literature review. I will begin by discussing the literature pertaining to social integration on campus. I will then describe and discuss nontraditional students and the research pertaining to nontraditional students in general. Finally, I will delve further into the literature regarding the experience of student moms specifically.
RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Much of the literature supports the theoretical relevancy of social connection. Research shows that the quality of relationships between students and their peers and faculty is an independent predictor of student persistence, across college type and student type (Tinto 1999). There is a wealth of research that supports the idea that on-campus relationships and sense of belonging effect students’ college experience (Freeman, Andersen, and Jensen 2007; Nora 2004; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini 2004; Kuh 1996; Strauss and Volkwein 2004). In sum, “We know that involvement matters” (Tinto 1997:600). There is overwhelming evidence that on-campus social interaction is important, particularly for traditional students.

The work of William Spady is a fruitful starting point for outlining the contemporary theory work related to student-institution fit, which includes quality and quantity of social relationships. Spady was one of the first to look at the relationship between student attributes and college environment (Berger and Lyon 2005). Berger and Lyon (2005) state that while earlier work on student retention provided a basic foundation, Spady’s work put forth a systematic effort to build theory that examined the interaction between the student and the institution. In a 1969 article, Spady argued that, “In general, they [researchers] suggest that parental occupation, education, values, encouragement, and family size all influence educational aspirations, regardless of the child’s sex or intelligence” (Spady 1969:680-681).
Vincent Tinto built on Spady’s work to develop his theory of student attrition (Berger and Lyon 2005). Research has supported Tinto’s social integration theory. “Empirical studies support the suggestion that failure to form satisfactory interpersonal relationships in college is associated with outcomes such as depression, anxiety, suicide, criminality, and college freshmen attrition” (Freeman, Andersen, and Jensen 2007:204). In a survey of 893 college freshmen Nora (2004) found that a feeling of personal acceptance was twice as likely to predict college persistence as other factors. The findings validate the hypothesis that students who feel a sense of belonging are more committed to the school, which decreases propensity for attrition (Nora 2004).

Moreover:

Feeling accepted, safe and comfortable in a new academic and social setting is a quality of the college choice process that has greater relevance for students making their final decision than other factors such as institutional quality, location, diversity or cost (Nora 2004:199).

In a longitudinal study of eighteen four-year colleges Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that interaction with peers and extracurricular involvement was important for “both intellectual and personal development during college” (p. 276). After combing through an assortment of studies to locate empirical evidence for Tinto’s propositions, Braxton and Lee (2005) found that greater social integration leads to greater satisfaction, which in turn leads to persistence. Strauss and Volkwein (2004) also found that contentment is a predictor of persistence and includes a student’s overall impression and satisfaction with a school. Furthermore, Kuh
(1996) states that, "...Conversations with faculty and peers have been positively related to persistence and satisfaction and gains in such areas as social competence, autonomy, confidence, self-awareness, and appreciation for human diversity" (124).

Tinto (2005) pointed out that integration involves more than matriculation. It is an affective concept involving a feeling of belonging or not. Freeman, et al. (2007) also studied the issue of belonging. They hypothesized that students who develop a sense of belonging will be more motivated to achieve academically. To test this hypothesis, they studied survey data from college freshmen. They discovered that sense of belonging increases factors of motivation. Furthermore, Freeman, et al. (2007) argued that sense of belonging is strongly associated with a student’s sense of self efficacy.

Kuh’s study (1996) examined the relationship between different college factors and students’ development in various areas. The study found that 79% of participants stated that interaction with peers affected their development. Interaction with peers was the top antecedent for many of the dependent variables (Kuh 1996). In a multi-institution study, Strauss and Volkwein (2004) found that campus experiences were almost five times more important than other variables for predicting commitment to the institution. They also found that the impact of social integration was one of the strongest predictors of satisfaction and that this effect was seen regardless of student demographics or type of institution (Strauss and Volkwein 2004).

By utilizing Tinto’s model, Christie and Dinham (1991) conducted a study that involved open ended interviews to examine the social integration experiences of new
undergraduates. Their findings supported the premise that social integration is important to students and that students who reported favorable social integration within the institution were more satisfied with their experience. The following excerpt provides an example of a student's perception:

_Interviewer:_ What have been the benefits to you of participating in the sorority?
_StUDENT:_ I can't even list them: Something to do on weekends, I've made new friends, I've broadened my horizons. Just getting to meet new people. There's so much. It's helped me academically and socially. (Christie and Dinham 1991:422)

As mentioned previously, “We know that involvement matters” (Tinto 1997:600). In fact, students are often more concerned with social attachments than academics when first entering college (Tinto 1997). “Meeting people and making friends during the first year of college is a major preoccupation of student life” (Tinto 1997:609). Not only is peer interaction crucial, but engagement with faculty is paramount for student development (Tinto 1997). When students do not perceive a sense of caring from faculty, motivation diminishes (Freeman, et al. 2007). Positive relationships with faculty are an important aspect of developing a sense of belonging.

Research on the issue of social capital also provides some insight into how relationships affect education outcomes. For instance, Coleman (1988) found that social capital was related to student attrition in terms of family composition. In one study, he found that children who lived with both parents, had only one sibling and whose mothers had college expectations were 22.5% less likely than those who had only one parent, more siblings, and whose mothers had no college expectations to drop out of high school (Coleman 1988). In another study, Coleman (1988) found that
students who attended Catholic schools were less likely to drop out than those who attended public schools or other private schools. He reasoned that the findings from both of these studies were due to social capital factors such as high achievement norms and integration within the community that perpetuates those standards.

In summary, there is a broad body of research testing Tinto’s (1975) theory of integration. This research supports two conclusions. One is that social connection on campus is positive; the other is that social connection on campus is linked to persistence.

**NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

Although some of the research in the preceding literature review included nontraditional students, much of it was conducted with traditional students. Nontraditional students differ from traditional students in several ways and are likely to have unique issues. The literature is fairly clear about the role of social integration for traditional students, but it is not as straightforward for nontraditional students, including student moms.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines a nontraditional student as a student with at least one of the following characteristics:

1. Does not enter college immediately after high school.
2. Attends part time rather than full time.
3. Works 35 hours a week or more.
4. Is financially independent as defined by financial aid criteria.
5. Has dependents other than a spouse.
6. Is a single parent.

7. Lacks a high school diploma.

Student moms clearly fit this description by way of having dependents other than a spouse. They may also fit some of the other characteristics listed. Horn (1996) argues that there is a continuum for nontraditional students. Students with only one of these characteristics are considered minimally nontraditional. Those with four or more are considered highly nontraditional. Student parents are likely to be highly nontraditional. In 1999-2000, 73% of undergraduates nationally had at least one of these characteristics (NCES 2000). In addition, approximately 28% of all undergraduates were highly nontraditional while only 27% were traditional (NCES 2000). In 2004, approximately 27% of undergraduates had dependents and enrollment of students with dependents is increasing (NCES 2004).

As noted previously, Tinto’s model does not make the distinction between traditional and nontraditional students (Ashar and Skenes 1993). Subsequent scholarship has sought to examine the ways in which the interactionalist model applies to nontraditional students and the ways in which it does not. Bean and Metzner (1985) argue that more research is needed to examine the needs and behaviors of nontraditional students specifically. They argue that the heavy focus on social integration that is prominent in Tinto’s model is not applicable to nontraditional students and that the external environment is more salient in the departure process. They present a model that contains four main sets of variables that affect attrition for nontraditional students. The variables are academic, background, environmental, and
intent to leave (Bean and Metzner 1985). They present a path model that includes a complex interrelationship between variables. For example, they argue that positive environmental factors can mitigate poor academic factors, but that positive academic factors cannot mitigate poor environmental factors (Bean and Metzner 1985). Both factors impact psychological conditions and the student’s attitude towards school, resulting in a decision to stay or leave. As will be discussed, others have also theorized about nontraditional student outcomes. These other theories generally keep within Bean and Metzner’s (1985) basic framework.

According to Bean and Metzner (1985) social interaction is related to environmental factors. The environmental factors that affect nontraditional students are finances, working long hours, lack of encouragement, family responsibilities, and transfer issues. They found that outside encouragement is positively associated with persistence for nontraditional students. However, they also argue that outside contacts may detract from a student’s ability to become connected with the institution. This relates to the negative aspects of social capital, as described by Portes (1998).

Bean and Metzner’s (1985) literature review found mixed results related to the issue of social integration and persistence for nontraditional students. Only eight of sixteen studies included a social integration variable. Of those that did, some found that social integration was not related to drop out decisions for nontraditional students. Others found a negative relationship, showing that social integration increases the propensity to drop out. Still others found a positive relationship between social integration and persistence. Bean and Metzner (1985) note that more research is
needed to understand this area. They reason that although social interaction variables may be salient for particular individuals they will be relatively unimportant to nontraditional students as a whole (Bean and Metzner 1985). External social relationships, such as those with family and friends, are thought to be more important than on-campus relationships (Bean and Metzner 1985). Finally, they argue that in general more research is needed to determine how variables impact specific subpopulations of nontraditional students. Diversity in existing research samples confounds results (Bean and Metzner 1985). As such, theories about nontraditional students are still relatively nascent.

Brown (2002) and Donaldson and Graham (1999) have also theorized about education outcomes for nontraditional students. Their theories are similar to Bean and Metzner’s in that they focus on academic, background, and environmental variables related to students’ intent to persist. This is compatible with Tinto’s model as shown in Figure 1; however all of these models diverge from Tinto’s model by placing more emphasis on off-campus factors.

Brown (2002) argues that the following variables can be used to examine adult (nontraditional) student outcomes:

1. Background characteristics (demographic, educational, social, and family history),

2. Social/psychological integration (goal commitment, employment goals, interpersonal relationships with student peers and faculty, etc.),
3. Academic/institutional integration (grade performance and GPA, program policies, instructors, student support services, scheduling factors, etc.),

4. Environmentally based factors such as student’s finances, hours of outside employment, family and peer encouragement, peer relationships, and family responsibilities. (p. 69)

Donaldson and Graham (1999) also developed a model of adult education outcomes. The model consists of six components (also see figure 2):

1. Prior experience and personal biographies

2. Psychosocial and value orientations

3. Adult cognition

4. The connecting classroom as the central avenue for social engagement on campus, for defining the collegiate experience, and for negotiating meaning for learning

5. Life world environment—the different contexts in which adults live, defined by the roles they occupy in their various work, family, and community settings, in which they learn and develop knowledge structures that differ from the academic knowledge structures of the classroom

6. College outcomes—different types of outcomes such as learning new content to finish a course, to really understand it, to apply it in authentic settings, and to use it to improve the lives of others (p. 28).
The model presented by Donaldson and Graham (1999) provides a role for supportive family and friends through the psychosocial and value orientations dimension. In addition, the concept of the connecting classroom allows for an examination of interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students within the classroom setting. Nontraditional students are less likely than traditional students to participate in extracurricular activities. Donaldson and Graham (1999) posit that nontraditional students receive the necessary on campus social interaction in the classroom and the necessary external support from the life-world environment.

Kasworm (1990) conducted a "qualitative meta-analysis" of the literature pertaining to adult (nontraditional) undergraduate students (p. 346). Five themes were found in the study. The themes were: image of implied deficiency, image of student entry and adaptation, image of description and characterization, image of psychosocial development, and image of equity and outcome. These themes refer to the focus of the research that was analyzed or "domains of reality" for the various studies (Kasworm 1990:348). All of these areas are intertwined, with each affecting the other. As such, it is difficult to study them in isolation. The following section outlines the literature pertaining to student moms and contains some of these themes.
THE LANDSCAPE FOR STUDENT MOMS

Literature regarding student moms and their experiences is relatively difficult to find. I was able to locate fifteen studies that span a period of twenty years. That is a mean average of less than one study per year. As such, there is a paucity of literature to draw upon (Branscomb 2006; Carney-Crompton and Tan 2002; Duquaine-Watson 2001). Furthermore, it is difficult to disentangle student moms from
studies that focus on nontraditional students in general or even returning women students in particular because parental status is not always explicit.

The existing literature presents a mixed perspective on the issue of social relationships for student moms. Lundberg (2003) argues that, “The role of social integration is one that is especially unclear for adult students” (665). Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1996) argue that traditional students are concerned with “fitting into university,” while nontraditional students are more concerned with “fitting university in” (p. 235). For women with children, social connection is generally represented as a positive asset (Rizer 2005; Quimby and O’Brien 2006; Scott, Burns, and Cooney 1996), but at the same time there is evidence that social connection is unavailable for some student moms and presents tension in terms of the need to balance various needs (Duquaine-Watson 2001; Emlen and Emlen 1991; Carney-Crompton and Tan 2002; Home 1998). While relationships can be a positive asset for student moms, they can also be detracting (Scott, Burns, and Cooney 1998).

Positive Aspects of Support: On campus

Moms (along with other nontraditional students) may need additional assistance to navigate school, which means that positive relationships become important (Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann 1994). Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) argue that women with family responsibilities need additional social support to persist in higher education because family and school are both “greedy institutions” requiring a great deal of attention (p. 141). Belenky, et al. (1986) studied adult women’s
development in the 1970’s. They found that adult women felt alienated in academic settings and gained more from relationships than the formal setting.

A review of nine studies on adult women’s development found that interpersonal relationships are highly salient for women’s self-concept (Tennant and Pogson 1995). Chickering’s (1993) model of the seven vectors of adult development directions places “developing mature interpersonal relationships” before “establishing identity” due to the argument that relationships are key for student identity formation (p. 39). Strong support networks can help alleviate the real and perceived strain of juggling school with family and sometimes, work (Home 1998). In her study of single student moms, Stenson (1988) found that social support is more useful in producing change than individual or other means.

Van Stone, et al. (1994) argue that “Women (more than men) evaluate the quality of their academic experience in relation to the degree to which they develop relationships with others” (p. 572). Moreover, relationship building and sense of belonging is important for the self esteem of single moms and their ability to identify with the role of student (Sharp 2004). In one study, 69% of single moms cited peer support as an important factor for student success. The study cited academic reasons, but also the importance of emotional and moral support (Van Stone, et al. 1994). Sharp (2004) conducted a study that examined differences for student moms at three types of universities and found that students have better experiences where they are able to develop a sense of community within the college and a sense of support among peers. Ashar and Skene (1993) conducted a quantitative analysis to test Tinto’s theory
of attrition with nontraditional students. They found that measures of social integration were positively related to persistence.

Rizer (2005) provides a first-hand account of the importance of on-campus social relationships. While in college, she developed a network of friendships with other student parents and describes the following components of that network:

1. Shared babysitting
2. Shared financial hardships
3. Shared time constraints
4. Shared resources and information
5. Shared emotional support

... All of the student families latched onto one another for support and friendship because we understood what it was like to need financial aid to cover the cost of diapers. We could commiserate about coordinating schedules to accommodate both swimming lessons for the kids and study sessions for ourselves. We gave one another scholarship information and scoops on the most family-friendly professors. We offered each other a place to laugh or cry about our hectic lives (Rizer 2005:B5).

In a 1999 survey of adult reentry students, 40% of respondents stated that meeting new friends was one of the greatest satisfactions of returning to school (Bay 1999). Another study found that single moms in a Northeastern college relied on social encouragement and support from faculty, community, and peers to get through college (Van Stone, et al. 1994). Rizer (2005) described how a college friend took care of her when she and her son were sick. Another woman described three on-campus friends as "more or less my support system. We helped each other. We talked about personal things as well as academic. We were very supportive of one
another. We had cook outs together. We would study together” (Sharp 2004:119). At one school, a program called the Single Parent Project provided a springboard for student moms to meet and network with other moms. The program proved to be fruitful because traditional social experiences were not appealing to moms when they did not include their children (Van Stone, et al. 1994).

Interaction with faculty is also important for student moms. They seek relationships with faculty to obtain mentoring and confirmation of their ability to learn (Van Stone, et al. 1994). Donaldson and Graham (1999) found that the social aspects of instruction are more important for adult students than traditional students. In Steck’s study (2005) women reported that relationships with supportive faculty and staff were crucial for their college experience. Additionally, Lundberg (2003) found that “quality of relationships with administrators was a strong predictor of learning for all students in this study, but it was strongest for students thirty and older” (682). In addition, one study found that on-campus support from peers and staff mitigated the effect of unsupportive families for student moms who graduated (Scott, Burns, and Cooney 1998).

Tett and Maclachlan (2007) stated that research shows that social capital is important for learner identity development. They found that social capital impacts students’ sense of confidence and that reciprocally, sense of confidence impacts social relationships. Students in this study reported that bridging social capital, which involves developing connections with people who are different, enhanced self-efficacy. Bridging social capital, developed through relations with school personnel,
peers, and tutors, was able to mitigate negative messages from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The support and encouragement received at the school led students to believe in their capabilities as learners.

**Negative Aspects of Support: On campus**

Not all of literature presents a positive view of social relationships on campus for student moms. Research also shows that negative social experiences are present and can negatively affect student moms. Unfortunately, some student moms may experience resistance from the institution in their efforts to obtain a degree. Student moms may experience marginalization due to difficulty connecting with younger students, feeling out of place, professor discrimination regarding appropriate gender roles, alienation, and trying to fit in (Hayes and Flannery 1997). There are those within higher education who feel that adult students do not belong in the college classroom (Kasworm 1990).

Student moms appear to have mixed views on the importance of social interaction on campus. Some are able to develop social relationships, while others would like to but do not have opportunities to do so (Sharp 2004). Some research suggests that lack of on-campus social support does not impact nontraditional female students negatively. For example, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) found that older female students with children performed better academically than traditional women although they had fewer sources of support. The authors argue that sampling characteristics might explain this finding, including the fact that the sample consisted of relatively older women (mean 40.29) who had teenage children.
The salience of on-campus support varies for different student moms. Branscomb (2006) found that on-campus relationships were more necessary for student moms who did not have an external support network of family and friends. Support from instructors was found to be particularly important, but unfortunately many of the student moms in the study felt uncomfortable approaching faculty with their problems (Branscomb 2006). Scott, et al. (1996) discovered that some student moms cited hostility from faculty as a factor in dropping out.

Steck (2005) found that faculty generally assume that students do not have children and make course decisions that are insensitive to the needs of student parents. Student parents in Steck’s (2005) study felt that college personnel were sometimes very unsupportive of their needs. One administrator told a student mom that it was her choice to have a child and that she would not receive special treatment or accommodations. Student moms in Scott, et al.’s (1996) study reported feeling that lack of support from university staff was a contributing factor of withdrawal.

Sharp (2005) found that student moms in a large, urban university felt alone, confused and detached from other students as compared to a small college. In a 1991 study, Emlen and Emlen found that “For many PSU [Portland State University] parents, parenting is a solitary role” (p. 28). In the same study, only slightly over half of students stated that they had a support network of family and friends (Emlen and Emlen 1991). One student stated, “Professors seldom understand the excuse of missing class because of a sick child. I have little social contact and no family support for my educational efforts...I cry and scream a lot” (Emlen and Emlen 1991:25).
Student moms can become disenchanted with faculty and staff when they are not sympathetic to the needs of parents and even sometimes express hostility to the needs of student parents. If the institution does offer support services for student parents, they may be under-utilized due to lack of awareness (Branscomb 2006). Student parents in Branscomb’s (2006) study expressed the need for understanding from faculty in addition to recognition. Steck’s (2005) study of student parents found that a sense of disconnection from the university community was a common experience. In regards to social relationships, one student stated:

I really don’t have any, I would say, I have acquaintances here, but I don’t really have any people that I associate with. They’re a lot younger than I am and I think that we don’t really have the same things in common. I mean I have a family, they wanna party. It’s a completely different life (Steck 2005:3).

Data on younger student moms also showed tension regarding peer interaction within the institution. Student moms in Branscomb’s (2006) study experienced stigmatization, alienation, and isolation from their same-age peers because they have children. They reported feeling that they were missing emotional support and understanding from peers (Branscomb 2006). In addition, student parents reported feeling excluded from campus activities because they do not include their children (Steck 2005; Branscomb 2006). Hayes and Flannery (1997) argue that women are less likely than men to participate in learning groups outside of the classroom due to feelings of inadequacy or time deterrents.

Dill and Henley (1998) put forth the idea that student parents simply do not have the time to develop a social network at school. Social relationships on campus
may be limited for some student moms because of time constraints and also issues related to their identities as moms (Duquaine-Watson 2007). Duquaine-Watson (2007) found that rather than embracing out-of-class activities and group work, single moms may bemoan these activities because they can conflict with family responsibilities. Although Rizer (a student mom writer) (2005) reported developing positive experiences with other student moms, she also reported a lack of sense of belonging with other students at school who were not moms. She described the lack of commonalities as a barrier to developing a sense of belonging (Rizer 2005). The literature shows the benefits of collaborative learning, but it can be problematic for women with children (Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall 1996).

Adult students (students older than 24 years old) are presumably more time-limited than younger students due to off-campus responsibilities. Student moms of all ages also fit this description. Bean and Metzner (1985) found that time constraints often lead students to withdraw from school. As such, social integration may be a complicated concept for understanding satisfaction for these students (Lundberg 2003). Kasworm (1990) suggests that it is not necessarily the age of the student that is important per se, but the changed life circumstances and responsibilities that generally accompany the adult age student. The implication is that on-campus social relationships may be relatively low on the list of priorities for these students.

Positive Aspects of Support: Off campus

Quimby and O’Brien (2006) conducted a quantitative study that focused on psychological well-being for student moms. The results showed that positive social
relationships outside of school were related to low levels of psychological distress, high levels of self-esteem, and high levels of life satisfaction, all of which are related to persistence. They argued that, "Encouragement and reassurance may be especially critical for the self-esteem of nontraditional female students who often return to school after an extended break to begin a family or a career and may doubt their ability to succeed in school" (Quimby and O'Brien 2006:456). Stenson (1988) also found that support from friends, relatives, and personal conversations greatly influenced single student moms' overall well-being and happiness. Support from friends also alleviated loneliness and enhanced student moms' ability to deal with challenges (Stenson 1988). Branscomb (2006) found that student parents used support from family and friends in their strategies for success.

The literature suggests that a broad, diverse support system is most beneficial. In her doctoral thesis, Branscomb (2006) found that emotional support from the family network is critical for student moms' success. 30% of survey participants in one study cited praise from family as the greatest satisfaction of returning to school (Bay 1999). In addition, Branscomb (2006) found that support from friends and neighbors was important for student moms' success. Bean and Metzner (1985) also found that positive encouragement from friends and family was related to persistence for nontraditional students. 88% of married student moms cited their husbands as a main source of support (Van Stone, et al. 1994). Single student moms spoke about the importance of emotional and financial support from family (Van Stone, et al. 1994). Hostetler, et al.'s (2006) study found that student moms who received childcare
assistance from family, friends, or daycare providers were four times more likely to return to school than those who did not receive daycare assistance.

Mason (2002) conducted a study regarding the experiences of single moms receiving welfare who were participating in higher education. She approached the study with four hypotheses predicting attrition for single student moms. The study hypothesized that student moms with high academic and high social support would persist. The study also hypothesized that student moms with low academic support and high external social support would persist. Finally, it hypothesized that student moms with high academic/low social support and low academic/low social support would not persist. The study found that external social support was more important to student moms than academic support (Mason 2002). Interestingly, the last set of hypotheses was not supported. Student moms who had high academic/low social support or low academic/low social support did not drop out. Qualitative data showed that high motivation mitigated these factors (Mason 2002).

**Negative Aspects of Support: Off campus**

As discussed, it has been found that external social connections can mitigate lack of on-campus social relationships. However, Durkheim argued that too much social connection could prove to be constraining. Moreover, Portes (1998) pointed out that social capital can produce downward leveling norms. As such, off-campus relationships can negatively impact student moms as well as on-campus relationships. External networks can either support or inhibit nontraditional students' efforts (Donaldson and Graham 1999).
For instance, Branscomb (2006) found that the spousal relationship can be advantageous for student moms in terms of support, but it can also be a source of stress. Husbands who do not value higher education can be unsupportive when their wives return to school (Suitor, et al. 2008). Relationships are valued, but women find it difficult to balance roles (Tennant and Pogson 1995). In a longitudinal study of student moms, Suitor, et al. (2008) found that husbands may be resentful of the time commitments associated with attending college, particularly if they did not obtain a college degree.

An Australian study that compared student moms who graduated with those who did not discovered interesting findings regarding the role of family and on-campus support. Scott, et al. (1998) found that students who did not finish their studies often had unsupportive families. Furthermore, they found that students who were highly motivated sometimes still withdrew when met with unsupportive families. Family support was also associated with outcomes for student moms who graduated. Of those who were successful despite the presence of unsupportive families, some persisted to pursue self development.

In a 2005 study, Field found that, “In adult life, the family seems more likely to play the role of a brake on personal development and change, which might otherwise threaten the stability and continuity of community life” (p. 78). Scott, et al. (1996) found that low socio-economic status student moms were particularly susceptible to withdrawal due to lack of family support. This is due, in part, to the more traditional gender role expectations in low socio-economic status homes (Scott,
Lack of family support can lead to lack of self-confidence. Ironically, in this situation social integration becomes a deterrent rather than a source of help.

Branscomb (2006) suggests that older students are less likely to get support because of cultural expectations surrounding life stages. The student parents in her study reported that they generally put the needs of their children before their own needs in order to fulfill role responsibilities (Branscomb 2006). When asked to describe the greatest challenges of attending school, 80% of student parents stated that it was having too many responsibilities, 31% wrote about financial strain, 15% wrote about guilt and 12% mentioned lack of social life (Branscomb 2006). Bay (1999) also found that multiple responsibilities were the biggest difficulty in attending school for nontraditional students. Suitor (2008) found that spouses who did not support their wives in returning to school did not attempt to take on more chores to help alleviate time constraints.

Branscomb (2006) found that student moms can become disappointed when they do not receive the support they need from spouses and extended family. This tension can create stress within those relationships. Scott et al.'s (1996) study found that hostility and lack of support from family members was one of the top five reasons why women with children withdraw from college. The top two reasons were pressure from family responsibilities and pressure from work responsibilities. Arguably external support would be necessary to mitigate these pressures. However, in some households traditional sex roles insure that women remain solely responsible for household chores (Scott, et al. 1996).
Student moms with younger children must juggle children’s needs, school work, and personal or social needs. Attention in any area detracts from the others (Van Stone, et al. 1994). Activities that detract a student’s attention from school may have a negative impact on learning because there are fewer resources available to apply to school related activities (Lundberg 2003). In response to a questionnaire that contained a “Role Management Strategies” scale, one student mom stated, “A lot of these suggestions assume there are family members or friends to ask for help. I don’t have those options and a lot of parents my age don’t have those options” (Branscomb 2006:106). Another student echoed this sentiment, despite the fact that she lived with her parents. Branscomb (2006) found that family members who do not value the student role will be unlikely to help student moms. A qualitative study in Northern Ireland found that social connection impacted adult learning negatively. Field (2005) found that lack of family support, in addition to other factors, was cited as a reason why women with children did not return to school. Branscomb (2006) found that the family may not have resources to help support the student mom or family members may become weary of helping the student mom.

Relationships that are unstable or abusive will not provide support for the student mom (Branscomb 2006). Attempts to obtain support from family may create strains and conflict (Branscomb 2006). Strawn (2003) found that deep social connection is linked to non-participation in formal learning. Strawn (2003) argued that one potential explanation is that people may rely on their social networks instead of formal credentials or resources to obtain desired ends. However, Strawn (2003)
stated that more research is needed in the area of gender because women were more likely than men to participate in adult learning, particularly those with children.

The relationship between social capital and women's educational opportunities is complex. Strawn (2003) describes the ways in which social capital can be beneficial and the ways in which it can be detrimental:

Among marginalized communities social capital of support might help overcome barriers by sharing affective and instrumental resources. Examples of instrumental support are help with transportation, childcare, money, job flexibility, computer access, and homework. Affective support might take the form of modeling possibilities, encouragement, and positive valuation of endeavors. Social networks might also impose barriers, such as family responsibilities, work demands, abusive relationships that limit activities and freedom, and negative valuation of endeavors. Social capital might be available in a community, but the individual’s use of it may be mediated by the community’s discourses about individual mobility and/or education (p. 19-20).

The research related to the importance of social support for nontraditional students shows a complex story (Lundberg 2003). In general social connections, both on campus and off, seem to be a positive resource for student moms attending college. However, there is also evidence that social relationships, both on campus and off, can negatively impact women who attempt to return to school or continue in higher education after having children.

The question remains: how do they do it? The literature suggests that social connection provides benefits for some student moms, while it constrains other student moms. Moreover, some of the literature presents data that shows the importance of on-campus relationships for student moms, while other literature argues that on-campus relationships are relatively unimportant for understanding student moms’
experiences. This raises another remaining question: if social support is not a useful concept for understanding student moms’ failure or success, what is?

The literature pertaining to nontraditional students includes a diverse array of students. As such, subpopulations must be separated and analyzed separately to gain a richer understanding (Lundberg 2003). The goal of the present study is to present an analysis of qualitative data, collected in focus groups of student moms who are near graduation, which will suggest answers to these questions.
CHAPTER 4: METHODS

In this chapter I will describe the method of data collection for this study, which is focus groups. Furthermore I will outline the sampling and recruitment process that was used to gather data. I will also describe the characteristics of the sample. Finally, I will address data analysis techniques.

METHOD

Ragin (1994) states that qualitative methods are appropriate when deep knowledge is desired. Moreover, qualitative methods are useful for obtaining information about a specific population (Ragin 1994). The literature regarding student moms is limited. There is only a nascent understanding of the factors that affect their college experiences and abilities to persist. Therefore, the appropriate approach for this study was semi-structured interviews, captured in a focus group setting. The value of this approach is that it allows the researcher to obtain evidence of subjects’ perspectives, through their own words.

The goal was to understand women’s interpretations of their experiences and attempt to capture “subjective reality constructions” (Essed 1991:56). A survey method somewhat limits the ability to probe into specific experiences and feelings. It might also constrain the concepts available for women to describe their experiences, possibly creating a disconnect between experience and description, particularly given the lack of knowledge about this population (Savage 1997). Another benefit of utilizing interviews is that a feminist approach can be used to promote an egalitarian relationship between the researcher and subjects and capitalize on the insider status of
the researcher (Essed 1991). I have been and continue to be a student mother. In addition, as previously mentioned there is not a stable theoretical model that describes the experience of subpopulations of nontraditional students. As such, it is important to obtain the perspective of participants in their own words.

The interviews were conducted in a focus group setting. The purpose of a focus group is to obtain descriptions of experiences and perspectives (Morgan 1997). By utilizing focus groups to gather data about women’s subjective experiences I utilized the constructivist paradigm whereby “…story telling supplants classical logic as a way of knowing” (Capra 1989, in Fried 1995:43). Field (2005) argues that focus groups are “a particularly good way of studying social capital” (p. 44). Focus groups provide an opportunity for respondents to interact amongst each other and “share and compare” experiences (Morgan 1997). This creates an opportunity for rich data because ideas from one participant can spark conversation with other participants. Focus groups offer the following advantages over individual interviews:

1. Synergism: When a wider bank of data emerges through the group interaction.
2. Snowballing: When the statements of one respondent initiate a chain reaction of additional comments.
3. Stimulation: When the group discussion generates excitement about a topic.
4. Security: When the group provides comfort and encourages candid responses.
5. Spontaneity: Because participants are not required to answer every question, their responses are more spontaneous and genuine (Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub 1996:14).
All of these features were evident in the focus groups that I conducted. I observed these principles first-hand and witnessed the power of group discussion for generating data and also creating a bond between participants. The assumptions underlying the proposed benefits of the focus group method are:

1. People are valuable sources of information, particularly about themselves. This assumption, of course is also inherent within all self-report measures.

2. People are capable of reporting about themselves and are articulate enough to put opinions about their feelings and perceptions into words.

3. The best procedure for obtaining people’s feelings and opinions is through a structured group conversation in which information is solicited by the moderator.

4. There are effects of group dynamics that enhance the likelihood that people will speak frankly about a subject, and these cannot occur through individual or small-group interviews. Related to this assumption is that the information obtained from a focus group interview is genuine information about what each person feels rather than a group mind in which people conform to what others believe (Vaughn, et al. 1996:7).

The benefit and detriment of the focus group approach is that it provides data about the experience of the group as a whole. This is advantageous in terms of developing a coherent picture of a particular population. It is disadvantageous because it does not provide an opportunity for individuals to elaborate on their particular experiences the way that an individual interview would. However, I made every
attempt to provide opportunities for participants to elaborate on their individual stories.

**INSTRUMENT**

A focus group guide was used to provide topic structure, yet also allow for openness (Patton 2002). The guide reflects Morgan’s (2008) idea of the “funnel” approach to gathering data, whereby the moderator begins the discussion in broad terms and then narrows the focus to capture researcher driven information. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) agree that a focus group guide should transition from the general to the specific. The full focus group guide for this study, the format of which was modeled after Dr. David Morgan’s study of first year graduate students (ongoing), is found in Appendix A.

Effective focus groups provide range, specificity, depth, and personal context (Merton 1990, cited in Morgan 1997). The researcher can capture range by allowing participants to provide accounts of their experiences, feelings, and opinions in their own words. The researcher does not limit categories nor does she make assumptions about which issues will be important. During the focus groups that were conducted for this study, theoretically relevant topics were introduced and participants were free to interpret and discuss what they thought was meaningful. Specificity was achieved through the gathering of participants’ experiences, meaning that specific experiences were probed. Depth of coverage was reached through engagement by the participants, which was supported by me as the moderator and also participants’ personal connection to the subject matter.
I attempted to establish rapport with respondents by maintaining neutrality and creating a safe setting. Tisdell (2000) argues that the researcher can develop rapport with participants by briefly talking about herself and her interest in the research area. The researcher can avoid “othering” participants by divulging personal information and conducting interviews collaboratively (Tisdell 2000). In addition, Devault (1990) argues that a feminist approach relies on interaction and shared experience to develop understanding. Focus group methodology is well-suited for facilitating that type of environment.

During the groups I told the participants that I was a student mother and I contributed to the conversation when it was personally relevant. I also attempted to validate and appreciate responses while listening carefully to gather useful data (Patton 2002). The focus group format gave student moms a voice and also provided data to potentially advance theory regarding education outcomes for this population. In addition, the focus groups provided data for institutional administrators to utilize in developing support programs for student moms. The focus groups also provided a setting for student moms to develop social connections with other student moms.

The goal was not to predict any particular outcome, but rather to increase understanding of the experience of student moms. It was necessary to flesh out the perspectives of the women to ascertain how their experiences have impacted their overall education. Moreover, “Attitudes lead to intentions, which in turn lead to behavior” (Bean and Metzner 1985:493). Put simply, experiences affect the student’s orientation toward the institution. That orientation will propel the student to decide to
leave or stay, ultimately resulting in a drop out decision. Therefore, developing understanding of the women’s attitudes provides adequate data about their likely future decisions in relation to dropping out or persisting.

**RECRUITMENT**

This study focuses on student moms rather than student fathers for several reasons. For one, women are typically primarily responsible for parenting responsibilities (Steck 2005; Suitor et al. 2008). In addition:

That the parental role is more salient to women than to men can be gleaned from qualitative work on parenthood. Women invest more emotionally in the parental role and their sense of self is tied more closely to parenthood than men’s. Parenthood is perceived as a central role by moms, regardless of employment and marital status. While parenthood is not unimportant to males, these studies suggest that the relative salience of the parental role in men’s and women’s self-conceptions is implicated in sex differences in vulnerability to ongoing parental role strains (Simon 1992:26).

Moreover, student moms with young children experience higher levels of strain and depression due to balancing roles (Dill and Henley 1998; Scott et al. 1996). Although student fathers likely experience particular hardships related to attending school and fulfilling parenting responsibilities, the preceding discussion argues that student moms experience that strain more acutely. In addition, moms are more likely than fathers to be scrutinized and judged for participating in activities that take them away from their children (Steck 2005). As such, researchers and administrative personnel need a better understanding of the experiences of student moms.

The target population for this study was women who have children who are in grade school or younger. The reason for the limitation on children’s ages is that
children who are in grade school or younger typically require a greater level of involvement and care than older children, which is pertinent to this study in terms of learning about moms who have competing obligations. In addition, children of that age generally require some type of child care, either all day or after school and this creates a demand on the mother’s time that may constrain the ability to develop social connections. The analysis focused on undergraduate student moms who are near completion of their programs. Seniors or nearly seniors were recruited so that they would have a full experience to draw upon. In addition, by recruiting students who were nearly finished with their degrees I was able to examine the overall impact of social relationships on their abilities to persist.

Student moms at Portland State University were targeted to participate in the study. Portland State University is the largest university in Oregon and is located in an urban area with a population of approximately 2.5 million people. It is somewhat difficult to get a clear picture of how many students at Portland State University have children because that data is not tracked specifically. One way to estimate is to utilize demographic information on financial aid forms. For the 2007-2008 school year, approximately 16% (4,356 of 27,967 applicants) of financial aid applicants indicated that they had dependents. That figure is up from about 13% in the 1999-2000 school year. This figure should be used with caution because it does not necessarily represent all of the students who eventually matriculated. In addition, it does not represent students who did not apply for financial aid funding.
The primary recruitment strategy for this study was campus-wide advertising. Recruitment fliers were posted at several locations on campus, including bathroom stalls, bulletin boards, and program offices. Fliers were posted in the Advising Center, two on-campus childcare centers, the Women's Resource Center, Student Parent Services, and other locations throughout campus (see Appendix C for fliers). Additionally, announcements were posted on the student email log in page and the Student Affairs website. The study was announced in classes. The thesis chair offered students in her class the option to participate in and write about the focus groups to fulfill an experiential assignment. Participants were also found through informal networking and snowball sampling. The flier described that childcare would be available during the focus groups and that students would receive $20 to attend a focus group. The monetary incentive was necessary to encourage women to share a precious commodity: time. Moms from different backgrounds were recruited to glean the commonalities in their experiences. Diversity of participants provided some sense of representation and allowed me to create a composite of the social experiences of student moms (Ragin 1994). Belenky, et al. (1986) argues that researchers typically study homogeneous groups when a diverse population is needed to tease out commonalities that exist regardless of background.

Limitations of Sample

Open recruitment runs the risk of sampling error. Without random sampling there is always the possibility that there is some fundamental difference between the people who choose to participate in the study and those who do not. In addition, some
women who were interested in participating were unable to due to scheduling conflicts; it is not known if they differed systematically from those who did participate. It must be remembered, too, that participants were purposefully limited to student moms who were all close to finishing their degrees and had young children. These results may not generalize to student fathers, moms of older children, graduate students with children, or new students with children. Three men responded to recruitment efforts and expressed interest in participating in the study, but I did not want gender issues to complicate the data and the focus of the study.

THE GROUPS

All four focus groups took place on campus. The groups were tape-recorded and a transcriptionist attended each group to capture the conversation. This is important with focus groups because it can be difficult to determine who is speaking on a recording.

Thirty-three women originally signed up to participate in the groups. Twenty-eight actually participated, resulting in a participation rate of 85%. The groups lasted approximately ninety minutes each. At the beginning of the groups participants were given a packet of materials that included a name ‘tent,’ informed consent sheet, demographic survey (see Appendix B), and a sheet of paper for three writing exercises. All materials were marked by a unique number so that they would be kept together.

The informed consent statement was read and participants were given their money before the group began. Participants were then asked to fill out their name
tents and write a number on their tents that represented their perceived level of support while attending college. Participants were asked to rate their level of support on a 1-7 Likert Scale with a rating of 1 corresponding to no support and a rating of 7 corresponding to a high level of support. Key words were taken from The National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) to describe low levels of support and high levels of support (see Appendix A: Focus Group Guide for more information). Home (1998) argues that perception of support is an important indicator for women with children. Perceived level of support is a greater predictor of psychological outcomes such as well-being than actual received support (Quimby and O'Brien 2006). Therefore, it is appropriate to allow subjects to furnish their own perceptions of support.

During the focus groups participants were asked to complete three writing assignments. The first was to list three sources of support that helped them attend college. The second was to list three people or institutions that were unsupportive of them as student moms. The final assignment was to write a letter to incoming student moms regarding the issue of support and attending college while raising children. These exercises provided structure for the group and also hard data for the analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

The following process discussion is influenced by the work of Berg (2003). The analysis began with open coding. A transcriptionist was present during the focus groups and produced all of the transcripts. I listened to each tape while reading the transcripts to check for accuracy. Categories were generated from immersion in the
data, which was attained through careful listening of the recordings while examining the transcripts. Coding was completed in several phases. The first phase involved sorting data into categories derived from the literature review. The second phase consisted of creating subcategories derived from in vivo concepts within the data. Finally, further in vivo codes were constructed for data that did not fall within other categories. Once the data were reorganized into new categories, they were openly coded again in an effort to develop unifying concepts. Finally, the concepts were coded for overarching themes. This was all done within Microsoft Word, using copy and paste functions.

Berg (2003) argues that good analysis combines components of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Morgan (1997) argues that qualitative analysis can include counts of concepts, which is a quantitative process, although not necessarily statistical. I created a table with counts of the number of times sources of support were mentioned in the writing exercises (see Table 2).

In addition, good analysis focuses on latent content in addition to manifest content (Berg 2003). As such, in vivo codes were used in addition to sociological constructs in the final analysis (Berg 2003). Ritchie and Spencer (2002) provide a more detailed set of instructions with their concept of “Framework.” This strategy entails systematic handling of the data and includes directions for the final analysis. The stages of this framework include familiarization with data, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation (Ritchie and Spencer 2002:312). Creation of shared themes improves the reliability of the analysis.
Combining Berg's (2003) ideas with Ritchie and Spencer's provided a rigorous data analysis approach. Essed (1991) argues that reliability is assured through an examination of shared interpretations rather than a focus on individual peculiarities. Morgan (2008) argues that the researcher must look for similarities across groups and similarities between individuals within the group. In terms of interpretation, I went back and forth between theory and the data. I utilized theory in order to make sense of the data, but I also had to return to theory when the data suggested contradictory mechanisms. As I analyzed the data, I continued to read the work of others in order to fully understand the data and glean all of the relevant information that it contained.

When the researcher has inside status, reflexivity is crucial. Throughout the analysis I remained cognizant of connections between my personal experiences and subjects' experiences. I attempted to remain true to the words of the participants and allow their words to tell the story rather than my words. In some ways, my role was to be a medium for participants and allow their story to tell itself. The literature review provided guidance and direction in terms of theory inclusion and a baseline for interpreting the data.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Four focus groups were conducted in November 2008. The sample consists of twenty eight total participants, all student moms at Portland State University. Table 1 provides information about the sample. See Appendix D for full participant profiles. Names and specific majors were omitted for privacy.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics (N=28)

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<td><strong>Current Marital Status</strong></td>
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<td>Unmarried participants (%)</td>
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<td>Racialized Non-Dominant Groups (%)</td>
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<td>Not receiving (%)</td>
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<td>Part time (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Level of Support (Likert Scale 1-7, 1 no support, 7 full support)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 1, a composite of means describes a white, thirty-year-old woman with 1.5 children, who has attended college before (not shown in table, but all participants had attended college previously), is receiving financial aid, and is going to school full time. She is more likely to be married or in a long-term relationship than not married and reports feeling slightly higher than neutral on level of support. In regard to race/ethnicity, the sample reflects the total Portland State University undergraduate student population, approximately 25% of which reports non-dominant racial/ethnic origins. Approximately 65% of the overall undergraduate population at Portland State University is attending classes full time. The present sample contains more full time students than the undergraduate population in general. The mean age of 30 for the study sample is slightly older than the mean age for all seniors at Portland State University, which is 28.
FINDINGS

The following information is taken from the writing exercises that participants completed during the focus groups. First, participants were asked: “I would like to know about where and how you get help when you need it. I would like everyone to write down three sources of support that have enabled you to finish your degree. If you have particular people who have helped you, then write those people down. If there is an organization that has helped you, then write that down.” After some discussion, participants were told: “I would like you to use the three other spaces on your sheet of paper and write a list of three people or situations that have been unsupportive of you as a student mom.” The participants’ responses are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Sources of Support and Number of Mentions from Writing Exercises (N=28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supportive On-Campus</th>
<th>Supportive Off-Campus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland State University</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare centers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other student moms</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daycare Provider</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 2, off-campus support was mentioned most frequently and on-campus support was mentioned least frequently, perhaps indicating that off-campus relationships are more dominant in participants’ experiences. Totals between positive support and negative support differ because participants left some of the lines blank on the second writing assignment, which was to list three unsupportive people or entities related to their education efforts. Spouse was the most frequently mentioned source of off-campus support. Financial aid was the most frequently mentioned source of on-campus support. "Portland State University in general" was the most frequently
mentioned negative source of support. Negative sources of support off-campus were more evenly distributed.

Table 3: Totals (number of mentions) from Writing Exercises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Off-campus Support</th>
<th>On-campus Support</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1, N=28)=6.05, p < .05

Table 3 shows aggregated totals from the writing exercises. A chi-square test comparing positive on-campus support to positive off-campus support showed statistically significant results. This indicates that off-campus support is particularly salient for the student moms who participated in this study. In addition, considering the nature of the sample (successful students) it indicates a relationship between off-campus support and success for this sample. Some participants did not fully complete their writing exercises. Any blank spots in the writing exercises were treated as missing data. However, given the relatively small size of the sample it is relevant to note any statistically significant results. This finding provides another piece of evidence to support the findings listed below, which show that external support is crucial for most of the student moms who participated in this study.
Advice to New Student Moms

As a final written exercise during the focus groups, participants were asked to write a letter to new student moms about getting support. In their letters to new student moms, participants offered words of encouragement regarding the need to find support and also self care. The theme of persistence is also present in the letters. In their letters, participants told new student moms to find support, use self-care, and seek out other student moms. One student mom summarized the general feelings of the others when she wrote, “Support is critical.”

I feel that getting support for yourself and your family while in school is hugely important. The best advice I could give would be to find/create a supportive social network on and off campus.

Another letter provided words of encouragement and support:

Dear Mom: Welcome! Take a breath. You are here, you made it and you are wonderful. Talk to your teachers the first day of class and tell them you are a mama. Don’t be afraid to leave class early to hunt for resources. You are amazing!

Another letter gave this advice:

Be kind to yourself. If you are not noticing how much work it took you to get here and how capable you are, you should. Say nice things to yourself when you get things done.

Another wrote:

If you can find a way to honor yourself and reward yourself for this accomplishment-getting through a difficult exam or making a C- instead of the D+-DO IT! Set your sights high and be goal oriented; Don’t let your family suffer because you have eighteen hours of reading to do in a twenty-four-hour period. Take care of yourself and remember it will pay off in the end. Find support in every corner and don’t be hard on yourself.
The following letter illustrates the type of support that student parents are willing to give to one another.

Although your time may be very limited and life very hectic, there are resources to be found. Have a tough skin and remember that it is possible to get your degree; there are other moms in your position too. I promise to always smile and be understanding when you are in class and your baby is cooing or your kid is laughing in the computer lab. You are not alone.

In another letter one of the participants encouraged new student moms to “Find another mom on campus and ask what she is doing for support.” One participant referenced external support by writing, “You better have outside support, whether from family or friends.” Yet another stated, “There is support on campus, but you have to find it.” Another woman echoed that sentiment by writing that it is important for student moms to be persistent when trying to obtain support. Another wrote similar advice. She discussed the fact that student moms must be “diligent about seeking support.” Several of the letters shared the theme of persistence in seeking support in addition to the need to “be bold and upfront with the teachers and classes, to make parenting an important issue to their [sic] teachers and something they consider in how they run their classes.” Another participant advised student moms to be vocal about their needs. Several letters urged new student moms to not give up. Another letter stated,

What I would say to other student moms who have support, grab it with both hands and finish your degree! You need it for yourself and for your kids to improve your quality of life. For those who don’t have support, there are resources on campus; you may need to hunt them down.

One participant offered these three points of advice in her letter:
1. Don’t hide your kids from your academic world.

2. Figure out how to successfully advocate for yourself and your kids.

3. If you don’t know how to do this, find others who are and learn from them.

Addressing Portland State University, one participant wrote, “There has got to be a way to help us feel better included and to help ease the strain, financially, mentally, and logistically.” Another participant also wrote about the need for the institution to become more inclusive of student parents.

A DIFFICULT JOURNEY

The pursuit of a college degree while raising children involves a juggling act. One participant stated, “I feel like I am juggling. People are like: let me help you. I say, if you touch it, it will fall.” Student moms in this study reported that they must take care of household chores, children, bills, and personal needs all while trying to complete homework assignments. The overwhelming sentiment from the data is that there are simply not enough hours in the day for student moms to handle all of their responsibilities. The participants of this study reported that their personal needs are greatly ignored in an attempt to attend to the needs of their children and the needs of the institution in terms of progressing toward degree completion. One woman said:

I feel like you are touching on something really important. In our school we have great psychological services that are available to students taking five credits or more. I don’t have time to go to a counselor. I don’t know when I will see a doctor. I feel like I am developing pneumonia. I know I need to get help for Seasonal Affective Disorder. I don’t know when I would do that.
Participants discussed not getting enough food or sleep, basic human needs. One woman said she “lives on coffee.” Another said, “I am getting wrinkles everyday. I’m looking old now. It’s horrible.” Yet another said:

I don’t sleep enough because I am doing too much. That part, taking care of yourself, is super de-prioritized. Everything is. I didn’t eat this morning. When I saw food here [at the focus group site], of course, these people get it.

The data show that student moms in this study are determined not to let their children suffer as the result of the juggling act that is required to attend classes as a woman with children. One participant stated, “Because I have so many job obligations I don’t want my kid to miss out on, like, human connections so he just has a village and that’s the way it is.” The juggling act requires sacrifices and tradeoffs. Another woman stated, “I’m not dropping the ball on this one. Like my kid isn’t the place where I’m going to drop the ball. If I’m going to drop the ball, it’s going to be in Spanish 411.”

It is definitely-I am conflicted about spending quality time with my daughter and doing my own school work. That’s where-I find that sometimes I will be with her over getting a good grade on a paper. For me and her, where she is now is more important than getting an ‘A.’ If I can spend less time, get a ‘B’ and ‘C’ on a paper and take her swimming, that’s where I am. That’s the choices I am making.

Participants reported that there is a lot of guilt associated with these trade-offs. Attention in any area takes away from another.

And then there’s the guilt that goes around with that, too, like volunteering with the [child’s] school. They’re always asking me to
volunteer. I want to do so much but there's not enough time. And then I feel guilty because, oh, I really should have attended that PTA meeting or I really should have done this or that.

In large part, for the participants of this study the experience of attending college while raising children is "exhausting, isolating, lonely, and tiring," as stated by one of the student moms who participated in the focus groups for this study. Another participant stated it well when she said, "I feel like in this society if you decide to have a kid you are on your own; we will not help you. It makes me so mad." Some of the participants reported feeling, "all alone, with nothing else." Moreover:

...it's just a general feeling of being a parent and I don't know. That's the kind of [message]. I guess you messed up and you got to go to school, so sorry about your bad luck. I bet the whole welfare thing [inaudible] and it's really like a stigma. Maybe it's on my own part that I put on myself, but I feel that otherness feeling or that embarrassment of being a parent and having to go to school.

This isolation and stigmatization can lead to depression and other negative emotions. One participant stated, "You cry sometimes when nobody's around." As such, women in this study reported that bastions of support are crucial for their persistence. Without them, some women might become "depressed and suicidal."

The following section will detail some of the reported reasons why going to school while raising children is such a difficult process and where student moms reported that they are able to obtain refuge.
Institutional Level

In general, participants did not portray the institution as a positive source of support. This is evident in their conversations and written exercises. Lack of support at the institutional level was one of the most frequently discussed topics during the groups. Participants did speak about particular individuals or departments as sources of support, such as the Student Parent Services office and Student Legal Services, but overall they discussed the perception that there is a lack of support at the institutional level. The data show that student moms at Portland State University do not feel included in a physical sense or in terms of the image of undergraduates that is promoted within the institution.

For instance, one participant discussed her perception that campus-wide emails regarding student events often revolve around drinking beer or eating pizza. Another participant stated, “They do not want to sell themselves as a student parent college. That is not on their agenda.” The data reveal the perception of the student moms in this study that the institution continues to make certain assumptions about students. One participant discussed some of the language that is used in relation to students. For example, she cited instances when language referred to students’ parents, with the assumption that students are still largely overseen by their parents. Another participant focused on the changes she has perceived at the institution:

I’ve been on campus for a long time. Actually, eight years off and on, part time, full time, but anyways I’ve noticed the change in the students here at Portland State. Like when I first started I felt like I was the only young one and there were all these older people and everyone had...
families. And when I did start, my son was only a couple of months old. So I mean there were a lot of student parents. A lot of people had families outside of school...And now it seems like there is a lot of younger people, straight out of high school and it's just different. I come to school with my kids. I used to take my oldest son with me and now I bring him and I get looks you know, it is just weird. And it's different to bring my kids here because a lot of people I feel like don't have kids.

Other participants discussed the neutrality of the institution. One stated, "School: there isn’t a lot of support. It’s kind of nothing, neither good nor bad.” It is also the case that focus group participants reported feeling that a pretense of inclusion is present, but not manifested in reality. Participants reported feeling that the institution is more focused on the traditional student and traditional image and that student moms are marginalized.

For example, one student mom discussed the perception that the institution is more concerned with the football team than childcare resources. In addition, several participants mentioned the new recreation center that is being built on campus and their perception that it will not be family-friendly. Another area where student moms do not feel included on campus is related to course scheduling. Many reported feeling that course scheduling is not created with any consideration of student moms or other adult students.

The data show that participants lack a sense of inclusion as student moms. One participant said, “I feel like student parents are a group that is kind of ignored in a way.” Many of the participants discussed the idea that there is a lack of family-friendly spaces on campus. A participant summarized the feeling by stating, “There is no place to be physically on campus, even if you just have your kid.”
They don’t really take into account people having kids on campus. It’s not, it seems like they would because obviously everyone was a kid and this whole thing is foundational in life, but you know there’s not a lot of places for you to take your kids and just kind of hang out that feel like a good place to take them… It just seems like there’s this whole double role that women have now when they have kids and they have this whole part of their life; you can’t just leave it at home and disengage from your children. So there needs to be a way to at least accommodate the fact that this is going to happen and it is going to keep happening. People are going to keep having kids and want to finish school and it’s not going to stop. The campus doesn’t seem to be set up to allow for this role and for there to be this need. It is still built on its initial foundations where men went to school and didn’t bring children to school. So it seems like that whole system needs to adapt and change a little.

Another example of the lack of inclusion for student moms in terms of space is the lack of breastfeeding areas on campus. This issue was discussed frequently in the group sessions. There is only one designated breast feeding lounge on campus. This creates a problem for nursing moms. One participant said:

I know a lot of people who come to Helen Gordon and have a baby to breast feed. I feel bad. They are engorged. You can see it. I know they are uncomfortable. I know that feeling. I say, I can let you, you can go breast feed. They shouldn’t have to go to a random place to breast feed.

Another woman echoed this concern:

You see people, it is cold, raining outside, I seen women sitting outside nursing their babies [when] it is cold. That isn’t fair. The reason they are sitting outside, we are the biggest campus in Oregon, [yet] we can’t find some place to let you nurse your babies.

Others discussed the problem of trying to pump breast milk and store it without adequate facilities. One woman discussed her strategy of breast feeding in the open on campus. She stated, “I have found random places around campus. You get
lots of nice looks. Older male teachers for some reason walking by. In their day they didn’t even come in for the birth.”

Moreover, participants discussed their perception that other groups of students seem to get more support than student moms. “We have very necessary support services for all other sorts of students [such as] low-income students, opportunities of all kinds. Student parents are not important.” Another participant discussed her perception that the TRIO program and athletics are examples of populations that get support while student moms do not.

Participants also reported the opinion that Portland State University is less family-friendly than other institutions. One participant discussed the fact that she was researching graduate schools. She stated that other institutions seemed to have more services for student parents than Portland State University. Not only did student moms in this study report that they feel that they are not included on-campus, they also reported feeling that they are not being honored for their particular efforts. One woman voiced the perception that the institution does not take the initiative to single out student parents for attention.

Unfortunately, the lack of institutional support has a strong detracting effect, even if students are supported outside of school. One participant mentioned the fact that the institution has a lot of control over her life and as such when it is unsupportive, it has a big impact. Another pointed to the importance of institutional support by stating, “I would love to see parents feeling like they’re actually supported here [on campus] if they’re not supported at home.”
Another way that student moms in this study reported being isolated on campus is related to a lack of awareness regarding the services that are available to student moms and the assertion that student moms have to really search to find these services. One participant stated, “They want to say we are kid friendly. They have these things, but you have to look for them. It is like looking for a grant, they are out there, but you need to hunt.” Another argued that brochures are not sufficient for disseminating critical information to student moms. One student mom felt that the institution needs to advertise more about breast feeding and student parent groups. Participants discussed the need for a centralized resource area for student parents.

Although Portland State University does have a Student Parent Services office, few participants knew about it. Participants who did know about resources lamented that they discovered them accidentally or when they were near the end of their degree completion. One woman stated, “Well, I was going to say there seems like there is some services out there like on campus, but you don’t really know about them. You find out right when you’re about to graduate or something, like me.” Many of the services that participants desired do exist on campus, such as a student parents’ group and campus housing for family, but participants lacked the knowledge that is necessary to take advantage of these resources. “People need to be shouting it from the roof tops because a lot of moms could get use from this.”

Financial aid is another area on campus where student moms in this study reported frustration. Of course financial issues are not unique to student moms. What is unique is that student moms in this study reported that they feel that the financial aid
findings indicate that mothers' college achievement is beneficial for the entire family.

George Kuh (1995), a leading educational scholar from the Institute on Higher Education Research states:

On average, college graduates exhibit: substantial gains in knowledge (particularly in the major), autonomy, social maturation, and personal competence; modest gains in verbal and quantitative skills, cognitive complexity, aestheticism, and awareness of interests, values, aspirations and religious views; and modest decreases in irrational prejudice, political naiveté and dogmatism (p. 123).

Clearly, education continues to be a source of access to greater life chances for women and their children. Seidman (2005) states that, "It can be said that education is the great equalizer. No matter what economic stratum a person is born into, he or she can acquire the skills necessary to succeed through education" (p. xi). That said, it is important to uncover the factors that contribute to students' successful completion of a college degree. Although education may be the "great equalizer" people do not enter education on equal ground. In fact, they enter with different levels of resources and different limitations or constraints, which impact their ability to complete a degree. As such, it is essential to determine which factors matter to different types of students.

Student moms have many competing demands. The issues that they face will likely differ from those of the traditional student.

STUDY POPULATION

The Status of Moms in Higher Education

Bronte (1997) states:

During most of this century, education was for the young, whose minds were pliable. Adulthood was a fixed line drawn across the life cycle: once you were grown up, you were fully formed. No more real
process is not accommodating to the special needs of students with children.

Participants stated concerns regarding income level guidelines, navigating the process, and insufficient funding. One woman summarized some of the issues by stating:

I am not a 20-year-old who lives on campus. I have a mortgage. I have a kid. They don’t seem to understand that there’s a different student, you know, who needs the assistance. That has been a frustration of mine. Exactly. And should I have to go through school and be completely destitute?

Furthermore:

I don’t know how they do the allotment, but they should think about increasing the aid to account for parents because those books are expensive...One book is my daycare cost for a week. So I think somewhere along the lines maybe that guideline if, I don’t know, if they’re doing it if you’re the same without kids and you have a standard thing and you get additional for child care. I think they should have more variations to it than just one standard.

The issue of on-campus childcare was discussed by nearly all of the participants and is another example of an area where student moms in this study reported feeling that they are not receiving adequate services. Portland State University has two childcare centers on campus. However, these facilities are not meeting the needs of the parents who need childcare.

Daycare is huge because there are parents on campus and there are just going to be parents on campus. And, you know, to have to go to Helen Gordon [campus childcare center], you know, to say, “Well I am thinking about getting pregnant. Can I get on the list so that in three years, when the kid is born...” Two and three year waiting lists are insane. And everywhere else in town has those too. So I don’t really consider it a benefit if you’re you know, if you’re on another waiting list.
Others echoed the concern that waiting lists for on-campus childcare are exceedingly long. Ellie Justice, Director of the Helen Gordon Child Development Center, stated that the waiting list currently has approximately 750 children on it. Participants discussed the fact that attending school without childcare is obviously impossible and that some had to wait until children were school age to be able to return to school. As mentioned previously, many expressed concern over the fact that a new recreation building is being constructed on campus, but childcare services are not being expanded. The few who were able to obtain on-campus childcare viewed it as a huge source of support.

The Impact of Faculty

Although much of the discussion surrounding support at the institutional level was negative, participants did discuss some positive aspects of the institution. For example, positive support from faculty was mentioned often. Although the writing exercises did not reflect the perceived importance of faculty, group discussions did. Many of the participants said that they have received positive support from faculty at Portland State University. One of the ways that some of the participants reported feeling supported is through faculty providing special accommodations for students with children. Examples of this include professors allowing students to bring their children to class, allowing students to miss a class when children were sick, and giving students additional time to complete assignments when situations arose that impeded completion.
Another way that participants said that they felt supported by faculty was by simply understanding the challenges of raising children. One woman described a female professor who is also a parent. She said, “She has weaning and nursing stories. It seems like she is close to my age and that helps with the rapport between us. It has been a real experience for me.” Another stated, “The teachers who can understand where you are coming from make all the difference.” Having supportive faculty was reported as being extremely important to student moms in this study. Some stated that they seek out such faculty when choosing courses and come to rely on that type of support. Relationships with supportive faculty are important to student moms in this study on an emotional level as illustrated by the following excerpt:

I had really good support you know. I had a professor who gave me my only incomplete and I was like racked with guilt and traumatized about the whole thing. And she is a mom and she is a super bad ass and she was like, Screw it! Like, I mean we, I was having this really great talk with her actually about-I mean sometimes, screw it.

Supportive faculty might mitigate the lack of support from the institution as indicated by the following student mom’s statement: “Teachers are often more accommodating than the actual system, so I put a 6 [on a 1-7 Likert scale of support].”

As mentioned, much of the discussion regarding faculty support was positive, but there were some stories about unsupportive faculty as well. One of the issues that was discussed by some participants during the focus groups was lack of consideration for student moms, particularly from faculty without children. Some participants argued that faculty are not interested in supporting student moms. One discussed the image that there are still those who “are like science cowboy, rugged, loner men.”
Others recalled experiences when they reported feeling that faculty were completely unsympathetic to their challenges. One woman’s story provides a useful illustration:

I have one example. My daughter, I don’t know, we were trying to rush out of the house, somehow she was bending down and her head got slammed in the door. So I had to take her to the doctor. So I had to call my professor and did the big girl thing. I won’t be in class today, this happened. And I said, I can get a note from the doctor and he said, “Well could you because you could be making this whole thing up as I’m talking to you.” And I thought, for real? So you have that too. I feel like they don’t believe me or something. They take the attitude: get it together, you’re in college now.

Not only was this faculty person unsupportive, but his reaction suggests hostility and stereotypical perceptions. Another study participant posited that some professors do not take into consideration that students have many other responsibilities in life other than school. Although this was not true across the board, in general when participants spoke positively about faculty the faculty were also women with children and when they spoke negatively about faculty they were males or women without children. This suggests that gender issues are relevant.

The Impact of Other Students

Student moms in this study reported that they are appreciative when they are able to make connections with other students, however it does not happen very often. The few times when support from other students was mentioned, it was always when student moms in the study made connections with other students like them in terms of also being a parent or an adult student. One participant also spoke of the support she received from other students of her same race. The importance of having access to class notes from other students when needed was also mentioned. The primary focus
of participants’ discussions about relationships with other students was the lack of connection and support from other students and the negative situations related to other students on campus.

Participants reported a lack of connection with other students on campus, particularly those without children. As such, they reported that they perceive little support from other students. Participants reported their perception that students without children do not understand what it means to be a mother and a student and that lack of understanding creates a barrier to connection. Participants also described feeling stigmatized by other students. However, in some ways this lack of connection and support from other students without children did not deter student moms in this study from their goals. One participant stated:

It’s definitely kind of awkward, at least it was, walking around pregnant. Like you get a lot of looks…I wasn’t really, like I’m not really that concerned about being accepted on campus, like it is not a big part of my life. I’m just trying to finish school. I just thought it was kind of funny. People seemed to make a lot of judging kind of looks. So that was always a little awkward, but at the same time I was like, well, I’m okay with being pregnant. I’m happy.

Another story points to how other students can be unsupportive of student moms:

I put, I mentioned it, but computer labs. And the people like, you know, the library, maybe it’s just the staff, but the students they’re just not—they make you feel very uncomfortable. I had one guy not too long ago…my son was laughing and talking, [then] he wasn’t even talking and the guy looked at me and got up like he was annoyed and went to another computer. And it was, sometimes you just don’t have a choice. You need to be able to use the computer, bring the kids with you.

The data show that differences in lifestyle between student moms in this study and other students create a barrier for support. One participant described how other
students often invited her to go to night clubs. She replied to them: "Are you kidding me? Why would you ask me that?" This illustrates a lack of understanding on the part of students without children regarding the challenges of parenting and daycare issues. Some study participants stated that they preferred not to disclose the fact that they are parents to other students or faculty unless necessary. One participant reported that she felt that, "...other students might look at them differently." Another participant stated, "It's a really awkward situation, so I don't tell people [that I am a mom] unless I feel I need to say I can't be there because my daughter and then I'll tell them." Student moms in this study reported feeling fundamentally different from other students. One participant captured the perception by stating:

It's not very easy to pinpoint. Like, you can feel the "Oh man. I'm not like everybody else." You feel it, it's hard to pinpoint exactly where it's coming from. It's almost a subtle prejudice, not a blatant thing.

Participants discussed feeling different because of their age differences in terms of being older than other students. However, younger women with children who participated in the study also described feeling different from their peers due to the fact that they are moms. One of the participants was 23-years-old, which is very close to traditional age for a senior. She stated that she does not feel that she can relate to students her own age and generally does not mention that she is a mom. This particular participant reported that she transferred from a more traditional college to Portland State University in order to develop a greater sense of belonging as a young student mom, but that although Portland State University was more diverse than her previous school she still did not feel a sense of belonging at PSU.
Many of the participants stated that they feel that student parents are a very small minority on campus. Several described feeling like "the only person in the class over the age of twenty...or who has a kid or anything like that." The data show that these age and lifestyle differences make peer connections difficult for the student moms in this study. One woman said, "I think parents in general, it just automatically puts you in a different category than some of the kids coming fresh out of high school." Another argued that student parents are not only different, but that being a student and a mother is viewed as abnormal. She stated, "I think normalizing parenting in the class [would be helpful]-like it's an admirable thing to be a parent in a class."

These differences inhibit student moms from developing a sense of belonging on campus. Another participant stated, "But I oftentimes feel like, you know, I have a completely different perspective than everybody else in my classroom." In addition, "They [students without children] all have different priorities and different ideas and it's hard to connect with them a lot of times." Again, lifestyle differences between student moms and other students are difficult to overcome. Student moms in this study reported that they attend classes and leave campus without really engaging with other students. "In general this campus is, I go to class and leave kind of thing."

I have found-but I don't know if anybody else has that experience-but I do shut out the rest of class because I do hear things that do not relate to me. And the parties and things that they're doing and people that live on campus and, oh my gosh!
Student moms reported many negative experiences when they have been obligated to work with other students outside of class for group projects. One participant stated, “I think group projects are horrid.” Another called group projects “horrible.” This is mainly due to scheduling conflicts, lack of daycare, perceived judgment, and lack of understanding on the part of students who do not have children. Participants described feeling judged negatively when they had to bring children to group meeting sessions. One woman described that she received “dirty looks” when she brought her child to group meetings. Another said, “I’m willing to do a twenty page project on my own, just so I don’t have to work [with others]...I really don’t want to meet with people who take time from my family.”

As previously discussed, the experience for student moms at Portland State University is isolating. Student moms in this study did express a deep interest in developing connections with other student moms, but there seems to be a lack of time for developing those relationships and a lack of opportunities to find other student moms. One participant stated that Portland State University is, “a lot more anonymous.” While student moms in this study reported that they feel challenged in terms of developing relationships with other students and deriving support from those relationships, they spoke about a desire for connections with other student moms. One participant said, “I feel like socially I prefer to hang out with moms because they understand.” Another said that she wants to feel that she is “not alone.” Yet another stated, “I have a longing for it and I hear girlfriends talking next to me in class about
where they’re going after and what they’re doing Friday, and I’m like, Ooh, I’m doing laundry.”

The data show that student moms in this study are negatively impacted by the lack of social support they receive from other students on campus. One woman stated, “…I’m a single mom, like, and I don’t have that social support at school. And I was like, I need to go and find if there’s a single moms group at school or something like that. I was trying to figure out a way to make some situations at school.” Developing relationships with other student moms is important because the women in this study reported that they want to be able to utilize others’ experiences in their own lives. Participants spoke about a longing to talk with other moms who understand what it is like to be a mother and go to school. They said that they want to hear the tips and tricks that other women used to get through the process. Participants discussed the potential affective and instrumental support that could be obtained from relationships between student parents. “…It would be fun to have, not just fun, but really useful to have a group of other moms or any dads, other parents who have sympathy and maybe can carpool or whatever. Just have that as a resource.” There is a student parent group on campus, but most of the participants were unaware of it. One participant stated:

Us being parents, I haven’t heard of a mother’s group or anything. It gets lonely. Even if you are married, have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, whatever the case is, it gets lonely. Sometimes I am walking in, all I have on my mind: I have to get my kids; I have fifteen hours of homework to do; I need to go to work. If I say that to a student, they say, “you need to go to a counselor.” If I go to another mother, they completely understand. It gets lonely and tiring.
Another participant stated that parents have “an instantaneous bond.” Many of
the participants described participation in the study’s focus groups as a positive
experience because they were able to connect with other student moms. Women
continued to talk and trade stories after the groups were over. One woman said, “This
was really helpful. I wrote down so many valuable resources that I’m going to go
home and Google. Just, I really appreciate hearing about them. I feel this was
therapeutic.” Another woman, who participated in one of the focus groups as part of a
class assignment, wrote this about the experience:

Words cannot express how this focus group has helped me. The focus
group made me realize that I am not alone in the struggles that come
with raising a child and going to school...it was surprising and
comforting to see that I was not alone in the feeling of not being
supported. All of the moms and myself felt that Portland State could
use more resources for us...The second major theme the focus group
discussed was resources that were available. This was most important
to me because I have a hard time making ends meet and sometimes
cannot afford to buy my daughter all of the things she needs...With
how hard times are for my family, it was wonderful attending this focus
group that was not only therapeutic, but making it possible for me to
stay in school.

Although participants expressed a desire to connect with other student moms,
they also reflected that they have insufficient time to try to find other student moms
and develop those relationships. One of the student moms in this study stated that the
student parent group on campus is floundering because student parents do not have
time to put into it. The data show that student moms in this study must approach the
process of attending school and raising children in an efficient manner, which does not
leave room for socializing. One participant said, “I, you know, get the job done and
I’m out. I’m here for the business you know. There’s no socializing really here on
There’s no play time.” Another stated, “I plan my school schedule around getting home for after school sports and church and Cub Scouts and a spouse being in school. You get out of class and run to the Max [light rail].” Again, there is that longing for connection, but insufficient resources to make it happen. “As much as I want to spend time with other moms, it feels like something else I have to do. I want to do it. It is more energy to put out there.”

The college experience may not be what these women envisioned. One stated, “I had this idea of going back to college, having this college life, it would be kind of cool. No.” Another participant discussed how she attempted to become engaged in the student community, but was unable to commit the time. She stated:

It’s just impossible. It just, you don’t have enough time to actually put in other things into the student life, like trying to—I think that what I was doing was trying to enhance my community, you know, like what I talked about, but there was a time when I feel like I really needed to contribute a little more because I wasn’t contributing. I was just taking, like, you know, from them. So I went and I was like, “Okay, I’m going to be in UISHE now.” And, like, I never had time for anything. So I was just like no more student groups for me. That’s the end of that.

**EXTERNAL SUPPORT**

The data clearly show that the experience for participants on campus is generally unsupportive, with the exception of certain faculty members. I will now move on to discuss the issue of external social support for student moms in this study, which is predominantly more positive than the findings for the on-campus climate. External support is very important for student moms. One participant wrote this during the letter writing exercise:
Create a social network for yourself, whether it’s family, friends, people at your child’s daycare, other parents, whatever because if you have it in place outside of school you’ll have it to fall back on whether or not you can create it at school. You know it’s great to have it at school. If you can, you should. But whether you have it at school or not, you can have it outside.

The findings about spousal support are mixed, but primarily positive. Approximately 61% of participants were married or in a long-term relationship. Three participants stated that they were not married, but in a long-term relationship. Participants who were married ranged in experience from being completely supported by spouses to being unsupported enough to contribute to divorce. On the positive side the data show that spouses make sacrifices and provide emotional, financial, and childcare support to student moms in this study. Some student moms reported that they have spouses who are also students. One participant stated that she and her husband are “battle buddies.” There is the sense that couples are engaged in the process together. One woman stated:

My husband has been incredibly amazing. We don’t have any family up here and don’t have family that can afford to come up here. So at least-I mean, it’s two days at a time, but he just, you know-I got pregnant with my daughter and he’s just kind of, “Well, whatever, you know, whatever you do, whatever we need to do to get you finished.”

Several participants discussed that they felt like their husbands were their only source of support for going to school and raising children. As discussed previously, it is a juggling act for women with children in this study to attend college and it involves tradeoffs and sacrifices. The data show that the same can be said for the spouses of these women. One woman stated, “My husband has been really supportive, as much
as he hates for me to be away and as hard as it is for him.” Another said, “He just accepts it and he’s just like, ok, two more years, even though he’d be miserable with the time.” The data show that husbands of student moms in this study must pick up the slack with child care and finances. The data also show that they are cheerleaders of sorts for their wives. One participant stated that her husband told her: “Let’s get you whatever you need so that you are happy in your job and in your life and we can get through this.” Another woman described how her husband worked two or three jobs to provide for the family while she is attending college.

While participants generally described positive support from spouses, there is evidence that being married and attending college as a student mother can be a double-edged sword because although spouses can be supportive they also present another source of obligation and time commitment for student moms in this study. One of the study participants had recently gotten married at the time of the focus group and she stated:

And now that I’m married I feel like I have more of a second shift dilemma coming on. Like there’s just more work. And my husband is very supportive and I love him, but sometimes he thinks he’s being supportive, but he’s not...

Another woman described the lack of support from her spouse in relation to the issue that she is unable to be at home as much. One participant stated, “My husband is not too excited about me not being able to cook and clean as I was a stay at home mom for the whole time [before].” Another said, “He would much rather, you know he complains that I’m not spending enough time with him when I’m studying. Why
can’t I study tomorrow? You know, things like that.” One woman said that her husband was “like a second child” in terms of needing attention.

Other participants described the lack of support they perceived from partners as a contribution to divorce or separation. One woman, who stated that lack of support for education contributed to divorce, also stated that her ex-partner continues to constantly tell her to drop out of school and get a job. Another participant said, “I had to leave my husband to go back to school and now he’s really good about it. Before he was like, we can’t afford for you to go to school and not helpful at all.” Participants reported that they felt that some former spouses did not understand or value the desire to obtain a college degree. Because they share children, student moms in this study must maintain relationships with former partners who reportedly were not and continue to not be supportive of participants’ efforts to attend classes.

He doesn’t really value it. And we will end up in some ridiculous conversations about why I need to study or why you know, so I think like we’re not doing anymore and he wasn’t actively against it, but he definitely wasn’t for it and it caused some really lame moments.

Similarly to the situation with spouses, student moms in this study reported that they primarily receive positive support from family and friends. And like supportive spouses, participants reported that supportive family members are extremely important. The data show that family and friends are available to provide financial, emotional, and childcare support for student moms. Financial support was particularly salient in the data. Participants described family members (generally parents) who pay their tuition, their children’s daycare, and also allow the student
moms and their families to live with them. One participant’s father pays her mortgage while she is attending college. Another participant said:

I moved back to Portland because my family is here and they have really come through. Like-it’s going to make me cry, but it has been really great. But my family actually paid for my son’s daycare when I started going to school again this fall. So I don’t know, I’d be out there, but I’m glad they’re there.

A few participants told stories about times when their own moms moved to Portland to help them with childcare while attending school. Others described how family will provide childcare so that the student mother can sleep or complete homework assignments. Others described the emotional support they perceive from family. One woman stated:

I’m really-my dad pays my mortgage while I’m in school. I would not be able to do this without that. So I feel like because I have such a supportive parent, parental unit, that I was, you know, I had to quit school when I was nineteen and decided I’m never going to college. It’s stupid. And now that I’m older and deciding to go back, both of my parents really pushed me to go back.

Student moms in this study reported that friends can also provide emotional and childcare support. One participant stated:

I don’t have family in town so I have friends that have become my family and will help me out. And it’s great because I have friends, especially with friends I met while we all had kids in school at Helen Gordon. Our kids are at the age now where I’ll take your kid for an overnight and then next week you take mine. Or Portland Public Schools had a day off or a week off and we’ll all take turns. You’ll take Wednesday off, take all the kids. I have a lot of single mom friends too because I’m a single mom and we understand the kinds of support and can provide it and it’s just easier.
Another participant described the importance of having friends who are parents because they understand the issues that parents face. In addition, student moms in this study reported that they can spend time with other parents more easily because their children can also play together. Throughout the data, student moms in this study show their need for activities that include their children.

Like the findings related to spousal support, when participants described lack of support from their families it was generally related to a lack of value placed on obtaining a degree or role norms associated with mothering. For instance, one participant said that her parents told her:

You should be working. You should be working or just stop going to school. And I have a brother who comes here to Portland State and all the support is for him because he’s a guy and he needs to support somebody and you’re a woman. Why are you in school if you don’t need to?

Another participant argued that her friends and family are not supportive of her attending college as a student mom because they do not understand. “They all just think like, why don’t you go get a job?” One participant stated that her family told her that she should be working when she complained about the financial strain of attending college and raising children.

Some participants spoke about the lack of support they receive from friends who do not have children. One woman said, “I am in this weird, mid-30s thing, going back to school. All my friends are Sex in the City. They are professional doctors, blah, blah, blah. They are all single. They don’t get it.” Participants described situations where old friends did not offer to provide support such as childcare and who
seemed to distance themselves once the women became moms. The following story illustrates that point:

I had that experience too when I was pregnant, like this is great, I will have so much support. Now not one of those people threw me a baby shower, not one of them. They rarely call me. I am on my own. I scared a lot of my friends when I asked them to baby-sit in the beginning when she was a newborn because she cried for six hours straight.

The final off-campus area that was discussed by participants is social services. Student moms reported mixed support from social services related to attending college. Several of the participants reported receiving some type of financial support from social services agencies, which they described as an important aspect of their ability to go to school while raising children. However, similarly to the description of obtaining services on campus, participants described a struggle to get support from social services. Some described helpful personnel within social services, but more described personnel who they perceived as being unhelpful, unknowledgeable, or hostile to the idea of women who are receiving social services going to college. Like some of the family members described earlier, some social services personnel told student moms in this study to “get a job.”

**INTERNAL LOCUS OF POWER**

The participants in this study reported that they do not generally feel supported on campus at Portland State University. This lack of support may be mitigated by the external support that was described by participants. In addition to off-campus support and support from individual faculty members, participants described a sense of individual motivation and drive that surpasses external factors.
Thus far I have described student moms’ levels of support off-campus and on-campus. In addition to these external support systems, student moms in this study reported strong internal support mechanisms or orientation toward completing their education. I did not start begin this study with the intention of examining motivation, but the data presented that theme. The data show that the student moms in this study are highly motivated to obtain their degrees. As one woman stated, “We are moms. It is like Yoda. Don’t try. Do.” There is a sense that being children makes student moms in this study more driven in terms of completing assignments, attending classes, and focusing on school. One participant stated:

I feel like-and it’s probably because I’m an older student, but I feel like I’m much more serious about being in school than most of the people in my classes. And I have, like this real drive to you know get that paper in on time.

Another said, “I have always felt like parents kind of work harder. Like I see them being more committed and I feel like-this is true of me-I didn’t ask for stuff ever, never screwed around.”

Student moms in this study reported that they are motivated to finish their degrees in order to obtain well-paying jobs so that they can provide for their children. One woman stated:

Do I go work for a minimum wage job forever? No. I don’t want to do that. I just keep getting this overwhelming feeling of I’m the only one that can really do what I need to do while I’m here you know and that drive has really kept me going.
Another woman stated that she does not feel that she has a real choice about attending college. She reported that she feels that it is absolutely necessary in order to be financially stable for her children.

Sometimes children necessitate the need to go back to school. Obviously there is the order that people do things in and some people don’t. And once you have a kid you have to go back to school because you have no other option. You’ll never work a job that will pay for the daycare, health care, etc.

Student moms in this study reported that they feel that they are more responsible than young students without children. They have a sense of determination that keeps them moving forward. They reported that they are willing to persist even though it is difficult. One woman stated, “People see me and say, you are a wreck. I am tired and always sick. Why are you doing this to yourself? I enjoy being in school. It is important.” Another said, “When you reach the end of your rope, you find you have a little more rope left.”

And that’s also a mantra that I keep going through my head all the time. You know, just like getting this degree one assignment at a time. Like each one is behind me. It’s done. It’s back there and I can just move forward from here on out. I’m an eternal optimist. Everyone will tell you that about me. I just get through it.

Student moms in this study indicated a great deal of perseverance in getting what they need to be successful and challenging those who are not necessarily cooperative. Participants spoke about being persistent in trying to obtain resources such as financial assistance or childcare. One woman said that going to school and
raising children requires a great deal of diligence. She said, “If you really, truly want support you have to be really diligent in staking it out and not stop when you hit a brick wall and just keep going.” Another said, “If you got a brick wall, find a sledge hammer.” Others discussed the perception that they were only able to obtain resources by “pushing the envelope.” As one woman stated, “persistence breaks resistance.” Although in some ways this seems rather individualistic, participants also discussed the belief that support was important and that student moms must be proactive about obtaining it.

I just hunt for resources. I do take people up. People I meet on the street, in the neighborhood. I feel comfortable with, saying, you babysit? Can you get on board? Living with intention of trying to use the community. But it definitely is a different shift from being like I need to do this myself.

In the following section I will interpret these findings in an attempt to answer the question: how do they do it? Student moms in this study have answered that question in numerous ways. As such, I will synthesize the data in order to understand their experiences overall and also provide analysis regarding how the data from this study point to broader societal issues.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

OVERVIEW

I began this study with the question: how do they do it? I utilized a social support lens because a review of the literature led to the conclusion that social support would be an important factor for women who are going to school while raising children. I found this lens to be illustrative, but also lacking in full efficacy for explaining how student moms navigate the college experience. This lens explains a small piece of the experience, but leaves a lot to be explained. I will begin by interpreting the data and describing why Durkheim and Tinto’s theories of group membership are not completely sufficient for understanding the student moms in this study. Essentially, utilizing theories of social integration would predict a drop-out decision for student mothers in this study because they do not have a sense of group belonging on campus. However that is not what this study discovered.

I will then go on to explain why the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu provides more theoretical tools for understanding the experiences of the student moms in this study and perhaps helps us to understand why the student moms in this study have not dropped out. I will also introduce a component that I believe to be missing in Bourdieu’s theory: emotions. Finally, I will outline recommendations for institutions of higher education in terms of improving campus climate for student moms.

THE STATUS OF STUDENT MOMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The data in this study support that which was found in the literature review on nontraditional students and student moms. Student moms discussed external support,
on-campus support (or lack thereof), and their motivation for attending school. Similarly to the findings shown in the study by Duquaine-Watson (2007) student moms in the present study reported that they perceive marginalization and stigmatization within the institution of higher education due to their minority status and particular life circumstances.

The findings from this study reflect what others have found regarding student moms. All of the themes that were present in the literature review were also present in this study. The first premise is that student moms in this study must juggle multiple roles and responsibilities while attending college. This can lead to isolation and alienation. The second is that social connections, both on campus and off, can be positive or negative for student moms in this study. Connection with like students is important to student moms, while connection with students who do not have children is difficult for them and not necessarily welcomed. Student moms in this study reported that they would like to develop connections with other student parents, but lack time and energy to do so. The result is that student moms in this study have few or no social connections on campus. The student moms in this study who did not have an external support system valued on-campus relationships immensely. In particular, nearly all of the student moms discussed the importance of developing relationships with faculty for affective and instrumental purposes. As such, relationships with faculty are the only source of social connection to the university for some student moms.
The data generated from the focus groups that were conducted for this study show that going to school while raising children is a desolate experience. Study participants reported that having children makes them feel stigmatized and going to school while raising children is largely an independent enterprise. As shown in the literature review and voiced by the participants of this study, the message that student moms receive is that going to school while raising children is a personal choice requiring personal efforts rather than communal efforts.

Student moms in this study reported that they are more likely to get support from immediate family than other sources and therefore have a limited support network. This reflects a national trend. A 2006 article by McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears showed that people have fewer confidantes now than they did in 1985 and that social networks have decreased. The number of people who reported having no one to confide in about important matters tripled (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006). The authors argue that time constraints might be a potential culprit in the decline of networks. The participants of this study confirmed that view. According to the focus group data, student moms in this study are longing for connection with other student moms, yet they are constrained by the time constraints associated with juggling multiple responsibilities.

One thing that is striking about the student mother experience presented in this study is the commonality that is apparent in the women’s stories. Differences in age, race, marital status, and other areas did not seem to greatly change the fundamental experience of going to school while raising children. The other thing that is striking is
that this similarity of experience between student moms makes them fundamentally different from students without children in terms of lifestyle. As stated, the experience of the student mothers in this study is marked by isolation, marginalization, and stigmatization, particularly on-campus. Student moms in this study reporting feeling a sense of otherness on campus. They reported feeling judged and forgotten, yet they have all managed to persist.

The literature also shows that unsupportive faculty negatively impact student moms. My study supports that proposition. Student moms reported that they are more concerned about their relationships with faculty than they are with relationships with other students. This suggests that unsupportive and unaccommodating faculty might have the power to derail student moms’ from their goals. Student moms in this study stated that they are greatly benefited by the emotional support that comes from relating to faculty as other adults who understand what it means to have family responsibilities. As stated previously, faculty relationships are the only social link between some student moms and the university. Student moms in this study who reported negative experiences with some faculty also spoke about positive relationships with other faculty, suggesting that it is not a matter of quantity, but one of quality.

My study also corroborates the existing literature on student moms regarding the importance of external support for student moms. Participants in this study reported that affective and instrumental support from family and friends is crucial for student moms’ persistence. Lack of support from those sources has hugely impacted
the student moms in this study, even to the point of divorce, as reported by focus
group participants. Expectations surrounding age and gender role norms were present
in the literature and in my study, resulting in hardship for women whose family and
friends disapproved of them attending college. However, negative responses from
family in terms of support did not cause any of the participants to drop out.

The most important thing to recognize is that none of the student moms in this
study dropped out. They have all managed to come close to graduating. Most of the
student moms in this study reported that they have off campus support; some did not.
 Few reported feeling supported by the institution in general. One theme that is present
in this study that was not largely present in the literature review is individual
determination. Themes of passion and persistence presented themselves in the data
and provided another layer of understanding regarding student moms in this study.
While much of the literature focused on issues external to student moms, this study
discovered the importance of internal factors in addition to external factors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DURKHEIM AND TINTO

In a broad sense, Durkheim (1951 [1897]) argues that group membership is
important for well-being. Although this perspective is useful for understanding some
of the experience that was described during the focus groups, I would argue that his
conception of group membership is too narrow for the student moms in this study.
The student moms in this study did not report having a sense of membership with the
undergraduate student body as a whole. They reported being more likely to have a
sense of membership with students of their own kind (parents) and their preexisting
family relationships. Student moms in this study reported a desire to create group membership among one another, but are largely constrained from doing so due to their time constraints. Student moms in this study also reported that they would like to have a sense of belonging on campus and that they are negatively impacted by their perceived stigmatization, which supports Durkheim’s theory of group membership.

However, the participants of this study reported that their greatest sense of belonging lies with their children and families. Moreover, lack of connection on campus is not ultimately a deterrent for obtaining a degree. Student moms in this study reported their perception that connecting with other student moms would enhance their college experience, but it is not a determining factor for choosing to persist or drop out. Neither is marginalization, stigmatization, or isolation.

Durkheim (1951 [1897]) acknowledged that people have a sense of membership within their families; however he was skeptical that family could provide the sense of belonging necessary to inoculate a person against suicide. He argued that the best source of group membership was within occupational groups. This begs the question of how women with children would develop a sense of group membership when their primary attachment is to the home and family, as shown in the data for this study. Although student moms in this study reported that they do not have a sense of group membership within the institution of higher education, they reported that they have a very strong sense of group membership within their families, particularly their children.
However, even if we attempt to push the limits of Durkheim’s theory by shifting the focus to group membership within the family it does not adequately explain the experiences of some of the student moms who participated in this study. As stated, although most participants reported that they receive positive support from family members in relation to attending college, there were some who did not. Some participants were discouraged by family members.

Despite the difficulties faced by student moms in this study and despite their narrow ledge of social support they have persevered. Durkheim’s framework does not serve to explain this. The social integration theory of Tinto would also predict that these student moms would drop out of school. Tinto’s (1975) social integration theory (within the context of higher education), which is partly based on Durkheim’s work, does not seem to generalize to or fully explain the experience of the student moms in this study. As discussed in Chapter Two, Tinto (1975) presented a three phase model for students entering higher education, the first of which is disengagement from the student’s origins in order to integrate socially with the institution. Clearly this is not possible for student moms. Their children are their primary source of attachment.

Tinto’s (1975) model, targeted to traditional students and focused on social integration on campus, is not centrally relevant to the successful, senior-level, student moms in this study. Tinto’s (1975) model shows that students’ on-campus experiences will affect their institutional and goal commitments. In both of these areas student moms seem to be anomalies. Poor grade performance is not seen as a deterrent as long as grades are sufficient. Poor peer interactions are not a deterrent
either. Although the student moms in this study expressed interest in creating connections with other student moms it is not crucial for their success.

The first section of the literature review (Chapter 3) presented evidence that on-campus social relationships are very important for the college experience and that on-campus social relationships affect persistence. However, these findings do not generalize to the student moms in this study. Student moms in this study reported that they feel stigmatized by other students and generally do not have a connection with other students. The student moms in this study reported that they do not want to connect with other students (who do not have children) because their life circumstances are so different and because they feel stigmatized by students who do not have children. The data surrounding group work illustrates this point. The student moms in this study reported being leery of working with students who do not understand their constraints and whose maturity levels are still being developed. They also reported that they are stigmatized in group work situations because they might have to bring a child to a group meeting or cannot meet when other students want to meet because of childcare issues. As with Durkheim, Tinto’s conception of social integration on campus is too narrow to explain the experience of student moms in this study.

Tinto’s (1975) model applies to the student moms in this study on an abstract level, but not in terms of consequences. As Tinto’s (1975) model would predict, student moms reported that they would like to have a sense of belonging on campus in terms of institutional norms and practices. The student moms in this study also
reported that they would prefer to develop group membership with other student parents, but do not have time to do so. Student moms in this study reported that they attend their classes and leave. Moreover, they reported that they do not feel a connection to the institution and they perceive the institution as a hostile entity. Yet, they did not drop out, as Tinto’s (1975) model would predict.

Tinto (1997) said that, “Meeting people and making friends during the first year of college is a major preoccupation of student life” (p.609). The data from the focus groups conducted for this study does not support that assertion for the student moms who participated in this study; however, there is theoretical context to suggest that it has lead to attrition for other student moms (according to the literature review). In other words, it might be salient for some student moms and in some circumstances. That could be an interesting research question for future studies.

Within the Tinto model, levels of connectedness are also related to overall satisfaction with the institution, which is another variable that predicts persistence. However, the student moms in this study mostly spoke of the institution as unsupportive of the student parent population, yet that does not deter them from their goals. In some ways they seem intent on finishing regardless of campus climate and social conditions.

In summary, the theories of Tinto and Durkheim are shortsighted by mainly focusing on social integration. The tenets of Durkheim’s group membership and Tinto’s integration theories would predict suicide and attrition for student moms due to their relative social isolation. However, in a certain sense the moms in this study
are not wholly deterred by external variables. The data suggest that these women will
go to great lengths and make varied sacrifices in order to be successful. Additionally,
the data show that student moms in this study are adept at capitalizing on the few
resources they do possess, particularly outside of the institution.

Social integration theory simply does not adequately explain the student
mother experience in this study. Many of these women described lacking basic
necessities such as sleep and food because of their competing obligations. As such,
although creating a sense of group membership might be important on an abstract and
emotional level, it is not prioritized on a practical, economic, concrete level.

The data show that in this study, student moms’ greatest sense of belonging lies
with their children. In contrast to Durkheim’s theory of suicide, student moms are
able to persist in spite of low levels of belonging on campus, perhaps due to their high
levels of belonging with their children. Their intense levels of personal motivation
and drive coupled with strong attachments to children seem to buffer the negative
effects of isolation and stigmatization. The situation brings to mind the classic
dialectic between self and society. Humans are highly social creatures, but on the
other side they also possess certain aspects of fierce individualism which can combat
that which is negative or missing on the societal level.

Durkheim and Tinto’s theories of group membership informed this study by
guiding the literature review and instrument development. However, rather than
highlighting the importance of group membership within the institution I discovered
the importance of social connection outside of the institution. In addition I discovered
that the notion of external support was also insufficient for fully explaining how
student moms persist because not all of the student moms in this study had external
support. Therefore, I had to rely more heavily on the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu
(introduced in Chapter 2) to explain the power of individual action.

Another theorist whose work is helpful in this task is Anthony Giddens, who
conceptualizes society similarly to Bourdieu. As Giddens’s (1986) structuration theory
points out, actors are capable of making individual choices outside of the constraints
of the social system or structure, which he defines as rules and resources. At the same
time, individual actions create structure; it is both where action takes place and is the
outcome of action (Giddens 1986). Student moms in this study reported that they
fight against the constraints of the institution. By doing so, they affect the institution,
however incrementally. In essence, student moms follow the rules as well as their
resources allow them to, which eventually alters the rules. They are impacted by the
rules of the game within higher education, but they also have the ability to reflect on
those rules and decide to ignore the rules if necessary, such as when they must bring a
child to class. They are also impacted by the structure of their families, including
those that are unsupportive of their efforts.

Bourdieu agrees with Giddens in that both give credence to the power of
individual action, while also recognizing social constraints (Layder 1981). That is the
issue that distinguishes Bourdieu and Giddens from Durkheim and Tinto. In addition,
the theories of Durkheim and Tinto are only able to explain a small piece of the
overall experience. A theory with more concepts and possibilities is necessary for
explaining additional aspects of the experience, as presented by the student moms in this study. In the data analysis for this study, the concepts provided in Bourdieu’s theory allowed for an exploration of the features of participants’ experience that could not be understood using Durkheim and Tinto.

THE UTILITY OF BOURDIEU

Turner (1988) argues that, “The main task of all theory [is] to understand how the social world operates” (p. 156). In order to do that, we must understand why people act as they do. In terms of this study, at one end of the continuum Tinto and Durkheim argue that people act based on how the social structure would lead them to act. At the other end of the continuum there are theories that describe action as purely individually constructed. Theorists like Bourdieu and Giddens are somewhere in the middle of the continuum, arguing that action comes from a mixture of both sources.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1998; 1986) is most helpful for understanding the experience of the women who participated in this study for three reasons. The first is that Bourdieu’s (1998) discussion of social space and fields is applicable to the student mother experience, with the education and domestic fields being most prominent.

Ritzer (2007) states:

Higher Education in the United States in the early 21st century is certainly a field in the sense of the terms as it is used by Bourdieu. It is a network of relations among objective positions within it...like other fields, it can be looked at as a kind of vast military battlefield in which a variety of struggles to improve or protect positions are taking place.

This is an apt description of how student moms in this study try to navigate a field in which they are isolated, marginalized, and stigmatized. Movement between
fields (domestic and education) is difficult on a structural and institutional level. The integration theories of Durkheim and Tinto do not sufficiently describe how actors can manage situations where the group they are entering is not aligned with their personal values or does not respect their needs. The data from this study show that domestic and education fields are highly compartmentalized and generally incongruent. According to Bourdieu’s theory, a student mother’s success will depend on the amount and type of capital available in both fields. As shown in the data, social capital is particularly important for the student mothers in this study in terms of affective and instrumental support. The data from the focus groups also shows that quality of social capital is more important than quantity for the student moms in this study.

The efficacy of Bourdieu’s theory is that is allows us to examine all levels of phenomena. At the broadest level we can examine the game or system itself. The game is competitive; it is infused with power relations. In relation to the student moms in this study, the game is set up so that going to school while raising children is a difficult task.

At the mid level we can examine fields and movement between fields. For the student moms in this study the education field is fraught with obstacles and negative messages. The domestic field is filled with challenges as well. The relationship between these fields is represented by the analogy of a juggling act.

At the micro level we can analyze the experience of the individual. Much of the present discussion is aimed toward that goal. The habitus can be seen as a micro level feature, interacting between all levels. Issues regarding capital are present at
every level of analysis. In terms of the micro level, we can see where different configurations have impacted the student moms in this study, such as the differences between married women and unmarried women within the domestic field in terms of spousal support and constraint.

The second reason that Bourdieu’s social theory is useful for analyzing the experience of the student moms who participated in this study is that his description of capital and fungibility of capital seems to apply to the experience. As stated previously, there can be no doubt that social capital is a salient feature of student moms’ education experiences, as reported during the focus groups. They use it as a resource to achieve ends that would be difficult or impossible alone. They are able to take the social capital that they receive from family and friends and exchange it for cultural capital in the education field. Due to fact that going to school while raising children is an isolating experience, any social support that is available becomes highly valuable and is a prized form of capital. Social capital also provides economic capital for the student moms in this study, as illustrated by the several instances where participants described the financial support they receive from family members.

By including other forms of capital in addition to social capital, Bourdieu’s social theory allows for a richer interpretation of the interplay between resources that affects outcomes. It also stresses the importance of the actor in terms of making use of capital in a direct way. In addition, it allows for the explanation that resources can be used and exchanged to mitigate lack of other resources.
The data from the focus groups includes evidence of the negative impact of social capital in terms of downward leveling norms, as discussed in Chapter Two. Family members who do not value a college education will try to use their influence to deter women with children from attending college. Moreover, intense commitments to children, the institution, and other family members lead student moms in this study to de-prioritize themselves, as discussed in the focus groups. However, the data from the focus groups also indicates that negative social capital can be a motivating factor rather than a detracting factor. As one of the participants in this study stated, negativity from others regarding college attendance and raising children drives some to work harder to disprove those who are unsupportive.

The third reason that Bourdieu’s social theory is useful for understanding the experience of the women who participated in this study is the notion of habitus. Habitus is the internal, subconscious construct that connects social space, field, and capital to action. “Put simply, the habitus is composed of the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one’s social world” (McLeod 1995:15). Moreover, it reflects “deeply internalized values” (McLeod 1995:15). Somehow, the habitus of the student moms in this study has been shaped to reflect the message that obtaining a college degree is important for attaining social mobility. Due to their position in social space they are goal oriented towards completing a degree. As such, success in the education field is ingrained in the habitus. Yet the domestic field is also dominant for student moms, both in terms of their attachment to children and their sense of
responsibility in the role of mother. The domestic field becomes a driving force for the education field.

Student moms in this study stated that having children pushed them to return to school in order to be successful in the economic field so that their children would have better lives. They also reflected on the fixed nature of this motivation, or in other words the entrenchment of that orientation within the habitus. There was no question in their minds that they have to obtain a degree to be successful. The first part of this study outlined the many benefits of obtaining a college degree. Student moms' lives and their children's lives can be enhanced by those benefits. The habitus of the student moms in this study is ultimately focused on a higher purpose of achieving financial success for their children. This is surmised by the fact that they are willing to sacrifice in every way in order to finish and continue to work toward their goals even when they do not receive adequate support. As one mother stated, "...it's like Yoda. Don't try. Do."

INTRODUCTION OF EMOTIONAL CAPITAL

The theories of Tinto and Durkheim provided focus for the study, or in others words social integration theory provided a starting point. That data presented the need for a theoretical construct that would explain the aspects of experience that are not explained by Tinto and Durkheim. The social theory of Bourdieu was employed to provide that analysis. This theory enriched the analysis, but there was still something in the data that was not explained. The concept of habitus offers much in the way of
linking structure to action, but it still seems to be lacking in descriptive power for the student moms in this study.

Bourdieu’s social theory is illuminating for understanding the process by which student moms in this study utilize capital in order to achieve social mobility. The notion of habitus helps to make clear how this takes place in terms of the internalization of cultural messages that lead women with children to pursue a college degree to provide better lives for their children. However, an explanation of the mechanism behind motivation and determination is missing.

In order to understand that aspect of the experience of the student moms’ in this study I would like to introduce the concept of emotional capital, a term which is used in literature ranging from business (Thomson 1998) to economics (Gendron 2004) to sociology (Reay 2004) and undoubtedly other areas. DeLamater and Myers (2007) state that, “We can see some ways that emotions produce [italics added] important social outcomes, and therefore their role as inputs into social situations should be considered as carefully as are questions about how emotions emerge from social situations” (p. 263). For instance, literature on social activism shows how emotions generate action and sustain participation (DeLamater and Myers 2007).

Like social capital, emotional capital is a concept that has various definitions in the literature. For the purposes of this study emotional capital is defined as the affective experience of an individual actor, but even more than that it refers to an actor’s spirit or emotional energy. It is necessary to use this concept in order to get a sense of the
driving force behind the process of attending college while raising children and to enhance our understanding of how student moms do it.

Utilizing this concept extends Bourdieu’s social theory further to include an account of the ability of human actors to transcend external circumstances. Although Bourdieu (1998) did not grant a particular role for emotional capital in his theory, he did suggest that women provide a type of emotional energy for their families. Gender biases may have stunted further exploration of this phenomenon (Reay 2004), but Bourdieu (1998) did encourage future researchers to expand on his model of capital.

The sociology of emotions, a relatively recent field in sociology, is useful for explaining action and is used here in an attempt to understand more about the student moms in this study. Arlie Hochschild stated, “If, as C. Wright Mills said, the job of sociology is to trace the links between private troubles and public issues, the sociology of emotion is—or should be—at the very heart of sociology” (2008:80). This is because “Emotions link structure and agency” (Barbalet 2002:3). Emotion and rational action are interlinked because it is only through emotions that are actors able to place value on potential options (Turner and Stets 2005). “Whether conscious or subliminal, emotions will influence how individuals act” (Turner and Stets 2005:252). Emotions, such as love, can explain why actors will sacrifice for others. “Love is…the desire to give another status” (Turner and Stets 1005:219). This applies to the data in this study in terms of participants’ discussions about their desires to enhance their children’s lives.
Bourdieu's (1998) concept of habitus can possibly explain how student moms become dedicated to achieving social mobility for themselves and their children by invoking cultural messages that encourage people to strive for cultural and economic capital. However, habitus cannot fully explain how that internalized message is transformed into concrete action, drive, and persistence. Rather than viewing this as a purely cognitive process, Turner and Stets (2005) state that, "Emotions are not only what energize individuals, but what drive them to behave in ways that meet cultural expectations in a situation" (p. 264).

In summary, the social structure and one's place within that structure, generates messages about the necessity of obtaining a college degree, which influences habitus or orientation, but I would argue that emotions actually drive action. Student moms receive the message that they must obtain a college degree, which is a form of cultural/symbolic capital in order to ultimately gain economic capital in the workplace. From the perspective of Bourdieus's social theory, student moms make a rational exchange of human, economic, social, and cultural capital to obtain greater capital; however it is the emotional value placed on obtaining greater cultural and economic capital that sustains them. Student moms attempt to manage their emotions and channel them in order to persist. Although they may experience negative emotions associated with the hardship of going to school while raising children, they cultivate and display feelings of commitment and determination, a process that Hochschild (1979) calls "emotion work" (p. 561).
In addition, the support that they receive from family members is social capital, but it is also emotional capital. As such, they also exchange emotional capital. “Emotions are what give cultural symbols the very meanings and power to regulate, direct, and channel human behavior and to integrate patterns of social organization” (Turner and Stets 2005:292).

Turner and Stets (2005) argue that people seek situations that enhance long term emotional energy. Shilling (2002) terms this emotional effervescence. Face to face interactions feed positive emotional energy. In the case of the student moms in this study, their ongoing, daily interactions with family serve to feed their emotional energy for completing a degree for the benefit of themselves and their children.

Negative experiences can also feed emotional energy. When people lose status, such as the experience of the student moms in this study, they can become angry, which gives them a source of power (Turner and Stets 2005). People can turn the negative feelings that arise from an attack on their identities into emotional power, resulting in action (Turner and Stets 2005). Student moms in this study clearly lend credence to this idea with their talk about disproving the notion that they will be unsuccessful in the university. Some participants reported that they wanted to prove family members or spouses wrong in terms of their ability to complete a degree, a finding that is supported by a recent longitudinal study conducted by Suitor, Plikuhn, Gilligan, and Powers (2008). Other participants in this study reported that negative experiences on-campus gave them energy to try to change the system.
BROADER IMPLICATIONS

The student mother story, as presented in this study, is relevant in and of itself, but it also points to other broader issues. In terms of the agency, structure debate the student moms in this study show that they are not wholly constrained by structure. They are influenced by it in terms of the message to succeed and the constraints they experience, but they are also active agents who are willing to assert their rights when necessary. Their strong levels of determination and higher purpose (emotional capital) mitigate the presence of injustice. Goal commitment sustains them when they are denied support. Individual characteristics, such as emotional energy associated with a higher purpose, override social constraints.

In the 1980's Margaret Thatcher famously proclaimed, "There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families." When Durkheim theorized about group membership he was mainly referring to social group membership outside of the home, such as within the church or workplace. Tinto theorized about social membership within the university, but is that relevant in the modern context? Perhaps Ms. Thatcher was correct and society consists of individual actors striving for individual aims with the help of their families. The data gathered from the student moms in this study seem to support that concept, particularly if we take the term "family" to mean children for those student moms who do not have other family support.

Putnam (2000) wrote about bowling alone, student moms in this study spoke about doing it alone, McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006) showed that people
have fewer confidantes now than they did in 1985 and that social networks have decreased. Isolation marks the experience of the women who participated in this study and perhaps the lives of Americans as a whole. The relationships that were of utmost importance to the student moms in this study are family relationships, perhaps indicating a contraction of societal connectedness. The participants in this study suggested that they simply do not have time to cultivate social networks, a finding that is supported by McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006). Future research could examine whether there is an association between parenting and lack of time for social networking to determine if parenting itself is a special type of deterrent to social networking.

The data from this study also show the resiliency of the participants to overcome their reported isolation for a higher purpose. As such, the data show the transcendence of the individual over the social structure. In addition, although social support is completely necessary for the student moms in this study to persist, they also have a sense of drive and motivation that surpasses the need for support, indicated by their ongoing efforts despite a small pool of support and negative institutional conditions. Like those who have fought for a cause throughout the ages, student moms in this study are willing to suffer and persist regardless of the obstacles. The fact that the sample consisted of women who were close to finishing their degrees is noteworthy because it suggests that these women are especially resilient. They are the ones who are actually close to making it. It is possible that less resilient women have dropped out of higher education when faced with lack of support and negative institutional
environment. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate statistics regarding the drop-out rate for student moms, perhaps due to the fact that parental status is not tracked explicitly.

The data from this study also show that student moms share a unique experience. There is also data to support the notion that student moms in this study would like to join forces in the fight to obtain resources and support one another. This alludes to the potential for group transcendence and the possibility that student moms would be able to impact change if they were able to organize. As previously argued, United States culture may be on a trajectory toward increasing individualization. The experiences of the student moms in this study show the negative effects of that trend. The student moms in this study are trying to obtain social mobility and they mainly have to do it on their own. Although it does not necessarily cause them to drop out, the isolation experienced by student moms in this study affects them greatly. Due to the fact that their education experiences are largely individualistic they report that they suffer emotionally and personally.

The data suggest that student moms in this study recognize that developing a network between women who understand could alleviate some of the strain, but they do not have the energy to make that happen. Perhaps one of the reasons that off-campus support is so important is that it is easily accessible because it comes from people who are already a part of student moms’ lives. No extra effort is needed to cultivate those relationships. In order for student moms to be able to take advantage
of group membership within the institution, it would need to be readily available and conveniently accessible.

Bourdieu (1986) posits that life is like a game and everyone is competing to obtain their fair share of the winnings or capital. The issue is that people are equipped with different resources for playing the game, which means that the game is not fair in terms of equal opportunity. As shown in this study, student moms do not receive the proper resources on campus to compete on a level playing field. The power and resiliency of the women in this study speaks to their store of emotional capital, but we must wonder how much further they could go with the proper resources. In addition, we must wonder about all of the women who have been unable to make it.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

There are several possibilities for further research that could expand on the results of this study. One avenue for further research is to study student moms who have dropped out and learn more about why they dropped out in order to determine how their experiences fit into Bourdieu’s social theory. Further research could also expand on the applicability of the notion of emotional capital, as presented in this study. Doing so would create an opportunity for testing the conclusions of this paper. Further research could pose the same questions regarding social support to student moms who drop out, but it could also include questions regarding emotional capital to determine its impact on those women who are not successful. Finally, another intriguing area for further research is to learn more about the resiliency and emotional
capital exhibited by the student moms in this study. Perhaps the greatest question to pose is how they acquired these factors, particularly in terms of habitus and aspiration.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INSTITUTION**

As previously mentioned, one of the benefits of utilizing Bourdieu’s social theory is that it is useful on several levels of analysis, including particular fields. The following is a discussion of how to create an education field that is better suited to the needs of student moms. These recommendations also address the need to enhance movement between education and domestic fields.

1. The institution should create family-friendly spaces within the campus, such as an area where there is an enclosed play area for children, seating for adults, and computer terminals. There are practical reasons for this as well as social reasons. In terms of practicality, such a space would allow student parents to read or print papers while children play. In addition it would allow space for moms to breastfeed, exchange children, or take care of other practical matters. The spouses or family members of student parents could utilize the space to share a meal or chat between classes, creating a doorway between education and domestic fields. Family-friendly spaces would also provide a social outlet for student parents to meet one another and create social capital and emotional effervescence. During the focus groups that were conducted for this study, it was apparent that gathering student moms created palpable emotional energy. Family-friendly spaces would also create opportunities for student moms to obtain emotional energy from others in similar situations. Finally, family-
friendly spaces would create symbolic acknowledgement from the institution regarding the acceptance of moms on campus. Such spaces might crystallize group identity, which enhances sense of belonging and emotional energy (Turner and Stets 2005).

2. Make faculty aware of student parents and the accommodations they might need. Student moms in this study reported that positive relationships with faculty were very important for them to have a positive experience in the classroom. Some faculty may not be aware of the constraints experienced by student moms. They need to be trained about normalizing parents in the classroom and providing practical support such as alternatives to group work, alternative assignments if a child is ill, and consideration of time constraints. Including these provisions within the syllabus might provide symbolic acknowledgment and normalization of parents within higher education, both for student parents and also the general student population.

3. The institution could do more to honor student moms. This can be done by creating campus events that are family-friendly by welcoming and accommodating children when appropriate. This could potentially normalize and de-stigmatize student parents on campus, in their own perception and the perception of other students who do not have children. Turner and Stets (2005) argue that shared experiences create “particularized cultural capital” which has symbolic power and feeds emotional energy (p. 82). This can also be done by employing inclusive language throughout the institution, for instance not
assuming that students are dependents. In addition, the institution should make efforts to increase awareness about resources that are available to student parents on campus, including student services, child-friendly areas within the campus, information about financial assistance and childcare, and opportunities for meeting other student parents. Finally, institutions of higher education could make efforts to somehow acknowledge the particular achievements of student moms, given their constraints and limitations.

4. The institution should track parental status. Parental status is clearly a salient background characteristic. By tracking parental status offices of institutional research will have the ability to generate a wealth of data about student parents, their education experiences, and education outcomes. In addition, by including parental status as a student demographic characteristic, institutions will have the ability to determine the effect of various programs on that population.

These changes would mark a fundamental shift in the orientation of the institution. Institutions must decide whether to cling to the traditional, male model or to transform along with changing student demographics, which place women with children at the forefront of an influx of nontraditional students. Public institutions of higher education are generally geared toward providing access to a great number of students; however access without support is neither admirable nor fair.

This study has provided a great deal of information about the nature of the college experience for the student moms who participated. It supports the existing
literature regarding student moms, suggesting some level of generalizability, although further research is still required. This study has shown that the student mom experience is complex and subject to broad social forces. It also provides insight into the structure/agency debate by demonstrating the power of the individual to resist oppressive conditions. The answer to the question of how student moms “do it” is that they utilize a combination of capital that includes a large store of emotional capital and they squeeze every resource for maximum utility.
References


Appendices

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Guide

Informed Consent

I am going to go over something called informed consent. Basically informed consent means that you are here voluntarily and you know that you are free to leave at any time. Also I don’t want this to be uncomfortable for anyone. We will be taping the session, but the transcripts will be anonymous and your confidentiality will be protected in any of the written materials. I will not use your real name in anything that I write. Of course since this is a group it is not going to be completely anonymous or private so I would just ask that you be aware of that. I would also ask that everyone in the group respect the other participants and not discuss the session outside of here.

(Read informed consent, sign, give money)

Introduction

I want to thank everyone for coming today. I really appreciate that you are willing to take some time out of your busy schedule. I want this to be a relaxed experience for all of you. Just think of this as a group of friends talking about school. I really want to hear from everyone so that I can understand the diverse and common experiences of students with kids.

How this works

A focus group is all about you interacting and talking to each other. I will be here to put forth topics and questions and to make sure that everyone is able to speak, but it’s really about you as a group. I will talk a little bit about each question but then I really
want you to have a group discussion and I will mainly be listening. If something particularly important to the research comes up I will ask you more about it. If the conversation gets off topic I will steer us back.

Ground Rules

There are a few simple rules for participating in this focus group. Be respectful of each other. Take turns speaking and do not interrupt each other. It is ok to disagree, but do so politely. I want to get a range of perspectives so make sure everyone gets a chance to speak.

Introductions

Let’s take a minute to write down names so we can become familiar with each other. I would like you to take your packet and remove the name ‘tent.’ I would like you to write your name on the tent and also a number. This number is going to represent how socially supported you have felt while going to school and raising children. This can include on campus or off. Please rate this on a scale of 1-7, with 1 being not supported at all and 7 being very supported. Those who have felt unsupported might describe their social relationships as unfriendly, unsupportive, unavailable, unsympathetic, unhelpful or inconsiderate. Those who have felt supported might describe their social relationships as friendly, supportive, available, helpful, sympathetic or considerate. Try to think about all of the people in your life, on campus and off and choose a number that represents your overall level of support. This will be on the board in case you forget. (pause for writing)
Ok, I want to get started with introductions. I would like everyone to go around the table and tell us three things: your name, how many children you have and their ages, and describe your number.

Focus group questions

1. Three sources of support

The first question we’re going to look at is related to how you find support to help you get through school. Going to college while raising children can be challenging and I want to know how you are able to get by. I would like to know about where and how you get help, when you need it. I would like everyone to write down three sources of support that have enabled you to finish your degree. If you have particular people who have helped you, then write those people down. If there is an organization that has helped you, then write that down.

[Pause for writing, put up paper]

Now we will go around and have everyone talk about the first item on their list. I will write everything down on these sheets of paper.

[Write down first items from lists]

Now let’s look at the rest of your lists. Who has something else to put down? If you have something that is similar to someone else that is ok because we really want to create broad categories of sources of support. If you have something different that is great also because we want to get as many categories as we can at first. Once we get through all of the items on the lists we can add to the categories that you all come up with. This will be a group process.
2. Nature of support

Now that we have talked about who has been there for you, I want to talk about how these different people have helped you. Basically I want to know what the people we talked about have done for you to help you get through school. I especially want to hear stories or examples of specific situations that have happened throughout your time at PSU.

[Probe for stories and examples when needed]

3. On-campus experiences

Now I would like to share some of the research with you and see what you think about it. The research literature on higher education states that it is important for students to develop a “sense of belonging” on campus. Would you say that you have a “sense of belonging” on campus?

Probes:

1. Is it important in your life to have a “sense of belonging” on campus?

2. Can you think of times when you have felt a “sense of belonging?” What created this “sense of belonging?”

3. Do you have any relationships or interactions with students outside of classes? For example do you participate in any extracurricular activities or belong to any clubs or student organizations? What about study groups?
4. What about your interaction with faculty? Do you have any examples of interactions with faculty that have been important to you in terms of sense of belonging?

4. Unsupportive aspects of experience

Now that we have spent some time talking about how you have been getting help from others to keep going in school I would like to talk a little bit about people who have been unsupportive of you trying to go to school. I would like you to use the three other spaces on your sheet of paper and write a list of three people or situations that have been unsupportive of you as a student mom.

[Pause for writing]

Now that we have done that, are people willing to share at least one of the things that they wrote down? If you are willing to share more that would be great. I would especially like to hear stories or examples of situations where others were not supportive of you going to school. Also, I would like to know how you handle people or situations that are unsupportive in order to keep going.

5. Institutional feedback

We are almost to the end now. I want to thank you all for hanging in there with me. I want to make sure we talk about one more issue before we go on to the concluding exercise. I want to talk about what the college can do to support student moms. Let’s spend just a few minutes throwing out ideas about how the college can do that.
6. Free writing

We are at the very end. You have done a great job! The last thing I would like to do is have you all free write for a couple of minutes about the issue of support and going to school while raising children. When you do this I would like you to think about other moms who might be starting school. What would you tell them about the importance of getting help to get through school? Feel free to include anything that we might have missed during the session. When you are done we will go around and read what we have written. I will read mine last. If you are not comfortable reading your writing, that is ok. You can share whatever you would like in terms of a sort of closing statement.

[Pause for writing, have participants read their writing]

7. Wrap up

I want to thank you all again for coming. This has been a great group. If you think back to the beginning of the group you will remember that I asked you to rate your level of support while going to school. Has your opinion changed at all since we have been talking today? If it has, write down the new number in parenthesis. Remember, 1 means you have not felt supported while going to school and 7 means you have felt very supported while going to school. If you can also turn your paper over and fill out the demographic survey that would be great.
APPENDIX B: Demographic survey

College Attendance

1. How long have you attended Portland State University?
2. What is your major?
3. Have you attended college before?
   Yes
   No
   If yes, for how long?
   If yes, how long has it been since you previously attended college?
4. Are you attending classes full time or part time?
   Full time (12 credits or more)
   Part time (11 credits or less)
5. Are you receiving financial aid?
   Yes
   No
   If yes, what type?

Background (for statistical purposes only)

6. How many children do you have living at home?
   List Ages
7. Are you:
   Single
   Married
   Divorced
   Married, but separated
   Widowed
   Long-term relationship, but not married
8. What is your age?
9. Do you identify as:
   Black or African American
   White/Caucasian
   Mexican or Mexican American
   Puerto Rican
   Other Hispanic or Latina
   Asian, Asian American or other Pacific Islander
   American Indian or other Native American
   Multiracial/Mixed Heritage
   Other (specify):
   Any other details about race/ethnicity?

*Race categories taken from National Survey of Student Engagement.
Got Kids?

Let your voice be heard!

Please join us for a focus group being conducted by a fellow student mother who is completing her thesis in the Department of Sociology.

Who can participate?
❖ PSU women undergraduates who have children in elementary school or younger. I am particularly interested in talking to women who are close (within one year) to finishing their degree.

Why participate?
❖ Meet other student moms
❖ Receive $20 in appreciation of your time
❖ It’s an opportunity to talk about your experiences
❖ Help a fellow student mom (Me!) get a degree
❖ Provide the college with information about how to support student moms
❖ Free food!

The details?
❖ Focus groups will be held on campus
❖ The typical session will last about 90 minutes
❖ Focus groups provide a relaxed atmosphere to talk about your experiences going to school and being a mom
❖ Childcare will be available
APPENDIX D: Participant Profiles

*Bus.-Business related major

*L.A.-Liberal Arts major

*A.L.-Arts and Letters related major

*Ed.-Education related major

*Sc.-Science related major

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<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Attended College Before?</th>
<th>Full/Part time?</th>
<th>Receiving financial aid?</th>
<th>(# Children), ages</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Age</th>
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