

**THE LIFE COURSE OF SINGLE WELFARE-RELIANT MOTHERS:
EXPERIENCES IN SEEKING ACCESS TO AND PERSISTING IN POST-
SECONDARY EDUCATION**

A Dissertation

by

REBECCA JO McPHERSON

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2012

Major Subject: Educational Human Resource Development

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Mary Alfred
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	Jia Wang
	Elizabeth Umphress
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ABSTRACT

The Life Course of Single Welfare-Reliant Mothers: Experiences in Seeking Access to
and Persisting in Post-Secondary Education. (May 2012)

Rebecca Jo McPherson, B.S., Regents College; M.A., University of Phoenix

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Mary Alfred

Welfare reform, as a social policy, has implications for higher education policy, because it restricts welfare-reliant women from seeking sufficient post-secondary education for economic mobility. The 2006 Deficit Reduction Act was reinterpreted in the 2008 final rule, allowing welfare-reliant mothers to pursue up to 12 months of post-secondary education. However, this is not sufficient for mothers to persist toward completion of associate's or bachelor's degrees. Recent scholarship has not adequately investigated the impact of this expanded access to post-secondary education. The purpose of this study was to investigate the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course from poverty to post-secondary education. To better understand the essence of their experience, this study utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach to investigate experiences that influenced their (a) pathways and social roles, (b) perspectives as sole providers, and (c) decisions to access and persist in post-secondary education.

The three major findings of this study were presented in the context of a developmental life course framework supported by social role theory and women's adult

identity development concepts. The first major finding elucidated two distinct pathways to adulthood for six single welfare-reliant mothers. The three teen mothers experienced transitions to adulthood that were premature, truncated, and compacted. As a result they missed their developmental task of exploring possible selves in their transitions to adulthood. During their identity development as sole providers they returned to the task of exploring possible selves in their choices to access post-secondary education. The second major finding elucidated that single welfare-reliant mothers' perspectives as sole providers were experienced as an evolving adult identity, beginning with the birth of their first child and evolving throughout the era of early adulthood as mothers persisted in post-secondary education. The third major finding elucidated a recurring pattern of negotiating between role conflict and role salience experienced by single welfare-reliant mothers that resulted in critical junctures and recurring commitments to their decisions to persist toward post-secondary education goals. This study determined that commitment toward their adult identity as sole providers had a direct link to their commitment toward persisting in post-secondary education.

DEDICATION

To my husband, Glenn McPherson, who encouraged and supported me throughout our lives together, and whom I look forward to growing old with.

To my son, Cole McPherson, who always asked how my day was and lifted my spirits when I was down.

To my daughter, the future Dr. Hannah McPherson, who asked a million questions about how my research and writing were going.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Welfare rights and feminist advocates who ascribe to the notion that the welfare state should provide protections from poverty for the most vulnerable members of our society also believe that welfare reform negatively impacted the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers by removing their safety net from poverty (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Christopher, 2005; London, 2006; Nadasen, 2002; Pickering, Summers, Harvey, & Mushinski, 2006; Ridzi, 2009). The central piece of legislation, referred to as welfare reform, was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (PRWOA). PRWOA embodied political claims to end welfare as we know it, thereby retracting the welfare state's protection of vulnerable populations and seeking to protect the free market economy (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Ridzi, 2009). The welfare state, which was originally underpinned by the assumption that mothers should remain home to care for their children, was changed by PRWOA. The new workfare ideology underpinning welfare reform espoused work as a moral obligation of single mothers, specifically "(1) that almost all recipients can get and keep jobs, and (2) that regular work will eventually lead to a living wage and self-sufficiency" (Corcoran, Danziger, Kalil, & Seefeldt, 2002, p. 241). The PRWOA reforms of the welfare state created the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) as a replacement for Aid

This dissertation follows the style of *Adult Education Quarterly*.

to Families with Dependent Children. As an extension of PRWOA, TANF (1) allowed states to create their own eligibility requirements, “as long as all applicants receive ‘fair and equitable treatment’ and as long as all geographic areas of the state are served” (Corcoran et al., p. 242); (2) provided time limits for participants, which included a lifetime benefit of 60 months with work requirements after two years of receiving benefits; (3) work requirements requiring nearly all single mothers to participate in subsidized or unsubsidized work or related work activities of 20 hours a week within 24 months of receiving benefits, and (4) punitive sanctions of terminating welfare assistance for failing to meet PRWOA work-first expectations (Corcoran et al., 2002; Lee & Curran, 2003). Work activities also included job search and job readiness, community service, completion of a high school diploma or equivalent, job skills training directly related to employment, on-the-job training, education directly related to employment, and vocational education training (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005). This shift in ideology eliminated human resource development programs directed toward training and post-secondary education and focused on reductions in welfare rolls by requiring welfare recipients to participate in work or participate in work programs that simulated the work environment (Ridzi, 2009).

Citing the success of welfare reform, in 2005 Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act, which reauthorized PRWOA and TANF through 2010. Sidonie Squier, Director of the Office of Family Assistance, (2007) declared in his testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives, “The key to the success of welfare reform was work”

(“Temporary Assistance to Needy Families,” para. 3). He supported this statement claiming:

Welfare rolls have declined by 60 percent between August 1996 and September 2006, . . . unprecedented numbers of former recipients have gone to work, . . . child support collections have nearly doubled, and . . . overall child poverty rates declined from 20.5 percent in 1996 to 17.6 percent in 2005. (“Temporary Assistance to Needy Families,” para. 2)

Despite the notable success in reducing welfare rolls (Squier, 2007), at the time welfare reform passed in 1996, poverty rates in the United States were at a six year low; however, the poverty rate in 2009 was at an 11 year high (Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). According to the Department of Health and Human Services’ (DHHS) statistics, poverty rates for single mothers, prior to welfare reform in 1996, was 35%. However, in 2008, 48% of those living in poverty were single mothers. The number of single mothers living in poverty jumped 13% in the 11 years since the passage of welfare reform. Clearly the validity of claims declaring the success of welfare reform is dependent on the measures used to define success. Using the measure for success of reducing welfare rolls validated the claims of welfare reform’s success; however, if one’s intention was to reduce poverty, then the claims of success for welfare reform were not valid (Drayse, 2004; Peck, 2001; Pickering et al., 2006; Ridzi, 2009).

Previous research has clearly established that single low-income mothers have endured hardship and poverty over their life course as a result of following PRWOA’s work-first ideology in seeking work rather than education first (Handler, 2006; Fang &

Keane, 2004; Lee & Curran, 2003; Mushinski & Pickering, 2005; Ridzi, 2009) and that TANF's work requirements were an obstacle to post-secondary education for single welfare-reliant mothers (Acs & Loprest, 2007; Austin, 2003; Bloom, 2009; Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Christopher, 2005; Corcoran et al., 2002; Jacobs & Winslow 2003; London, 2006; Pearson, 2007, Shaw, 2004). The 2006 Deficit Reduction Act's interim rule reiterated PRWOA's position as a barrier to post-secondary education, stating "the TANF program was not intended to be a college scholarship program for postsecondary education" (Federal Register 45, 2008, p. 6792). Further, the interim rule stated that PRWOA explicitly restricted post-secondary education leading to a bachelor's or advanced degree from inclusion in vocational education training. This was a barrier because vocational education training was a core work activity of mother's who received welfare assistance and counted toward their required 20 hours per week of work experience. However, acknowledging solicited comments of experts and the overwhelming body of research that identified the limitations of PRWOA as a potential barrier to economic self-sufficiency when sought through post-secondary education, the Deficit Reduction Act's (DRA) final rule published in 2008 shifted their position to allow welfare-reliant mothers to pursue post-secondary education under vocational education training, within defined limits (Federal Register 45).

The DHHS suggested that welfare counselors and welfare recipients should understand the intricacies of defined limits that allow for greater use of welfare assistance while obtaining a post-secondary degree. DHHS clarified the defined limits authorized by Congress included "allowing time spent in a bachelor's degree program to

count as vocational educational training; [and] allowing up to an hour of unsupervised homework time for each hour of class time in all educational activities” (Federal Register 45, 2008, p. 6772). They elaborated:

Many of the training activities counted under vocational educational training can also count under job skills training directly related to employment and education directly related to employment. The former is a core work activity that is limited to 12 months in a lifetime, whereas the latter are non-core activities that can only count once the core activity requirement has been met. (Federal Register 45, 2008, p. 6780)

Despite the new flexibility of TANF toward post-secondary education, maximum time limits of 12 months on education prior to assuming a core work activity for 20 hours a week and maximum life time limits of 60 months of welfare assistance continued (Federal Register 45). This meant that welfare-reliant mothers who pursue post-secondary education beyond 12 months must also work part-time, at least 20 hours a week, to continue being eligible for their welfare benefits. Given the shifted position in allowing 12 months of post-secondary education for welfare-reliant mother, how have these changes in welfare reform impacted the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers (Collins & Mayer, 2010)?

Background of the Problem

The life course of single welfare-reliant mothers is impacted by the context of their lives within welfare reform. Therefore, welfare reform’s focus on work-first policies and its goal to reduce welfare rolls is also imbedded in the context of single

welfare-reliant mothers' lives and contributes to the boundaries that influence their perspective, choices, and subsequently their life course. Such boundaries have included the punitive measures of work requirements, sanctions, and the exclusion of post-secondary education implemented through the passage of the PRWOA in 1996 (Corcoran et al., 2002). These punitive measures have negatively impacted their lives by forcing them into the low-wage unskilled secondary labor market and the ranks of the working poor (Handler, 2006; Hays, 2003; Goldberg, 2010; Ridzi, 2009). The passage of the DRA in 2008 moved single welfare-reliant mothers one step closer to self-sufficiency by expanding access to post-secondary education, which increases access to the primary labor market, comprised of more lucrative, higher-paying, higher-skilled jobs. However, the impact of expanded access to post-secondary education has yet to be fully assessed. Recently, Collins and Mayer (2010) suggested that the meager expansion of access to post-secondary education falls woefully short of what is needed to allow welfare recipients to bridge the gap between the low-income secondary labor market and the career advancing primary labor market, which would enable economic self-sufficiency over the life course. To examine the substance of the problem this section will consider the effects on the life course from (1) PRWOA's forced participation of welfare-reliant mothers in the secondary labor market and (2) the 1996 PRWOA and the 2008 DRA's impact on access to postsecondary education.

The Impact of Forced Low-Wage Work on the Life Course

Forced participation in secondary labor markets, comprised of low-wage unskilled jobs, was mandated by the PRWOA in their requirement for unskilled

recipients to participate in work or work-related activities rather than training or education programs in exchange for welfare benefits. Demographic research describing welfare-reliant mothers indicated that the majority have long work histories in the secondary labor market (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Hays, 2003; Pickering et al., 2006). Despite their participation in the secondary labor market, research indicates that these mothers continue to subsist in poverty before turning to welfare for assistance (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Drayse, 2004; Handler, 2006; Fang & Keane, 2004; Lee & Curran, 2003; Mushinski & Pickering, 2005; Ridzi, 2009). Welfare reform's work-first mandate negatively impacted the life course of welfare-reliant mothers by (1) forcing unskilled mothers to work in the secondary labor market that offers low-wages with little or no benefits and (2) forcing single welfare-reliant mothers to assume dual roles of wage-earner and student.

Forced participation in the secondary labor market. Advocates of the work-first ideology contended that work at any wage rate will eventually result in mobility between labor markets over the life course (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Corcoran et al., 2002; Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Hays, 2003; Ridzi, 2009). Advocates of human capital development, alternatively, considered education as a bridge between labor markets and work-first ideology as a barrier, blocking access to the primary labor market over the life course (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Ridzi, 2009). Therefore, the distinction between the secondary labor market and the primary labor market is essential because it underpins the argument that forced participation in low-wage jobs contributed

to long-term enduring poverty as a member of the working poor rather than economic mobility over the life course (Collins & Mayer, 2010).

In the 1990's the labor market became increasingly segmented, causing a polarization between low-wage and high-wage jobs (Drayse, 2004). Drayse explained that during this century high-skilled high-technology jobs and unskilled low-wage service jobs grew, while middle-income low-skilled jobs bridging the two labor markets disappeared. This created the gulf between the primary and secondary labor markets. Ridzi (2009) contributed that changes in the secondary labor market was indicative of the growing demand by employers for low-wage unskilled labor. The career paths in the secondary labor market were constrained by lack of training and education, facilitating mainly lateral movements within the secondary labor market that offered lower wages, less secure employment, fewer opportunities for advancement, and membership in the ranks of the working poor. However, the primary labor market, which was represented the growing demand by employers for a highly skilled and educated labor supply, saw expanding growth in job mobility and wages. This career path entailing both lateral and upward mobility, offered flexibility, high salaries, better working conditions, and job stability. We can surmise that for welfare-reliant mothers, the inability to access post-secondary education and the disappearance of the middle-income labor market, which was based on short-term and on-the-job training, creates an unbridgeable gulf between the primary and secondary labor markets. In addition, PRWOA exacerbated the problem through work first requirements.

In the late 1990's the passage of PRWOA under the work-first ideology added to pressures on the secondary labor market. Critics of welfare reform suggested that the mandated work-first requirements and the scaled back benefits of PRWOA had two distinct but interwoven effects on economic self-sufficiency for single welfare-reliant mothers. First, PRWOA forced single mothers into the secondary labor market by excluding single mothers who were employable workers, thereby expanding the low-wage labor supply and driving down wages (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Peck, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 1971/ 1993). Second, the PRWOA set the bottom limit for wages and benefits that welfare participants were forced to accept, thereby reducing employers' incentives to provide a competitive living wage rate (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Peck, 2001; Ridzi, 2009). Therefore, we can conclude that welfare reform's policies have negatively impacted labor practices, which constrain available choices of welfare-reliant women and subsequently their life outcomes (Collins & Mayer, 2010).

Despite welfare-reliant mothers' participation in the secondary low-wage labor market, both imperial and qualitative research to date clearly confirmed that accepting low-skilled, low-wage jobs moved participants off welfare rolls, but also contributed to the negative life outcome of enduring poverty throughout the life course (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Drayse, 2004; Handler, 2006; Fang & Keane, 2004; Lee & Curran, 2003; Mushinski & Pickering, 2005; Ridzi, 2009). Enduring poverty leaves many former welfare recipients returning to TANF cash assistance as a means to supplement their low incomes (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Loprest, 2001). Unfortunately, the additional support is short lived, as the passage of PRWOA limited the availability of cash assistance for able-

bodied workers to 60 months (Corcoran et al., 2002). Based on 1999 welfare participation, Loprest (2001) found that 52% of women who left welfare remained in poverty and Moffitt (2001) found that as many as 25% to 40% of former welfare recipients were unemployed and destitute. This trend was confirmed in a longitudinal study by Acs and Loprest (2004), which determined that a decreasing number of welfare leavers were working, growing the number of those who were destitute and living below the poverty line, while those who were working became confined to the low-wage labor market. Forced participation in the low-wage labor market clearly has negative life outcomes for welfare-reliant mothers. However, for single welfare-reliant mothers who choose to pursue post-secondary education in addition to meeting the forced work requirements, this created conflicting dual roles that resulted in additional negative impacts on their life course.

Forces dual roles for single mothers as wage earners and students. The provisions of the PRWOA required that welfare-reliant mother participate in work or work-related activities. The 2008 DRA final rule allowed post-secondary education to substitute for 12 months of work requirements. This meant that those welfare-reliant mothers who chose to remain in post-secondary education beyond 12 months had to assume the roles of single mother, worker, and post-secondary education student at the same time to maintain welfare benefits (Christopher, 2005). The assumption of dual roles, worker and post-secondary education student, had a potential negative impact on the welfare-reliant mothers' choice of educational program (Christopher, 2005; Jennings, 2004) and persistence in post-secondary education (Center for Women Policy Studies,

2002; Dave, Reichman, Corman, & Das, 2011; Haggstrom, Kanouse, & Morrison, 1986; Jacobs & King, 2002; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003).

Previous research has clearly indicated that the assumption of multiple roles impacts access to and persistence in post-secondary education. Research showed that the presence of children was most likely to have a positive impact on welfare-reliant mother's choice to pursue post-secondary education (Christopher, 2005; Jennings, 2004). However, when the mother assumed dual roles, the likelihood of accessing or persisting in post-secondary education to the completion of her educational goals was less likely. Research supporting this statement showed that when mothers assumed the parent, spouse, and worker roles, access and persistence to post-secondary education declined (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Dave et al., 2011; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Jacobs & King, 2002; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). Likewise, research found that when single mothers assumed the role of worker while living in the context of poverty, the additional barriers hindered access to post-secondary education (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Kahn & Polakow, 2004).

Research revealed that managing multiple roles creates conflict between those roles and mothers must then balance demands between roles. Researchers investigated conflict strategies, citing that mothers were creative with their strategies to reduce conflict (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Christopher, 2009). However regardless of the strategy used to reduce conflict, research indicated that time spent working correspondingly reduced their available time to attend class and study (Dave et al., 2011). Dave et al. continued, even those women who work only 20 hours a week are

less likely to attend or persist in post-secondary education. The result was inevitable; the majority of welfare-reliant mothers who persisted in and completed post-secondary education goals found it necessary to extend their time in educational programs. According to the Center for Women Policy Studies (2004), fewer than 60% of single welfare-reliant mothers completed their post-secondary program within six years, despite more than 60% who chose a training program that was two years or less.

This section demonstrated that PRWOA work requirements resulted in forced participation in the secondary low-wage labor market and the assumption of dual roles for single welfare-reliant mothers. This section also showed that over the life course, the cumulative effects of work-first ideology have resulted in enduring poverty. However, in addition to forced work requirements, restricted access to post-secondary education has also negatively impacted single welfare-reliant mothers' life course. Restricted access to post-secondary education will be reviewed in the next section.

The Impact of Restricted Access to Post-Secondary Education over the Life Course

Restrictions in access to post-secondary education were mandated by PRWOA in their exclusion of participation in post-secondary education as a qualified work activity under vocational education and training. Labor market research clearly demonstrated that educational attainment had a direct impact on potential wages and career attainment over the life course (Grubb, 2002a, 2002b; Kane & Rouse, 1995; London, 2006). Human capital development contends that unskilled individuals who participate in the secondary labor market are the least likely to be provided career-advancing educational opportunities because these jobs are generally subject to high turnover (Becker,

1964/1993). Therefore, despite welfare-reliant mothers' participation in the low-wage labor market, they are unlikely to obtain further education and qualify for higher paying jobs without assistance. Welfare reform's exclusion of post-secondary education between 1996 and 2006 negatively impacted the life course of welfare-reliant mothers by (1) causing mothers to drop out of post-secondary education, (2) redirecting welfare-reliant mothers to short-term training and vocational education for high-demand low-wage jobs, and (3) creating a barrier in bridging the secondary labor market to the primary labor market.

PRWOA caused welfare-reliant mothers to drop out of post-secondary education. Research cited the free market economy and the labor market demands of employers as the catalyst to retractions and expansions in welfare participants' access to post-secondary education through public policy such as the 1996 PRWOA, the 2002 Family Support Act, and the 2006 DRA (Goldberg, 2010; Ridzi, 2009). In the early 1990s, the free market economy experienced high growth contributing to the largest labor shortage in 30 years (Goldberg, 2010). This coincided with Clinton's welfare reform efforts to push able-bodied welfare-reliant mothers off welfare rolls and into the labor supply (Corcoran et al., 2002). Clinton's efforts culminated in the passage of the 1996 PRWOA enacting punitive work requirements. These work requirements required mothers to work or engage in work-related activities for at least 20 hours a week. The DHHS emphasized that post-secondary education was not allowable under work activities and that welfare-reliant mothers must seek work or face losing their benefits (Cox & Spriggs, 2002).

Prior research identified the PRWOA's exclusion of post-secondary education as a barrier to accessing it for welfare-reliant mothers (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Hays, 2003; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). Specifically, the passage of PRWOA in 1996 and the exclusion of post-secondary education as a work-related activity caused single welfare-reliant mothers' enrollment in post-secondary to drastically decline (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Cox & Spriggs, 2002; Dave et al., 2011; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003; London, 2006; Pickering et al., 2006). Because each state was allowed flexibility in establishing welfare policies, the effect on enrollment varied from state to state with the most restrictive states having the highest levels of reductions in college enrollments (Dave et al., 2011). The most restrictive states reported enrollment declines as low as 56% in Massachusetts (Kates, 1998), 50% to 60% in Michigan (Khan & Polakow, 2000). The overall national decline coalesced at 56% five years after PRWOA (Jacobs & Winslow, 2003), with the heaviest declines represented by Black welfare-reliant mothers (Cox & Spriggs, 2002). Despite devastating declines in post-secondary enrollment, only about half of the states had enacted a post-secondary education exclusion policy (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002). Unfortunately the reauthorization of PRWOA in 2002 in the Personal Responsibility, Work and Family Promotion Act, explicitly forbid post-secondary education as part of the states' PRWOA policies (Center for Women Policy Studies). The impact from the reauthorization in 2002 did not have as large of an impact on welfare-reliant mother's post-secondary education enrollments as the original PRWOA for two reasons. First, the economy continued to grow throughout the late 1990s, causing high demand in the labor market to

continue to push unemployment down (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; Collins & Mayer, 2010; Peck, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 1971/1993). Second, PRWOA's life time benefit of 60 months incrementally shrunk welfare rolls as much as 50% by 2002, reducing the pool of qualified welfare-reliant mothers (Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). This means that welfare-reliant mothers who may have qualified for participation in post-secondary education were redirected to work in the secondary labor market or to participate in short-term training or vocational programs.

PRWOA redirected mothers to short-term training and vocational education for high demand low-wage jobs. The PRWOA did not expressly forbid welfare-recipients from seeking post-secondary education in addition to PRWOA authorized activities. Rather provisions encouraged work first, and then if the welfare-recipient could not obtain a job, then welfare counselors encouraged them to seek short-term training for up to 12 months (Christopher, 2005; Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Hays, 2003). However, this PRWOA supported training program could not be post-secondary education; rather welfare-reliant mothers were redirected to short-term training programs or short-term vocational education.

Under PRWOA short-term training programs were provided through on-the-job training at the employer site or outsourced to vendors. Empirical research of participants' outcomes for those who were redirected to employer based training programs found that more often employer specific training was offered, which resulted in minimal wage gains. The results of this study determined that the modest wage gains were inefficient for welfare-reliant mothers to escape poverty through work and on-the-

job training (Ellis, 2005; Hamilton, 2002). For those directed to short-term training, Johnson Dias and Maynard–Moody (2007) found that women and mothers were redirected to the shortest training available. They explained that PRWOA created conflicts when outsourcing training and vocational programs between the administrators' needs to fulfill strict completion ratios and the educational needs of individuals with disadvantages, like single welfare-reliant mothers. This means that over their life course, those mothers redirected to employer based and short-term training gained lateral mobility but not upward mobility out of poverty (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002).

Welfare-reliant mothers with the fewest barriers to persisting in adult education were redirected to higher levels of short-term vocational training that lasted 12 months or less through programs such as the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) (London, 2006). WIA reformed the national job training system and collaborated with PRWOA to provide skills training to qualified welfare-reliant participants (Bezdek, 2001; Ellis, 2005). Bezdek (2001) summarized, like PRWORA, WIA was intended to help reduce welfare rolls. This means that WIA served a diverse group of applicants, not just welfare participants in their literacy and occupational skills programs (Amstutz, 2001; Bezdek, 2001). Although WIA served a diverse group of participants, it was accountable through state and local labor market representatives in a representative local workforce board. Therefore, the choice of occupational skills programs available to participants were identified by state and local workforce boards, whose purpose was to identify labor market shortages and increase skilled labor in those areas (Bezdek, 2001; Ellis, 2005). To ensure the most effective use of limited funds WIA, like PRWOA

programs, imposed strict accountability measures on local workforce boards for successful completion and job placement of participants (Sparks & Peterson, 2000). This led to the further marginalization of those potential applicants who had the highest needs and the most barriers, particularly women and especially mothers (Johnson Dias & Maynard–Moody, 2007; London, 2006; Sparks & Peterson, 2000). We can surmise that those welfare-reliant mothers who participated in vocational education programs were the most likely to have also participated in post-secondary education prior to its exclusion (Dave, Reichman, & Corman, 2008; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003).

Researchers suggested that after post-secondary education was excluded by PRWOA, many welfare-reliant mothers chose vocational education, in lieu of post-secondary education (Dave, Reichman, & Corman, 2008; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). Jacobs and Winslow found that TANF substantially shifted enrollments from both associate and bachelor degree programs to short-term certificate programs. Similarly, Dave et al. (2008) found that there was no negative effect on enrollments in short-term vocational education for welfare-reliant mothers with a high school diploma. However, as suggested by Johnson Dias and Maynard–Moody (2007), London (2006), and Sparks and Peterson (2000), there appeared to be a negative impact on the enrollments of those mothers who had not attained a high school diploma (Dave et al., 2008). Research supports the conclusion that additional education, even vocational education, will have a positive impact on welfare participants' wages over the life course (Barrett, 2000; Blank, 1989). However, as research has shown, the actual impact of education over the life course will be dependent on the quality, length, and type of educational program

(Hamilton, 2002) as well as the completion of certificate programs and degrees in occupations employers are demanding educated labor (Grubb, 2002a, 2002b).

Therefore, those vocational programs that do not lead to further education may not bridge the gap between the secondary labor market and the primary labor market.

PRWOA created a barrier between bridging the secondary labor market to the primary labor market. Recent studies have found that short-term training and the accumulation of education alone does not create economic mobility between labor markets (Ellis, 2005; Hamilton, 2002). In a study by the DHHS, Hamilton found that although the length of time spent in an educational program and the quality of that program affected the potential financial gains upon completion, short-term welfare-to-work educational programs did not positively affect long-term financial outcomes. Ellis (2005) explained that employer based training for the secondary labor market including life skills and at best non-transferable employer specific training does not result in significant economic gains. Specific training often encompassing on-the-job training is intended to increase productivity within the organization but will not usually assist individuals in seeking higher wages because it does not transfer to other employers (Becker, 1964/1993). Similarly welfare-to-work education programs are generally short-term training programs combining high school equivalency or basic skills remediation and job based training (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton, 2002), which had little impact on long-term earnings (Hamilton, 2002). Research suggested that welfare-reliant mothers, as a vulnerable population who was excluded from post-secondary education and redirected to short-term training and vocational education programs, need assistance

in gaining the additional education that will lead to economic mobility between labor markets (Christopher, 2005; London, 2006).

Recognizing a need for more skilled labor in the labor market and identifying welfare-reliant mothers as a potential source of labor, public policy shifted to allow post-secondary education as a work activity. This shift occurred as job growth shrunk to zero percent toward 2006 and caused unemployment to steadily creep upward (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). At that time, Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2005) indicated that although labor supplies were increasing, out-of-work unskilled and skilled laborers were having difficulty finding employment, yet they noted employers were having difficulty finding skilled laborers with the desired set of skills. In addition, they suggested the number of current graduates in post-secondary education would not be sufficient to meet the needs of the high growth jobs in 2005, which will require an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree, leading them to conclude that there was a skilled labor shortage. The retraction of labor demand and the expansion of the labor supply coincided with the passage of the DRA in 2006 and a reiteration of the no-post secondary education emphasis for single welfare-reliant mothers (Federal Register 45, 2008). However, in 2008 amidst increasing unemployment and a declining job market, the DHHS reversed its interpretation of PRWOA and increased access to post-secondary education for welfare-reliant mothers by allowing them to substitute post-secondary education for work during the first 12 months of receiving welfare benefits (Federal Register 45).

PRWOA reauthorization in 2006 and its 2008 DRA final rule took a step toward helping welfare-reliant mothers bridge the gap between the secondary labor market and

the primary labor market through post-secondary education. However, the assessment by Collins and Mayer (2010) deemed that 12 months was not enough to bridge this gap. London (2006) also concluded that degree completion was essential to obtaining higher earnings. London, supported by prior research, found that the earnings of welfare women increased in relation to educational attainment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; Kane & Rouse, 1995; Grubb, 2002a, 2002b). The Department of Labor (DOL) in 2010 declared a need for individuals to seek higher levels of specialized skills and educational attainment that is needed in the primary labor market (Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, 2011). The DOL (2010) identified the 20 fastest growing jobs. Seven of those jobs required short-term to moderate-term training and were identified as having low or very low potential earnings and situated in the secondary labor market. Three of the jobs required an associate's degree, two of which had very low potential earnings in the secondary labor market and one had very high potential earnings in the primary labor market. Eight of the 20 jobs identified required a bachelor's degree or higher, had potential earnings of high or very high, and were situated in the primary market. Clearly the type of education and the level of education had a direct impact on the level of potential earnings and in which labor market the job was situated. Finally, the information provided by the DOL supported Collins and Mayer's (2010) assertion that in most cases, 12 months of post-secondary education was not sufficient to bridge the gap between the secondary and the primary labor markets.

Summary of the Problem

Welfare reform has negatively impacted the life course of welfare-reliant mothers in two distinct ways. First, PRWOA forced single welfare-reliant mothers into the secondary labor market that offered low-wages with little or no benefits and forced them to assume dual roles of wage-earner and student. Second, since the publication of the 2008 DRA final rule, PRWOA allows the pursuit of 12 months of post-secondary education, which is not sufficient time to persist toward completion of an associates or bachelor's degree as a full-time post-secondary education student. In summary, welfare reform, as a social policy has implications for higher education policy, because it restricts welfare-reliant women from seeking sufficient post-secondary education for economic mobility. Therefore, changes in welfare reform and its impact on mothers' life outcomes is a concern requiring continued investigations by welfare rights and feminist advocates (Nadasen, 2002; Shaw, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course from poverty to post-secondary education. To better understand the essence or meaning of their experience, this study investigated (a) experiences in their life course that influenced their pathways and social roles, (b) experiences in their life course that influenced their perspectives as sole providers, and (c) experiences in their life course that influenced their decisions to access and persist in post-secondary education from their perspective as sole providers.

The Conceptual Framework

As the role of women changed from one of mother-care to dual roles of mother-care and wage-earner, single mothers were faced with the added burden of being sole providers for their children. Some low-income mothers, unable to escape the pervasive and unrelenting nature of poverty combined with their need to provide for their children, may find their best choice to support their children is the short-term or intermittent use of welfare. Subsequent choices to escape poverty are then complicated by welfare reform's time limits and sanctions as well as its discouragement of post-secondary education (Christopher, 2005). How can we understand the choices made by low-income welfare-reliant mothers about career and adult education opportunities when they are focused on providing the primary survival needs for their children within the restrictions of welfare reform?

To better understand the career aspirations of single welfare-reliant mothers who choose to pursue post-secondary education, it is necessary to situate their experiences within the broader context of their life course, delineated by transition events as life course markers. To describe the perspective of single welfare-reliant mothers as sole providers, it was necessary to situate their adult identity development within the life course and transition markers but also to utilize women's identity development concepts. To further investigate and describe the relationship of role conflict and role salience in their decision to persist toward completion of post-secondary education, it was necessary to draw on social role theory to support the life course framework that guided this study. Utilizing life course as a framework that draws on transition events and women's

identity development concepts as well as social role theory, this study examined the shared experiences that revealed the formation of career aspirations of single welfare-reliant mothers that resulted in accessing post-secondary education and describe the tension of role salience and role conflict that impacted their choice to persist in the pursuit of post-secondary education goals. The components of the conceptual framework applied in this study and reviewed in this section include (1) life course theory, (2) social role theory, and (3) a description of the phased life-span.

Life Course Theory

According to Levinson (1996), life course provides a “framework within which specific events, roles, relationships, and developmental processes” (p. 17) such as the experience within poverty and decisions about one’s life course “can be studied in a more integrated fashion” (p. 17). Life course is a developmental perspective of career theory (Moore, Gunz, & Hall, 2007) and human development (Yoshioka & Noguchi, 2009). It is based on the works of Erickson’s (1950/1993, 1959/1994) eight-staged developmental theory and has progressed with the contributions of Levinson’s (1978, 1996) age-based life cycles, Super’s (1983, 1990) phase-based life span, and the more recent scholarship that sought to bridge the two into an integrated developmental life-cycle and life-span approach (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002). This section includes a brief overview of the evolution of developmental life-course theory and the components of Levinson’s (1996) life-course framework used in this study.

The evolution of life course theory. Life course as a developmental career theory is an integration of “two theoretical perspectives on development, which are both

of central importance in the study of human development” (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002, p. 387) including life-course sociology and life-span psychology. According to Vondracek and Porfeli, life course was used mostly in sociology and comes from a person-centered perspective that takes a holistic approach. This meant it viewed the person as a system, while accounting for contextual and historical influences around the person. This approach emphasized human trajectories in the connections between pathways and transitions delineating the outcomes from the timing of the transition events. Pathways constitute the sequence and timing of transition events as an unfolding path through the extended life course constrained by human agency and structural influences (Yoshioka & Noguchi, 2009). Transitions within the pathway are the markers that describe movement between social roles, where social roles are labels such as student, spouse, or mother applied to a socially constructed concept of a social position in society, and where the transition event is the identifying marker of those social roles such as graduation, marriage, and parenthood (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Mouw, 2004; Pallas 1993). Although social roles were identified in the transition, the life-course approach focused on the transition event “as a socially patterned behavior” (Yoshioka & Noguchi, 2009, p. 875) rather than the social context of the social role. Whereas, the life-span approach segments the psychological attributes of the individual making explicit the complexity of social roles and life stages (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002). The life-span approach was used mostly in developmental psychology and came from a function-centered perspective. It takes a person-level function approach that differentiates the purposes of life roles focusing on categories of behavior bounded by stages and ignores

the contextual and historical influences around the person (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002; Yoshioka & Noguchi, 2009). These two perspectives began merging in research studies in the late 1900s and resulted in an integrated life course (person-centered) and life-span (function-centered) approach.

The melding of the life-course and life-span approaches resulted from the sociology and psychology disciplines seeking to address weaknesses in their respective research, where the life-course approach incorporated behavior functions of psychological development in social roles and the life-span approach incorporated the contextual and historical influences (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002). According to Vondracek and Porfeli, the most notable distinction between the two approaches was the methods used in research. The life-course approach of sociology tended to utilize narrative-rich qualitative methods, whereas the life-span approach of psychology tended to utilize variable-centered quantitative methods. In addition, life-span approaches tended to draw from stage-based models, “which understood human development to be dynamic and progressing” implying only forward-progressing development (Moore et al., 2007, p. 26).

Stage-based career theory found its roots in the life-span approach but branched over to the life-course approach emerging as a developmental life-course approach based on cyclical life-cycles (Moore et al., 2007). In a summary of the historical roots of career theory, Moore et al. identified the trend of scholarship of the developmental life-course approach with its beginnings in the works of Carl Jung, who investigated midlife late-career interests and individuation, moving into the realm of human development

through Eric Erickson's eight-staged developmental theory, and finally through adult development theorist Daniel Levinson.

Jung's focus on midlife brought to the attention of scholars that a shift in one's perspective of the world occurred in midlife, where the individual sought and pursued a self-construction of a "well-lived life" (Moore et al., 2007, p. 27) as a process of individuation. Erickson (1959/1994) contributed to midlife investigations with his eight-staged developmental theory depicting a life cycle that spanned the life course from infancy to older adulthood (as cited in Moore et al., 2007). Within each stage, Erickson (1959/1994) identified two tasks that the individual must negotiate between. The eight progressive tasks included negotiating (1) basic trust versus mistrust, (2) autonomy versus shame, (3) initiative versus guilt, (4) industry versus inferiority, (5) identity versus identity diffusion, (6) intimacy versus isolation, (7) generativity versus self-absorption, and (8) integrity versus despair. The tasks of industry as work ethic, identity as vocational interest, and intimacy as commitment to work were the focus of career investigations (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002). Levinson's (1978, 1996) work built on the works of Jung and Erickson's focus on the midlife and contributed to midlife and midcareer investigations by "stressing the interaction between the individual and his or her environment" (Moore et al., 2007, p. 29). Levinson (1978, 1996) created a life-course framework that incorporated an underlying pattern of stages, "each of which is connected to either structure-building or structure-changing periods. The midlife transition, the point at which individuals become disillusioned with their current reality,

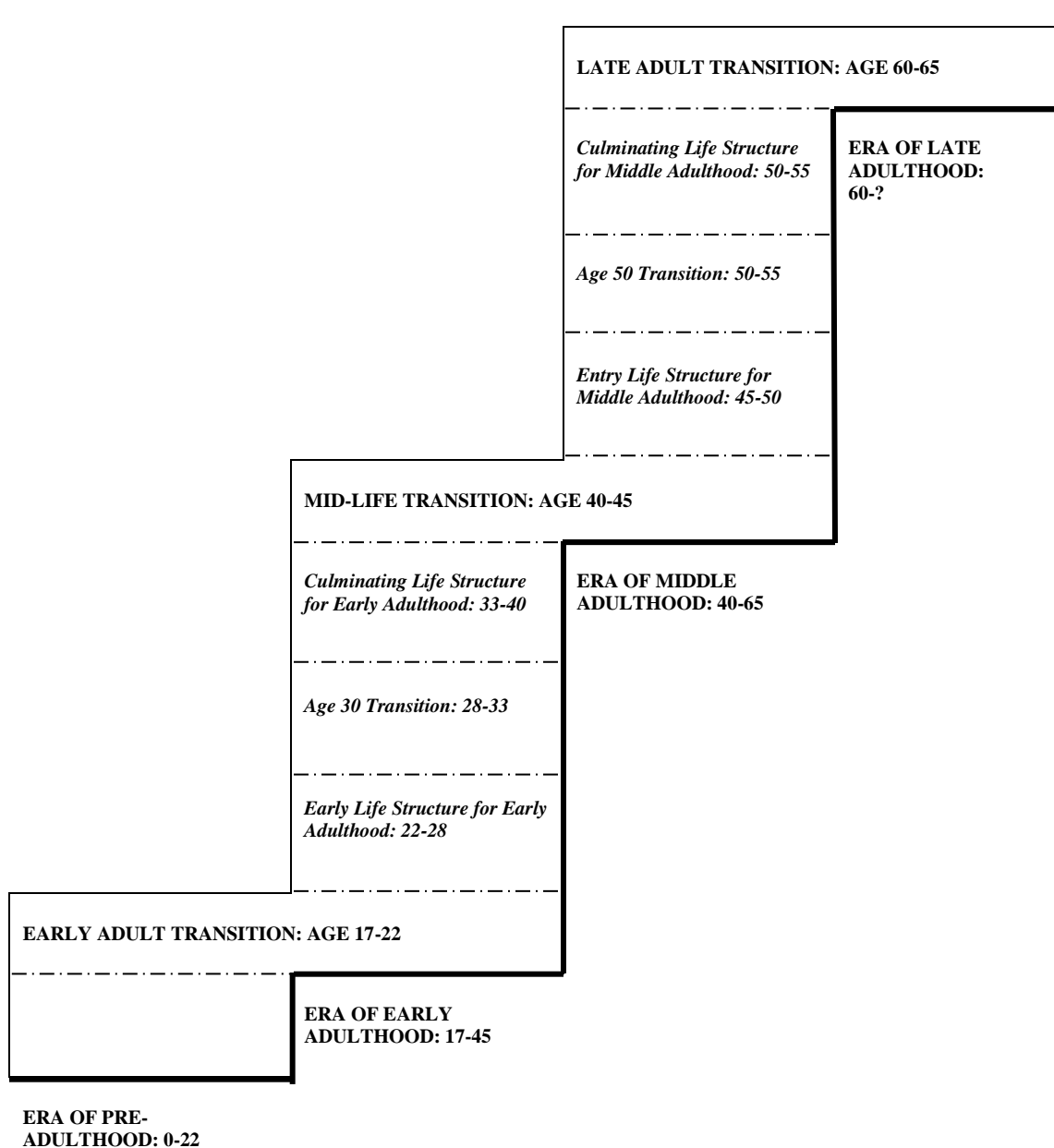
involves confronting and reintegrating the polarities that define their lives” (Moore et al., 2007, p. 29).

Levinson’s developmental life-course framework. The merging of the life-span and the life-course approach in career studies has evolved into an investigation of human development throughout the life course as it impacts career outcomes. The components of the life-course framework are multifaceted and contextually rich. This framework spans the life course from adolescence to late adulthood in defined stages with specific age-defined tasks within recurring life-cycles. Levinson’s (1978, 1996) life cycle theory was delineated both structurally, drawing from the life-span approach, and developmentally, entrenched in the life-course approach, resulting in a stage-based model. Within the development of the structure Levinson segmented the life course through structure-building and structure-changing periods identifying pathways, transition events, and social roles. Drawing from adult development, Levinson expanded social roles as contextually rich descriptions of the self in the world, rather than as isolated labels, and focused on the process of individuation as a negotiation of identity. As with the traditional life-course approach, Levinson accounted for contextual and historical influences around the person and utilized qualitative methodologies. This section presents Levinson’s constructs of life cycles, structural development, and adult development within the developmental life course approach.

Life cycles. Levinson (1996) proposed that the life course had an underlying pattern that everyone followed. His original research developing his developmental life course framework in 1978 was based on a White male participant group. However, in

1996 he continued his research seeking to determine if women followed the same underlying life course as men. He found that although individual life courses varied for both men and women, there was a fundamental pattern followed by all lives regardless of gender. His research culminated in a model that delineated the underlying pattern of life course termed the “Developmental Periods in the Eras of Early and Middle Adulthood” represented in Figure one (Levinson, 1996, p. 18) (see the figure on page 131). Within this model, Levinson described the developmental life course and its life-span as a structural sequence of eras based on approximate ages that included the era of pre-adulthood (0 to 22 years of age), the era of early adulthood (17 to 45 years of age), the era of middle adulthood (40 to 65 years of age), and the era of late adulthood (60 plus years of age). The stage-based structure was built on the works of Jung and Erickson. However, a major weakness of their work was the assumption that each stage was progressive and linear (Moore et al., 2007). Levinson’s (1996) life-cycle approach departs from previous scholars in that he acknowledged recurring cycles from one stage to another. The initial cycle, the era of early adulthood, was described as a sequence beginning with a transition to early adulthood (17 to 22 years of age), which bridged the era of pre-adulthood and the era of early adulthood. Within the era of early adulthood the cycle begins with building the early life structure (22 to 28 years of age), adapting to change in a transition to middle adulthood (28 to 33 years of age), and maintaining the structure of one’s life in the culminating life structure (33 to 40 years of age). The cycle reoccurs with the mid-life

Figure 1
Developmental Periods in the Eras of Early and Middle Adulthood



Source: Levinson, 1996, p. 18.

transition bridging the era of middle adulthood with late adulthood. Within the cycles are structural tasks that each person seeks to complete that results in the developmental structure.

Structural development. Levinson (1996) contended that adult development needed to be situated within the structure of the life course to better understand developmental characteristics of the self, such as social roles and identity. Levinson delineated the structure in two separate, but interrelated ways. First the life cycle within each era was segmented by structure-building and structure-changing periods. Second, the development of the structure was delineated by identifying pathways, transition events, and social roles.

Structure-building and structure-changing. Levinson (1996) described the life-cycle tasks as a process to create and maintain a suitable life and enhance that life through appropriate change. Levinson concurred with Jung and Erickson that within recurring life cycles an individual may not fully complete the structural tasks within a stage. However, Levinson built upon their works and proposed that individuals may loop back to a task and complete them later in the next cycle. Levinson depicted the tasks as structure building, structure changing, structure maintenance, and structure termination, which framed the development of the structure within the life cycle from the era of early adulthood through the era of late adulthood. Another contribution of Levinson was the definition and application of satisfaction in the life structure.

Levinson defined satisfactoriness as both an external and internal attribute. Externally, it refers to the structure's viability in the external world—how well it works,

what it provides in the way of advantages and disadvantages, successes and failures, rewards and deprivations. Internally, it refers to the structure's suitability for the self, that is, what aspects of the self can be lived out within this structure? What aspects must be neglected or suppressed? What are the benefits and costs of this structure for the self? (Levinson, 1996, p. 28-29)

Structure building entails making decisions about major life choices such as pursuing an education, getting married, and having children. If the life structure that is built creates a satisfying life, then the individual enters into structure maintenance to maintain the life he or she has built. If the individual deems the life structure to be unsatisfactory, then he or she will seek to make adjustments to the structure of his or her life through structure changing and then revert to structure maintenance once the structure is satisfactory. However, the underlying pattern shows that eventually the individual will question his or her existing life structure and transition to a new life structure. Structure changing during a transitional period involves the process of terminating the current life structure. These are developmental periods in the life course, where the individual transitions between eras creating a new life structure and beginning the task of structure building again. The structural choices made during each of these periods are linked together creating a pathway that elucidates the transition events and social roles.

Pathways entailing transition events, and social roles. Pathways within the life course are composed of transition events and social roles that are interwoven into a single structure. This structure, when viewed as a linear construction of transition events

and social roles, creates a visual picture of the unfolding path through the extended life course.

Recent scholarship has contributed to the developmental life course framework through the investigation of transition events (Meyer, 2009; Pallas, 1993). Transition events are the markers that identify movement between social roles. Transition events can occur in a standard or non-standard sequence. Typically transition events are expected to occur in a particular socially accepted sequence such as leaving home, accessing college, graduating from college, gaining full-time employment, getting married, and becoming a parent (Levinson, 1996). However, according to Pallas (1993), a non-standard sequence of transition events has emerged over time, where they have been interrupted, reordered, and revisited in later life. He suggested that those most likely to see these changes in the sequence of transitions are low-income populations. Pallas contributed to the life course framework noting that a shortening of the transition from the era of pre-adulthood to the era of early adulthood in the life course was likely for low-income populations and would have an impact on the emerging developmental structure.

Social roles within the developmental structure are the corresponding labels to the transition events that elucidate the pathway through the assumption and exit of social roles. The assumption and exit of social roles emerge from transition events such as assuming the role of mother. Levinson (1978, 1996) described these social roles as components of the life structure. He related that these components could be central, meaning that they were very important to the individual and held a high priority in their

life. Levinson suggested that marriage and family are usually the central component of lives; however, recent scholarship contributed to the framework suggesting that the role of mother was generally the most central component in the lives of women (Christopher, 2009; McCormack, 2005). The timing and sequence of transition events impacts the social roles that become and remain central components of the individual life course. Not all components are central to an individual's life. Levinson (1996) suggested that a component could also be peripheral, meaning present but not important. Peripheral components are social roles and relationship that are less important and less time intensive such as the social role of sister or daughter and are usually lessened in importance and time commitment by transition events such as leaving home. Or the component could be unfulfilled, something that the individual wants such as marriage or post-secondary education but is not currently part of the life structure.

Summary. Structural development is distinctly different from the development of the self in the life course. The life cycle from the era of pre-adulthood to the era of late adulthood is a scaffold for structural development of the life course. Situated within this scaffold are the tasks of structure-building and structure-changing as well as transition events and social roles. The resulting pathway over the life course is the sum of the structural development as it unfolds. Structural development itself does not wholly represent the life course but rather it represents a one-sided perspective of the life course. Within the developmental life course framework, adult development is essential to provide a holistic picture of the life course.

Adult development. Where structural development provides the scaffold of the life course, adult development concepts provide contextually rich descriptions of the self in the world. Adult development goes beyond mere labels of social roles. Rather it expands on the constructs of social roles and focuses on the negotiation of identity through the process of individuation. This section discusses social roles and individuation.

Social roles. Levinson suggested that to gain a clearer picture of the life course, requires investigating the details of their lives through social roles and the context of those roles. The life course framework by Levinson (1978) integrated social roles in its original study of White men. However, when Levinson (1996) conducted his second study of women, he applied the framework developed by a White male participant group, making no adjustments for gender. Lopata (1994) suggested that to understand the gendered social roles of women in the life course framework, the social role needs to be examined through social interaction because the social role does not exist without its social relationships. Likewise, Josselson (1983) and Eakins (1983, 2010) noted that women are often strongly relationship-based and view their world and roles through their varied relationships, but Eakins suggested that roles related to the family cycle were the more central components requiring examination. Therefore, the gendered examination of social roles is essential to the life course framework.

The examination of social roles has a long history in social role theory based on the seminal works of George Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1967). Social role theory contributes to the life course framework by allowing the researcher to explore the

construction, integration, and evolution of social roles in detail. Helena Lopata (1994) merged social role theory with the life course framework to elucidate the social roles of women and their shared evolution through social interaction. She focused on the unique worlds of individuals and, in particular, their construction of multiple social roles entailing their evolution and interpretation of meaning through social interaction. She also contributed to the life course framework by furthering the gendered construct of a social role.

Lopata (1994) suggested that the way a social role was understood and constructed impacted the researcher's understanding of social interaction. In the construction of a social role Blumer's (1967) cautioned that it should not be narrowly defined by a limited set of responsibilities. Rather, he indicated, it was the creation of an individual as an object to himself entailing, "all the ways in which others define one to himself" (p. 13) in the forms of a discrete individual, a discrete organized group, or as a member of an abstract community. Lopata (1994) furthered the construct of a social role, based on the work of Blumer, as a negotiated construction created from "structured social relationships" (p. 559). Lopata's construct of a social role was not limited to a position an individual holds, as defined by their responsibilities, but also included "interdependent social relationship[s]" (p. 20). In addition, building on the works of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1967), Lopata (1994) bridged social role theory with the developmental life course framework by setting social roles within the construct of a life space concept to create a unique framework in which to analyze the evolution of social roles in the social world as one constructed meaning and choices.

Individuation and adult identity development. Levinson (1978, 1996), like Erickson (1959/1994) identified adult development as a process that spanned the life course framework from childhood to late adulthood that was a developmental perspective of the evolution of social roles in the social world and the meanings the individual ascribes to them. The developmental aspects identified by Levinson based on the works of Erickson and Jung elucidated adult development within a life course framework and included concepts of individuation - determining what is and is not me, and satisfaction - happiness with the structure of one's life and negotiating crisis.

Individuation is a process of adult identity development where one separates and negotiates who one is and who one is not beginning in the era of pre-adulthood and spanning the life course through the era of late adulthood (Erickson, 1959/1994; Josselson, 1983; Levinson, 1996; Rangell, 1994). Like Josselson (1983), Levinson described individuation as “establishing a boundary between the ‘me’ and the ‘not me’, and forming more stabilized relationship with the external world” (1996, p. 33) and initiation “exploring new possibilities, altering our existing relationships, and searching for aspects of self and world out of which new relationships might evolve” (p. 34). According to Levinson (1996), the era of pre-adulthood (0-22 years of age) established a base line where the individual began accepting or rejecting aspects of his or her life during his or her transition to early adulthood (17-22 years of age) that defined who they were and who they were not. He also added that individuation occurs in predictable cycles that mirror the life cycles. Levinson also noted that individuation as development

within the life cycle was also impacted by the choices in the assumption and exit of social roles and satisfaction of the life structure.

Satisfaction also impacts adult development through negotiating an adaptive crisis or a developmental crisis. An adaptive crisis is “a problem in coping with a highly stressful situation” (Levinson, 1996, p. 35). Often this situation is a product of the structure, being trapped in a “situation such as combat, illness, or abuse” (p. 35). In an adaptive crisis the individual must change the structure of his or her life to adapt to the crisis. This change draws from satisfaction, making the life structure viable internally to the self as well as externally in the world. Levinson noted that a developmental crisis, stemming from one’s inability to meet the demands of the current era, was an exception to the life cycle perspective. Rather a developmental crisis can occur at any age, in any stage or period. The developmental crisis “occurs when a person is having great difficulty in meeting the tasks of the current period The crisis is about being suspended in transit—caught between the ending of one life structure and the beginning of another, not knowing which way to turn” (p. 35). The process of managing both adaptive crisis and developmental crisis forces the individual to make choices about who they are and who they are not in choosing avenues to overcome the crisis.

While many scholars agree that the process of individuation is a key process in adult development (Erickson, 1959/1993; Josselson, 1983; Jung, 1931/1969; Levinson 1978, 1996; Marcia, 1997, 2002), feminist scholars (Carlson, 1972; Gilligan, 1979, 1982; Josselson, 1983) noted a weakness of the construct for describing individuation of women’s gendered adult development. While Carlson (1972) and Gilligan (1982)

identified the lack of interpersonal attachments in the process of individuation related to Erickson's works. Josselson (1983) noted this missing element brought forward in Levinson's (1996) life course works. Josselson added to the construct of individuation by identifying the concept of anchoring as an essential part of women's individuation through relationships. She explained that women base their internal and external identities on their relationships with others; therefore, the process of separating from childhood relationships, which in turn defined who they are no longer, then required a replacement anchor, or a relationship that now defines who they are. Josselson defined these anchors as "primary family, husband/children, career, friends—or some combination of these" (1983, p. 175).

Summary. The developmental life course framework is a merging of the life span approach and the life course approach. It includes adult development over the life course as the development of the self within the scaffold of the emerging development of the structure. Structural development includes structure-building and structure-changing that delineates transition events, social roles, and unfolding pathway. While adult development entails contextually rich social roles drawing on social role theory and individuation of the self in seeking satisfaction of the life and the emerging gendered adult identity. Because the developmental life course framework is contextually rich and utilizes rich narrative description, it is often used to segment the life course for investigations into a narrower segment of the life (Meyer, 2009).

Phased Life-Span

The developmental life course framework developed by Levinson (1978, 1996) was a merged life-span / life course approach where he developed a stage-based model that was segmented by age. The purpose of this study was to investigate the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course from poverty to post-secondary education. To do this required a narrowing of the life course to the segments that span welfare participation. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a limitation of Levinson's developmental life course framework was the segmentation of periods based on age. To mitigate this limitation in the framework, this study adapted a phased life-span, based on the works of Super, which segmented the life course by the assumption and exit of the welfare participant social role. This segmentation was intended to be overlaid on Levinson's stage-based model, *The Developmental Periods in the Eras of Early and Middle Adulthood*, to provide the boundaries that would create a more narrow view of participants' life course.

Donald Super (1990) utilized a similar adaption of social roles in his *Life-Career Rainbow*. Super created an outer rainbow shaped semi-circle with increasingly larger rings moving outward. From the inner most ring moving outward in order of assumption were social roles with shaded areas to represent the amount of time commitment to that role. The two measures that eclipsed the semi-circle and the totality of social roles represented the entire life span and included first an inner ring of the linear age and second an outer ring of cyclical developmental tasks.

Super's (1990) life-span approach informed the segmentation of participants' life courses into three distinct phases: phase one - pre-welfare reliance, phase two - welfare reliance (the assumption of the welfare recipient role), and phase three - post-welfare reliance (the exit from the welfare recipient role). This section provides an overview of each phase.

Phase one: Pre-welfare reliance. The first phase entails the period of time prior to the individual's first application for welfare assistance. In this phase the individual may be self-sufficient, working part-time or full-time or she may be dependent upon another person such as a parent, guardian, or spouse. This phase begins in the era of pre-adulthood, when she is dependent upon her parents, but may conclude at any point within the life course that coincides with the assumption of the social role of welfare participant. This phase is linear from the beginning of the life course.

Phase two: Welfare reliance. The second phase begins with the assumption of the social role welfare participant. However, as noted by Edin & Lien (1997a, 1997b) and others, for many single mothers becoming welfare-reliant was a survival strategy, but as many as 60% of welfare mothers chose to use welfare intermittently, cycling on and off welfare, when they were unable to scrape together enough money from other financial resources (see also Hays, 2003; Miranne, 1998). Due to constraints of PRWOA, welfare benefits are limited to 60 months, spanning approximately five years (Corcoran et al., 2002; Lee & Curran, 2003). Yet if the participant is using welfare benefits intermittently, then this phase may span longer than five years. However, the participant may assume a dependent role such as spouse or assume a work role that

provides enough funds to become economically self-sufficient and exit the social role of welfare participant. In addition, some participants may be permanently sanctioned off of welfare rolls due to violations of welfare rules, causing them to exit the social role of welfare participant. This phase may be either linear or cyclical, lasting until the individual believes that she is permanently exiting the social role of welfare participant.

Phase three: Post-welfare reliance. The third phase begins when the welfare participant exits the social role of welfare participant and does not anticipate cycling back onto the welfare rolls. The individual may be involuntarily removed from the welfare role due to meeting the 60 month maximum lifetime limit or be forced off welfare rolls due to sanctions. However, the individual may also choose to leave the welfare rolls voluntarily due to a change in their existing financial situation based on the assumption or exit of another social role. This phase is anticipated to be linear, due to the individual's belief that she is now capable of sufficiently providing for her child(ren). However, if the individual left welfare rolls for a spouse, then divorce may lead back to welfare rolls if her time limit has not been exceeded. Likewise, if the individual left welfare rolls to assume a full-time work role, then a termination of employment or layoff may lead back to welfare rolls, if unemployment benefits are not available and her time limit has not been exceeded.

Summary

The conceptual framework guiding this inquiry into the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course from poverty to post-secondary education is set within Levinson's (1996) developmental life course framework, based

on the works of Jung (1931/1969) and Erickson (1959/1994). This developmental life course framework also drew from the contributions of Lopata (1994) in bridging the life course framework with social role theory and was based on the works of Blumer (1967) and Mead (1934). In addition, this framework drew from the women's adult identity development concepts elucidated by Josselson (1983) to inform a gendered approach to individuation. Finally, the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers was segmented by their assumption and exit of the social role welfare participant to allow for a narrower time frame and a more rich and thick descriptive examination of their segmented life course.

Research Questions

The underlying research question was: *What is the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course from poverty to post-secondary education?* As a result, the following research questions address specific factors of the underlying research question.

Research question 1: What was the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course that influenced their pathway and social roles from poverty to post-secondary education?

Research question 2: What was the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course that influenced their

perspectives as sole providers from poverty to post-secondary education?

Research question 3: What was the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course that influenced their decision to access and persist in post-secondary education from their perspective as sole providers?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the research study:

Adult development. Adult development encompasses “the ways in which we develop, biologically, psychologically, and socially” from pre-adulthood throughout adulthood (Levinson, 1996, p. 13). For women, adult development was immersed in the social world and relationships (Carlson, 1972; Gilligan, 1997; Josselson, 1983).

Levinson (1978, 1996), based on the work of Erickson, proposed that adult development occurs in cyclical patterns throughout the life course termed lifecycles. Therefore adult development was a holistic term for the many cyclical tasks that occur within the lifecycles of the life course and impact our development both psychologically and socially.

Adult identity development. Levinson (1978, 1996) asserted that adult identity was an evolution of the childhood identity and can be viewed as a process over the life course through transition event markers. Josselson (1983) added that the evolution of identity from childhood to old age was a process of refinement where the core identity

was established through the early adult transition. She summarized that women's adult identity can be elucidated by understanding relationships that impact a woman's choices, priorities, and schema.

Early adult transition. The early adult transition occurs between the ages of 17 and 22. It was a transition that overlaps both the era of pre-adulthood and early adulthood. As a transition, it was the process of terminating childhood and becoming an adult, when the individual was not fully in either era. This was often viewed as a turning point in the life course where change was evidently visible. The stage between these eras was a cross-era transition, in which one terminated childhood and initiated early adulthood (Levinson, 1978, 1996).

Era of early adulthood. The era of early adulthood began as the individual entered the early adult transition at approximately age 17 and continues with life structure, building from ages 22 through 28. The eras of adulthood were expected to move in a cycle, where adults then re-entered an adult transition at approximately 30 and again continued with life structure building of the final life structure of the era of early adulthood, which was expected to last from about age 33 through age 40 (Levinson, 1978, 1996).

Life course. According to Levinson (1978, 1996) and based on the works of Erickson and Jung, the life course was a cycle of events including termination of a life structure, transitions to new structures, and building of new structures. The life course was composed of the assumption, growth, and exit of multiple social roles, the

configuration of multiple social roles in ordering their salience, and pathways as choices between social roles in managing crises and transitions.

Social role. A social role was a socially constructed concept of a social position in society such as mother, worker, or student, which was a reflection of the individual's perception of how society functions, comprising its rules, norms, and morality (Biddle, 1986) including specific expectations about "their own behavior and the behaviors of others" (MacMillan & Copher, 2005, p. 859). From an individual perspective, a social role was the creation of an individual as an object to himself entailing, "all the ways in which others define one to himself" in the forms of a discrete individual, a discrete organized group, or as a member of an abstract community (Blumer, 1967, p. 13). As a social construction, a social role was a negotiated construction created from structured "interdependent social relationship[s]" (Lopata, 1994, p. 20).

Significance of the Study

This study has the potential to contribute to the field of higher education in the areas of career research, higher education policy, and higher education practices as well as social policy. It contributes to career research by exploring the shared experiences of a population that is under represented in career literature. It contributes to social policy by challenging the assumptions that underpin the construct of a potentially successful student who is worthy of government financial assistance for post-secondary education. Finally, it contributes to higher education practices by informing education professionals who counsel disadvantaged student populations and create intervention programs that aid disadvantaged students in successfully completing their educational goals.

Research

Although researches have investigated the impact of welfare reform on access to post-secondary education for welfare-reliant mothers (Bloom, 2009; Christopher, 2005; Jacobs & Winslow 2003; Shaw, 2004), little has been done to expand the research to address career development among this population. A review of the literature suggests that this group is under represented in career research. Career scholarship includes the formation of career aspirations, the choice of college, the decision to change major, and the decision to persist in college. Current career scholarship has investigated student populations such as traditional students and non-traditional students including older students (Christopher, 2005; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Jacobs & King, 2002), students of color (MacMillan & Copher, 2005), women and mothers (Bloom, 2009; Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McClain, 1995; Christopher, 2005; Jennings, 2004; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992), and distinctions by social class status (Christopher, 2005; Conley, 2001). However, because welfare reform further marginalizes single welfare-reliant mothers who are already a disadvantaged student population, Christopher (2005) advised it is essential to investigate the experiences of those welfare-reliant mothers who successfully access and complete post-secondary education. As a result further investigations should inform the creation policies and practices that may expand access and persistence in post-secondary education for other members of this disadvantaged group. This study will contribute to existing career scholarship by investigating the formation of career aspirations and the decision to persist for a small group of single welfare-reliant mothers.

Policy

Federal policies such as welfare reform, WIA, and financial aid all impact welfare-reliant mothers' ability to access and persist in post-secondary education. Welfare reform has implications for higher education policies because it limits the choices available to disadvantaged populations at critical junctures within their life course presuming that work first, rather than post-secondary education, is the best pathway out of poverty (Christopher, 2005; Shaw, 2004). In addition, WIA, a federal policy, also has implication for higher education by further marginalizing single welfare-reliant mothers in seeking to meet their stringent successful completion ratio goals. This has resulted in suitable participant constructs, which narrowly defined who was anticipated to be successful in post-secondary education (Johnson Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2007; London, 2006; Sparks & Peterson, 2000). Finally, federal student aid has implications for low-income students' access and persistence in post-secondary education. Previous research suggested that work-study programs play an important role in the persistence of low-income students (Christopher, 2005; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 1999). However, previous research has not evaluated the contribution of welfare assistance, suitability constructs, and financial aid packages on the welfare-reliant mothers' decisions to persist in post-secondary education. This study informs social policy and higher education policy by investigating the success of single welfare-reliant mothers, challenging the concepts of who can be successful in post-secondary education, and exploring the impact of welfare benefits and financial aid on mothers' decision to persist toward post-secondary education goals.

Practice

Career scholarship contributes to the understanding of unique situations faced by disadvantaged student populations, such as single welfare-reliant mothers, and informs the practices of colleges, financial aid professionals, professors, and career counselors. Previous career scholarship has recognized the impact of social roles and role conflict on women's career decision-making (Cox, 2010; Crozier, 1999; Pare, 2010) and the salience of the mother role in these decisions (Cox, 2010; Hennessy, 2009). Role conflict has been identified as a substantial challenge to the persistence of welfare-reliant mothers (Cox, 2010), yet current literature has identified the presence of children as a possible motivator or welfare-reliant mothers to persist in post-secondary education (Christopher, 2005; Jennings, 2004). However, current literature has not investigated the relationship between role conflict, role salience, and the decision to persist in post-secondary education. This study provides higher education professionals, who create student support programs, insight into the experiences of single welfare-reliant mothers' role conflict, role salience, and critical junctures that effected their decisions to persist in post-secondary education.

Delimitations and Limitations

The study was delimited by its female participant sample. This study was intended to explore the gendered experience of mothers from a feminist perspective seeking to provide an accurate reflection of the context within the lived experience of the phenomenon. In addition, an individual's worldview is constructed in layers from membership in different groups defined by ethnicity, race, gender, socioeconomic status,

culture, and other factors (Croteau, Talbot, Lance, & Evans, 2002). In seeking to explore the individual's worldview from their membership in the female gender, motherhood, and low socioeconomic status, I sought to describe the experiences of a group of welfare-reliant mothers that was under represented in the literature (Christopher, 2005; Shaw, 2004; Bloom, 2009).

The number of participants in this study was delimited by its small sample of six participants. The data derived from this small participant numbers enabled the construction of thick descriptive data. The methodology used in this study was transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology acknowledges an "eidetic universality" (Kockelmans, 1994, p. 179) of the phenomenon; that is "so long as one can employ the eidetic reduction, with the help of imaginative variation, one can obtain an eidetic intuition into the state of affairs and describe an essential finding this is intrinsically general" (Giorgi, 2006, p. 356). Therefore, the essential findings should be transferable to similar situations for single mothers with similar characteristics; however, this study was not intended to be transferable in describing the lived experiences of a large population of single mothers.

This study was delimited by the lived experience of current or previous welfare-reliant mothers who have experienced welfare's structural barriers to post-secondary education since the passage of welfare reform. Welfare reform created a change in the options of welfare-reliant single mothers. Individuals who experienced pre-welfare reform options would have a different experience in poverty than post-welfare reform recipients. To mitigate the impact of pre-welfare reform policies on barrier and choice,

the participants with welfare recipient experience needed to have the experience in the post-welfare reform era.

This study was delimited by the mothers' status as sole providers and residential parents. This study focused on mothers who were the sole source of income for their child(ren) while seeking access to and persisting in post-secondary education. Being single residential parents, living with the child, constrained the mothers' choices through their need to financially provide for the care of their child(ren). Whereas, a parent who is married or living with a significant other has greater options in choices to provide for the financial well-being of his/her child(ren).

This study was limited to gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural expressions by the participants depictions of identity development. Although constructs of race are part of the mothers' lenses and identity development within the life course (Croteau et al., 2002), participants were not specifically asked questions about race because it was not a shared identity. Therefore, the emergence of data from this does not focus on racial identity development.

Assumptions

It was assumed that the human capital approach was the most efficient means of escaping poverty and underpinned the premise of this study (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002). However, human capital development through post-secondary education was acknowledged as not necessarily being the best choice for all single mothers (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Woodward, 2008). It was further assumed that individuals who were informed about their range of options were the best situated to make decisions

about their own educational needs, based on the constraints they must work within to fulfill expectations as sole providers through their multiple social roles (Woodward, 2008).

It was assumed that women as sole providers faced unique challenges and constraints in seeking to escape poverty. These challenges were further exacerbated by the restrictions and sanctions of welfare reform (Christopher, 2005).

Dissertation Format

This dissertation was written and defended using the journal dissertation format. Three independent manuscripts were provided as the key contents of the dissertation. A brief description of the content is provided below:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: Research design including the methodology and method.

Chapter III: Presentation of researcher's epoche and participants' case stories.

Chapter IV: First manuscript report entailed the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers from poverty through post-secondary education focusing on transition events that culminated in accessing post-secondary education. The findings of the participants' life course structures are presented and discussed in the context of a developmental life course

framework supported by social role theory. The findings emphasized the need for future research in adult development and higher education to investigate further impacts from recent changes in welfare reform focusing on implications that reveal the larger impact on life course outcomes for single welfare-reliant mothers.

Chapter V: Second manuscript report entailed the women's adult identity development of single welfare-reliant mothers as sole providers and elucidated their perspectives as sole providers in forming and enacting career aspirations. The findings are presented and discussed in the context of a developmental life course framework supported by women's identity development constructs. The findings emphasized the need for future research in adult development and higher education to investigate this marginalized group as a unique group of women, focusing on the impact of their life course and identity development on commitments to access and persist in post-secondary education.

Chapter VI: Third manuscript report entailed the decision to persist in post-secondary education, elucidating single welfare-reliant mothers' negotiation of social roles emphasizing the negotiation of role conflict and role salience. The findings that are presented and discussed in the context of a developmental life course framework described the decision

to persist, a recurring pattern of negotiation between role salience and role conflict experienced by all of the participants. The findings emphasized the need for future research in higher education to investigate perceptions of degree utility at varying levels of educational programs for low-income students, access of low-income students to technology and internet access for online courses, and student support services that would expand social networks impacting the persistence of single welfare-reliant mothers in post-secondary education.

Chapter VII: Summary of the major findings contributing to existing research, and implications for higher education practice, policy, and future research.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study was to investigate the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course from poverty to post-secondary education. To better understand the essence or meaning of their experiences, this study investigated (a) experiences in their life course that influenced their pathways and social roles, (b) experiences in their life course that influenced their perspectives as sole providers, and (c) experiences in their life course that influenced their decisions to access and persist in post-secondary education from their perspective as sole providers. This chapter provides the rationale for the research design based on the purpose of the study, as well as a description of the methodology and method used in the study.

Research Design

The research questions of this study focused on deriving the meaning or essence, which they give as the reality, of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in deciding to pursue and persist in post-secondary education. It sought to describe their perspectives and their creation of meaning within the context and scaffold of their life course. Therefore, the conceptual framework of this study drew from developmental life course theory, in particular Levinson's (1996) developmental life course framework, which was derived from the works of Erickson and Jung and provided a basis to describe reality for participants and construction knowledge from their representation of the experience. Therefore, the selection of developmental life course as a conceptual

framework guided the researcher's choice toward a qualitative and phenomenological research design.

The developmental life course framework draws from the traditions of both psychology and sociology in its representation of the individual life experience. It is a merging of the quantitative life-span approach of psychology and the qualitative life course approach of sociology (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002). Developmental life course drawing from the works of Levinson (1996) seeks the participant's presentation of his/her subjective life with all of the contextual details and intertwined relationships. This rich qualitative presentation of participant's reality embodies both the objective details and the subjective constructions, which researchers seek when engaging in the co-construction of knowledge about the participant's life experiences. Within this framework it is assumed that reality as a truth can be claimed and changed based on individual's schema and his/her experiences in the phenomenal world (Sankey, 2000), where knowledge is a co-construction between the researcher's and the co-researcher's (participant's) perceptions of reality or truth (Schwandt, 2007). Therefore, a researcher's co-construction of reality is assumed to be guided by the participant's perception and experience as "a legitimate source of knowledge" (Kockelmans, 1994, p. 14), where everything presented by the participant and that which is intuited by the researcher is presumed to be reality within the limits of its representation.

The developmental life course conceptual framework and its assumptions about reality and knowledge informed the choice between a quantitative or qualitative research design. The life-span quantitative research design was inappropriate because it seeks to

objectively examine reality and define the relationship between this data with statistical methods (Creswell, 2007), lacking the contextual historical influences surrounding the life experience (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002; Yoshioka & Noguchi, 2009). Rather, the life course qualitative research design supported the assumption that reality based on “truth” was what was given by the participant (Sankey, 2000), knowledge was limited to the participant’s perspective of the experience, and the examination of experience entailing a subjective contextual rendering of rich narratives accounting for contextual and historical influences around the person (Yoshioka & Noguchi, 2009). Therefore, a qualitative research design best supported the examination of participants’ subjective experiences of the phenomenal world. This section will describe the qualitative research methodology and method used in this study.

Research Methodology

The purpose of the study guided the selection of the research methodology. The methodology describes the way a particular problem can be framed and investigated using a specific set of assumptions and principles (Schwandt, 2007). The methodology does not describe the method used in the study, but has a “synergetic relationship” (Creswell, 2007, p. 193) with the selection of data collection and analysis techniques. Qualitative research employs a variety of methodological traditions, seeking a variety of outcomes.

Selecting a Methodology

Creswell (2007) described the five major traditions of qualitative research as grounded theory, ethnography, case study, narrative, and phenomenology. The following section provides a brief discussion of each tradition.

Grounded theory, ethnography, and case study were determined to be the least appropriate methodologies for this study. Creswell (2007) described grounded theory as a search to “generate or discover a theory” (p. 63) from the data of a large number of participants in a wide geographic area. An ethnographic study was described as an examination of the shared patterns of about 20 participants from the same geographic area who participated in a grounded theory study. Although these approaches could be used to describe a general explanation of why some single welfare-reliant mothers choose post-secondary education and persisted toward their goals, this was not the purpose of this study. Therefore, neither of these research designs was appropriate. The case study approach provides an understanding of a problem shared within a bounded system and uses “multiple sources of information” (p. 73) to provide a description of the problem using themes. Again, this research design did not support the purpose of this study, because this study sought to describe the participants’ shared perspective and actions rather than a shared problem.

Of the five major research traditions, the narrative and phenomenological approaches were most appropriate to investigate the problem of this study. According to Creswell (2007), the narrative research design provides a deep understanding of one individual’s or two individuals’ experiences within their life course, which results in

either a biography or a description of how the individual was constrained in his/her life. This design would be appropriate for the first research question, which sought to explore participants' life course stories and to order them by experience, sequence, or meaning that would underpin the subsequent research questions. However, the second and third research questions sought an understanding of participants' perspectives that related to specific events/actions within their life course that made the narrative approach only somewhat appropriate. Like the narrative approach, Creswell described phenomenology as a deep understanding of participants' experiences. However, unlike the narrative approach, phenomenology seeks the shared experiences of as few as three participants (Giorgi, 2006) and as many as 25 participants (Polkinghorne, 1989). Like the narrative design, researchers using phenomenology seek narratives about a phenomenon of interest that is "oriented toward a lived experience" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59) of the participants. Because this research sought to describe the shared experience around the phenomenon that reflects themes of the groups lived experiences to "convey the overall essence of the experience" (p. 60), phenomenology was the most appropriate research design for this study.

Choosing Between two Major Phenomenological Traditions

There are two major approaches to phenomenology, which include Hermeneutical phenomenology and Husserlian transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). The following section provides a brief discussion of each tradition.

Hermeneutical phenomenology relies on the researcher's interpretation of givens to identify truth as a correlation between statements and things and between things and

ideas (Farber, 1958) in the interpretive reduction process that results in a reflective-interpretative meaning. Husserlian phenomenology draws from a different concept of truth (Kockelmans, 1994) and assumes truth to be given; it seeks to identify a shared truth in the invariant reduction process, resulting in a description of the phenomenon. Heidegger's inclusion of a *personal perspective* that is an integral part of the interpretative reduction process was not appropriate to the purpose of this study, where a description of the phenomenon, rather than a reflective-interpretative meaning was sought. In addition, recent research supports using the Husserlian transcendental phenomenological approach in social science research that explores the experiences of participants (Benton, 2010; Bean, 2005; Christy, 2010; Konecni-Upton, 2011; Wechter-Ashkin, 2011; Raffanti, 2008). Therefore, Husserl's transcendental phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study.

Transcendental Phenomenology

The transcendental phenomenological methodology was attributed to the works of Edmund Husserl (Kockelmans, 1994) and based on his original works in phenomenological psychology as well as his later works in transcendental phenomenology. The following section provides an overview of transcendental phenomenology and Giorgi's contributions to the Husserlian phenomenological tradition.

The transcendental phenomenological tradition focused on creating a description of the phenomenon from *participants'* reflection of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). To do this, the descriptive process was underpinned by epoche and the

transcendental reduction. In the Husserlian tradition, epoche was described as bracketing and actively setting aside the researcher's experiences with and bias regarding the sought phenomenon (Kockelmans, 1994). This concept was developed with the original concept of phenomenology and then brought forward into the subsequent transcendental phenomenological concept. Husserl commented that psychological phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology were developed to address research issues within the discipline of psychology. He suggested that to utilize this methodology may require researchers in other disciplines to make adjustments (Kockelmans).

Husserl commented that this methodology was created for the discipline of psychology and to utilize transcendental phenomenology in other disciplines would require some adjustments. Amedeo Giorgi (1997) concurred with Husserl's assessment of the limits of transcendental phenomenology within psychology and its need for adjustments to be utilized in cross discipline research. In addition, Giorgi stated that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was more of a philosophy, making it difficult to utilize in research. Giorgi and his colleagues later operationalized the Husserlian method in the Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology and built upon this method by incorporating a variant of bracketing.

Giorgi (1997) operationalized the transcendental research method in a way that addressed the issue of crossing disciplines as mentioned by Husserl. Giorgi and his colleagues focused on the researcher's bracketing and created a variant, a separate layer he described as reducing the "individual subjectivity of the describer" (1997, p. 244) by

further bracketing out the researcher's disciplinary perspective. Then Giorgi applied only this bracketed disciplinary perspective to the transcendental reduction process in his variant existential-phenomenological method. Giorgi claimed that his existential-phenomenological variant method in the Husserlian tradition was compatible with, and allowed the describer to "perform an analysis from the transcendental [phenomenological] perspective" (p. 244).

Summary

The purpose of the study was utilized to support the choice between the five major methodological traditions in qualitative research. Phenomenology, which has two major approaches, was determined to be the most appropriate methodology.

Transcendental phenomenology, which seeks to explore the lived experience of participants, best supported the purpose of this study. Although Husserl expressed difficulties with utilizing transcendental phenomenology outside the psychological discipline (Kockelmans, 1994), Giorgi (2009) and his colleagues operationalized this methodology to enable effective cross-discipline research.

Phenomenological Method

The method of the study provides a set of procedures and techniques used in the generation and analysis of the data. According to Giorgi (1997), Husserl's transcendental phenomenological methodology and the procedures predominantly used in the adult education discipline have a compatible relationship with his existential phenomenological method. Giorgi (2009) provided a summary of his method and the steps used in the application of this method.

Giorgi's Phenomenological Method

As transcendental phenomenology evolved over time, Husserl's successive work in phenomenology resulted in a very distinct methodology that was more of a philosophy, which lacked the definition and detail needed (Kockelmans, 1994) to adequately operationalize the phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1997). Giorgi and his colleagues operationalized Husserl's phenomenological methodology and sought to elevate the methodology from a philosophy to a human scientific method.

Giorgi (2009) identified and described the steps required in this phenomenological method to raise it to a human scientific method, which are provided in the data analysis section. Before examining the steps in the phenomenological method, Giorgi (1997) proposed that to adequately understand the phenomenological method, the researcher must have an understanding of facts and essence from a phenomenological perspective.

Giorgi separated the experience into constructs of either fact or essence. The *facts* of the experience were the presentation of the conscious world as one became intentionally aware of objects both intuited and real, without addition or deletion, that then becomes the givens (Giorgi, 1997). *Consciousness* of an experience was the internal perception of the external world, where the internal perception was the awareness of the self in the world as the world presents itself (Giorgi, 1997; Kockelmans, 1994); alternatively, *intentionality* was the direction of one's awareness from the self toward an object in the conscious world (Kockelmans). The *essence* of the experience was the "what" of an individual's perception that could be labeled as an idea.

The idea can range from general to categorical, from specific to concrete, from adequate to inadequate, from distinct to indistinct, or from clear to unclear. However, it was always the participant's perception and, therefore, was always one-sided. The essence could be either empirical, a conscious grasping of an idea in its authentic reality or essential, a conscious grasping toward an idea without regard to reality in experience or fantasy. This one-sided formation of an essence in either its empirical or essential state was considered "adequately self-given" (Kockelmans, 1994, p. 83) or the given. As the participant's given it was both adequate and "a legitimate source of knowledge . . . within the limits in which it thus presents itself" (p. 84). These constructs underpinned the data collection and data analysis method provided by Giorgi.

Systematic Steps in Giorgi's Phenomenological Method

Research data collection procedures and data analysis in Giorgi's phenomenological method followed systematic steps to ensure the research was both phenomenological and scientific (Giorgi, 1997), which are described in this section.

In order to meet the requirements of being a phenomenological method, the research was "(1) descriptive, (2) within the phenomenological reduction, and (3) sought at least individuated meanings of some sort, and, with the help of free imaginative variations, search for more invariant or essential meanings" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 249). Free imaginative variation was the application of the researcher's bracketed discipline in the reduction of data. In order to meet the Giorgi's requirement of scientific research, this research was (1) *systematic*- following an ordered acquisition of knowledge, (2) *methodical*- utilizing a sequential method, (3) *general*- resulting in applications beyond

this specific situation of the research, and (4) *critical*- making results available to a community of scholars for scrutiny. Giorgi assimilated these requirements into the following five sequential steps that were labeled as stages: “(1) collection of verbal data, (2) reading of data, (3) breaking of the data into some kind of parts, (4) organization and expression of data from a disciplinary perspective, and (5) synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community” (p. 245).

Giorgi’s Husserlian inspired method was both scientific and phenomenological, providing a means to interrogate the participants’ experiences (Giorgi, 1997). He described the concepts that underpinned this method as fact or essence, entailing consciousness, intentionality, and givens. As researchers, we do not have first-hand knowledge of the participants’ experiences, rather we experience their perceptions through our own consciousness and intentionality of what is presented to us as their givens. The phenomenological method then ascribes meaning to an experience in the act of reflecting on the perception of that experience. In conducting this phenomenological research, the concepts and steps of Giorgi’s phenomenological method were utilized to interrogate participants’ perceptions of their experiences.

Application of Giorgi’s Phenomenological Method

This phenomenological study described the constructed meanings for six participants’ experiences of being sole providers living in the context of poverty and their experiences that contributed to the construction of choices to pursue and persist in post-secondary education. This study was organized to address the interlocking phenomena that shaped the women’s lives. The first phenomenon was the construction

of their experiences from poverty to post-secondary education, including the assumption of social roles, pathways within their life course, and adult identity development. The second phenomenon was the description of their experiences in the construction of career aspirations and the pursuit of post-secondary education as single mothers, including their struggles to negotiate between the needs of their children, career aspirations, and barriers to education. The third phenomenon was the description of their experiences as sole providers in choosing to persist in post-secondary education at critical junctures, including role conflict and role salience, between their multiple social roles that affected their choices.

The research was completed in five stages. The first stage commenced by collecting secondary and primary data through reviews of current literature and person-to-person interviews. The second stage entailed reading and re-reading the data that was transcribed from the interview to gain a holistic view. The third stage consisted of breaking the data into parts to separate transitions from one idea unit to the next. The fourth stage continued with the organization and expression of data from a disciplinary perspective. Finally, the fifth stage concluded with a synthesis of the data into chapters of the dissertation as individual manuscripts for publication in an appropriate scholarly journal.

Stage 1: Collection of data. Collection of data included three components. First, major data sources were considered through the exploration of secondary sources and identification of primary data needs. Second, participants' characteristics were established, selection procedures were identified, and participants were solicited.

Finally, the researcher conducted the literature review, bracketed the researcher's epoche, and then collected and transcribed primary data through person-to person interviews.

Identification of major data sources. This study utilized data from prior literature and participants' interviews. First, I conducted a literature review to frame the study and the individual objectives. Next, I sought participants for the study and then conducted semi-structured interviews.

I conducted three systematic literature reviews to frame each research objective. I used the Texas A&M University library databases including Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, ERIC, MLA International Bibliography, OmniFile Mega, PsycINFO 1872-current, Science Direct, and Web of Science. First, I conducted a systematic literature review to examine and organize secondary data associated with barriers in access to and persistence in work and adult education. This search resulted in a comparison of studies that identified types of barriers, prevalence of barriers, and potential impact of barriers on access to and persistence in work and adult education that framed the first research objective. I used the key words "welfare", "welfare reform", "barriers", "access", "persistence", "post-secondary education", "adult education", "work", "mother", "single mother", "study", and "research". I conducted a second literature review to explore literature associated with developing and compromising career aspirations that framed the second objective. I used the key words "aspirations", "career", "access", "post-secondary", "female", "mother", "single mother", "welfare", "compromise", "study", and "research". I conducted a third

literature review to explore literature related to persistence in post-secondary education, role conflict, and role salience that framed the third research objective. I used the key words “persistence”, “post-secondary education”, “student”, “mother”, “female”, “single mother”, “welfare”, “conflict”, “salience”, “study”, and “research”.

The foundation of this study was the experiences of low-income single mothers seeking access to and persisting in post-secondary education; therefore, human subjects were the primary data source. This was not a statistically representative or diverse sample. In addition, participants were not chosen randomly, but rather they were purposefully chosen based on their similarity to predetermined characteristics.

Participant selection. Participant selection included the identification of sought participant characteristics, which was informed by the purpose of the study and subsequent research questions. Participant selection procedures were established to ensure the participants as a disadvantaged population were conducted with respect to persons and confidentiality. The final participant profiles are included at the end of this section.

The participants for this study were required to meet the following characteristics. The experiences of the sought phenomenon were those shared by a specific student subpopulation within post-secondary education. To claim membership in this subpopulation, participants were required to be current or former students in post-secondary education, single residential mothers, and current or former welfare participants. Participants included in the study hold or had held the role of post-secondary student and were expected to graduate in the next year or graduated within the

last year. It was expected that their pending graduation or recent graduation would allow them to provide relevant descriptive and vivid accounts of the experiences within the phenomenon during post-secondary education. A critical aspect of the phenomenon studied was the experiences of single mothers in accessing and persisting in post-secondary education. Therefore, the participants were all single mothers. In addition, the role conflict and role salience to be investigated in this study sought to explore role conflict and role salience arising from the presence of children while persisting in postsecondary education. Therefore, to investigate role conflict and role salience between the role of sole provider and other social roles, the single mothers were also required to be residential parents. Bailey (2007) described a residential parent as the parent living with and caring for the child(ren). Finally, this study sought to explore experiences of low-income single mothers as students who were impacted by the unique challenges of assuming a welfare recipient role (Christopher, 2005). In an effort to investigate multiple role conflict that was impacted by potential barriers from participation in welfare, participants were required to have participated in post-secondary education while receiving welfare benefits. Because welfare reform was assumed to create additional barriers to post-secondary education (Christopher), the participants were required to have participated in welfare benefits since the passage of both welfare reform in 1996 and the Deficit Reduction Act's final rule in 2008. Therefore, the participants were included if they were welfare recipient, having used benefits since welfare reform reauthorization in 2008. Participant meeting the sought

characteristics for this study were members of a disadvantaged population and were selected with care and consideration through an established selection procedure.

Contact with potential participants and selection of actual participants for this study followed a set procedure that was approved by the Texas A&M University Internal Review Board (IRB). Not all potential participants who inquired met the sought participant characteristics for this study. Although eight participants were interviewed, two were subsequently excluded. Only six participants interviewed met the required participant characteristics and participated fully in the study.

Once approval was obtained from the Texas A&M University Internal Review Board (IRB), I contacted financial aid offices at local junior colleges, universities, and local welfare offices in the Central Texas area to distribute IRB approved solicitation materials requesting potential participants to contact me. I explained the purpose of the study, characteristics sought of potential participants, and participation requirements. Some of the colleges and the welfare offices posted flyers in high traffic areas, while other colleges sent the information through the college's student e-list service. When potential participants responded to the flyer, I reiterated the sought participant characteristics and emailed them the study information sheet. Once the potential participants indicated that they met the sought characteristics and were interested in the study, I sent the potential participants the informed consent form to read, sign, and return. Potential participants were assured of confidentiality and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

Fifteen potential participants indicated an interest to participate in the study; however, only six participants were included in this study. One potential participant did not meet the participant characteristic requirements and was eliminated from participant selection before the interview process. Six potential participants withdrew from the study after meeting the potential participant characteristics and indicating an interest in participating. Eight participants indicated that they met the sought participant characteristics, signed and returned consent forms, and completed the interview process.

Of the eight participants who were interviewed, two participants' interviews were removed from inclusion in the study before data analysis. The first participant whose interviews were eliminated was a former welfare participant (not currently or recently receiving welfare benefits). After data collection was complete, it was discovered that this participant did not participate in welfare benefits since 2008 and, therefore, had to be eliminated from the study. The second participant whose interviews were eliminated from data analysis inclusion had not declared a major and lacked a career goal. During the first interview it was discovered that this participant was not within a year of graduation, a requirement for participation in the study; therefore, she was eliminated from the study. The demographics of the six participants who were included in this study are reflected in the table Comprehensive Participant Profile (see Table 1).

As a group, participants met the sought characteristics, yet they were a diverse group in background and race. All of these mothers were single mothers, sole providers for their children, current welfare recipients, and attending post-secondary education within a year of graduation. These participants encompassed generational poverty and

Table 1
Comprehensive Participant Profile

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Pseudonym	Lisa	Tammy	Crystal	BJ	Nancy	Catalina
Current Age	25-30	25-30	20-25	30-35	30-35	35-40
Race	White	White	Black	Black	Hispanic	White
Socioeconomic Background	Situational Poverty	Generational Poverty	Generational Poverty	Generational Poverty	Situational Poverty	Situational Poverty
Age at Birth of 1st Child	19	16	19	20	14	17
Pregnancy Occurred in	College	High School	College	College	High School	High School
Number of Children	2	4	1	4	2	4
Ages of children	6 & 8	6, 11, 13, & 15	4	2, 4, 6, & 11	6 & 10	19, 17, 13, & 13
Occupation	Work Study	Work Study	Not employed	Academic Professional	Work Study	Illegally employed
Post-secondary educational goals	BA Business Alternate Teaching Cert.	AA Respiratory Therapist	BS Psychiatrist	MA Education and Counseling	BS Social Work	BS Criminal Justice
Career Goals	Secondary Teacher	Nurse LVN	Psychiatrist PhD	Academic Counselor	Social Worker	Medical Examiner

situational poverty, as well as pregnancy as both teen mothers and college students. The representation of race included White, Black, and Hispanic participants. Participants selected pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality in the identification of their diverse characteristics and individual responses from the data collection.

Data collection. Data collection included four steps. First, relevant literature was reviewed, and then the creation of epoche was conducted to bracket out my individual and disciplinary perspectives. Next, I conducted interviews with participants

using an interview protocol. Finally, I transcribed participants' interviews converting multiple audio recordings into a written representation of the raw data.

First, I identified the problem and conducted a systematic literature review to frame the study in existing research (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The next step in data collection process was the creation of epoche as suggested by Giorgi (1997). The process of epoche was used to bracket out or identify my relationship to the problem, assist in setting aside my preconceived notions or understandings about situations, and enable me to view the experience of the participants from a fresh or new vantage point (Creswell, 2007). To do this required that the problem was both socially and personally relevant.

In the creation of epoche, I sought to bracket out my relationship to the problem in several ways. First, I considered the problem of the study and the participants whom I was seeking. I tried to identify what I had in common with them. Then, I spoke with my mother about my memories from childhood related to the topics of the study in an effort to co-construct the experiences of my childhood from a freshly adult perspective. Next, I considered my experiences from childhood through post-secondary education and how I would describe those experiences. Finally, I created a written summary of my experiences as they related to each of the topics, which is provided in the next chapter.

Next, I collected data using one-on-one interviews. First, the interview protocol was created, bracketed by specific topics. Then, data was collected from the participants through two semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed. Field notes were taken during interviews that included participants' body

language, additional questions that arose during conversations, and information that was avoided or not addressed.

The interview protocol was divided into three broad topic areas that included participants' life histories from poverty to post-secondary education, accessing post-secondary education, and persisting in educational goals. Within these broad topics, interview questions were constructed as "generally broad and open-ended, so that the subject has a sufficient opportunity to express his or her viewpoint extensively" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 245). Linde (1993) suggested that constructing life story narratives requires the interviewer to structure the interview to "elicit narratives that form an important part of the life story, often including several narratives on the same topic, as well as explanations and other forms of reflection on and reworking narratives" (p. 52). Therefore, participants were provided a copy of the interview questions before the first interview and asked to segment their stories in a way that would allow for a natural progression of their lives but allow them to relate their experiences in smaller pieces. An example was provided that separated a person's life by pre-welfare reliance, welfare reliance, and post-welfare reliance. However, participants were encouraged to select segments that best suited their construction of life stories. The development of questions related to the construction of choice were drawn from Levinson's (1996) life course framework and sought to explore interactions between factors that shaped the relationship between social roles, important relationships, and the social world. Interview questions also sought narratives describing participants' contextual constructions of their social roles. The construction of interview questions related to

social roles were drawn the works of Lopata (1994), Blumer (1967), and Mead (1934). Interview questions about the life course and social roles included such questions as, “Can you tell me about your experiences that led you to seek welfare assistance?”, “Can you tell me about your experiences that made you decide to go to college?”, “Can you tell me about your social roles?”, and “Since becoming a college student, have you ever questioned if you will make it to graduation or perhaps why you are continuing to pursue a college education?”

The first interview lasted approximately one hour and sought to describe the participants’ experiences in the narrow space of their life spans from poverty through post-secondary education that shaped their life courses and underpinned their assumptions and exit of social roles, as well as the development of their identities. It also sought to describe experiences of mothers imbedded within this narrow space, which shaped their career aspirations, especially those experiences where participants may feel compelled to compromise their career aspirations due to educational barriers or the needs of their children in the construction of their choice to pursue post-secondary education. Field notes were used during interviews to redress questions that were not fully answered or to explore questions that arose directly from participants’ answers. Additional questions were asked in the second interview by email or telephone for clarification as needed. The second interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and sought to describe the experiences of mothers accessing and persisting in post-secondary education as they negotiated salience and conflict between their roles as sole providers and other social roles in making the choice to persist in post-secondary education at

critical junctures. Additional questions were asked by email or telephone as needed for clarification of this topic. Field notes were also used during the transcription process to help connect topics and explain information gaps when the recorder was turned off due to extremely emotional moments. The audio recordings were transcribed totaling 191 pages of raw data.

Once the primary data was collected, interviews were transcribed into the raw data. This marked the completion of the first stage of the research. The second stage began the analysis of the raw data.

Stage 2: Data analysis - reading of the data. Giorgi (2009) described the second stage as a holistic reading of all of the data collected from participants. Giorgi stated that the “researcher goes back to the beginning of the description and begins to reread it, more slowly this time, and the attitude adopted is a synthesis of the phenomenological reduction, a psychological perspective, and mindfulness of the fact that the description purports to be an experience” (2009, p. 143) of the sought phenomena.

In the second stage, I listened to the recorded interviews while reading the transcriptions to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. Then, I reread the transcripts in their entirety to gain a “global sense of the data” to “determine how the parts are constituted” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 246). After ensuring the accuracy of the data and gaining a holistic sense of the data, I identified unclear information and gaps in the data. Participants were contacted and asked for a follow up conversation or an email response at their

convenience. After participants provided clarifications and addressed gaps in the information, this data was added to the transcripts.

The second stage of the research was completed once the accuracy of the transcribed data was ensured and additional information was obtained from participants. The final transcription totaled 191 pages of raw data. The third stage continued the data analysis by dividing the data into meaning units from a participant perspective and into parts from a disciplinary perspective.

Stage 3: Data analysis - dividing the data into parts. During the third stage of data analysis, I reread each transcript and broke the transcript into meaning units. Two disciplinary perspectives were applied to further delineate and elucidate meaning units. The creation of epoche drawing from Giorgi's method called for the bracketing of both the individual perspective and the disciplinary perspective. This stage divides and groups' meaning units with a disciplinary perspective that maintains the meaning unit's chronological order (Giorgi, 2009).

First, I went through each transcript and broke the data into meaning units, while maintaining the data's chronological order. To do this I reread the data, and as each participant changed topic or thought stream I moved the data down to create a separate paragraph. Some meaning units were as small as one sentence. Others were several sentences long. Giorgi (2009) advised that at the end of this process, the end product is "the full description broken down into meaning units" (p. 143). The 191 pages of transcribed raw data were broken into 935 meaning units.

The disciplinary perspectives that were bracketed and applied were adult development concepts from the adult learning discipline and feminist concepts from the women's studies discipline. The adult development research perspective bracketed and applied concepts that described and bounded social roles and imbed them within the contextual framework of the participant's life course as described by Levinson (1996) some of which included eras of adulthood, transitions, transition events, and social roles. The feminist perspective bracketed and applied concepts that described the participant's social role as a mother at the center of the experience bounded by her social world (Lopata, 1994) that entailed her female gender and low socioeconomic status within the social, political, and cultural morality of the white male majority (Bloom, 2009; Christopher, 2005; Collins, 1991) as well as women's adult development concepts described by Josselson (1983), including individuation and anchoring.

Giorgi (2009) stated that meaning units could be as small as one sentence or as large as several paragraphs. When separating meaning units in the second stage it is possible to separate them to the point that meaning units are too small and the result becomes a meaning unit with no clear relevance to the research objectives. Applying the disciplinary perspectives in the third stage allowed me to consider the individual meaning unit in a holistic context, labeling the meaning units and pulling together several meaning units that were previously separated by the participant's perspective. Chronicles, explanations, and narratives that appeared unrelated to the adult development and feminist concepts being applied in this stage were set aside or reduced from the data by coloring them a light grey, but leaving them in the chronological order.

Some of the data that was set aside included introductory comments, requests for clarification of a question, and detailed descriptions of health problems. Reducing and setting aside information that was not relevant by coloring it grey allowed me to view the relevant meaning units, maintain the chronological order, yet allow the set aside meaning unit to be reconsidered at a later point if I felt I had eliminated it in error.

Giorgi (1997) described the third stage as a “process of meaning discriminations” (p. 246), where I reread slowly through the meaning units seeking to describe them with labels that reflected in the participants’ words within the disciplinary perspectives. Meaning units were first given a label such as a chronicle, explanation, or narrative to describe the type of meaning unit that followed. A second label for the meaning units provided a more descriptive label. The chronicles included information that provided the scaffold of the life course entailing mostly transition events such as “pregnant at 19,” “single mother at 20,” “work experience,” and “left home to live with brother.” Explanations described participants’ reasoning for choices and were provided a second label such as “choosing to keep my child,” “considering a divorce,” and “why I chose college.” Narratives provided a summary of an experience beyond a chronicle and were provided a second label such as “self as a victim of parent,” “self-tribute as a good mother,” “leaving my husband,” and “seeking help from counselors.” When the labels were finished the result was a descriptive outline of the potentially relevant meaning units and their potential fit within the adult development or feminist constructs. The delineation and reduction of meaning units resulted in 846 remaining meaning units for further data analysis. Giorgi (2009) reassured that any potential over delineation of

meaning units in this process would again self-correct in the next stage as the meaning units were transformed into the disciplinary languages.

Stage three entailed applying the disciplinary perspectives of adult development concepts and feminist concepts to divide the meaning units into parts. The reduction of unrelated data while maintaining the six narratives' chronological orders and the coalescing of resulting meaning units into parts marked the end of stage three. Stage four continued the data analysis through the transformation of raw data into the disciplinary languages.

Stage 4: Data analysis - organization and expression of raw data into disciplinary language. According to Giorgi, “once the meaning units are established, they have to be examined, probed, and re-described so that the disciplinary value of each unit can be made more explicit” (1997, p. 247). Giorgi emphasized that because participants “describe their concrete experiences from the perspective of everyday life” it is important to “transform” their language into the “more narrow . . . scientific discipline being utilized” (p. 247). He stated that this step “requires the researcher to express each meaning unit more explicitly in language revelatory of the psychological aspect of the lived-through experience with respect to the phenomenon being researched” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 145). He cautioned that the researcher should keep in mind the objective of the research.

In this research study, the sought objective focused on the participants' choices to seek access to and persist in post-secondary education from their perspectives as sole providers for their children. This objective was broken into three supporting objectives

in the research questions, interview protocol, and data analysis. The first objective focused on experiences from poverty to post-secondary education that shaped the participants' pathways within their life courses and social roles. The second objective focused on experiences in their life courses that influenced their perspectives as sole providers. The third objective focused on experiences in their life courses that influenced their decisions to access and persist in post-secondary education from their perspectives as sole providers.

Giorgi (2009) described the process of making meaning units more explicit in disciplinary language as a transformation. He related that there was no specific number of transformations required, but that the transformation that explicitly reveals the sought focus is the finished product. In the fourth stage I moved the data into tables as illustrated by Giorgi to allow for side by side transformations of meaning units that would maintain the participants' intents. The first transformation was from first person to third person, creating the initial distance from the individual participant to a text as data within a phenomenon. Subsequent transformations of meaning units used imitative variation. The second transformation was the expansion of unsaid text that was understood in context from verbal language but absent in written language. The third transformation of data was the application of the disciplinary perspectives. Further transformations were made as necessary after rereading the transformations.

Giorgi (2009) described the first transformation as an exact repetition of the participant's word in third person form. He stated that this provides the research with a layer of distance from the data and allows for more effective subsequent transformations.

For example, Lisa provided a narrative about choosing to apply for welfare benefits. In the raw data first person narrative she stated:

It was mainly my mom, who I'm not going to say persuaded me. But, opened my eyes, to, there, she pulled up statistics of how many people are unemployed but still receiving [government assistance], and all that kind of stuff. She said, here you are Lisa going to school and working, it's going to be okay if you, get some of this. And, um, she was like, I pay taxes and I don't mind if you do. I was like, mom, but um, it was mainly just her enlightening me on what it was.

The narrative was transformed from first person to third person with Participant 1 (P1) inserted for the name and transformed to third person:

It was mainly P1's mom, who she did not want to say persuaded her. But, rather opened her eyes, to, there, her mother pulled up statistics of how many people are unemployed but still receiving [government assistance], and all that kind of stuff. Her mother said, here you are P1 going to school and working, it's going to be okay if you, get some of this. And, um, P1's mother was like, she pays taxes and she doesn't mind if P1 does. P1 was like, mom. But um, it was mainly just P1's mom enlightening her on what it [welfare] was.

Giorgi (2009) described the second and any potential subsequent transformations as attempts to get the expression right. He continued that “the first meaning that comes to mind may not be the best one and, in fact, it usually is not. Moreover, imaginative variation has to be used in order to ensure the eidetic status of the meaning to be described” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 154). The eidetic form sought is a mid-range generalization

where the sought phenomenon sets the boundaries. Imaginative variation is the multiplicity of psychological reality that can be imagined but is limited to the perception of disciplinary perspectives (Giorgi, 1997). The second transformation draws on the previous holistic reading to select words that make the meaning unit clearer. It adds to the meaning unit drawing on imaginative variation to make explicit underlying or missing information. For example, the second transformation of the previous narrative follows:

P1 identified her mother as the person who encouraged her to apply for welfare assistance. She declared that her mother opened her eyes to welfare as an option to providing for her children that she had not previously considered. Her mother supported this by showing P1 statistics of how many people were unemployed but who were still receiving government assistance. P1's mother assured her that she was worthy of assistance stating, "Here you are, P1, fulfilling the roles of going to school and working. It is okay for you to receive money from the government." P1's mother further assured her. Her mother let her know that she contributed to the government assistance funds through her taxes and she felt that P1, as a mother, should be entitled to welfare assistance. P1 described this conversation as her mother mainly enlightening her on what welfare assistance really was and that she was worthy.

Part of this interpretation drew from Lisa's comments about not being a typical welfare recipient. She stated that her perception of welfare recipients was that they were Black or Hispanic and did not have a job but received thousands of dollars a month from

the government, sitting at home all day doing nothing but watching TV. In her view, she was not the typical unworthy welfare recipient. Therefore from the holistic reading, perceptions about women, being worthy, and meeting socially constructed expectations of social roles all provided a disciplinary perspective to this transformation.

The final transformation compacted the narrative in the disciplinary language and further drew on the holistic reading,

P1's mother stated that she approved of her daughter, who as a mother should provide for her own children by applying for welfare assistance. P1 was a worthy White working mother seeking an education and therefore worthy of government assistance. P1's mother provided welfare as an acceptable option for P1 to financially support herself and her children because her mother would no longer financially support her.

The fourth stage entailed multiple transformations of the data that resulted in a clearer text of the sought phenomenon from the individual's meaning units. The creation of final individual participant's transformations marked the end of stage four. Stage five moved from individual data analysis to analyzing and summarizing data across participants to identify the phenomenon for communication to the scholarly community.

Stage 5: Data analysis - synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community. Stage five culminated in the emergence of the sought phenomenon from the previous data analysis. The data as a whole was synthesized three separate times, once for each objective, thereby changing the

application of imaginative variation for each rendering. However, the final result was four invariant structures of the phenomenon rather than three.

To build the structure of the phenomenon a table was created to set similar individual meaning units side by side. The rows were provided descriptive labels in the left column that emerged with the movement of meaning units into the table. The columns were labeled P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6. The individual meaning units were placed into rows using imaginative variation and grouped together by similar content (facts), but also based on underlying intent (Giorgi, 2009). The meaning units that did not span the participant group were slowly set-aside from the other meaning units and the structure of the phenomenon began to emerge. Once all of the potentially relevant meaning units were aligned in the table, I printed the table, cut the rows into separate cards and began building the structure by moving cards around and removing those that did not appear essential. Giorgi suggested that any meaning unit that spanned the group's experience but that could be removed and did not collapse the structure was not essential to the phenomenon. Therefore, the phenomenon was tested by removing different elements, of the participant group's transformed meaning units. Giorgi suggested that if the phenomenon collapses with the removal of an element, then it was necessary to the phenomenon. The final visual depiction represented the participant group's experience in the phenomenon and was used as a guide for the final stage of the research. This evolution of the structures using imaginative variation was reproduced three separate times, with each separate rendition guided by one objective.

The second step in building the structure of the phenomenon was to create *constituents*. The final individual transformed meaning units placed side by side in rows created the basis for the constituents, combining meaning units from multiple participants. Using imaginative variation, the individual meaning units were combined as constituents, relevant to the particular objective. This entailed a first rendition of transformed meaning units and a second rendition transforming individual meaning units into a unified transformed constituent that “may be expressed in words quite different from the words used in expressing separate meaning units” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 199). The constituents of the structure were further reduced where needed to result in the essential structures that resembled a “central tendency” (p. 200).

To demonstrate, the first objective focused on experiences from poverty to post-secondary education that shaped participants’ pathways within their life courses and social roles. One row was labeled Major Life Event. This was an event or situation that the participants referenced as a catalyst prior to choosing to access post-secondary education. The final individual meaning units for participants were transformed into a major life perspective as a potential individual constituent of the emerging structure as seen in the table Constituent of Shared Phenomenon: Major Life Event (Table 2).

Table 2
Constituent of Shared Phenomenon: Major Life Event

Label	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Major Life Event	Getting divorced was a major life event that caused a reevaluation of her life course when she chose to return to college.	Being evicted and lacking a reliable provider caused a reevaluation of her sole provider role when she chose to go to a trade school.	Exhausted unemployment benefits and the inability to find or maintain a job, as a sole provider, to her college meant job security. She chose to sacrifice to remain in college.	After separation from her husband, the current funds with a BA were not sufficient to pay childcare and all of the bills while working.	Got pregnant a second time and could not provide for the additional child. She put the child up for adoption.	Worked in low-wage jobs no one would hire her for a living wage, unless she had a degree. She reasoned there must be a better job for her and decided to go back to college.

This card was not able to be eliminated and still maintain the structure of the participants' experiences that shaped their shared pathway from poverty to post-secondary education. The final constituent of the structure was labeled Culminating Major Life Event.

Giorgi explained that the last step in this process was to apply the structures back to the raw data "in order to highlight finding and draw out implications" (2009, p. 202). To do this a new table was constructed for each structure that identified each constituent of the structure and the corresponding raw data from each participant. This process allowed the researcher to utilize the "insights provided by the structure" (p. 200) and "help flesh out the sometimes more abstract points contained within the structure" (p. 200). This process elucidated the need to draw out an additional structure from the raw data that depicted the participants' perspectives as sole providers. The synthesis of the data resulted in four invariant structures that supported the sought phenomenon.

Although there were three objectives, the final result of the reduction process was multiple invariant structures represented as Figures 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Figure three is the shared life structure of participants as single welfare-reliant mothers from poverty through post-secondary education. This structure is a scaffold bounding the remaining invariant structures. Figure four is the structure of the participants' life course represented as developmental constructs of the participants' shared adult identity development in assuming the identity of sole providers, and the change within their perspectives after a major shift in their life courses. Figure five and six depict the mothers evolving adult identity as it shifts within the shared developmental structure of the life course. Figure seven is the structure of the participants' persistence toward educational goals illustrated as a shared recurring pattern. Each of these invariant structures was used to guide the written portion of the dissertation manuscripts resulting in three manuscripts.

The fifth stage culminated in the merging of final individual transformations into a group representation of the meaning units as constituents. The emerging structures were tested and reduced to remove non-essential constituents. The creation of the final visual representation of the phenomenon marked the end of stage five and began the written portion of the dissertation manuscripts.

Summary

This chapter provided a rationale for the qualitative research design and a description of the phenomenological methodology and Giorgi's phenomenological method used in this study. Further it provided examples of the data analysis used to

create the invariant structures of the phenomenon based on explicit steps detailed by Giorgi (1997, 2009). Prior to the presentation of the manuscripts, the next chapter of this dissertation entails a written summary of the researcher's epoche and the participants' case stories.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCHER'S EPOCHE AND MOTHERS' CASE STORIES

The written portion of the dissertation process began with a description of the researcher's epoche. This was a summary of the researcher's experiences that were both similar and somewhat different from the participants. The epoche delineates the researcher's positionality to the research topic and participants' potential experiences. The researcher's epoche is followed by an abbreviated life story for each participant, which will provide background and context to the subsequent three manuscripts. To provide confidentiality, participants chose the pseudonyms of Lisa, Tammy, Crystal, Nancy, Catalina, and BJ. These pseudonyms will be used throughout the dissertation and manuscripts to identify their individual responses.

Rebecca: The Researcher's Epoche

The deliberation upon epoche was an intentional exploration of how I felt and what I thought about the research topic. It was an exploration into my past experiences to uncover how I came to those thoughts and feelings. This exploration allowed me to identify, acknowledge, and set aside my thoughts and feelings about the research topic and to understand how it may impact my collection and analysis of the data. Included in this epoche is the segmentation of my life course beginning with my childhood in poverty, my career pathway to post-secondary education in early adulthood, and my persistence in post-secondary education in adulthood.

As a young girl we lived in cycles of situational poverty. Despite my parents working multiple jobs, we never seemed to have enough money. However, my parents did their best with our limited finances. While in elementary school my family volunteered at a charity that accepted donations for low-income families. My father and brother volunteered to repair electronics and other household items. My mother and I repaired donated clothing. In exchange for our volunteer services, our family received free clothing for school and work. My mother stretched our finances by purchasing clothing and presents from yard sales. At school my brother and I qualified for the free and reduced lunch program. Unlike my brother, who was oblivious to our lack of funds, I felt our poverty deeply and struggled against the way other people treated me.

After reflecting on my childhood, I believe that our living in situational poverty was the result of my parents struggling with financial choices, limited knowledge about options, and my parents' lack of post-secondary education to qualify for higher paying jobs. Although they tried to increase their income through better job opportunities, they were unable to qualify for jobs that would meet their income needs. I watched my mother work multiple jobs and develop medical problems from the stress and exhaustion. She moved through life from one working hour to the next. Though she did not seem to hate her jobs, she did not appear to enjoy them either. Living through childhood poverty and watching my parents' struggles made me committed to finding my way to a better life, one where I was not working multiple low-wage jobs.

Post-secondary education was promoted in movies and in high school as a sure way to avoid a future in poverty. However, my mother strongly discouraged me from

attending college and helped me plan an appropriate career goal, which she described as a marketable skill acquired through vocational education or on-the-job training.

My educational goals were formed early. However, as other high school students were taking the SAT in school, my mother and I discussed the facts of life for people like us, those living in poverty. She explained that attending college cost money that we did not have. Because we could not afford college, I had to compromise my personal aspirations and look at more realistic career options. In addition, she said that a college degree was worthless. She explained that she had a co-worker with a college degree doing the same job as her making the same amount of money. She emphasized that I could do just as well in learning what I needed through on-the-job training. We discussed my interests and the jobs she felt I could be successful at with a high school diploma. After this discussion, I had two choices that my mother would support me in pursuing. I could become an airline flight attendant or a cosmetologist. I still had dreams of attending college so I needed a local job; consequently, I choose to become a cosmetologist. I took out a student loan and attended a cosmetology vocational school.

Despite my mother's discouragement and lack of funds; for me, seeking post-secondary education was an enduring goal. After becoming a licensed cosmetologist, I moved out on my own and maintained full-time employment; however, my earnings remained close to the minimum wage rate. Petrified of a low-income future, I visited several local colleges and decided to take the college placement exam. I was very disappointed to learn that I had to take several math and English classes without college credit before I could take classes for college credit. This was a very frustrating

experience. I was very excited when I finally enrolled in my first for credit class; to me this was a huge accomplishment.

I spent a year struggling with attending classes, studying at home, and working full-time. Despite not having children to provide for in the beginning, I was unable to survive and pay for college on my low income. I spoke with the financial aid office about grants. However, I found that my parents, who I did not live with and could not contribute to my education, made too much money for me to qualify. In addition, I was White, so I would not qualify for the many minority scholarships that were available in Texas. I was so frustrated. I knew I needed to work for money to live on and attend college, and I also needed to attend college to eventually have a better income and future. After much consideration, I decided to join the United States (U.S.) Army to increase my income and acquire money for college. This turned out to be one of the best decisions that I made.

After joining the U.S. Army, I went to basic training in New Jersey, advanced individual training in California and Texas, and eventually a permanent duty station in Maryland. I was enlisted in the U.S. Army for four years and attended college in each location when possible. When my four-year commitment to the U.S. Army was completed, I used the G.I. Bill and the Army College Fund to attend college full-time. However, I only attended one year of college full-time before meeting the man of my dreams, getting married, and moving to Europe. I completed my undergraduate education through distance classes and onsite classes at military installations. Two

children, 12 colleges, and eight years later, I finally graduated in 2000 with a Bachelor of Science in Management of Human Resources.

After my military enlistment and completing my bachelor's degree, I was married with two children and working full-time in a professional position. However, I found that to move into higher income positions, the work environment was demanding higher levels of education. I decided to return to college to acquire a master's degree and later a doctoral degree. My experiences in post-secondary education were vastly different in graduate school, leading me to empathize with single mothers and their struggles to persist in post-secondary education.

My college experience was more difficult when I returned to college because I had to combine the role of wife, mother, worker, and college student. As a conflict reduction strategy, I choose to seek an online master's degree program to reduce time away from my children. I worked during the day, spent the evening with my kids, and attended class and completed homework online until after midnight. At times my husband was deployed for months, and I felt like a single mom. Everything seemed more difficult and problems, when they arose, felt catastrophic. However, I did not have the financial struggles as I had before. I finally graduated in 2005 with a Master of Arts in Organizational Management.

A few years later, I again decided to further my education seeking a doctorate degree at a college two hours from our home. As a conflict reduction strategy, I had the luxury of quitting my job so that I could focus on my children and attend college. Although life was smooth while my husband was home, when he deployed I still felt like

a single mother. While I was in college, it became apparent that one of our children needed more assistance in overcoming severe dyslexia than was provided at the local public school. We sought help at a local private school that was developing a pilot program for dyslexic students. The cost of the private school prompted me to once again seek full-time employment. While employed I tried to maintain class attendance, spend time with the children, and work full-time. I was not doing anything well. I was constantly stressed and my priorities kept shifting based on the most recent crisis. Luckily, my husband received a raise and I was able to quit working again, narrowing my focus and conflicts between my children and college. I realize that my struggles were small in comparison to others who have no spouse to rely upon.

Examining my childhood prompted me to discuss my childhood memories of poverty and struggles to access post-secondary education with my mother. She shared her distress at not being able to provide necessities during my childhood. Her emphatic discouragement of me aspiring to a formal education was a way to protect herself from the disappointment she thought I would feel at not being able to eventually attend college. She did not have finances to pay for my education and no knowledge of recourses that could assist me in acquiring a formal education. My determination to pursue post-secondary education goals as a means to escape poverty and my varied student experiences as a worker and mother have enabled me to empathize with struggles that single low-income mothers face. These experiences have led me to the conclusion that everyone is not equal in accessing or pursuing post-secondary education, and the assumption that everyone is equally able to access and persist in post-secondary

educational marginalizes and belittles the efforts to succeed for those with different and difficult life courses. Following are the case stories of six single welfare-reliant mothers who struggle to persist in post-secondary education and who graciously agreed to share their stories with me for this study.

Mothers' Case Stories

Six single welfare-reliant mothers participated in this study. To protect their identity and provide confidentiality, they each choose a pseudonym. Tammy, Catalina, and Crystal experienced childhoods in poverty and currently live in generational poverty with their children. Lisa, Nancy, and BJ experienced a vastly different childhood growing up in the middle class but live in situational poverty with their children. Despite their backgrounds and current circumstances in poverty, each of the mothers is a current post-secondary student within a year of graduation. Following are their case stories including a summary of their life course from childhood through persisting in post-secondary education.

Tammy

Tammy was one of the most disadvantaged participants in the study and the only participant to discuss race as a major part of her life history. Tammy was White, but her father's White supremacist racism played a major part in her child abuse and neglect. At 15 years old, Tammy got pregnant in high school. At the time of the interview Tammy was 30 years old, working to provide for four children, and attending post-secondary education towards an associate's degree. Following is a description of Tammy's life

history from childhood poverty through her decision to persist in post-secondary education.

Tammy's parents divorced when she was 6 years old. Her father was an alcoholic, drug addict, and a member of the Aryan Nation. Tammy lived with her mother until she and her sisters were stolen by her father. She remained with her father during her early childhood, subject to continual mental and physical abuse. In her early teens, Tammy became sexually active with an older Black man. When her father found out, he had her admitted to a mental hospital. She was diagnosed as being clinically depressed. She affirmed that the doctor was correct; her life was "hideously horrible" and she was suicidal. She was later sent from the mental hospital to a girl's home. Tammy was kicked out of the girls home after a month for challenging their authority and striking a worker who had struck her first. Tammy moved back with her father, but was caught talking to a Hispanic guy from school. Her father, disgusted by her continued friendships and relationships with non-White people, sent her away from her sisters to live with her mother.

Tammy went from an abusive controlling father, to living with an absent unconcerned mother. Shortly after moving in with her mother, she resumed her sexual relationship with the older Black man and got pregnant at the age of 14. Her father disowned her for getting pregnant by a Black man. Her mother's attitude went from unconcerned to dismissive. During Tammy's early pregnancy, her mother gave her \$8.00, dropped her off at a hotel to live with her boyfriend, and told her to stay out of trouble. Tammy found out that her boyfriend was a drug dealer when he forced her to

sell drugs in exchange for a place to live and food to eat. Tammy felt like she had no options. She was not old enough to work legally, and she did not trust authority figures. The times that she left her boyfriend, she would sleep under bridges and starve. Tammy had an uncle who finally took her in. However, while staying there, he tried to force her to sign over custody of the baby to him and his barren wife. Tammy was afraid her uncle would steal her baby, so she convinced her mother to allow her to move back in with her. Her mother took her to apply for welfare benefits. After a long, unstable, and frightening pregnancy Tammy had her baby at the age of 15. Shortly after the birth, Tammy met another Black man and moved in with him, beginning of her pattern of being a live-in dependent of family and friends.

When Tammy was forced out of her mother's home during her pregnancy, she also dropped out of high school, with safety, shelter, and food being her main concerns. However, when Tammy turned 16 years old, she got a job at a nursing home and got off welfare. Unfortunately, her second boyfriend died two months after she found out she was pregnant again. Tammy was more secure this time as she was working and getting food stamps. However, she was not making enough money to provide a place for her children to live. Tammy decided to move in with her grandmother. Unfortunately, her grandmother took all of her money in exchange for living there, which depleted necessary funds needed to provide properly for her children. Tammy met and moved in with her third boyfriend as a means to escape her grandmother. She stayed with him for five years and was very proud not to be on welfare or food stamps at that time. However, she stayed with him because he was a good provider, but she did not have a

loving relationship with him. She related that she had nothing in common with him and she was constantly miserable. When Tammy was 19 she met another man, moved in with him, and got pregnant again. The new boyfriend physically abused her and put her in the hospital. Tammy decided to put this child up for adoption at birth because she thought it was in the best interest of the child. She got back together with the abusive boyfriend, but left him three years later to finally move on her own.

Tammy moved into her own apartment but was evicted after six months. Although she worked, received food stamps and welfare, her mom was helping meet the financial shortfall to remain in the apartment. When her mom suddenly stopped helping her financially, Tammy and her children were evicted. Rather than having her children living on the street, Tammy sent them to live with the abusive ex-boyfriend. Tammy met her fifth boyfriend and moved in with him. However, she discovered that he lied to her. He claimed to be in the military, but he was dishonorably discharged and a drug addict. Tammy was continually disappointed by the people in her life. She knew that something needed to change because her choices never seemed to make her life better. She saved up her money, bought a car, applied for college, and received her general equivalency degree (GED).

When Tammy was looking for a college to get her GED, she found out she was pregnant again, even though she was on three types of birth control. Tammy was frustrated but practical. She moved in with the new drug addict boyfriend's mother until she was approved for family housing at the trade school she was attending. She allowed the drug addict boyfriend to move in with her, so she would have childcare. He began

cheating on her and moved out, taking her only transportation. Although she was studying to be a pharmacy technician, she lost her place at the trade school because without a car and childcare she could not attend classes. She was granted an exception and allowed back into the trade school; however, the drug addict boyfriend claimed to be drug free and asked her to marry him. Tammy said that no one had ever loved her enough before to offer her marriage. She said she made the worst decision of her life and quit college to move back with him.

Tammy's new fiancé lived up to her low expectations of people by cheating on her again and stealing from her friends. She now had nowhere to live, no money of her own, no job, and no college because she quit them for him. She met a new boyfriend and moved in with him, but he ended up in jail for violating his probation. She remained with him while he was in jail. His mom invited her to move in with her in California and she offered to pay for her nursing school if she would be a live-in-nanny. Tammy began making arrangements to move in with his mom. She sent her kids to temporarily live with the abusive ex-boyfriend and moved her stuff to California. In the middle of moving, her boyfriend got out of jail and broke up with her long distance. Tammy moved back to Central Texas and was again broke, jobless, homeless, and now without her children.

For Tammy, this was a turning point in her life. She decided that she was going to go back to college and support herself and her kids. She was so grateful when Section Eight housing called to say she was next on the list for housing. She finally had a place to live that was not dependent on a relationship with friends, family, or men. Tammy

decided to consolidate her loans and go to the local junior college. She wanted to be a nurse. However, the extended time required to take the entrance exam made being a respiratory therapist a more practical option. She already had her basics from the trade school. This meant that she would only need a few semesters to graduate as a respiratory therapist. At the time of this interview Tammy was within a year of completing her associate's degree.

Tammy said life sucked before becoming a single mother, and it has sucked afterwards. She has never had money. Since becoming a parent she still has no money. Subsequently, Tammy was most concerned with money when making decisions about the future. Although she had ideas of a dream job, money was one of the most important factors in choosing a career. She believes that her life now, living on her own and attending college with a future just around the corner, is the best it has ever been.

Catalina

Catalina was also one of the more disadvantaged participants in the study. Catalina came from a White, middle class background. Like Tammy, she had a history of child abuse and neglect with limited access to social networks. Catalina initially got pregnant and dropped out of high school at the age of 16. At the time of the interview, Catalina was 36 years old, divorced, working to provide for four children, and attending post-secondary education toward an associate's degree. Following is a summary of Catalina's life history from childhood poverty through her decision to persist in post-secondary education.

Catalina lived on a farm growing up. Though they never had much money, there was never a lack of food. When she was 10 years old her parents divorced, and her father got custody of her. Catalina's mom was diagnosed with schizophrenia and was institutionalized. After the divorce and her mother's admission to a mental hospital, Catalina's father told her she would have to learn to take care of herself. Although he provided a house and food, she had to cook her own food, wash her own clothes, and take care of herself. Catalina's father was an alcoholic. He frequented bars and gave little thought to her physical or emotional care. When she was younger and often in bars with her father, Catalina said that she grew up fast and had to become street smart to survive.

Catalina had no supervision, no guidance, and no family support while growing up. As she got older going into her teenage years, she watched her dad go from one girlfriend to the next and watched people move in and out of the house. She wanted out of her dad's house. She got involved with a boy, got pregnant when she was 16 years old, and had her first baby at 17. Catalina was physically abused as a child and after becoming pregnant, her father tried to make her abort the baby by beating her in the stomach. After she was beaten by her father, Catalina fled out of state to her brother's home.

Her brother helped her get emancipated from her father at 16 years old. Catalina got a low-wage job and applied for welfare assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. She was classified as a homeless teenager due to running away from physical abuse. Catalina related that something bad happened while living with her brother, so she

moved back with her father. Catalina returned to high school and completed the 11th grade, with the help of high school child care services. Catalina returned the following year as a senior. While living with her father, she was not allowed to apply for welfare assistance or food stamps; however, he wanted her to pay for her child's care and necessities. He told her, "you play, you pay." So, her father made her quit high school her senior year and go to work.

Shortly after returning to her father, Catalina moved in with the baby's father and married him the following year in 1993. At 18 years old, Catalina found out she had cancer and was pregnant with her second child. Catalina had her second child and moved to out of state with her husband. She worked multiple low-wage jobs but never rose out of poverty as her husband could not maintain a job. As a result, they lived with his mother, who often came between them. Catalina was very unhappy in her life but felt that she had no options. She tried to save money, but every time she would get something saved, some catastrophe would happen that depleted her savings.

Catalina felt that there must be something better waiting for her. When she turned 20 years old, she decided to go to college to get her GED. Although Catalina wanted to continue in college, she was pressured to quit by her husband and mother-in-law. Catalina's mother-in-law warned her husband that if Catalina became too smart, then he would not be able to control her. Unhappy with her husband and her life, Catalina again tried to save money to leave her husband. However, they moved around frequently, and she was not aware of any resources that would help her move out on her own. At 22 years old, Catalina got pregnant her third time with twins, who had severe

medical problems. Catalina's life continued to become more difficult as her husband started to physically abuse her.

As the mental abuse turned to physical abuse, Catalina was frightened but angry. His behavior seemed to change suddenly. She followed her husband one day and discovered he was running a meth lab. Though she wanted to leave her husband before, now she felt that she had to for the safety of her children and was now willing to do so without savings. She asked her father to help her hide from her husband. Her brother made arrangements for an escape through a safe house organization. Unfortunately, her husband got suspicious and stole her children. She was not able to find them for 5 frantic days. When Catalina finally got her children back, she left her husband immediately through the police's safe custody program.

Catalina was able to evade her husband and his extended family members. She lacked funds needed for survival because she was unable to apply for welfare while in hiding. She moved in with her father again while she filed for divorce and fought for custody of the children. During the divorce it was revealed that Catalina suffered both severe physical and mental abuse. Viewing the degrading abuse affected her children so severely that eventually they required counseling. When Catalina was finally granted the divorce from her first husband in 2002, she was also given sole custody of her children.

Determined not to repeat her mistakes, Catalina was very careful in the selection of her next husband. She married her second husband in 2006. During the marriage Catalina was a military spouse, housewife, and a post-secondary education student.

Catalina's husband divorced her unexpectedly in 2008, leaving her jobless, homeless, and essentially destitute. Because she had no job, she was forced to take a year off of school while she was getting established again. She reapplied for welfare assistance, and her father helped a lot with the kids. She took the first job that was offered; unfortunately, it was out-of-state.

Although Catalina was working, she was working at a wage rate that did not adequately provide for her children. The unexpected divorce, becoming destitute, and her continued unfruitful job search became a turning point in her life. Eventually Catalina was able to acquire a job near her father, but she was passed over for the more financially lucrative jobs that would pay her an adequate wage to support her children. She returned to post-secondary education hoping to improve her job opportunities.

Catalina had pursued post-secondary education in medical topics as well as criminal justice. Her interest in medical topics stemmed from her twins with severe medical problems. Her interest in criminal justice was a result of her determination to know her legal rights as a person, mother, and wife so she could not be taken advantage of by her husband and in-laws. Pulling these two interests together, Catalina is working on a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and later she would like to pursue a pre-med degree. Eventually she would like to work in forensics with a career at a forensics lab or a medical examiner's office.

Catalina expressed that she wants to be self-sufficient and to stop feeling ashamed of herself because she is not yet self-sufficient. Catalina has worked consistently at low-wage jobs since becoming a single mother, married mother, and

single mother again. All of her decisions, including the one to become self-sufficient, are driven by her need to care for her children. It is important to Catalina that her children see that she is trying to get an education and move them off welfare. She does not want them relying on welfare as she has had to. When Catalina decided to return to post-secondary education as a sole provider, she also decided to quit her full-time job. She is serious about completing this degree as soon as possible. Working while attending school full-time and caring for four children limited her study time and this was causing her to fail classes. She decided to combine welfare, federal grants, and student loans so she could focus on graduating and acquiring a good paying job.

Catalina moved on and off welfare through various desperate situations running from an abusive father, hiding from an abusive husband, and being destitute with children to care for alone. She struggled with the fear that her ex-husband would steal her children again. She was afraid of not being able to provide for her children. Welfare became a safety net that allowed her to rely on something else to help her properly provide for her children. Catalina was proud to be off welfare and supporting herself with the help of her second husband. This broadened her outlook on life, making her feel that she could do anything. Although Catalina has never had any money, life is much easier now that she is in college. Catalina sees a bright new future when she graduates.

Crystal

Crystal, also one of the more disadvantaged participants in this study, came from a childhood in poverty. Crystal expressed her feelings about growing up in a Black

single parent home, experiencing severe neglect, and alluding to experiences with her mother's boyfriends bordering on potential child abuse. When Crystal got pregnant, she was 19 years old and had completed one year of college. At the time of this study Crystal was 23, divorced, providing for one child, attending post-secondary education online towards a bachelor's degree, and seeking full-time employment. The following is a summary of Crystal's life history from childhood poverty through her decision to persist in post-secondary education.

Crystal's parents were divorced early in her childhood. Living with her mother, she and her sisters lived through a string of men that moved in and out of their house. Her mother was a victim of both childhood incest as well as, mental and physical spousal abuse. Crystal said her family had so many secrets that to get away her mother married the first man to offer her marriage. Her husband turned out to be an abuser, drug dealer, and pimp. How bad life was with him depended on how high he was on drugs. Her mother had a breakdown from the mental abuse and sent Crystal's younger sister away for a while. After her parents divorced, Crystal lived with her mother and sisters. However, her mother was mentally unstable and the girls were left to basically raise and protect each other while strange men came in and out of their house. Crystal described this as a very hard time in her life.

Crystal tried to be understanding of the horrible life her mother had that must have made her the way she was now. Crystal said that she respected her mother for giving her life and providing shelter and clothing for her. She said her mom was not a good mother but was perhaps the best mother she could be. Her mother always placed

her male relationships ahead of her children and their needs. She would hop from one bad relationship to another. Crystal attributed her mother's boyfriends as the cause of her sister's fearful and distrustful attitude toward men. She said one sister chose not to have relationships with men because of her childhood experiences.

Crystal's mother not only left her children to care for themselves, she used her children. Crystal began working at an early age out of necessity to contribute to the household and provide food. Her mother would take the money and spend it on other things. It became a pattern where she used her daughters to provide for her own needs or the needs of her male friends. In her early adolescence, Crystal and her sisters moved in with her aunt because they were being neglected. She described her aunt as a positive role model and source of encouragement in their otherwise horrible life. Although Crystal worked an exhausting schedule throughout high school, she was still a good student. With the help of her aunt, Crystal graduated from high school and went to college.

Crystal considered herself a good student and viewed college as necessary to gaining a good job. Her oldest sister obtained a degree in psychology and was married to a good man who was also a psychologist. They were excellent role models who helped shape Crystal's career goals and college aspirations. Unfortunately, during Crystal's first semester in college she found out she lost her job and was pregnant. Crystal's mom took her to apply for welfare benefits. She moved into her own apartment but did not have a car. While three months pregnant, Crystal decided to marry the baby's father, who was also a pastor's son, stating that it seemed the right thing to

do. While pregnant and married, Crystal found a janitorial job and was able to stay in college. However, the security of marriage and employment did not last long.

Shortly after getting married, Crystal's husband changed completely. He began physically abusing her in an effort to force her to leave him. Crystal related that he did not want to be trapped in the marriage and wanted her to leave. No one, not even her mother, would believe her that she was being abused. One night she showed up on her mother's doorstep beaten and bruised with her baby in her arms. Crystal stayed with her mother while she filed for divorce. Her daughter was nearly a year old when the divorce became final.

Crystal, being solely responsible for her child, was forced to find shelter with family but transitioned on her own as quickly as possible. Crystal was not on welfare while she was working and going to school. However, she lost her job and, subsequently, her apartment when the company she worked for closed down. Crystal filed for unemployment, disability, and food stamps. She tried to stay in college during her unemployment. Unfortunately, she was forced, out of necessity, to move back with her mother again when she lost her apartment. Crystal wanted desperately to find new employment. She took a low paying temporary job as a receptionist because it was close to her house and money was very tight. Fortunately, when her temporary job ended, she found another job right away as a billing clerk. Crystal stayed at the billing clerk position for two years. Again she lost her job and apartment as the company closed down. However, this time Crystal prioritized her bills and was able to keep her car using unemployment benefits. She moved back with her mom and filed for welfare again.

Crystal soon came to a turning point. Her bad luck with employers resulted in her exhausting available unemployment benefits, and she could not find another job. She came to a difficult decision. She heard through family members that the economy in Texas was better than it was in California, so Crystal decided to move to Texas and live with a cousin.

Although Crystal remained in college, it was impossible for her to do so in good standing. When Crystal was unemployed and moving between California and Texas, she tried to keep going to classes online. However, the lack of available public computers and the length of time required to relocate caused her to fail several classes. Due to failing classes, she lost her academic scholarship. Crystal petitioned the college to allow her to be admitted the following semester and to reinstate her scholarship due to extenuating circumstances. The college allowed her to reenroll in classes and reinstated her scholarship with the completion of an essay that outlined how she would prevent a similar situation from recurring in the future. At the time of the interview, Crystal was trying to catch up on the classes she failed.

Crystal was determined to complete her degree program and has implemented measures to ensure her success. She lives on very little income. She drops her daughter at school then drives to the local library to use their computers. She returns from the library to pick up her daughter and goes home. Crystal saves money by skipping meals and walking when possible. Crystal was actively seeking a new job and was interviewing for a billing position at a local company.

Crystal has been deeply affected by downturns in the economy. She has lost her job, her apartment, and transportation several times. From her perspective, her previous positions were easily filled by others, making her unimportant to the company. She also described these low-wage jobs as unreliable, resulting in her sliding further and further into debt. She sees a college education as the key to financial security. She firmly believed that the only one who could improve her financial situation was her. Her daughter was the driving force behind her need for financial security. She plans to finish her bachelor's degree, continue with her master's degree, then complete a doctoral degree, and finally become a licensed psychologist. For Crystal, having a college degree means job security in a bad economy and the ability to financially care for her child alone.

Crystal does not want her daughter to have the same negative experiences that she had in her childhood, which influenced her behavior that led her to become a single mother. She is committed to being a good mother and providing for her daughter. The needs of her daughter and Crystal's experiences with unreliable jobs have spurred her to persist in college despite challenges. By overcoming these obstacles Crystal believes she will provide her daughter with a quality life, and she will then be a positive role model for her daughter if she falls into a difficult situation. Upon reflection, Crystal expressed her happiness that she stayed in school because now she can actually see an end to her struggles. She affirmed that she has gone through a lot in her life but has not lost hope and done something desperate like others may have. She firmly believes when things get better, and she believes they will, she is going to be "this strong woman."

Lisa

Lisa was the participant in this study with the most advantages. Lisa came from a stable White, middle class, two parent home with a strong support network. Her parents raised her as an active Christian, and Christian religious ideology was a major part of her life, decisions, and feelings about herself. Lisa initially got pregnant she was 19 and had completed one year of college. At the time of her interview, Lisa was 27 years old, divorced, working to provide for two children, and attending college towards a bachelor's degree. The following is a summary of Lisa's life history life history from childhood poverty through her decision to persist in post-secondary education.

Lisa described childhood as being carefree with no money concerns. She said she had enough of everything and did not really worry about anything. When Lisa and her siblings were between the ages of five and 10 they lived in Germany. She said her parents never had a lot of money, but they were comfortable. When they moved back to Texas, life was the same way. She was brought up with Christian values and attended church regularly with her parents. They often volunteered with the church. While in high school she participated in a variety of extracurricular activities including cheerleading, soccer, volleyball, and track. She did everything she wanted; she had a huge group of friends, but she didn't drink, smoke, have sex, or go to parties. Although Lisa began working at the age of 13, she was working for college money and summer trips. She enjoyed high school and considered herself a good student. When she graduated from high school, Lisa chose a college that was far enough away to give her independence from her parents, yet close enough to be home if she needed them. Lisa

chose a larger college where she went from being very popular to just another student. In seeking acceptance from other students, Lisa described her decisions as poor and uncharacteristic of her previous behavior. Needing to fit in, she went to parties, got drunk, and even had sex. She found out she was pregnant her first semester in college.

The college Lisa attended was comprised of mainly traditional students just out of high school. Because she did not feel it was appropriate for a single mother to attend college, she quit college while pregnant and moved home with parents. After a month of living with her parents, Lisa chose to move out on her own with the financial assistance of her family. After the baby was born, the father terminated his parental rights. Lisa was a single mother living on her own for a year before she married her high school sweetheart.

Lisa was married for about a year. During that time she got pregnant with her second child. Despite being married, Lisa worked in a low-wage retail job until her second child was born, then she stayed home with her children. Lisa's husband kicked her and the children out and took their car. With no job, shelter, or transportation, Lisa moved back in with her parents. When Lisa's divorce was final, her first child was almost two years old. Lisa got another job and again moved on her own as soon as possible.

Lisa worked at a large retailer in a low-wage job; however, the income was not sufficient to provide for her children. She relied on her parents to make up the shortfall in her finances. Lisa's mother decided it was time for Lisa to manage her finances on her own. She convinced Lisa to apply for welfare benefits. However, coming from the

middle class, Lisa had preconceived ideas about what type of people were receiving welfare benefits. She adamantly affirmed that she was not the typical unemployed Black or Hispanic welfare recipient with multiple children. When Lisa's mother was able to identify, through published statistics, a group of welfare recipients with similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds in similar situations, Lisa decided it was ok to apply for welfare benefits. Lisa started receiving welfare in 2006 after her divorce and becoming a single mom again. Since then Lisa has held a number of low-wage jobs and has cycled on and off welfare trying to become self-sufficient.

For Lisa, her divorce and the financial abandonment by her mother was a turning point in her life. Although as a child Lisa always knew that she would go to college one day, she had given up that dream when she became a single mother. Getting divorced was the major event in her life that made her reevaluate the direction of her life and her decisions. She determined that she did not want to work for minimum wage the rest of her life. Without her parents' help, she determined that no one was going to support her and her kids in the way that she wanted them supported. She decided that she needed to make a good decision about how she was going to support them and then do whatever it took to make it happen. She concluded that she needed to go back to college so she could get a better paying job and support her children herself.

Lisa took her basics the first time in college when she was majoring in elementary education. She always wanted to be a teacher. However, when Lisa registered online, she accidentally enrolled in the business certificate program. Although she considered switching back to a teaching certificate, an academic advisor suggested

she only needed 15 credit hours to finish the business certificate then she could get an alternative teaching certification. Lisa decided that this would be a shorter avenue to teaching, and she could compromise by teaching high school rather than elementary school. At the time of this interview Lisa was working in a college work-study position and completing her final semester towards an associate's degree in business.

Lisa believed, although she always put her children first and they were a part of her decision to return to college, the decision to return to college was also about who she was as an individual. Lisa related that she conformed to her mother's behavior expectations and expressed her wrongness in her choices without her mother's guidance. Yet she feels that her mother's expectations of her are too high and unrealistic. As a result she tries not to rely on her mother whenever possible. Lisa also suffers ridicule from her siblings for her poor choices in life and her inability to be self-sufficient because of those choices. As a result, she was defensive and dislikes family get-togethers. She also related that she feels embarrassed to admit to former acquaintances that she has not finished her degree and was not working in a respectable career. Lisa wants to feel empowered by telling others what obstacles that she has overcome and that she still succeeded in her goals, despite the extended timeframe. She believed that attending college was improving how she felt about herself. In her final reflection, Lisa stated that she believed she was doing ok.

Nancy

Nancy was one of the participants with more advantages. Nancy came from a stable Hispanic, middle class, two parent home. She was raised by her grandparents but

had an emotionally distant relationship with them. When Nancy initially got pregnant, she was 14 and in high school. At the time of the interview, Nancy was 31 years old, divorced, providing for two children, and attending post-secondary education toward an associate's degree. The following is a summary of Nancy's life history from childhood poverty through her decision to persist in post-secondary education.

Although Nancy's parents were divorced and absent from her life, Nancy had a fairly stable childhood with her grandparents. Nancy's mother was a young single mother when she had her. While Nancy resided with her grandparents, her parents did not visit her often because her grandparents did not approve of their lifestyles. When Nancy was in second grade, her grandparents obtained custody of her. She spent the remainder of her childhood living with and being raised by her grandparents. She never lacked the bare necessities, but her grandparents were very frugal with money. The house and transportation being old and inexpensive gave the appearance of a low-income home and lifestyle. However, her grandparents, who grew up in the great depression, had some money in savings. The generation gap and the strict environment created a distant relationship with her grandparents. Nancy, seeking a warm and loving relationship through a boyfriend, got pregnant in high school. With the support of her grandparents, she went to an alternative high school, was pushed by teachers to not quit school, and got her GED. Nancy considered herself a good student of the subjects that she liked but a lazy student if the subject did not interest her. Although she liked school, she did not feel college was an appropriate choice for a single mother.

Nancy had her first child at 15 years old and tried unsuccessfully to move on her own. She moved in with friends for six months when the baby was about one year old. The situation did not work out well, and she decided to move back with her grandparents. Nancy was 17 years old and her baby was two years old when she moved out on her own. She had acquired a low-wage job with excellent benefits working at a major hospital as a billing clerk where she stayed for six years. She felt that she was young and dumb because she later quit that job and was unable to find another one with such good benefits.

Nancy quit her position at the hospital when she got married. She had her second child while married, six years after the first baby. However, Nancy was married only for a short time before divorcing. Nancy ended up working multiple and sometimes consecutive low-wage jobs to make ends meet. Although she worked several low-wage jobs at one time, it was still getting more difficult to adequately provide for her two children.

Despite having extended family through her grandparents, she was not able to rely on them as providing for her children became more difficult. Nancy's grandparents believed that she needed to financially support herself and the children alone. In addition, she had no contact with her parents and no family support network to rely upon. It was up to her to provide childcare, work, and financially support the children alone. Nancy had a third child during this time but could not financially support him as she was already struggling. She placed him for adoption because she thought this would be best for the child. Nancy described her experience as very painful and difficult. She

said she simply lacked better options. She related that the social workers were wonderful. They went through the entire process with her and provided emotional support. Their care and concern for her at a very bleak moment in her life was her inspiration to seek a career in social work.

Nancy had to overcome her preconceived notions about who should go to college before she could pursue her growing dreams of becoming a social worker. One of Nancy's low-wage jobs was working seasonally at a bookstore in a local junior college. Before working there, she thought only traditional students went to college. Subsequently, she thought she was too old to go to college. Nancy was surprised to see older and more non-traditional students attending college. The eclectic group of people attending college helped her imagine herself as a college student. If she had not seen the older students who attended college, she never would have realized that her stereotypes were unfounded. She thought she must have been dumb to believe non-traditional students did not attend college.

After having her stereotypes challenged and concluding she could attend college as a single mother, Nancy decided to seek admission to a local junior college and continue working full-time. Nancy began with the basics and decided to remain at the junior college for two years before transferring to a four-year college. However, as she was working full-time, the progression of college classes were getting harder and requiring more time to study. She realized she could not continue to work so many hours and successfully maintain her status as a full-time student. In discussing the situation with friends, they advised her to look into welfare benefits. She went to the

welfare office as well as the financial aid office at the college and asked about potential benefits. She made an informed decision to quit her second job and apply for welfare so that she could successfully maintain her full-time student status. Nancy's income actually increased when she took a work-study position because the welfare office did not count this money as income against her benefit amount.

Nancy was focused on completing her degree as soon as possible. However, she felt that it would take her at least 10 years to complete a four-year degree, as she was unable to attend as many classes as she needed. She decided to budget for internet access at her home so she could take online classes and hopefully increase her course load. Because she worked below the 20 hour per week required to qualify for childcare assistance through the workforce center, taking online classes helped her to reduce the cost of childcare. She applied for a school loan to put money in savings. She uses the loan money to help meet financial shortfalls as they arise so she does not have to increase her work hours. Though she has considered quitting or delaying, she realized that she needs this degree to better provide for her children.

Nancy felt she has already accomplished so much and does not have many classes remaining to finish; therefore, she should continue to push forward. She said that sometimes she feels silly about herself because things get so hard and she thinks about quitting. But she remembers that she has managed to come so close to being finished, and it would not take much more to finish the bachelor's degree. At the time of this interview, Nancy was in her second year of college working toward an associate's degree and was working part-time in the work-study position. She planned to attend

college through the summer so she would be done by next spring. She is looking forward to celebrating that milestone with her children before moving on to start the bachelor's degree in social work.

BJ

BJ was also one of the participants with more advantages. BJ came from a Black, single parent home with an extensive extended family network. During her childhood, her mother was married and they lived in a middle class lifestyle; later her mother divorced and their lifestyle declined into situational poverty. When BJ initially got pregnant, she was 20 years old and attending college. At the time of the interview BJ was 31 years old, divorced, working full-time to provide for four children, and attending college towards a master's degree. The following is a summary of BJ's life history from childhood poverty through her decision to persist in post-secondary education.

BJ's father was a soldier in the military; consequently, her family moved around every three years when she was a child. She lived in a relatively comfortable middle class two parent home. Her mother divorced and moved into situational poverty when she was just 12 years old. Money in her home was not plentiful, though there was never a serious shortfall. Her parents' divorce allowed BJ to stay in one place during high school. Like Lisa, she was very active in extracurricular activities throughout her high school years. She was involved in sports, basketball, cheerleading, student government, and homecoming court. She spent so much time on extracurricular activities that she almost did not pass the 10th grade. Then in 11th and 12th grades she started skipping

school to hang out with friends. However, she was very involved in basketball, and to play she had to go to class. BJ made a major effort to attend school regularly and pass so she could play basketball. Despite almost failing, BJ considered herself a good student.

The transition from high school to college was relatively seamless because during school they talked about and planned for college. While BJ was going to high school, her mother was also attending college to get a bachelor's degree. Her mother graduated from college while BJ was still in high school, so she saw the income level in their home go up. College was often a topic of discussion and an expectation for all of the children as a means to financial security. Her aunt also had a bachelor's degree and was working on a second bachelor's degree. BJ expressed that attending college was something that was always in her future. BJ began working at the age of 16 to help pay for college. She filled out the college application on her own and went to freshman orientation by herself. She considered herself very independent back then, with high expectations about the future.

BJ went to college directly from high school and lived in a dorm with a friend. In her second semester she found out that she was pregnant. She had her baby during her sophomore year but her mother encouraged her to remain in college. BJ's mother was determined that all of her children would graduate from college and not continue to live in poverty. She wanted them to do better than her, and to her that meant completing a degree. BJ sent her daughter to be provided for and live with her mother while BJ remained in college. She often refers to her first child as her mother's baby because her

daughter stayed with her mother for three years. As a single parent, BJ had visitations but no actual responsibility for the financial or physical care of the child. Her responsibility was to complete a bachelor's degree.

As a single parent BJ felt pressured to finish a bachelor's degree as soon as possible. Although she started college in the nursing program, after becoming a single parent, she switched her major to business administration to finish her degree and start working earlier. While in college, BJ lived on financial aid, not working her freshman and sophomore years.

During her junior and senior years she worked in a work-study position and applied for welfare assistance. BJ graduated with a bachelor's degree in business administration in 2002 and went to work for a large retailer as a sales manager until 2005. During that time she was a sole provider and off welfare until money got too tight.

BJ said parenting really kicked in when she got married in 2005 and had her second child. Her first child would visit her at school from time to time, but when she had her second child, she was there every day, day in and day out. During her marriage, BJ had three children. Despite the demands of having children every day, she claimed to have the best support system. Anytime she needed something, an extended family member was there to help her. This was essential when she separated from her husband in 2007. Before becoming a single parent again, her mother took care of everything. Now as a divorced single parent of four children, her mother expected her to financially support her children. At the time of this interview BJ was working full-time in an administrative position with an insufficient income to support her children.

Although BJ was working full-time, she now had to provide for four children. Like her mother before her, BJ situation shifted from a middle class two parent home to becoming a single mother in situational poverty. BJ noted this was a turning point in her life as she struggled with financial shortfalls that prevented her from providing necessities for her children. She realized the positions her bachelor's degree qualified her for would not provide an income that would bridge the financial shortfall. Although attending college at the bachelor's level was to meet her mother's expectations, continuing her education at the master's level was motivated by her need for a larger income to support her children.

As an adolescent growing up in poverty, BJ developed career aspirations intended to support a family when she was a mother. She chose nursing because this job was in high demand and paid well. Her compromise in selecting a shorter degree program so she could graduate and care for her child also reduced her potential income from the bachelor's degree she selected. Following her potential career progression in her current field and increased earnings potential from alternate career paths, BJ decided to become an academic counselor. Choosing this career path required her to return to post-secondary education for a master's degree. At the time of this interview, BJ was attending a four-year college seeking a master's degree in education and counseling.

BJ related that her children are happy their mother is going to school, but it has been challenging. She struggles with demands from school and her children's needs for her time and attention. To adjust, she shifted her homework to after the children are in bed. She also decided to take online courses whenever possible. Despite her previous

successes in education, she still questions whether she can persist to graduation. She feels the pressure from having to work full-time, and the time required at work to provide for her children has been an obstacle to completing her degree. However, she decided that she will do whatever it takes to get the work done and meet her goals.

BJ holds a mental picture of what her children's life should be like in a two parent family with enough money to provide beyond the basic necessities. This ideal picture was developed as a result of her exposure to both a stable middle class home environment and situational poverty as a child. Despite her mother being single, she worked to provide this ideal life for her children. BJ feels as a single mother, she is still responsible for maintaining this ideal lifestyle. This ideal drives her desire to increase her income and return to post-secondary education. However, she has carefully chosen a career path that would not reduce her time with her children. In our discussion, BJ related that not providing this ideal environment for her children makes her feel like an insufficient mother and provider.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST MANUSCRIPT

SINGLE WELFARE-RELIANT MOTHERS' LIFE COURSE: PATHWAYS FROM POVERTY THROUGH POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Levinson posed this question in his seminal works on the life course of women: “How do women’s lives evolve in adulthood?” (1996, p. 3). Levinson’s purpose was to understand adult development through the uniqueness and complexity of women’s lives as social roles embedded in the social world and the meaning women ascribed to multiple social roles through their interactions with the world. The pathways and social roles of welfare-reliant mothers are unique from other mothers because their vulnerable positions in society subjects them to the dominant society’s historical and emerging mothering expectations. Many scholars have noted the difficulty mothers in poverty face when seeking to fulfill society’s expectations of their social roles as mothers and wage earners (Edin & Lein, 1997a; Edin & Kefalas, 2007; Hays, 2003). Edin and Kefalas (2007) observed that welfare-reliant mothers, seeking to fulfill their views of the mother role, often chose single parenthood in spite of society’s expectation of two parent homes. Hays (2003) added that welfare-reliant mothers’ choices in their work roles are constrained by welfare rules, pushing them toward low-wage and menial jobs with little or no benefits. Edin and Lein (1997a) stated that leaving welfare rolls through low-wage work allowed single mothers to fulfill society’s expectations of them in assuming the wage earner role, yet this did not necessarily enable them to fulfill their roles as mothers

and sole providers. In addition, Christopher (2005) noted that welfare rules have restricted welfare-reliant mothers' access to post-secondary education, which would assist them in fulfilling their roles as mothers, wage earners, and sole providers.

Christopher (2005) suggested that the lives of welfare-reliant mothers who are successful in accessing and persisting in post-secondary education should be investigated to help improve the potential success and educational opportunities of other welfare-reliant mothers. Utilizing Christopher's suggestion for future research, this study refocused the question posed by Levinson (1996) about women's life course. This research seeks to understand how women's lives have evolved from childhood to adulthood within their shared life course, for a subgroup of women who have assumed the social roles of single parents and post-secondary education students while receiving welfare benefits and living in the context of poverty.

Background of the Problem

Understanding the life course of welfare-reliant mothers includes not only their individual lives in poverty but also the context of those lives. For mothers utilizing welfare benefits, their life courses and social roles are influenced by the dominant society's morality, which underpinned the creation, expansion, and retraction of the welfare state (Goodwin, 1995; Ridzi, 2009). The background of this study describes the welfare state's conceptions of emerging social roles and the limitation of post-secondary education within the life course of welfare-reliant women.

Emerging Social Roles

Concepts of protecting motherhood underpinned the welfare state and reinforced women's roles as mothers being central components, the most salient roles within their lives. With the advent of the welfare state, poor women were stigmatized and blamed for their poverty (Levine, 2001; Borrow, 2007) and blamed for their roles as independent wage earners, depicting them as unfit mothers (Goodwin, 1995; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Saxton, 2003). Welfare reform was marked by a change in public expectations of the role of mother. Welfare reform changed the focus from adequate income for mother-care to the mother's adherence to emerging moral standards, characterized by her ability and willingness to elevate the role of wage earner to a central component and work for her benefits (Boris, 1998). However, government welfare programs were unable to fund the large number of women who needed aid to remain at home and care for their children. Goodwin (1995) clarified that the shortage of funds resulted in legislators developing exclusions for unworthy mothers, to help reduce those who qualified. In addition, labor market supporters fought for and won the exclusion of employable mothers, those mothers who previously left the low-wage labor market when they qualified for welfare assistance (Boris, 1998; Goodwin, 1995). Goodwin contended that the scarce funds for welfare recipients caused a shift in practice toward women, encouraging them to embrace their roles as wage earners outside their home as central components of their lives and abandoning the notion of mother-care as salient roles for unworthy mothers. The passage of the landmark Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOA) in 1996 fulfilled both President Reagan and

President Clinton's intentions of ending welfare as we knew it (Sugarman, 2003). Sugarman asserted that without a doubt, the roles of women changed substantially over the life of the welfare state. "It is now widely thought to be unacceptable for able-bodied women to be supported by taxpayers while remaining out of the paid workforce" (2003, p. 33). However, recent changes in welfare reform have provided a limited opportunity for welfare-reliant mothers to pursue post-secondary education as a pathway to the wage earner role.

Welfare Reform and Post-Secondary Education

The goal of welfare reform was to reduce the number of participants on the welfare rolls. To do this the PRWOA set a 60-month lifetime limit for those receiving welfare. It required that all able-bodied welfare participants assume a work role (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Corcoran, Danziger, Kalil, & Seefeldt, 2002; Hays, 2003; Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Ridzi, 2009), restricted access to post-secondary education (Bloom, 2009; London, 2006), and created punitive sanctions of terminating welfare assistance for failing to meet PRWOA work expectations (Corcoran et al., 2002; Lee & Curran, 2003). The work-first requirements and exclusion of post-secondary education resulted in a mass exodus of welfare-reliant mothers from post-secondary education (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Cox & Spriggs, 2002; Dave, Reichman, & Corman, 2008; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003; London, 2006; Pickering, Summers, Harvey, & Mushinski, 2006). Research demonstrated that mothers utilizing on-the-job training, which was promoted by welfare requirements to acquire unskilled and semi-skilled employment, was not sufficient to move mothers out of poverty over their life course (Acs & Loprest,

2004; Drayse, 2004; Ellis, 2005; Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Handler, 2006; Fang & Keane, 2004; Lee & Curran, 2003; Mushinski & Pickering, 2005; Ridzi, 2009).

Acknowledging the need for education, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reversed their position on post-secondary education, allowing welfare-reliant mothers to substitute 12 months of post-secondary education for work requirements (Federal Register 45, 2008). DHHS reiterated that work first was still the primary goal for welfare participants, but that they should become better informed about how to adequately use welfare benefits in the limited time they are offered to ensure that they are capable of being economically self-sufficient before the time-limited benefits are exhausted (Federal Register 45). This means that welfare-reliant mothers were expected to maintain their work roles as the most central components in their lives, but DHHS acknowledged that for some mothers, education may be necessary to ensure they are able to acquire roles as workers.

Dominant society's expectation of wage earner roles being central components of welfare-reliant mothers' lives was now linked with increased access to post-secondary education. Future research should investigate how the contexts of welfare-reliant mothers' lives and their life courses have been impacted by recent changes in welfare reform. The purpose of this study was to investigate the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course from poverty to post-secondary education. To better understand the essence or meaning of their experience, this article describes the life course experiences that shaped their pathways and social roles.

Related Literature

This study drew on previous developmental life course research to frame and investigate the phenomenon of the single welfare-reliant mothers' life course.

Developmental life course concepts segment the individual's life into a narrower time frame and allow for a more in-depth investigation of the transition events and the context that underpins them. Subsequently this study drew from current literature in women's life course to identify potential pathways to adulthood for women. Although previous research has evaluated the life course of women through standard transition events (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Pallas, 1993; Mouw, 2004), a broader concept of transition events is needed (Mouw, 2004). In an effort to identify a narrower space of the life course, this research also drew from current literature investigating transitions to higher education. Previous research on transitions to higher education discuss the potential impact from the order and timing of transition events (Haggstrom, Kanouse, & Morrison, 1986; Jacobs & King, 2002) and individual demographics on the outcomes of access and persistence in higher education (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Gorard & Smith, 2011). Therefore, the related literature discussed in this section entails developmental life course constructs, the life course of women, and transitions to higher education.

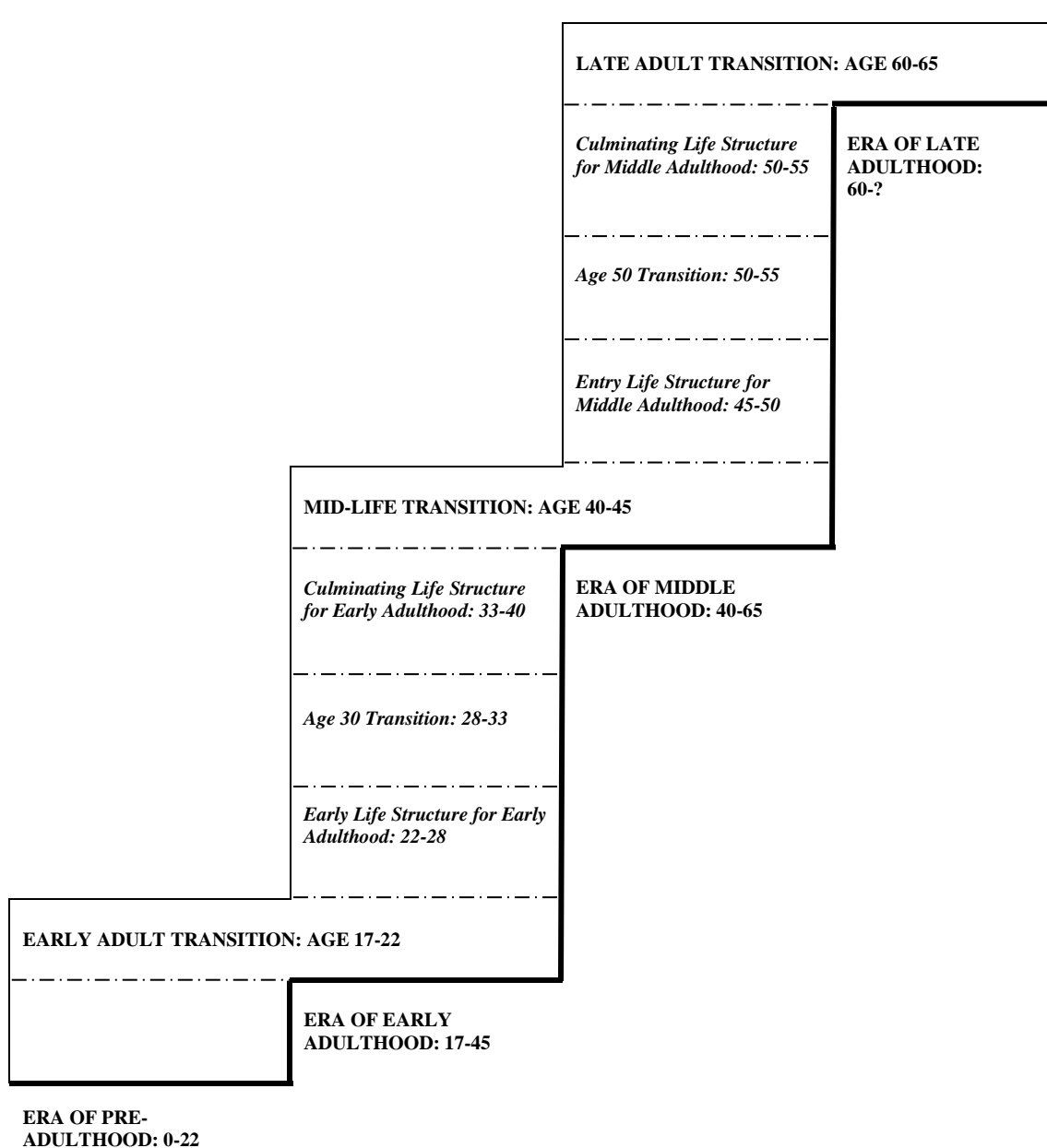
Developmental Life Course Constructs

The developmental life course perspective is unique in that it seeks to delineate a more narrow space of the life course rather than the life-span from birth to old age (Meyer, 2009). Levinson (1978, 1996), building upon the works of Jung and Erickson,

segmented the life course into overlapping eras of development that included the eras of pre-adulthood (0 to 22 years of age), early adulthood (17 to 45 years of age), middle adulthood (40 to 65 years of age), late adulthood (60 plus years of age) (see Figure 2). Then, he identified a sequence of reoccurring era-based life cycles that was sectioned into structure-building and structure-changing periods. The concept of life cycles was created by Levinson (1996), who proposed that everyone's life followed the same basic underlying pattern from childhood to late adulthood that entailed a process of reoccurring cycles. Within these reoccurring cycles individuals engaged in the tasks of structure building and structure changing that included building the early life structure and changing the structure in the mid-era transition, resulting in the culminating life structure.

Structure-building and structure-changing are linked together to form a structure-based pathway entailing the resulting assumption and exit of social roles through transition events. Structure-building periods reflect major life choices such as completing educational goals, committing to a relationship, and having children. Structure-changing periods reflect a lack of satisfaction with the current structure, such as lack of funds or self-development in seeking to reshape one's identity. Transitions are the markers that describe movement within the structure and between social roles, where social roles are labels such as student, spouse, or mother, and where the transition events are the identifying markers of those transition events as an unfolding path through the extended life course (Yoshioka & Noguchi, 2009). When grouped, the sequence of

Figure 2
Developmental Periods in the Eras of Adulthood



Source: Levinson, 1996, p. 18.

transition events in the life course represents a standardized sequence (Pallas, 1993).

Research utilizing developmental life course constructs has examined the evolution of standardized and non-standardized pathways (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Pallas, 1993) and gender-based differences in pathways (Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Mouw, 2004). Following is a summation of the literature for the gendered life course of women.

The Life Course of Women

Previous life course research has sought to identify pathways to adulthood for women and timing of events on life course outcomes. They sought to identify the standard life course and trends that shape the life course, as well as outcomes from those trends. Previous researches have used transition events (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Pallas, 1993; Mouw, 2004) to identify and explain changes in the life course and resulting outcomes.

Pallas (1993) conducted a meta study of 19 life course studies spanning from 1965 to 1993 seeking to delineate sequence and timing of transitions to education and their change over time. Pallas found that in recent history “standardization of schooling and other social institutions through state intervention has led to a more standardized life course” (1993, p. 440). However, Pallas found that this century has seen a shift toward more differentiated life courses, where the timing of typical transitions to education, work, and family have been interrupted, reordered, and revisited in later life. Further Pallas found the early adult transition bridging early adulthood and adulthood has become shortened and more compact. Mouw (2004) added to this research by

identifying potential pathways to adulthood for women using longitudinal the data of 2,939 women. Mouw identified six pathways to adulthood focusing on five pathway transition events. Mouw suggested that standard transition events when sequential represent the normative life course, including “leaving home, finishing school, finding work, getting married, and having children” (2004, p. 268). He acknowledged that the standard transition events used were limited and that other transition events may be needed to more fully identify and understand the increasing non-standard pathways of women from childhood to adulthood. He noted that the use of transition events in research could be investigated as age at transition, time spent in transition, or sequence of transition.

Rather than investigating the standard sequence of transitions, Berzin and De Marco (2010) investigated the timing of standard transitions that had a negative impact on the life course, which they termed critical life events. They investigated the life course of 375 low-income youths below the poverty line, compared with 1,142 youths above the poverty line ranging in age from 18 to 33 years old. Agreeing with Pallas (1993), Berzin and De Marco (2010) determined that the structural impact of poverty on the life course of low-income youth shortened the transition to early adulthood, an essential developmental period, through critical events such as leaving home early before age 18 and parenthood before age 25. They anticipated that shortened transitions to early adulthood as a result of these critical events would result in negative trajectories throughout adulthood, causing decreased opportunities in access to post-secondary

education and higher income employment. However, this finding was partially contested by Leadbeater and Way (2001).

Leadbeater and Way (2001) investigated the effects of the early transition to adulthood for 126 mostly Black and Hispanic teen mothers in a six-year study, where teen motherhood represented a critical life event. Similar to Berzin and De Marco (2010), Leadbeater and Way (2001) determined that teen parenthood was a turning point in the lives of young mothers. However, Leadbeater and Way indicated that the transition event itself did not necessarily result in a negative impact on the life course but concurred that early parenthood did result in a shortened transition to early adulthood. They indicated that the teen mothers' responses to transition events and their potential support networks determined which of four potential responses would subsequently impact positively or negatively their life course trajectory. Potential responses of teen mothers included (1) continuing attendance in high school and subsequent graduation, (2) stopping out of high school, but returning to complete high school at a later date, (3) dropping out of high school before the birth of the child and not returning, and (4) dropping out of high school after the birth of the child and not returning. Leadbeater and Way indicated that 52% of the teen mothers would eventually graduate from high school, 14% would attain some college, and 37% would seek work rather than educational opportunities.

Life course research focusing on transition events has contributed to existing research by identifying potential pathways to adulthood for women (Pallas, 1993; Mouw, 2004). Research has identified the standard transition events and the need for

more robust non-standard transition events to fully explain women's life course (Mouw, 2004). Finally, research into critical transition events has revealed that the transition event itself does not necessarily cause a negative life outcome (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Leadbeater & Way, 2001).

Absent in this body of research was a focus on of mothers' life course in poverty including transition events and pathways. The participants in the studies by Pallas (1993), Berzin and De Marco (2010), Levinson (1996), Leadbeater and Way (2001), and Mouw (2004) included low-income women subsumed within a larger group. Leadbeater and Way (2001) clearly had the largest representation of women who were both low-income and mothers and the only study to include single mothers. A growing body of research is focusing on specific transition events within pathways that result in specific outcomes, such as completion of post-secondary education (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Gorard & Smith, 2011; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Jacobs & King, 2002).

Transitions to Higher Education

A segment of the developmental life course research has focused on pathway transitions embedded in the life course. This research has focused on the impact of transition events and individual demographics on the specific outcomes of access, persistence, and completion of higher education.

Transition events and post-secondary education. Previous research has investigated the impact of early transitions to parenthood, marriage, and employment on transitions to higher education (Haggstrom et al., 1986; Jacobs & King, 2002).

Haggstrom et al. (1986) investigated the effect of early motherhood and marriage on transitions to higher education for 887 teenage mothers and 1,287 adult mothers. This study found that both parenthood and marriage negatively affected transitions to higher education, but early marriage had a greater impact than motherhood. Jacobs and King (2002) investigated the life course of 5,142 women college students from the ages of 15 to 44. “The data interweaves educational histories with other life course events, such as marriage, childbearing, and employment” (Jacob & King, 2002, p. 216). Participants were divided by parents’ educational and employment backgrounds and participants’ educational histories. Also included in the participant histories were age, “preschool-age children”, “marital status” (p. 217), and employment status. This study found that parents’ educational and employment background impacted decisions to access post-secondary education, but did not positively or negatively impact persistence toward completion of educational goals. This study indicated that while marriage had no effect on the persistence of wives, women who were divorced or mothers were less likely to complete educational goals. Finally, this study determined that for women who completed a general education degree (GED), delayed entry into college, or extended attendance as part-time students substantially reduced their completion of post-secondary educational goals.

Clearly demographic characteristics such as marital status, parental status, employment status, and individual educational histories impact persistence in post-secondary education. While previous research investigated the impact of demographics

focusing on transition event outcomes, similar research investigated transition event outcomes focusing on demographics.

Demographic characteristics and transition events. Further research has investigated the impact of social class and gender on transitions to post-secondary education in adulthood (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Gorard & Smith, 2011).

Bozick and DeLuca (2005) investigated transitions to higher education for a mixed longitudinal sample of high school students who delayed entry into college. They found that 16% of students who completed high school did not transition to higher education. They indicated that these students tended to be from the lower socioeconomic group and assumed early parenting and work roles. Andres and Adamuti-Trache (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of 730 participants from high school through post-secondary education and work to describe the sequence of stages and relevant transitions. They found that social class and gender shaped differences between life course structures. Although no uniform pattern developed, 50 distinct trajectories were identified. In addition, Andres and Adamuti-Trache found that women who were married with children were more likely to be non-participants in higher education. However, this study contributed new knowledge indicating that those students in vulnerable populations who attempted participation in higher education at community colleges or non-degree institutions were more likely to complete their educational goals. Similarly, Gorard and Smith (2011) investigated the role of barriers to education in the life course from birth to the decision to access higher education.

They found that although socioeconomic impediments present early and are persistent through the life course, these socioeconomic barriers are marginal in the decision to participate in higher education for traditional aged students.

Previous research has investigated the impact of standard transition events on post-secondary education (Haggstrom et al., 1986; Jacobs & King, 2002) and the impact of demographic characteristics on transition events (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Gorard & Smith, 2011). However, there is some conflict in the finding of previous research about the impact of transition events and demographic characteristics on access to and persistence in post-secondary education.

Conclusion

A number of research studies have investigated the life course of women including low-income women, married women, mothers (Haggstrom et al., 1986; Pallas, 1993; Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Levinson, 1996; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Mouw, 2004), and women college students (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Jacobs & King, 2002) as a subsumed subgroup within the larger population, but no study has explicitly sought to investigate the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers. Similar to previous research on the life course of women, the research studies seeking to reveal the life course and timing of transitions for women to higher education have subsumed low-income and welfare-reliant single mothers within their populations, rather than elucidating them (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Gorard & Smith, 2011; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Jacobs & King, 2002). This study will seek to

elucidate the life course and transitions to higher education for single welfare-reliant mothers as a unique group of women.

Methodology

This section identifies the methodology and method used in this study. Previous studies utilized standard transition events as markers of the life course's pathway (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Pallas, 1993; Mouw, 2004) and were grounded in quantitative methodologies. However, Levinson (1996) used a qualitative methodology to investigate descriptive social roles as transition markers in the life course's pathway. Levinson suggested that a qualitative design was needed to "gain a detailed picture of every life in order to show the diversity of women's lives" (1996, p. 4). Similar to Levinson, this study seeks to include social roles and, as suggested by Mouw (2004), it seeks to reveal additional gender-based transition events that were not predetermined but rather presented from the representation of the participants' oral life histories. Therefore, a qualitative research design was used to solicit descriptive data that allowed for the emergence of unique transition events, which shaped the participants' pathways through adulthood.

Research Design

Transcendental phenomenology relies on the participants' interpretations of their reflections (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell, the transcendental phenomenological methodology is considered a descriptive methodology in the Husserlian tradition, which focuses on creating a description of the phenomenon from the *participants'* reflections of their lived experiences. Utilizing the transcendental

phenomenological methodology allowed for the formation of the phenomenon, underpinned by a life history approach in the assumption and exit of social roles that were embedded in the contexts of participants' unfolding pathways through adulthood, which was represented by participants' combined experiences as an essence of the phenomenon. Therefore, this study employed a transcendental phenomenological methodology.

According to Moustakas (1994), the methodology of transcendental phenomenology was guided by three concepts: epoche, reduction of the data, and free imaginative variation that were intended to reveal the essence of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. Moustakas described epoche as intentionally identifying and setting aside one's "everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings" (1994, p. 33) so that one can be open to view the phenomenon as it emerges. Moustakas described reduction of the data as "removing repetitive statements" (p. 34). Finally, he described free imaginative variation as following the reduction process and seeking to grasp the structural description of the multiple experiences as one emerging structure of the phenomenon. The intention to arrive at the participants' perspectives of truth is the basis of the phenomenological methodology. Moustakas related that phenomenology as a methodology required a method that was a step-by-step process and included epoche, reduction, and free imaginative variation to be compatible with this methodology.

Method

Husserl's descriptive phenomenological method was developed for and most suitable to phenomenological research in the discipline of psychology (Kockelmans,

1994). Husserl noted the need to modify his method to effectively cross disciplines. Giorgi's existential phenomenological method was developed to offer a bridge between disciplines by incorporating a disciplinary perspective in data analysis. This section includes a summary of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method that was used in the participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

Participant selection. This study sought the essence of experience from poverty to post-secondary education for single welfare-reliant mothers; therefore, the primary data source for this study was human subjects. Participants for this study were solicited from the local welfare office, junior colleges, and universities, and it sought single women who were welfare-reliant mothers, solely responsible for the care of their children, and post-secondary education students. Additionally, students needed to be within one year of graduation.

Six potential participants were selected. All participants were current post-secondary students seeking a variety of degrees ranging from an associate's degree to a master's degree. Three participants became single teen mothers who ranged in age from 14 to 17 years old, whereas three participants were attending college when they became single mothers between the ages of 19 and 20 years old. All participants were sole providers for their children. Five mothers were living independently with their children, while one mother and her child were living with a cousin. All participants of this study were current welfare participants or utilized welfare benefits as an income strategy of recurring participation within the last three months. Participant demographics included three White, two Black, and one Hispanic participant ranging from 23 to 36 years old at

the time of the interviews. Three of the participants grew up in poverty, whereas three of the participants came from middle class and upper-middle class backgrounds. At the time of the interviews participants had between one to four children, while only one mother had preschool aged children. Each participant chose a pseudonym: Lisa, Tammy, Crystal, Nancy, Catalina, and BJ. The pseudonyms were used in this study to provide anonymity while identifying their individual responses from their interviews.

Data collection and data analysis. According to Giorgi (1997) there are five sequential steps in the phenomenological methods that were utilized in this study, that of: “(1) collection of verbal data, (2) reading of data, (3) breaking of the data into some kind of parts, (4) organization and expression of data from a disciplinary perspective, and (5) synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community” (p. 245).

Stage one: Collection of the data. Data collection included two interviews and follow-up conversations or emails when needed. The first interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and focused primarily on the participants’ life histories from childhood through post-secondary education. An interview protocol was used entailing open-ended questions. The second interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and focused on more narrow segments of the life history, specifically social roles and persisting in post-secondary education, as well as clarifying questions about answers from the first interview. The interviews were conducted at participants’ locations of choice and recorded with their permission. Subsequent conversations were either audio recorded or

conducted by email. All participant responses in interviews or follow-up conversations were transcribed, edited for accuracy, and totaled 191 pages of raw data.

Stage two: Reading of the data. The second stage of Giorgi's method began the data analysis requiring multiple readings of the transcripts. After the audio recordings were transcribed, I first reread the transcriptions to ensure accuracy and to get a feel for the comprehensive perspective of the phenomenon. The transcripts were then reread multiple times to gain a sense of the many part as they fit into the whole of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2006) and to identify potential gaps in the data. Participants were emailed requests for additional information or clarification and were offered the opportunity to provide written feedback by email or to discuss the information by phone. For example, while rereading BJ's transcript I was unclear about the timing of her second child's birth being before or during her marriage. I emailed BJ, providing her previous statement and my request for clarification. BJ replied by email, "My third and fourth child was born during the marriage. My second child was born in 2004." Once gaps and clarifications were addressed by the participants, the reading was finished and I was ready to break the narratives into parts.

Stage three: Breaking of the data into parts. The third stage began by separating the data into parts. The parts represented meaning units and were given labels that identified each meaning unit as (a) a chronicle of an event in the life course, narrative as a descriptive summary, or explanation describing the rationale for something (b) a descriptive construct of adult development's disciplinary language, and (c) a descriptive summary of the meaning unit. For example the meaning unit that was

clarified by BJ was first labeled a “narrative”, then identified as “early adulthood”, and described as “daily life with second child as a single mom.” The sequence of labels provided an outline of the transcripts that were again used to identify gaps or incomplete meaning units. Participants were again contacted for clarification or additional information. At this point the data was still in its raw form as verbatim sequential narratives (Giorgi, 1997). The resulting 935 meaning units were then reduced by making the text a light grey to remove meaning units unrelated to the sought phenomenon such as interruptions of the interview conversation and repetitive meaning units, yet maintaining their chronological order (Giorgi, 2009).

Stage four: Organization and expression of the data from disciplinary perspectives. To provide a bridge from the raw data to the transformed data, the meaning units were transformed from first person to third person and placed in a table. Giorgi (1997) related that this distance from the participants allows for better transformation of meaning units. Transformations were then conducted with free imaginative variation utilizing disciplinary constructs of adult development and feminism in the holistic reading of the data to make meaning units more explicit but rendering them at a mid-ranged generalization. Following is the transformation of BJ’s meaning unit presented in the table Stage Four: Transformation of BJ’s Meaning Unit (see Table 3).

Table 3
Stage Four: Transformation of BJ's Meaning Unit

Label	Original Meaning Unit	First Transformation	Final Transformation
Narrative- Early Adulthood- Daily Life with Second Child as a Single Mom	So and then when I had my second child that's when parenting really kind of kicked in. Yeah my older child when she was in school she would come, two months, three months at a time, but when I had my second child she was there every day, day in day out. It was kind of like, wow. And, but then again I have always had the best support system you can think of.	So and then when P6 had her second child that's when parenting really kind of kicked in. Yeah her older child when P6 was in school she would come, two months, three months at a time, but when P6 had her second child she was there every day, day in day out. It was kind of like, wow. And, but then again P6 has always had the best support system you can think of.	Although P6's became a single mother when her first child was born, she only had the baby for short intermittent periods. When P6 had her second child, she truly became a single mother. She was responsible for the daily care of her second child from the baby's birth. It was a drastic change, but P6 has had an excellent support system from childhood through single parenthood.

Stage five: Synthesis or summary of the data. The last stage of the data analysis was intended to result in a description of the phenomenon. The individual transformed meaning units were pulled together and placed side-by-side in a table. They were then transformed using free imaginative variation into a shared and more general meaning unit. In the above meaning unit, it was placed into a row with other participants' meaning units describing their parenthood experiences. The transformed shared meaning units were compiled into a visual repetition (invariant structure) of the phenomenon and reduced until only the essential elements remained. To do this I set to the side all meaning units that were not represented by all of the participants, and then I began removing shared experiences to determine if the phenomenon would collapse. Stage five was concluded with the final invariant structure that represented the shared life course from poverty through post-secondary education, the assumption and exit of

shared social roles, and the additional transitions required to elucidate their shared pathway that is presented in the findings.

Data trustworthiness. As a qualitative study, it is essential that researchers are diligent in the execution of the selected method to ensure the findings are valid (Giorgi, 2006). In addition, despite a rigorous application of the selected method, Giorgi suggested that no research is without vulnerability. However some vulnerability that can be decreased by reducing the length of time between experiences and interviews and having participants check the information for accuracy. To reduce the potential for inaccurate knowledge creation, member checks were utilized in stage two, multiple readings of the data. First, participants were initially asked to clarify narratives that were unclear and correct any data that appeared inaccurate. Then, participants were also asked to expand on narratives that appeared to be incomplete or disconnected. Finally, during the transformation of data, several participants were asked to review invariant structures of their own experiences to ensure accuracy before moving into stage five and synthesizing the data. The findings drawn from the resulting invariant structures were peer reviewed for gaps in conclusions and relevance to the adult learning discipline.

Presentation of Findings

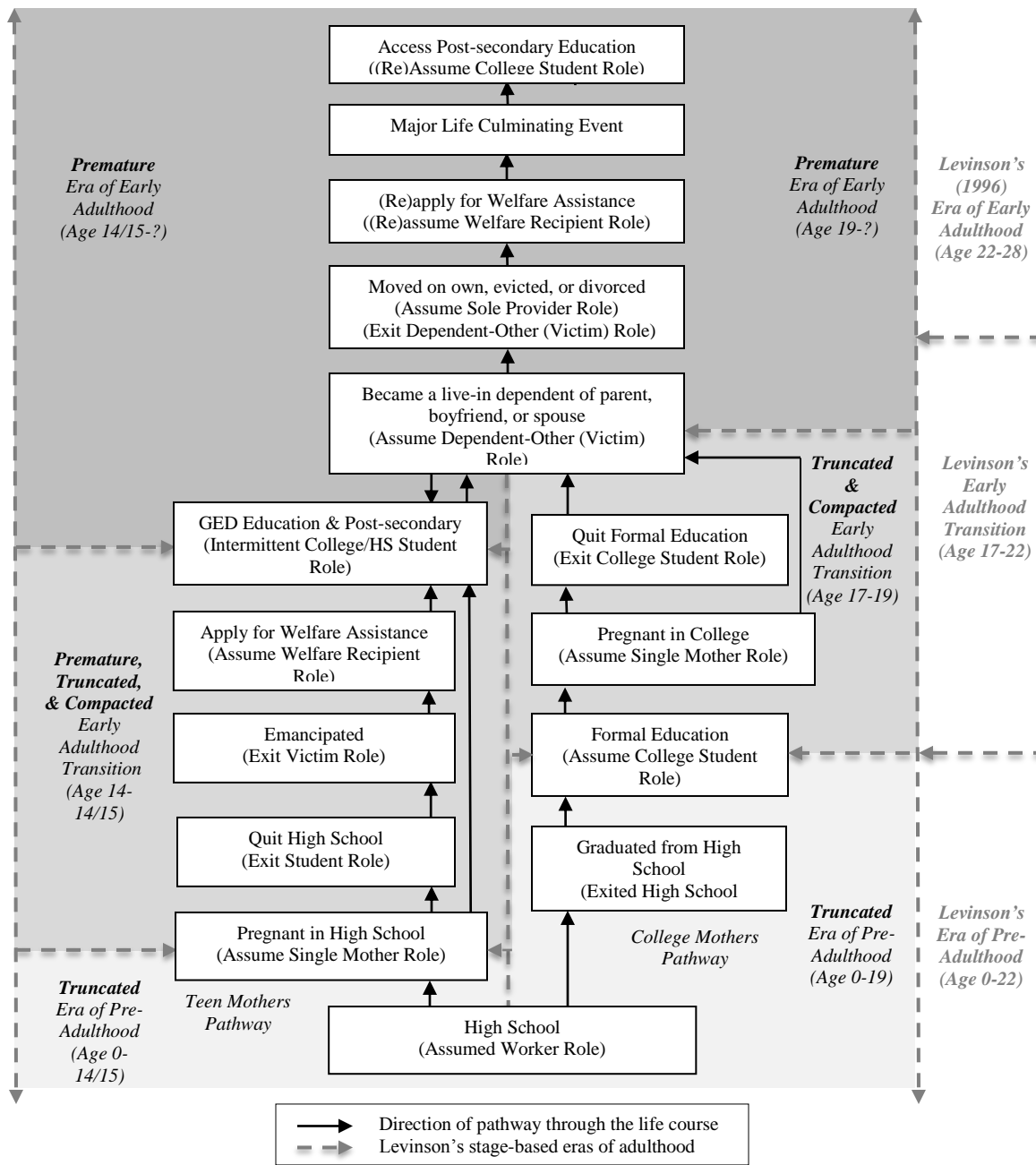
The findings in this section address the first question in a larger study exploring single welfare-reliant mother's experiences in accessing and persisting in post-secondary education. The purpose of this article was to describe the shared experience of six single welfare-reliant mothers as sole providers in the phenomenon of their shared life course, delineating their pathway in the sequence and timing of assuming and exiting the social

roles of single parent, sole provider, worker, and post-secondary student. The data revealed two distinct but merging pathways from childhood to postsecondary education depicted in the figure Single Welfare-Reliant Mothers' Life Structure & Transition Events (see Figure 3). Three of the single mothers transitioned to single parenthood in high school, while three of the mothers transitioned to single parenthood in college. The first group consisted of the teen mothers represented by Tammy, Nancy, and Catalina. The second group included Lisa, Crystal, and BJ, who became single mothers in college. The pathways of these two groups were separate during childhood and the transition to early adulthood but merged in the era of early adulthood when they became mothers who were dependent on another individual. The major findings of this study, pathways from poverty to post-secondary education, are grouped into three sections (1) the shared life course of teen mothers, (2) the shared life course of college mothers, and (3) the merged life course of teen mothers and college mothers.

The Shared Life Course of Teen Mothers

For Tammy, Catalina, and Nancy, the sequence of transitions imbedded in the early adulthood transition are identified on the bottom left of Figure 3. All of the mothers worked part-time while in high school and became single parents in high school. Two of the mothers were forced to quit high school, left home, became emancipated from their parents, and sought welfare assistance. All three of the mothers completed their GED and became live-in dependents of a spouse, friend, or family member. This section described the teen mothers' shared experiences including: (a) becoming a parent in high school, (b) leaving home through the assistance of welfare,

Figure 3
Single Welfare-Reliant Mothers' Life Structure & Transition Events



and (c) seeking non-formal and formal education opportunities.

Single parenthood in high school. The most notable transition for the mothers was the transition to early parenthood. Three of the mothers, Tammy, Nancy, and Catalina entered the transition to parenthood in their teen years. Each described an adolescent life structure with little or no family support.

All three teen mothers gave negative accounts of their home life and struggle to survive as they became mothers themselves. Catalina described her rough childhood with no support, “I had really no family support at the house. I had no supervision . . . I kind of wish I would have back then, but I didn't. I wanted to get out of my dad's house and the situation that I was in.” Similarly, Tammy, who was stolen by her father, noted a difficult home environment resulting in constant power struggles between her and her father. Tammy felt justified to thwart her father's authority, despite the difficulties that it caused her. Tammy clarified, “My dad is like a total racist . . . He [my father] would, talk to the principal and have me put me in ISS [isolation] for weeks at a time. So, I wouldn't be around anybody.”

Tammy, Nancy, and Catalina all transitioned to single parenthood while attending high school during their adolescent phase (13 to 18). Tammy and Nancy became pregnant at 14 and single mothers at 15 years old. Catalina became pregnant at 16 and a single mother at 17. The transition to early parenthood caused two of the three teen mothers to drop out of high school, while one continued in an alternative school. Catalina was forced to drop out of high school by her father. She explained, “I had to drop out because my dad would not allow me to get assistance to finish my education.

He said, ‘No, you play, you pay. You ruined your education and you threw everything away.’”

Tammy’s struggle to survive forced her to drop out of high school. Unable to force Tammy to behave as he wanted, her father sent Tammy to live with her mother where she had no supervision. Tammy got pregnant by a Black man and was promptly disowned by her racist father. Her disinterested mother did not want to be bothered with caring for her emotionally or financially. As Tammy explained, she was unable to remain in high school because she was trying to survive. “My mom had dropped me off at the hotel with eight dollars. And told me . . . be careful; call me if you get into any trouble. That was it. I was like 15 and pregnant.”

Nancy had a very different experience at the alternative school. Although she did not have the emotional support of loving parents, she did have the opportunity to remain with her guardians. She was encouraged by the school staff to continue and get her diploma. Nancy talked about her teacher. “He made a very good teacher as a coach. Sometimes he would just make me so mad, because he pushed just so hard . . . he was just like, [just do it] for your son or yourself.”

Becoming pregnant in high school preempted their transition to early adulthood and truncated their development in high school for two of the mothers. Survival concerns about the future dominated their decisions and impacted their life course transitions. Though the time between transitions varies, each of the mothers sought to survive after leaving home through the assistance of welfare.

Leaving home through welfare assistance. All three of the teen mothers left home during adolescence. Tammy and Catalina left home while they were still pregnant, and Nancy left home after the birth of her child. Nancy returned home and did not seek welfare until later in her life course. However, Tammy and Catalina were the most disadvantaged mothers in this study. They shared their experiences in continuing to work and becoming emancipated from their parents.

Continuing to work. Two of the mothers, Catalina and Tammy, became pregnant before they were legally allowed to assume full-time employment. All three of the teen mothers went to work, but their jobs did not adequately provide for them.

Catalina's father forced her to go to work to provide for her baby or give the baby up for adoption. Catalina said, "I don't believe in abortion and I do not believe in giving up your child just because you can afford to handle it. So, I got a job." The boyfriend that Tammy's mother dropped her off with was a drug dealer. She was given the option to live on the street and starve, which she tried, or to sell drugs. Finding no other options available to her, Tammy illustrated her experience selling drugs. "They showed me how to sell crack. And that was for two months. When I first found out I was pregnant, that is how I would have a place to stay. I'd sell crack; I'd transport crack."

Although Catalina and Tammy were teen mothers, they both sought to provide for their babies through work. When they realized that they would be unable to support their children, they sought welfare assistance. However, to gain welfare with their abusive and absent parents, they had to become emancipated.

Emancipation and seeking welfare assistance. Tammy and Catalina were forced out of their homes and were not able to make ends meet. However, Nancy, who chose to leave home seeking a more emotionally stable environment, quickly returned to her guardian. Like Tammy and Catalina, she found that she was unprepared to financially support her child. However, unlike Nancy, Tammy and Catalina felt that they had no options but to seek assistance through welfare. In order to qualify for welfare assistance, both Tammy and Catalina emancipated themselves from their parents.

Catalina initially remained home while she was working until her father began beating her. Catalina described her flight from her abusive father, leaving home, and seeking emancipation:

The first time he laid a hand on me, I said, “No, you're not doing this to me.” I packed my bags and I left home at the age of 16. I went to Arkansas, and that is where my brother that lives. He introduced me to the welfare department. I pretty much emancipated myself that way I could take care of myself going to school and things I needed to do.

Tammy sought refuge with family members to get out of selling drugs. She stayed with an uncle who originally hid his desire to adopt her baby. After learning that her uncle was trying to take her baby, Tammy convinced her mother to allow her to stay with her for a short time. However, her mother would not financially support her. Tammy described going to the welfare office with her mother to be declared independent. She related, “She went up there and signed paperwork that said, look I'm

not feeding her and her kid. You have to do it because I'm not going to support extra people.”

For Tammy and Catalina their transition to early adulthood began by truncating their life course in pre-adulthood. The severity of their situations caused them to seek welfare assistance earlier than the remainder of the single mothers. Tammy summed up her choice to apply for welfare, “I did it on my own. It was sink or swim, starve.”

The timing of the transitions of leaving home and seeking welfare assistance varies for each of the teen mothers. The lack of support and the presence of child abuse at home substantially impacted the mothers’ ability to remain in a safe environment or seek welfare assistance. Despite leaving home early and seeking welfare, the two mothers who were forced to drop out of high school later returned to complete their GED.

Formal and non-formal education. Although Nancy continued in the alternative school and graduated with a GED, Tammy and Catalina were unable to do so. Both Tammy and Catalina enjoyed being in high school and considered themselves good students. They stated that they would not have chosen to quit high school if they were aware of other alternatives. Subsequently, both mothers returned to school after the birth of their child seeking to complete a GED.

Catalina returned to her father’s home in Texas after an unsuccessful move to her brother’s home. When she moved back in with her father, she continued her welfare benefits, was able to return to school, and complete her GED. Catalina expounded on her transition, “My dad never apologized to me, but he did take me back. I transferred

my Medicaid to Texas . . . and I got my GED in 1995. I was supposed to graduate high school in 1992.”

Tammy took much longer to return to school and complete her GED. Tammy’s decision was driven by her need to survive. Seeking shelter, she lived with several friends and boyfriends during this time, having three more children. Tammy noted that she realized she needed to go back to school. Investigating her options, Tammy felt her best option was a trade school. Frustrated with unfolding events, Tammy explained, “So, I was like, I’ll go get my GED and whatever and get into college. I started looking for colleges in this area and then I found out I was pregnant again. And I still went ahead with college.”

Becoming pregnant in high school truncated their secondary education development, forcing one of the mothers into an alternative school and two of the mothers to drop out of high school. Although the time to return to high school and complete a GED varied, each of the mothers recognized the need to further their education despite difficult and impoverished circumstances.

Summary. In this section I presented the unique pathways of teen mothers from childhood to early adulthood. The findings suggest that the teen mothers experienced a premature and truncated early adult transition. In addition, the early transition to single parenthood caused a divergent pathway for Nancy compared with Tammy and Catalina. Nancy completed high school and returned home after leaving home early. In effect, the availability of a safe environment reduced the impact of the early transition to parenthood. However, for Tammy and Catalina, the presence of child abuse had a direct

impact on the severity of impact of the early transition to parenthood on their life course. They dropped out of high school, left home early, became emancipated, qualified for welfare assistance, and eventually returned to complete their GED. The pathway of the teen mothers that were revealed in this study was substantially different from the women of this study who became single mothers in college.

The Shared Life Course of Single College Mothers

The college mothers as a group were diverse in circumstances. For Lisa, BJ, and Crystal, the sequence of transition events that truncated their early adulthood transition are identified on the bottom right of Figure 3. Each of these mothers followed a shared sequence of transitions, graduating from high school, leaving home, and accessing post-secondary education. However, while BJ and Lisa progressed through this life course without incident, Crystal came from a different background, causing her life course to alter slightly with her transition to full-time work from high school and subsequently caused her to select an online educational institution. While all three of the mothers became pregnant while attending college, only one of those mothers chose to drop out of college. This section described the college mothers' experiences including: (a) leaving home, (b) single parenthood in college, and (c) quitting college.

Leaving home. All of the mothers worked part-time while in high school and graduated from high school on time. Crystal left home, but it was not until after she had a full-time job to support herself that she began attending an online post-secondary educational institution toward a bachelor's degree. However, Lisa and BJ left home to attend a post-secondary educational institution that lead toward a bachelor's degree.

BJ came from a middle class family. Her mother was a single mom in situational poverty for a short time. Attending college was presented by her mother as an essential transition. BJ worked in high school to help pay for her college education. She described her experience in seeking independence as choosing to enroll in college without help. BJ said:

It [college] was something that I knew I was going to do, regardless. I went and I filled out the application on my own. I went to freshman orientation by myself. I actually met another friend, we went to the same school, so we kind of went by ourselves. Our parents were at home and we stayed at the dorm. . . . You know, I did a lot of it by myself.

Lisa also came from a middle class family. She worked during high school as well to help pay for college. Going to college was an expectation in her family. Lisa described her choice to attend college away from home as a means to gain some independence. Lisa explained this decision, “It was far enough away and yet it was close and I have family.”

Crystal came from a low-income background. She also worked throughout high school, but did not have a college fund. Crystal worked to help support her siblings and have food to eat. Crystal and her sisters lived with their mother, whom she described as a user as well as a negligent and abusive mother. Needing to escape her situation at home, Crystal chose an online college so that she could transition to full-time work to provide for herself. Crystal rationalized her choice, “Your work has to be your first

priority. So I have to have a school that does online classes I started going to online classes so that I could work full-time, or overtime, or whatever I needed.”

The timing of the transitions leaving home and attending post-secondary education varied by social class and was impacted by the home environment. For BJ and Lisa coming from middle class stable homes, their transitions to higher education were seamless. However, for Crystal, coming from a low-income unstable home, her transition to higher education was impacted by her need to leave an unsupportive and abusive environment. Despite the varied timing of their transitions to higher education, all of the mothers interrupted their early adult transition by their out of sequence and early transition to single parenthood.

Single parenthood in college. Each of the three mothers became pregnant in college, interrupting their early adult transition. However, only Crystal and Lisa truncated their early adult transition by becoming single custodial parents living with their children. BJ, whose mother experienced life as a low-income single mother, gave temporary custody of her daughter to her mother.

Crystal found out she was pregnant her first year in college. She had just lost her job and was looking for a new one. When she found out she was pregnant, she was not sure how she was going to support the baby by herself, while the father pushed her to abort the baby. She divulged the moment when she realized that she would have to be responsible:

The father didn't want our child; he wanted me to have an abortion. I wasn't going to do that. I thought about it at first. I'm not going to lie about it. Because

I was young, I'm doing so good in school, and you don't want to disappoint your family. But . . . I knew I couldn't kill her And I have been raising my baby ever since.

Lisa also found out that she was pregnant her first year in college and chose to finish out the year. She returned home to have her baby. She described her experience in college as a need to fit in and behaving in a way that was not really her. She revealed her realization that she had made bad decisions and needed to assume responsibility for them. Lisa explained:

I knew right from wrong. But . . . I just [wanted to] feel accepted, you know do what they're doing so you feel cool and they think you're cool But, I think I could have made better decisions in some of the people I had hung out with.

Both Crystal and Lisa described a moment when they realized that they had to accept the responsibility of their baby. For Crystal it was a realization that the new life was now her sole responsibility. For Lisa it was a realization that her actions and decisions resulted in a baby. Both mothers made adjustments to their life that they believed would enable them to meet the needs of their new child.

Post-secondary education. Similar to the teen mothers, the transition to early parenthood caused one of the three college student mothers to drop out of college. Like the teen mothers, Lisa noted that as a single mother, it was her responsibility to work and provide for her child. Unlike Lisa, BJ gave up custody of her baby temporarily so that she could complete college. However, she changed her major so she could finish sooner. Crystal had no support network to rely on for assistance. However, acknowledging the

financial advantages of acquiring a post-secondary education, she remained in college after transitioning to early parenthood.

While BJ attributed her persistence in college to her mother's support stating, "My mom provided a lot of assistance for me, as long as I stayed in school," Crystal attributed her persistence to being enrolled in a wholly online university. Crystal continued toward her educational goals regardless of her context of profound financial hardship. Throughout this segment of her life course, Crystal endured recurring unemployment, relocation between states, homelessness, lack of transportation, and lack of a personal computer. Crystal summed up her difficulties: "Every time I lost a job. There were a lot of critical junctures . . . when I was failing, when I moved to Texas, when I was getting beat up on."

Several other mothers also indicated their preference for online education after accessing post-secondary education at local universities. After participating in online education, only Lisa indicated that she did not have the personal characteristics to succeed in online education. Lisa summed her experience, "I tried three online classes and one night class. And it killed me."

Despite two mothers coming from middle class backgrounds with parental expectations of attending college and one mother coming from a low social class background with no parental encouragement to attend college, social class did not clearly divide those who persisted and those who did not persist in college. Lisa, despite coming from a middle class background, dropped out of college. BJ, also coming from a middle class background, did persist in college. However, BJ's mother had experience

as a single mother in poverty and pushed BJ to continue, while Crystal, who experienced poverty first hand, chose to remain in college.

Summary. In this section presented the unique pathways of college mothers from childhood to early adulthood. The findings suggest that the college mothers experienced a truncated early adult transition. In addition, the early transition to single parenthood caused a divergent pathway for Crystal and BJ compared with Lisa. For Crystal and BJ, the experience of childhood poverty had a direct impact on the impact of early parenthood on their decision to remain in post-secondary education. However, Lisa's middle class and Christian background had a direct impact on her decision to drop out of college and return home. The pathways of teen mothers and college mothers merged as they entered dependent relationships in their early adulthood.

Merged Life Course of Teen and College Mothers

Within their life course, the pathways of teen mothers and college mothers merged in early adulthood. The sequence of transitions is identified in the middle of Figure 3 where the two pathways merge. This section of the pathway illustrates where mothers assumed the role of live-in dependent other, moved toward the outcome of becoming a sole provider, and chose to seek access to post-secondary education. Clearly, the timing of the transition to early parenthood did not affect the pathway of their shared life course once it merged, which included: (a) becoming a live-in-dependent, (b) becoming a sole provider, (c) seeking welfare assistance, and (d) seeking access to post-secondary education.

Becoming a live-in dependent. Each of the mothers became a live-in dependent of another, after becoming a single parent. Some of the mothers lived with a relative, including parents, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Most of the mothers married, only to divorce later, and several of the mothers choose co-habitation with a boyfriend.

Lisa, Crystal, Catalina, and BJ married after their first child was born. Crystal and Catalina both married the father of the child. Crystal rationalized her decision. “I thought, well I got pregnant. His dad was a pastor, he was in the church, and I had always been in the church. We thought the best thing to do was to get married.” Unlike Crystal, Catalina waited a while before marrying the father. She justified her decision, “The dad was not a part of my life at the time that I had my oldest child . . . when he found out . . . we moved in together. I never married him until 1993.” Lisa and BJ terminated their relationships with the fathers of the babies and later married other men. Lisa married her high school sweetheart. While BJ, who continued her degree, got married after graduation from college. Unlike the other mothers, Tammy did not marry, but rather moved in with a boyfriend and later from one boyfriend to another. Like Catalina and Crystal, Tammy found herself the victim of abuse in her relationships but was unable to move on her own. Tammy described trying to leave an abusive relationship:

He just beat me so bad. I mean, when my cousin came to the hospital . . . she walked right past me . . . because I was completely deformed. He broke my nose, my lips were blue, like Black, Black Black, turned all the way out, he fractured my ribs, he beat me . . . That's what happened when I left him.

Nancy was the only mother who did not marry or move in with a boyfriend. However, she moved in with girlfriends, but later moved back with her grandfather. She realized that she needed to be dependent on someone because she could not make it on her own. She related her choice to move back with her grandfather. “I moved out on my own, I tried to move in with friends. And then that was like, well I better go back and save up to go on my own. So I went back for a little bit.”

Each of the mothers sought dependent relationships after becoming a single mother. While in those relationship most of the mothers had additional children. Lisa had one additional child, Catalina had three additional children, and BJ had three additional children before their divorces. Tammy had three additional children with her boyfriends, and Nancy had one additional child. While these mothers had difficulty providing for one child, now they were moving on their own as sole providers for multiple children.

Becoming a sole provider. The transition to sole provider, which was expected to coincide with the transition to early parenthood, occurred much later in the shared life course of the mothers. Each of the mothers left their situation as live-in dependents, most of them not leaving of their own choosing, and several in conjunction with spousal abuse. Upon leaving, they each found themselves the sole provider for their child(ren) but with no means to do so.

Crystal and Catalina, who had married the father of their children, later divorced their husbands due to spousal abuse. Crystal explained that she tried to remain married. “He started abusing me and the last time he did I left. And then I went back to him . . .

and he did the same thing not even a month later. So I left.” Catalina was also the victim of spousal abuse. While Crystal was married only a short time, Catalina was married for several years. The abuse started out as verbal abuse and later turned into physical abuse. Like Crystal, she tried to remain in the abusive relationship. Catalina did not think she had any options. Finally she found out that her husband was running a meth lab. Her concern for the safety of her children drove her to seek shelter at a safe house through police custody. Catalina said, “I was not going have them raised in a situation where there was that going on.” She sought and was granted sole custody of her children. Though she initially moved back with her father, she eventually moved out on her own but was close to him so he could help with the children.

Although Catalina and Tammy left their significant others, Lisa, who was left by her spouse, found she destitute and jobless when she was forced to move on her own. Lisa said, “After I had my son, he said, ‘You don't have to work you have to have to’, I didn’t have a job . . . I had nothing. He kicked us out of the house, took the car.” Tammy, although never married, was living with her fiancé. She described her reaction after finding out that he was cheating on her.

I have no money, I quit school, I moved down here, I have this rent to worry about because we’re renting to own a house. I did all this work on this house thinking we’re good, we’re staying, whatever. And I have no car, I have nothing, I have just completely put my faith in a person again, and should have never done it.

Similarly Catalina was left destitute and desperate when her second husband left her. She elaborated on her desperate search for a job, “When we got divorced, he left me in such a bind I found a job living in another state So we left Texas and I went to work the very next day. I had gone back on welfare because I was stranded.”

BJ was the only mother who divorced her husband and had a full-time position to provide for her family. Like Nancy, she had very little to say about her ex-husband. However, she noted that choosing to change degrees allowed her to finish college early and qualify for a professional position. BJ said, “I switched from nursing to business so that I could go ahead and graduate and start working after I became a single mom.” However, the income from this position was not sufficient to support her four children.

Becoming a sole provider for each of these mothers was about leaving their dependent relationships that included spouses, boyfriends, and friends. The transition to sole provider did not coincide with single parenthood, but rather followed it. Also, becoming a sole provider was unplanned, resulting in insufficient funds to provide for their children and causing them to seek welfare assistance.

Seeking welfare assistance. The assumption or re-assumption of welfare assistance was directly linked to their status as a mother and a sole provider. For teen mothers who were abused and lacked family support, they cycled on and off welfare assistance after becoming single mothers. Becoming a sole provider caused them to re-apply for welfare assistance. However, for the remaining mothers, becoming a sole provider was their catalyst to apply for welfare assistance.

Two of the mothers, Tammy and Catalina, were teen mothers who were aged 15 at the birth of their child. Both of these mothers were victims of child abuse. It is clear that in this study, their choice to seek welfare assistance was directly related to their lack of family support but more specifically by their shared experience of child abuse. Catalina said, “I was young and dumb, . . . I had nowhere to go.” Both mothers sought welfare assistance when becoming single teen mothers, both experienced becoming sole providers earlier in their life course than the other mothers in this study, and, subsequently, both experienced long-term welfare recidivism.

The remaining four mothers sought welfare assistance after becoming sole providers. They described welfare assistance as a last resort strategy to provide food and shelter for their children. Lisa described her discussion with her mother when she made her decision to apply for welfare assistance. She revealed, “I was very embarrassed. I think . . . to this day, I still kind of am. But, mom and I sat down and she was like, this is what you are making.” Crystal’s mother also encouraged her to apply for welfare. Having no apparent options, Crystal said, “I remember while I was pregnant, I didn't know what to do. My mom, she was the one that took me down to the welfare office where I could get some kind of help.”

For each of the mothers in this study, welfare assistance was a safety net when no other options were available to them. However, for Catalina and Crystal, they identified welfare as a trap and an obstacle to economic self-sufficiency. Catalina, one of the abused teen mothers, described welfare as a trap that caused conflicting emotions of frustration and security. She related:

I never got away from welfare for long. I hate saying this, but it kinda got to where I was dependent upon it because I felt safe knowing that I had the benefits. I knew my kids were going to be fed. I knew that she was going to have medical insurance. And, I knew that the worst-case scenario, even if I did work at the time, even if she wasn't going to school, I knew that there would be some form of nutrition for her.

Like Catalina, Crystal was also abused and neglected as a child. However, she got pregnant after beginning post-secondary education and was already in the labor market in a full-time position. Her difficulty with employers going out of business or downsizing continually placed her in a desperate financial position. After exhausting her unemployment benefits and feeling out of options, she illustrated her emotional distress at the situation:

The money you get, it's really nothing. You still struggle just as much. It is like you spend money just to get the money. Driving to the workplaces, driving to a lead, and nobody hires. Even before you can even get leads you have to drive to the work centers every day. You have to work or you have to volunteer somewhere.

Nancy and Catalina identified welfare and their welfare counselors as the catalyst and resource for allowing them access to post-secondary education. Catalina described welfare as a trap, but also as a catalyst for attending post-secondary education. She related, "It was easier for me to get in college, I guess, because I was on welfare. They were kind of like, this is a welfare-to-work type thing. So, it was easier." Like the other

mothers, Nancy initially applied for welfare assistance out of necessity. She was working, yet her income was so low that she was still receiving welfare benefits. Nancy questioned the welfare counselor about her options for continuing her education. Based on their helpful answers, Nancy applied for a loan and quit her job to attend school full-time. She elaborated on the help provided by the welfare counselors:

I met with the caseworker, and they were telling me what I needed to turn in. I just turned in stuff, my work and my kids' information . . . I was worried when I took out the loan this semester. I told the caseworker, they [financial aid] are going to give me this much money for school, does that affect my benefits? She said no because that it was part of the grant.

Welfare assistance was a necessary but embarrassing strategy for each of the mothers. Each of the mothers was led to apply for welfare benefits by a family member or a friend. Feeling out of options they applied for welfare assistance. Crystal and Catalina described welfare as a trap that prevented them from moving out of poverty. Yet, Nancy and Catalina both attributed welfare counselors and welfare benefits as essential components of their choices to attend post-secondary education.

Access to post-secondary education. All of the mothers had previous experience in post-secondary education prior to their current degree program. The mothers who got pregnant in college each identified the value of education as a catalyst for maintaining enrollment or returning to post-secondary education. However, the teen mothers related that they struggled with educational and work barriers as well as

personal issues that continuously interrupted educational progress after initially accessing post-secondary education.

Lisa, BJ, and Crystal identified their reasons for remaining in or returning to post-secondary education. Lisa left college after becoming pregnant but returned after getting divorced. Although BJ completed her bachelor's degree, she also returned to post-secondary education to increase her income potential after becoming divorced. She justified her decision. "I know just having a bachelor's degree wouldn't cut it. You can only go so far with a bachelor's degree and experience, but yet with a master's degree you can go further and the income becomes better."

Crystal remained in her degree program despite inconsistent employment and has yet to graduate. She supported her decision:

I think I will have better opportunities for jobs [when I graduate]. I'm not saying that a billing clerk is bad or anything. It has paid my bills. The problem is that a billing clerk and a contracted psychologist are at [opposite] polls that are totally different. [Being a psychologist], you feel alone, but secure, you are not worried if this job will collapse. I can get to comfortable here and a couple years later it is still going to be okay. But if the economy gets worse, I will feel a lot more secure in my [professional] job, which would relieve a lot of stress. I wouldn't have to worry about my daughter's financial security. And, to me that alone is just, whoo! I want to be able to take care of her.

Nancy, Tammy, and Catalina described their frustrating effort to maintain attendance in post-secondary education. Nancy had a brief experience attending post-

secondary education but was unable to maintain enrollment due to lack of childcare. Tammy received her GED and repeatedly tried to attend college to support her children, but unstable relationships, unstable housing, and a child with a severe health condition have prevented her from maintaining attendance requirements. The first time she dropped out of college because she lost her transportation and babysitter. The college allowed her back due to what she described as “ridiculous extenuating circumstances.” However, she dropped out again to get married. She said, “I quit school like an idiot and came down here [with him].” However, when their relationship ended she had no shelter or transportation. She also had difficulty maintaining attendance when her son had issues at school. Tammy said, “My son is a constant thing. I have to leave class a lot of the time because of that [his autism].” Likewise, Catalina received her GED and repeatedly tried to attend college for self-development during an extended abusive relationship, which prevented her from completing a degree. Catalina related:

The family that I was married into, his mom convinced my husband that if I continued with my education, then I was going to be smarter than him and I would leave him. He believed that and would not allow me to finish my education. He did everything he could to make sure that I was not able to get it.

Each of these mothers became sole providers and lacking sufficient funds, applied for welfare assistance. Each of the mothers had previous experience in post-secondary education. The mothers who became pregnant in college appeared to have less difficulty persisting in college once they reapplied. However, the teen mothers consistently had difficulty completing their degree programs.

Summary

Though not all of the mothers came from poverty in pre-adulthood, at the time of this study all of the mothers, in early adulthood, were living in poverty with their children. The context their transition to early adulthood and their outcome in poverty highlights the developmental cycle's premature, truncated, and compacted period, giving rise to questions about its impact on the developing social roles and life course of these young women.

Discussion of Findings

This section will examine the major findings compared to previous research studies, which include the life course of women based on transition events, the impact on transitions to higher education by other transition events, and the impact of individual demographics on transitions to higher education.

The Life Course of Women

Based on previous research, the findings in this study identified standard transition events such as leaving home, completing education, working, marriage, and parenthood (Mouw, 2004). However, these standard transition events were not sufficient to fully explain single welfare-reliant mothers' pathways to adulthood. In addition to these standard transition events, single welfare-reliant mothers in this study also identified transition events such as emancipation, welfare assistance, becoming single parents, becoming non-married dependents, and becoming sole providers.

The additional transition events also elucidate unique pathways for these mothers. Two distinct pathways emerged that were unique from those identified in

previous research (Mouw, 2004; Pallas, 1993). These unique pathways revealed that the length and quality of transitions to adulthood were also impacted. This study found that for the first group of mothers, teen parenthood between the ages of 14 and 17 caused mothers to experience their transitions to early adulthood as premature, truncated, and compacted or shortening their transitions to early adulthood as suggested by previous research (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Pallas, 1993), but unlike previous research this study found that parenthood in post-secondary education between the ages of 19 and 20 also truncated or shortened the transition to early adulthood (Levinson, 1996). In addition, this study also found that due to teen parenthood the era of pre-adulthood for these mothers was truncated, causing a premature transition to early adulthood.

Contrary to previous research, the critical event of single parenthood did not negatively impact the era of early adulthood for all of the mothers (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Pallas, 1993). Rather, as suggested by Leadbeater and Way (2010), teen mothers who were in non-supportive environments endured the most negative effects from their critical events of teen parenthood. Two teen mothers were victims of child abuse and one teen mother was in a supportive home. Both mothers, who were victims of child abuse, were forced to drop out of secondary education, forced or fled from their home, and applied for welfare assistance. The teen mother in the supportive environment completed her secondary education, transitioned to full-time work, and left home to live independently. Supporting previous research by Leadbeater and Way, the presence of a

supportive environment had a substantial impact on mitigating the negative effects of the critical event, single teen parenthood.

Future research should investigate the impact of premature and truncated transitions to early adulthood and timely but truncated transitions to early adulthood for a larger sample of single welfare-reliant mothers. Findings suggest the difference in the impact of the critical event, single parenthood, may be a result of one factor or a combination of two factors. The first factor, teen mothers who suffered the most negative effects had two critical events; they left home before the age of 18 and they became single parents before the age of 25 as suggested by previous research (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Pallas, 1993). Whereas, the other mothers encountered only one critical event, becoming single parents before the age of 25. However, although college mothers were not living with their parents, the two mothers from supportive family environments remained financially dependent on their parents. The second factor, teen mothers experienced both a premature, compacted, and truncated transition to adulthood. This means that teen mothers ended their childhoods early, not only being unprepared to become adults but also experiencing much shorter transitions to early adulthood. The second group of college mothers, however, had already begun the process of becoming adults, reducing the effects of the shortened transition to early adulthood. Despite the negative effects of the critical event, single parenthood, each of these single mothers eventually transitioned to higher education within their pathway to adulthood.

Transitions to Higher Education

Research focusing on transitions to higher education has sought to identify the impact of transitions to parenthood, marriage, and employment on transitions to higher education. Previous research has also sought to identify the impact of individual demographics such as social class and gender that may have impacted or delayed transitions to higher education. This discussion separated findings of this study between access and persistence in the transition to post-secondary education.

Access to post-secondary education. The two groups within this study included teen mothers and mothers who were attending college at the time they became single parents. Therefore, issues in access to post-secondary education are substantially different between each group.

This study partially supported previous research that indicated parenthood and marriage had a negative impact on transitions to higher education but only within the first group, entailing teen mothers' access to post-secondary education (Haggstrom et al., 1986). Further this study sought to elucidate the sequence and timing of transitions as mothers moved from pre-adulthood to early adulthood. This study found that all of the participants transitioned to early work roles. However, reasons for the early work transition differed between mothers by socioeconomic class. Despite the diverging reasons for assuming early work roles, contrary to previous research, mothers indicated that work roles did not prevent or delay transitions to post-secondary education (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). Rather, consistent with prior research (Andres & Adamuti-Trache), all of the teen mothers indicated that early parenthood was the cause for their

delay in transitioning to post-secondary education. Finally, consistent with prior research, the mother's low-socioeconomic background was not by itself the cause of delaying the transition to post-secondary education (Gorard & Smith, 2011). Rather for teen mothers, being victims of child abuse that resulted in withdrawing from secondary education in conjunction with low socioeconomic status described by mothers as lack of shelter, lack of food, and lack of transportation were the causes of delayed access to post-secondary education. Although access to post-secondary education was delayed, all of the teen mothers eventually acquired a GED and accessed post-secondary education. However, concerns of persistence in post-secondary education affected both groups of mothers.

Persistence in post-secondary education. Mothers identified a shared sequence of transition events that impacted their persistence in post-secondary education, including single parenthood, welfare assistance, getting married or becoming live-in dependents, divorcing or leaving dependent relationships, and becoming sole providers. The discussion of persistence in post-secondary education is segmented by findings unique to teen mothers, unique to college mothers, and those findings that spanned both groups.

The first group, teen mothers, completed their GED, delayed entry, and then transitioned to post-secondary education. Some of the findings in persistence toward educational goals were unique to their status as teen mothers. Contrary to prior research, this study found that teen mothers who attained a GED or delayed entry to post-secondary education persisted intermittently or consistently on a part-time schedule

toward educational goals over their life course (Jacob & King, 2002). Therefore, although teen mothers in this study were more likely to remain in post-secondary education for a longer period of time, they continued to incrementally persist in their educational goals.

In the second group of college mothers, two of three remained in college to the completion of their educational goals. Some of the findings in persistence toward educational goals were unique to their status as current post-secondary education students. Inconsistent with prior research, this study found that for the second group of college mothers, early parenthood was not likely to have a negative effect on persistence for mothers who were currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution (Jacob & King, 2002). This study found, contrary to previous findings, parental background was likely to positively impact persistence as well as access to post-secondary education for college mothers whose parents were both middle class and educated (Jacob & King).

Findings that subsumed both groups mirrored their merged pathways to adulthood. Single welfare-reliant mothers as a holistic group merged their pathways when they transitioned to marriage or became live-in dependents. Their merged pathways continued with mothers becoming sole providers, subsequently applying for or re-applying for welfare assistance, and returning to post-secondary education. This study supported the previous assumption that single mothers are more likely to seek access to higher education than married mothers (Haggstrom et al., 1986). However, in contrast to previous findings, this study determined that while mothers within both groups were married they were less likely to persist in their educational goals (Jacob &

King, 2002). However, as noted previously, once mothers divorced or left their live-in dependent situations becoming single mothers and sole providers, their children's presence positively impacted their decisions to persist in post-secondary education (Christopher, 2005; Jennings, 2004).

Similar to previous research, mothers in this study indicated that as a vulnerable population they were more likely to persist in educational goals (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). Mothers from both groups in this study indicated that as single welfare-reliant mothers who were sole providers for their children, they were vulnerable to changes in the economy and of little value to employers as single unskilled mothers. Deeming themselves a unique and vulnerable population, these mothers reiterated their need to persist in their education for economic reasons and as a means to move out of their vulnerable status.

Summary of Discussion

This study delineated two distinct pathways to adulthood for a small group of single welfare-reliant mothers that resulted in several notable findings. This study identified several additional transition events needed to explain the life course of these single welfare-reliant mothers including that of emancipation, welfare assistance, becoming single parents, becoming non-married dependents, and becoming sole providers. This study found that for teen mothers premature, truncated, and compacted transitions to early adulthood resulted from the critical event of single parenthood and when combined with child abuse, it resulted in extended negative impacts on completion of secondary education and access to post-secondary education. This study also

confirmed that teen mothers were more likely to delay access to post-secondary education but found that they persisted incrementally toward educational goals. This study found that for college mothers, truncated and compacted transitions to early adulthood were unlikely to result in negative impacts on completion of post-secondary education from the critical event of early single parenthood when their parents were both middle class and educated. Finally, this study determined that being single parents and welfare-reliant mothers positively impacted their persistence in post-secondary education for all single welfare-reliant mothers in this study.

Conclusion

In summary, the DHHS revised position in 2008, allowed access to post-secondary education for welfare-reliant mothers, and contributed to positive outcomes for these six welfare-reliant mothers. Such outcomes of welfare reform in the lives of women are of particular interest to feminist researchers who seek to highlight political systems that reproduce dominant morality at the expense of marginalized women (Hutchings, 2004). In addition, it is evident that welfare reform has implications for higher education policy and impacts access to and persistence in post-secondary education for single welfare-reliant mothers. Giving voice to the lives of single welfare-reliant mothers helps to resist assumptions that underpin the perceived validity of punitive and selective practices within the application of welfare policy. More research is needed that reveals the impact of recent changes in welfare reform and its impact on welfare-reliant mothers' opportunities that set them apart as a vulnerable population,

including their incredible determination to seek access to and persistence in post-secondary education (Christopher, 2005).

CHAPTER V
SECOND MANUSCRIPT
A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ADULT IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: SINGLE
WELFARE-RELIANT MOTHERS AS SOLE PROVIDERS

This phenomenological study explored the life courses of six single welfare-reliant mothers who were participating in post-secondary education with the intention of graduating and entering full-time employment. The persistence of these mothers in post-secondary education is of particular interest to feminist researchers due the wave of welfare-reliant mothers who were forced out of post-secondary education by welfare reform's work-first requirements in the late 1990s (Bloom, 2009; Christopher, 2005; London, 2006). At that time, welfare-reliant mothers were forced to choose between maintaining their welfare benefits to provide food and shelter for their children or working low-wage dead end jobs that would gain them entrance into the ranks of the working poor (Handler, 2006). Historically, only 28% to 36% of welfare-reliant mothers persisted in post-secondary education beyond one year (London, 2006; Schneider, 2000), 16% graduated from college while on welfare, and another 20% graduated after leaving welfare (London, 2006). Because women with associate's degrees increase their potential earnings by 30% and bachelor's degrees increase their potential earnings by 51% (Bloom, 2009; Kane & Rouse, 1995; London, 2006; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008), it is essential to understand why some welfare-reliant mothers are

successful at persisting in post-secondary education.

Recent changes in welfare reform allow welfare-reliant mothers to participate in post-secondary education for 12 months in lieu of work requirements (Federal Register 45, 2008). Christopher (2005) suggested that the integration of multiple roles, the roles of worker and student with those of mother and welfare recipient, beyond the 12 months make persisting in post-secondary education difficult. Whereas, Lee and Oyserman (2009) suggested that mothers' expectations of positive future identities would contribute to their persistence in education programs. In addition, the presence of children has been found to encourage low-income single mothers to persist in post-secondary education (Bloom, 2009; Bradburn et al., 1995; Christopher, 2005; Jennings, 2004; Jacobs & King, 2002; Haggstrom, Kanouse, & Morrison, 1986). Yet despite these conclusions, uncertainty remains about what factors influence single welfare-reliant mothers to persistence in post-secondary education. The purpose of this article is to describe the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course that influenced their identity development as sole providers and subsequently impacted their choices to access and persist in post-secondary education.

Background of the Problem

Research studies investigating transitions to higher education, or success in accessing and persisting toward post-secondary education goals, have subsumed welfare-reliant mothers in larger populations of teenage mothers (Haggstrom et al., 1986), mothers in college (Jacobs & King, 2002), and women of low-socioeconomic status (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Gorard & Smith, 2011). However, these

studies have not sought to elucidate welfare-reliant mothers as a unique group or to reveal the impact of transition events in their lives; rather these studies have focused on a very narrow aspect of mothers' life courses entailing a single transition event. Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper (2003) suggested that to better understand transitions and their developmental issues that impact the success of a specific group requires an understanding their multiple identities as well the their position in society.

As a group, single welfare-reliant mothers are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. Therefore, race, ethnicity, and culture represent the multiplicity of diverse identities (Croteau, Talbot, Lance, & Evans, 2002; Jones, 1997) within the group of single welfare-reliant mothers but not a shared identity of the group. As a group's shared identity, single welfare-reliant mothers can claim membership in the female gender, motherhood, and low socioeconomic class. Being a female and a mother is a component of one's identity (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Giordano, 2001; Josselson, 1983; Lee & Oyserman, 2009) and low-income socioeconomic status is part of one's life course (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Gorard & Smith, 2011). Therefore, the multiple identities of gender, motherhood, and social class derived from socioeconomic status are also related to the group's shared multiple identities and subsequently their shared position in society.

Torres et al. (2003) proposed that an individual's position in society in non-dominant groups was represented in a societal framework that produces societal norms, historical assumptions about social groups and oppression. They indicated an identifier of oppression was the use of negative stereotypes to stigmatize and subjugate specific

social groups. Within this framework single welfare-reliant mothers have been stereotyped as unworthy mothers in caring for their children (Bremner, 1971; Goodwin, 1995), affirmed as lacking in moral values (Levine, 2001), classified as lazy parasites who leach on society's benefice (Corcoran, Danziger, & Kalil, 2002), and finally subjugated by political mechanisms that enforce dominant concepts of morality (Boris, 1998; Collins & Mayer, 2010; Corcoran et al., 2002; Hays, 2003; Goodwin, 1995; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Saxton, 2003; Ridzi, 2009).

Clearly, single welfare-reliant mothers' positions in society and the context within which their identities are developed and interact framed them as vulnerable and marginalized mothers. Therefore, investigating the identity development of welfare-reliant mothers within the context of their lives, as a unique group, may provide insight into their shared developmental experiences that contribute to their success or failure toward educational goals.

Lee and Oyserman (2009) proposed that constructions of identity connect choices in the present to outcomes in the future. Whereas Levinson (1996) suggested that understanding the context of one's life course, where identity is experienced, is essential to understanding connections between past choices and current or future outcomes. To investigate single welfare-reliant mothers' success in post-secondary education as a component of their group's identity development process requires an understanding of their group's shared identity development as females, mothers, and single parents, as well as their position in society as low-income and welfare-reliant mothers.

Related Literature

Rangell (1994) described the concept of identity in relation to social roles, proposing that they are closely tied to identity development. He suggested that it is through the interaction of multiple social roles and their shift in salience that identity develops and is elucidated. Rangell described social roles as the multiple identifications that the external world can label. These labels, such as mother or worker, can be temporary or lasting and can change over the life course. Rangell further described identity as a “mental state” (1994, p. 28) of “a person’s sense of self”, “how he is known to himself” (p. 27), “what he thinks and feels about himself” (p. 28), and what one “believes about oneself” (p. 28). He described identity as a self-conceptualization of multiple social roles that grows or develops over time. This identity tends to be “fixed”, “global”, and “cumulative” (p. 28). Further “identity, developmentally acquired, affects and determines the outcome of much of what he or she sets out to do” (p. 28). Related research in identity development is divided into two overlapping areas, the identity development of women and the multiplicity of identity development subsuming gender.

Identity Development of Women

Identity development as a descriptive process was proposed by Erickson (1959/1994), whose work underpinned the growth of women’s identity development literature (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1983). Gilligan (1982) and Josselson (1983) illuminated a gap in the identity development literature on women. They explained that dominant theories on identity development were developed for White men and

maintained consistent results when applied to men. However, when these theories were applied to women, they were not able to maintain consistent results.

Challenging men's conceptions of identity to women's lives, Gilligan's (1982) concept of women's identity development was based on three studies that asked questions about self and morality, and conflict and choice. Notably, only one study contained a small sample of mothers. Based on these studies, Gilligan proposed that (a) women's development entailed "separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights" (1982, p. 23) and must be understood within the life cycle; (b) women experienced themselves as individuals through their relationships with others; (c) relationships experienced as caring for others were complex constructs negotiating selfishness versus responsibility; (d) responsibility was an evolving construct grounded in self-sacrifice maturing toward interdependent relationships; (e) selfishness and self-sacrifice became complex judgments of moral and psychological truths; and finally (f) multiple truths exist, leading to a more complex understanding of relationships. Gilligan's concept of women's identity development was imbedded in a complex understanding of relationships. Likewise, Josselson (1983) considered the importance of relationships in women's individuation of the self.

Josselson's (1983) concept of identity development was developed from a study of 60 White women who were post-secondary education students in the early 1970s. Missing from this sample was the emergence of non-traditional students that single welfare-reliant mothers claim membership as a group. Josselson's notable contribution to identity development was the addition of anchoring. She suggested that women's

identities were anchored to relationships with others. In effect, women defined who they are and who they are not through their various relationships. As children, the women were anchored to the parents, as they separated from the parents they anchored in some combination to friends, significant others, and/or children.

Gilligan (1982) and Josselson (1983) sought to understand identity from a gendered perspective, thereby filling a gap in the research on women's identity development. However, as noted by Jones (1997), identity developed in the context of a lived environment where multiplicity of identities encompassed more than gender alone.

Multiplicity of Identity Development Subsuming Gender

Jones (1997) noted that identity development theories tend to narrow to one aspect of the identity, such as gender in the case of Josselson (1983) and Gilligan (1982), or focus on aspects of race such as Helms' (1993) White identity development or Cross' (1991) racial and ethnic identity development. However, identity, according to Jones (1997), is a multidimensional summation of our lives and includes more than one factor of the self. Several studies have sought to investigate factors in the multiplicity of identity development (Giordano, 2001; Torres et al., 2003; Jones, 1997; Lee & Oyserman, 2009), as well as multiplicity of identity development within the context of the extended life course (Levinson, 1996).

Investigating factors in multiplicity of identity development. Jones (1997) conducted a study of 10 women of diverse characteristics including race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and culture. Jones identified 10 key influencers on identity development that included:

(a) relative salience of identity dimensions in relation to difference; (b) the multiple ways in which race matters; (c) multiple layers of identity; (d) the braiding of gender with other dimensions; (e) the importance of cultural identifications and cultural values; (f) the influence of family background experiences; (g) current experiences and situational factors; (h) relational, inclusive values and finding personal beliefs; (i) career decisions and future planning; and (j) the search for identity. (1997, p. 379)

She found that these influencers were interdependent, where some were more salient than others. Gender, race, and culture crossed other aspects of participants' identities including social roles, background, current situational factors, and related experiences as well as anticipated identities relative to graduation from post-secondary education.

Lee and Oyserman (2009) conducted a study comparing the impact of demographic factors on women's constructions of positive and negative possible identities and their influences on commitment to work for 190 welfare-reliant mothers and 137 low-income mothers participating in a training program. This study explored a very narrow space of one year and sought participants' constructions of self from the limited context of their current situations as welfare recipients or attendees of a job training program. Although this study incorporated distinctions in race and lived context, it did not include distinctions between married and single parental status, which could impact work and educational aspirations, as well as role salience and conflict. Lee and Oyserman determined that race and other demographics did not significantly

impact constructions of positive or negative potential identities, but race, in particular being White, was related to lower levels of self-efficacy and increased role conflict. In addition, mothers attending job training programs were more likely to develop and work toward positive possible work identities and recognize negative identities they sought to avoid. Lee and Oyserman also investigated the composition of mothers' multiple identities, which they described as job-focused, caregiving, making ends meet, and education-focused, where the education-focused identities was a component of the job-focused identities. Further they concluded that making ends meet overlapped with providing for children and caring for children as part of the mothers' multiple identities.

Jones (1997) noted that some factors were more salient to identity such as gender, race, culture, and educational attainment. Lee and Oyserman (2009) contributed that race and other demographic factors were not as impactful on constructions of future identities as were current education programs. They also added that multiplicity of identities for mothers was composed of work, education, mothering, and making ends meet. Other investigations into multiplicity of identity as social roles have situated gender and demographic factors into the broader life course.

Drawing on life course to investigate the multiplicity of identity

development. Developmental life course as a framework considers interactions between the individual's multiple social roles and his/her social roles with the external social context that constrains or fosters the building and change within a narrow space of the life course (Moore, Gunz, & Hall, 2007). Developmental life course provides a framework that enables investigations into a narrow space such as a single transition

event, or a wider life space such as multiple transition events over time, and can be utilized to elucidate the process of identity development throughout adulthood.

Levinson (1996) investigated adult development over the life course, incorporating individuation as a part of identity development. Levinson depicted the life course as overlapping periods of development that were influenced by the assumption and exit of social roles. Levinson added that development occurred in predictable cycles that he, like Josselson (1983), identified as individuation or “establishing a boundary between the ‘me’ and the ‘not me’, and forming more stabilized relationship with the external world” (Levinson, 1996, p. 33), and initiation “exploring new possibilities, altering our existing relationships, and searching for aspects of self and world out of which new relationships might evolve” (p. 34). One exception to this cycle noted by Levinson was an adaptive crisis, a crisis as a result of “a problem in coping with a highly stressful situation” (p. 35) usually related to the completion of relevant tasks during the era such as structure building, structure maintenance, or structure changing. The other exception he identified was a developmental crisis, a crisis stemming from one’s inability to meet the demands of the current era, usually related to failing in a task due to the inadequate composition of the life structure. Levinson (1996) utilized this framework to explore the assumption and completion of several tasks that build and change the structure of the life course. One of those tasks was the process of individuation or an incremental evolution of identity development by continuously determining, accepting and rejecting, what is me and what is not me.

Summary

Josselson (1983) and Gilligan (1982) explored women's identity development as a gendered experience. Jones (1997) and Lee and Oyserman's (2009) examined relevant factors contributing to identity development and the composition of multiple identities subsuming gender. Whereas Levinson (1996) explored the life course of women and investigated women's adult development within the life course structure. However, women's identity development literature has largely excluded low-income welfare-reliant mothers or subsumed them into a larger category with the noteworthy exception of Lee and Oyserman. Their 2009 study investigated the construction of possible selves but did not include post-secondary education students. This article seeks to add to existing literature by elucidating the identity development process of a diverse group of single welfare-reliant mothers who are attending post-secondary education. The following section describes the methodology and method used to guide this study.

Methodology

The methodology describes the way a particular problem can be framed and investigated using a specific set of assumptions and principles (Schwandt, 2007). The methodology includes both the research design used to guide the study and the method used to guide data collection and analysis. This study utilized a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological research design and a descriptive phenomenological method.

Research Design

Drawing on a developmental life course framework as a scaffold made a quantitative research design incompatible with this study and narrowed the research methodology to a qualitative design. The purpose of this study sought to understand the essence of a phenomenon over the life course through an evaluation of participants' experiences in their lived context. Because this study sought thick narrative descriptions of experiences over life course, a qualitative research methodology was selected using the phenomenological approach.

The phenomenological approach seeks to draw out the essence of a phenomenon experienced by all of the participants. Although individual experiences may vary, it is the core meaning of experiences that is sought to build a structure of the shared experiences. The structure of their experiences is described by essential constituents, or shared elements of experiences that are essential to describe the phenomenon.

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to describe the structure of participants' experiences in a specific phenomenon and to capture the meanings that participants ascribed to their social roles and transition events. It sought to accurately describe the structure of experiences over a narrow space of their life course. This study delineated the narrow space of the life course from the era of pre-adulthood (0-22 years old) through the era of early adulthood (22-40 years old) as described by Levinson (1996). The phenomenological methodology was paired with Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method.

Method

The method describes the set of procedures and techniques used in the generation and analysis of data for this study. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method was selected and used to collect and analyze data. This method is compatible with the transcendental phenomenological methodology and sensitive to exploring meaning in the lived context (Giorgi, 2009). This section describes the participant selection, data collection, and data analysis for this study.

Participant selection. Potential participants with specific characteristics were solicited for this study from welfare offices in the Central Texas area, as well as local junior colleges and four-year universities. This study sought the experiences of single welfare-reliant mothers from poverty to post-secondary education. Therefore, participants were required to be single mothers, current or recent welfare participants, and current or recent post-secondary education students. This study also sought the participants' experiences in their social roles including those of mother, student, welfare recipient, and sole provider. Therefore, participants were required to be sole providers for their children, meaning that they have physical custody of their children, the children lives with them, and they do not have a live-in boyfriend. Only six of the 15 potential participants met the sought characteristics to participate in this study.

The six racially diverse mothers who participated in this study were assured confidentially and chose the pseudonyms of Lisa, Tammy, Crystal, Nancy, Catalina, and BJ. Pseudonyms were used to identify their individual responses and demographics. The participants ranged in age from 14 to 20 years old at the time of their first child's

birth and 20 to 40 years old at the time of the interview. Nancy, Tammy, and Catalina were teen mothers still in high school at the time of their first child's birth. Tammy and Catalina dropped out of high school, but all three teen mothers eventually gained their general education degree (GED). Lisa, BJ, and Crystal were attending post-secondary education at the time of their first child's birth. Only Lisa stopped out of college, but she returned later to complete her degree. All of the mothers began working in high school, but for varying reasons. Crystal lived in generational poverty as a child and worked to help afford basic necessities. Lisa and BJ worked to meet personal college financial goals. Tammy, Catalina, and Nancy worked, as teen mothers, to provide basic necessities for their children. All of the mothers either married or moved in with a boyfriend and were later divorced or separated. Lisa, Tammy, BJ, Nancy, and Catalina had additional children in their relationships (totaling 2, 4, 4, 2, and 4 children respectively); only Crystal did not have additional children. At the time of the interviews, five of the mothers were working and one was seeking employment. Finally, all of the mothers were attending post-secondary education, they were within a year of graduation, and all were anticipating full-time work upon graduation.

Data collection and data analysis. Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method was used in the collection and analysis of data. However, before participants' interviews were conducted, I sought to bracket out my own biases and perceptions utilizing a process called epoche. After epoche was completed, the data collections and analyses were conducted in five systematic stages that included (1) collections of data, (2) reading of the data, (3) breaking of the data into parts, (4)

organization and expression of the data utilizing adult development constructs from the adult learning discipline perspective, and (5) synthesis of the data into constituents of the structure.

Stage one: Collection of the data. The first stage began with coordinating and scheduling participants for interviews. The participants selected locations where they felt comfortable and that ensured privacy for two in-depth interviews. Interviews utilized open-ended questions and lasted approximately one hour each. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permissions and later transcribed. The transcribed data totaled 191 pages of raw data. Final edits of the raw data were conducted to ensure accuracy and concluded the first stage.

Stage two: Reading of the data. The second stage began with a slow and meticulous reading of each transcript to gain a holistic view of each individual's interviews. The second reading of the data sought to gain a holistic view of the combined interviews as a group. Gaps and questions that emerged from these readings were addressed through email requests. For example, Catalina had a gap in her responses that became apparent after reading all of the interviews. I emailed her the inquiry's context including what she said, "You said that you worked in low-wage jobs and no one would hire you for a living wage, unless you had a degree. You decided there must be a better job for you and decided to go to college." Then I provided the question, "Can you identify an incident that made you come to the realization that you needed to go to college?" and asked how she would like to discuss her answer. Catalina chose to reply by email, although some participants when asked chose to discuss their

questions by telephone. The second stage was completed with transcriptions of additional raw data being merged into the individual's transcripts.

Stage three: Breaking of the data into parts. The third stage entailed breaking the data into meaning units. As each thought in the transcript changed in focus, the data was separated into a new meaning unit. The 191 pages of raw data were divided into 935 meaning units. The adult development disciplinary perspective was used to further separate or merge bracketed meaning units, as well as to label them. For example, the meaning units were first labeled as a chronicle detailing an event, a narrative representing a descriptive summary, or an explanation as a rationale. Then this disciplinary perspective was applied labeling chronicles with life course constructs such as pre-adulthood or early adulthood and narratives with life course constructs such as social roles. For example one of Lisa's meaning units was first labeled an "explanation", then "early adulthood", then "deciding to go to college." The descriptive label described the meaning unit as an explanation of Lisa's choice to attend college in the era of early adulthood within her life course. The labels became an outline of the data, where gaps or incomplete data emerged, and participants were again emailed and asked to address or clarify and questions that may have arisen. The third stage was completed when all of the meaning units were bracketed and labeled.

Stage four: Organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective. The fourth stage entailed a successive transformation of the data. First the meaning units were placed in tables maintaining their chronological sequence. Then the first transformations were conducted that transformed the data from the first person to

the third person, substituting an identifier for the name such as P for participant and a number such as P1 for Lisa. Meaning units that were not relevant were set aside by graying the color of the text, but leaving them in the table for use later if necessary. The second transformation more clearly expressed the meaning units by reducing redundancies, and using free imaginative variation to add inferred or unsaid thoughts and choose more descriptive words in the disciplinary language. A third transformation, if necessary, further clarified the meaning units using free imaginative variation by combining meaning units, separating meaning units, or adding additional descriptive wording. Not all transformations required a third transformation. For example, Lisa's explanation of deciding to go to college is provided as a series of transformations in the table Stage Four: Transformation of Lisa's Meaning Unit (see Table 4). The fourth stage was completed when all of the meaning units were moved into a table and the relevant meaning units were transformed into their final transformations using the adult development disciplinary language and free imaginative variation.

Table 4
Stage Four: Transformation of Lisa's Meaning Unit

Label	Original Meaning Unit	First Transformation	Final Transformation
Explanation- Early Adulthood- Deciding to go to college	Then is when I decided I have got to go to school. I've got to do something. Because when I was with him I worked at an early childhood intervention. And then after I had my son. He said, "you don't have to work you have to have to, I didn't have a job when, you know, my mom, but I had nothing.	That is when P1 decided that she had to go to school. She had to do something. Because when P1 was with him she worked at an early childhood intervention. And then after she had her son. Her first husband said, "you don't have to work." P1 didn't have a job when, her mom told her to financially take care of herself, but she had nothing.	P1 worked in a low wage jobs until she had her second child. Then, she left the role of worker to remain home in the full-time role of mother. When her husband left her destitute and jobless, her mother also left her to financially care for her children alone. This is when she decided to return to post-secondary education and complete her educational goals.

Stage five: Synthesis or summary of the data. The fifth stage entailed consolidating the individual meaning units into shared meaning units called constituents. Then, the shared constituents were evaluated to determine which constituents were essential to the formation of the phenomenon's structure. To do this, constituents that were not shared by other participants were set aside. Shared constituents were assembled or arranged to represent elements of the phenomenon being explored. Those constituents were removed if they did not collapse the phenomenon. For example, a constituent about participants' roles as daughters was not essential to their identity as sole providers because being daughters were separate from being sole providers. However, a constituent about the participants' roles as mothers was an essential constituent to their identity as sole providers, because being mothers alone to care for their children was a critical aspect of their conception of being sole providers in both the physical and the mental care of their children. After all of the essential constituents were

identified and the invariant structure of the phenomenon was created using free imaginative variation, the structure was applied to the original transcribed data to draw out the findings of this study. Stage five was concluded with the presentation of the findings in the next section.

Data trustworthiness. Qualitative research designs use human subjects and rely on the interaction between the participants and the researcher in the construction of data through interviews. Giorgi (2006, 2009) suggested that it was essential to recognize that qualitative research is subjective and therefore requires caution in the collection and analysis of this data to draw trustworthy findings. To ensure trustworthiness of data, I used a systematic process to collect and analyze the data, as well as member checks and peer review. First, this study systematically and conscientiously applied Giorgi's method and then the data was validated by participants through member checks. However, Giorgi (2006) emphasized that member checks should occur in the beginning of the data analysis while working with individual transcripts. This allowed for corrections in misstatements, meanings, or incorrectly transcribed information. Giorgi adamantly stated that member checks should not be included in the analysis of the phenomenon where a shared essence was sought. He justified this stating that individuals can only validate their own experiences and not the experiences of others. Therefore, member checks were performed during the first three stages entailing the interviews and follow-up conversations, the reading of the data, and the transformations of individual meaning units into disciplinary language. Finally, findings were reviewed

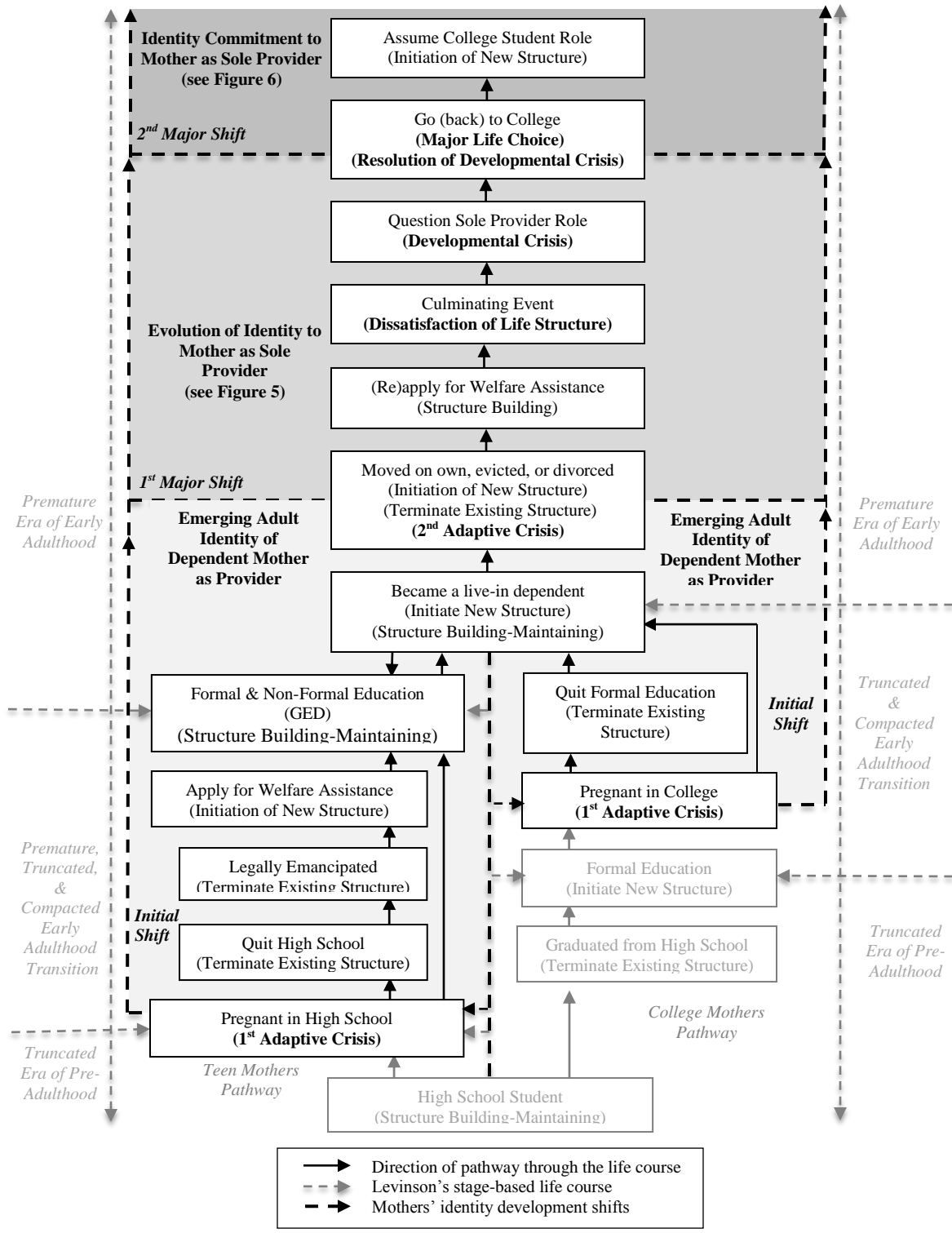
by peers to interrogate the conclusions for gaps as well as relevance to the discipline of study.

Limitation. Although constructs of race are part of the mother's lens and identity development within the life course (Croteau et al., 2002; Jones, 1997), the participants in this study represented a diverse racial group including White, Black, and Hispanic mothers. Because race was not a shared identity in this racially diverse sample, participants were not specifically asked questions about race. Therefore, the emergence of data from this qualitative study in relation to race is limited by participants' selections of narratives about experiences in their life course that they choose to share in responding to the interview protocol.

Presentation of Findings

Participants were asked to provide a life history from pre-adulthood to early adulthood concluding with their current situation as post-secondary education students and to identify and describe the various social roles in their lives. The life history delineated a structure of their shared life course embedded with shared transition events and social roles including the roles of mother, worker, welfare recipient, and student, which are illustrated in the figure *Single Welfare-Reliant Mothers' Life Structure & Developmental Concepts* (see Figure 4). Participants described the roles of mother, worker, welfare recipient, and student in relation to how these roles made them feel, as well as their responsibilities. However, being a sole provider was uniquely depicted, describing what they believed about themselves in relation to the other social roles. The

Figure 4
Single Welfare-Reliant Mother's Life Structure & Developmental Concepts



findings of this study are framed by the mothers' pathways through their shared life course, their evolving social roles, and their development toward an adult identity as sole providers. The adult identity development as a process of single welfare-reliant mothers is presented as (a) the initial adult identity formation of dependent mothers as providers, (b) the first shift in their adult identity of mothers as sole providers, and (c) the second major shift in committing to the mothers as sole providers identity.

Initial Adult Identity Formation: Dependent Mothers as Providers Identity

The participants in this study experienced a life course with a truncated and compacted transition to early adulthood. The transition event to parenthood as a single mother began prior to the transition to early adulthood for the teen mothers and interrupted the course of the transition to early adulthood for the college student mothers. For each of the participants, this transition event was unplanned, leading to an adaptive crisis, a crisis of the current life structure. The life structure is the presence, composition, salience, and conflict of social roles within their current lived-context of poverty. The shift in identity from dependent daughter to dependent mother as a provider caused a shift in role salience and the positionality of other social roles. As a result the mother role and live-in dependent role vied for salience as the mother sought to provider for her children through the dependent relationship. As the new mothers sought to build an adapted life structure resulting from the birth of their first child, their process of adult identity development was impacted by individuation, separating from childhood relationship and anchoring to new relationships throughout the transition to early adulthood.

Individuation through separation. Within this group of mothers, emotional separation occurred for Lisa and BJ. Both mothers had strong loving relationships with their mothers and relied on their mother's values and opinions as foundations for appropriate identities. However, Nancy, Tammy, Catalina, and Crystal became emotionally distanced from authority figures at an early age and did not experience emotional separation in the transition to early adulthood.

Emotional separation: Strong relationship with the mother figure. Lisa and BJ became single mothers while attending college and in the midst of their transition to early adulthood. Both mothers began their transition to early adulthood where they were experimenting with other ideologies in discovering who they were as a separate identity from their mothers. Lisa described her experience, saying "I think I could have made better decisions in some of the people I hung out with." Both chose to attend college away from home as a form of physical separation with the intention of becoming emotionally separate. Lisa said, "It was far enough away that my parents didn't have to know everything that I was doing."

After becoming pregnant, both mothers went through an adaptive crisis in their identity formation in trying to adapt to the new structure of their lives. Lisa's adaptive crisis was more severe as her family espoused a distinctly religious ideology, which influenced her perceptions of choice and feelings of being bad. Lisa gave up the identity she was working toward in college stating, "after I had my daughter, I was like, well, I can't do that [go to college] anymore." She adapted by moving back in with her mother and seeking her mother's correct opinions in forming her new identity as a single

mother. BJ's adaptive crisis was less severe, as her mother had been a single mother and was more supportive. BJ's mother wanted her children to graduate from college. This afforded BJ the opportunity to remain in college, essentially abdicating her role as a single mother to her own mother. She described this experience as a strong family support system that allowed her to continue exploring her potential new identities. BJ said, "I was not a typical kind of single parent, because my mom provided a lot of assistance for me as long as I stayed in school." However, she felt pressured to complete college as quickly as possible and adapted by switching her major. BJ described her decision to change majors, "getting into that program could have taken three years, and then another two years to finish it. I didn't think that I had that much time." Where Lisa and BJ experienced emotional and physical separation from their mothers in the individuation process, Nancy sought physical separation from her guardian.

No separation: No strong relationship with a parent figure or surrogate.

Nancy was raised by grandparents who were emotionally distant and had no strong attachments to friends or boyfriends. Therefore, she had neither a parent nor a surrogate replacement to emotionally separate from when leaving childhood. Nancy described her relationship with her grandfather, "When I was 11, my grandmother passed away and so it was just my grandpa. He worked all the time . . . and so that's all I knew, to work He wasn't that much of a talker."

Nancy had a less severe adaptive crisis even though she experienced a premature, compacted, and truncated transition to adulthood as an adolescent mother. This could be attributed to her lack of strong emotional ties to family members and or minimal support

from the family environment. Nancy lived in a somewhat supportive environment that allowed her to remain in an alternative high school until she acquired a GED. She was supported and encouraged by the school staff to continue toward graduation. Becoming a teen mother required her to adapt to a new school and new responsibilities as both a student and mother. She eventually sought to establish a new life structure as a single mother and sole provider by moving in with friends, but found that she was unable to provide for her baby alone. Nancy described her decision to move back in with her grandfather, “I tried to I moved out on my own; I tried to move in with friends. And then . . . [I thought], I better go back and save up to go on my own.” Although Nancy did not have a relationship where she experienced separation, neither did she reject her guardian as an authority figure, whereas, Tammy, Catalina, and Crystal built upon prior rejections of authority figures in their individuation process.

No separation: Childhood rejection of authority figures. Tammy, Catalina, and Crystal did not experience the separation from their mothers, a parent figure, or from a surrogate replacement. Stemming from years of child abuse, Tammy, Catalina, and Crystal had previously rejected their parental figures and other authority figures, as well as parental ideologies. For these mothers, individuation was an emotionally turbulent process of continually failing as a new mother, being unprepared to provide for their children with no social networks to draw from and no apparent options.

Tammy and Catalina were subjected to severe child abuse, and Crystal was subject to severe neglect, all of this in their pre-adulthood years. Tammy described being left with an abusive step-mother, “he would leave us with her. She would have

complete control of us. She was a child abuser. You know, she used to beat the crap out of us.” Crystal described her neglect and alluded to child abuse saying, “You know she wasn't loving and she has done some stuff to me. As much as I try to forget it, it's very hard.” Each of these mothers had to survive as children by seeking food and shelter from others when available. Their early separation from family included parents and authority figures that let them down. Crystal rejected her mother's concept of raising her, “I really don't think that my mom did such a good job. I know she probably did her best.” Tammy described resisting her father's racist ideologies as a child, “He used to be in the Aryan Nation. I never liked White guys . . . , so I can't be bad. I kept talking to them. All my friends were Mexican or Black. I never had any White friends.” They developed a very strong sense of belief in relying on themselves. Tammy, Catalina, and Crystal came to accept their own values and opinions as correct and actively rejected the values, opinions, and ideologies of their parents.

After becoming pregnant Tammy, Catalina, and Crystal went through an adaptive crisis in their identity formation, trying to adapt and build a new structure to their lives. Tammy and Catalina experienced a premature transition to early adulthood, which made their childhood more turbulent due to being adolescent single mothers and lacking a safe environment. They had to figure out how to adapt and survive, not just for them, but for a newborn as well. They were forced out of high school by their custodial parent and sought legal emancipation from that parent, which terminated their current life structure. For these teen mothers, identity formation was further negatively impacted by a compacted and truncated transition to early adulthood as they left home

early. Tammy was forced to leave home when her mother drove her to a hotel where her drug dealer boyfriend was living, dropped her off with \$8.00, and told her to stay out of trouble. She was forced to sell drugs at the age of 15 in order to have food and shelter. Tammy described her desperation, “I would have to sleep out under trees and stuff for a few nights. Off and on I was starving and I wouldn’t have any food.” Catalina was driven away from home by her father, who beat her trying to induce an abortion. She fled to another state seeking sanctuary with her brother, only to return to her father shortly after the baby was born. Catalina said, “circumstances happened which led me back to Texas and my dad. He never apologized to me, but he did take me back.” Both mothers applied for welfare assistance, yet felt that they had no options. Tammy and Catalina felt forced to search for providers, becoming dependent mothers, to build stable life structures for their babies. Tammy expressed her worldview, “it was just miserable. I couldn't really get a job. I had no vehicle. I was just 15.” Catalina added, “I was young and dumb. I saved [money] because I felt like I had nowhere to go.” Tammy adapted by moving in with and eventually marrying the father of her baby. While Catalina adapted by moving from one unsuccessful live-in relationship to another. Tammy and Catalina clearly experienced the most severe and lengthy adaptive crisis of their life structure, viewing themselves as powerless victims of circumstance and loved ones.

Crystal moved quickly through her adaptive crisis. Similar to Tammy and Catalina, Crystal was a victim of child abuse and rejected her mother as an authority figure and role model. However, Crystal, like Lisa and BJ, was in college in the midst of

her transition to adulthood and developing her adult identity when she became pregnant; this resulted in a compacted and truncated transition to early adulthood. Crystal quickly adapted by seeking a dependent relationship with the baby's father in order to build a stable life structure. Crystal described her decision, "His dad was a pastor, he was in the church, and I had always been in the church. We thought the best thing to do was to get married." However, her new life structure quickly fell apart when she became a victim of spousal abuse. Crystal adapted by moving back with her mother, then into her own apartment at the first opportunity. Crystal said, "I had to start working before she was a month old. So I hate it. Every day. You know, I will never get that time back. But, you have to do what you have to do. So I work." Crystal grew up in poverty and worked at a young age to provide for her siblings, so leaving her spouse and transitioning to work was approached in a quick and practical manner.

Each of the mothers moved through the individuation process differently. Lisa and BJ sought to emotionally distance themselves from a loving relationship with their mother to seek out who they wanted to be as an adult. Nancy experimented with leaving home, but did not have a strong relationship from which to separate. Tammy, Catalina, and Crystal all rejected their childhood abusers and their ideology. Yet where Tammy and Catalina floundered in developing their life structure, Crystal, further in her individuation process, quickly transitioned to a stable structure. In addition to separation from childhood relationships, anchoring to new relationships was also a part of the individuation process.

Anchoring. For these mothers the birth of their child during the separation-individuation process led them to place their child as the central relationship in their lives, making their children the anchor or focus of their decisions. However, two mothers anchored to their mother or husband after the birth of their child before moving to their children as their central anchor. The remaining four mothers moved their child to the central anchor in their lives when the child was born.

Lisa and BJ used their mothers as a substitute anchor; though physically separated, initially they remained emotionally dependent on them. Both mothers substituted their husband as the primary anchor when they married and then replaced their husband with their child as the primary anchor when they divorced. The remaining mothers, Tammy, Crystal, Nancy, and Catalina, moved their child upon birth, as their newly formed anchor. Their sense of identity became that of actively resisting being poor mothers like their own mothers. While choosing to redefine themselves as good mothers, one whom their children could rely on for security, safety, support, and love. Tammy described herself as a good mother from the moment of her child's birth, "She was well taken care of, even though I was only 15. I was a really good parent. From the minute I had my kids, I knew that I didn't want to do the same stuff that was done to me." Crystal tried to verbalize her fear of being a bad influence on her daughter, "I don't want my experiences . . . to influence her. I mean. I want to influence [her] in a good way, but not in a bad way, of the person she becomes. I want to be able to love her like our mother should [have loved us]."

As their transition to early adulthood concluded, all the mothers developed an identity with the mother role as the central component of their identity. Each of the mothers took an avid interest in the health and well-being of their children, subordinating all other interests. Catalina said, “My kids come first, before anything.” They choose dependent relationships as a means to enact their identity as a good mother. Tammy described one of her dependent relationships, “I really didn't like him. But, he loved my daughter and I could tell that he really cared about me, . . . I don't really like him, but I don't even care. It's not about me.” The mothers related to others in their social world by how they cared for their children as a mother.

Although being a mother was the central component of their identities, each of the mothers' strategies to provide for the children through dependent relationships was terminated. This created a second adaptive crisis and caused the formation of a new life structure in the era of early adulthood, which modified their identity from a single mother as a provider to that of a single mother as a sole provider. This juncture of the life course was foundational to the mothers' identity development as they chose not to seek another live-in dependent relationship, but rather to care for their children by themselves.

First Shift in Adult Identity: Evolving Mothers as Sole Providers Identity

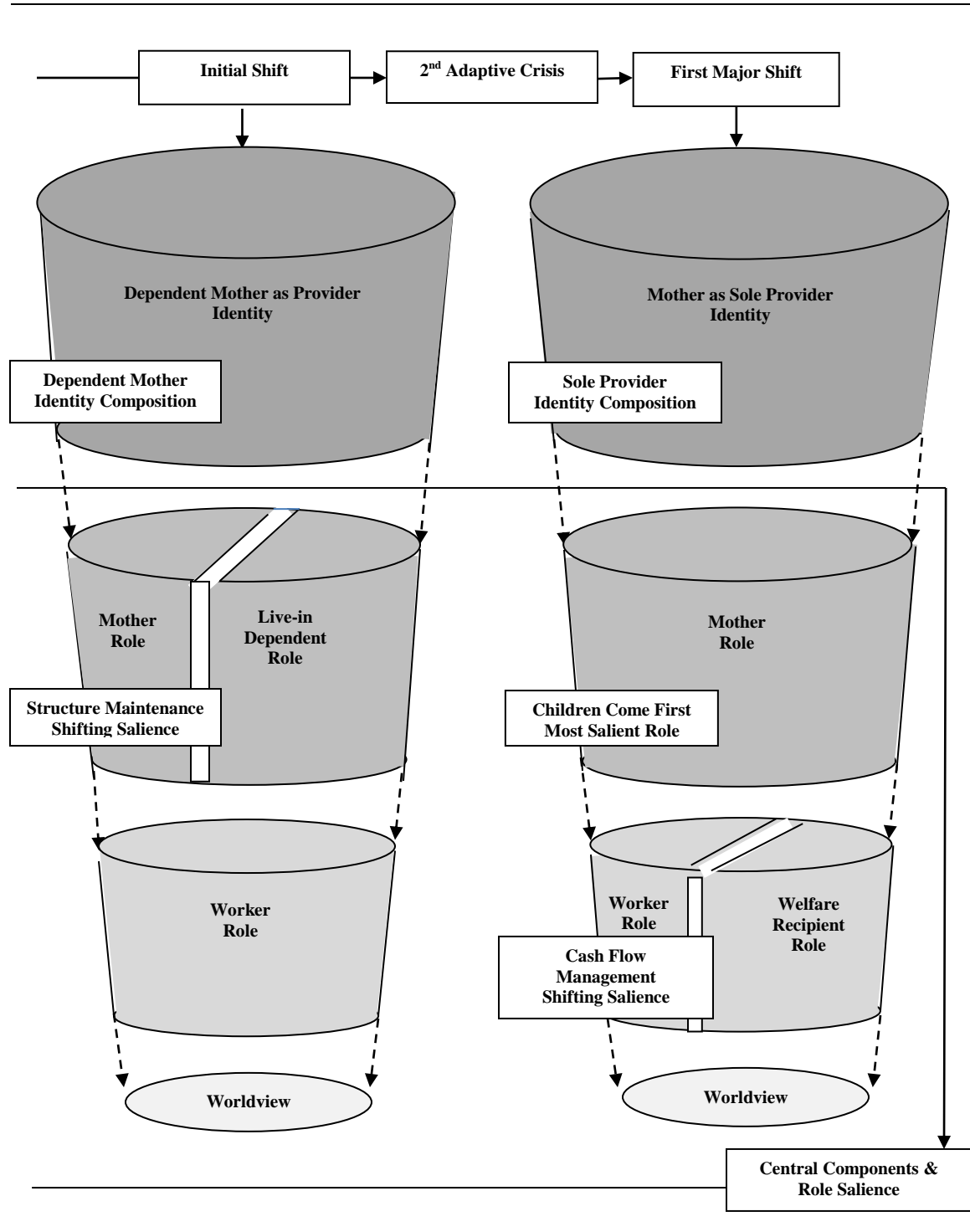
Where provider was previously a component of being a mother and being a live-in dependent, the concept of sole provider was substantially different. In relation to other social roles, the shift to identity from mothers as providers to mothers as sole providers, the mother role became the most salient role and subsumed the other social

roles. The role of live-in dependent was terminated and the roles of worker, welfare recipient, and student were now ascribed salience in how they helped manage the overall cash flow. The description provided by the mothers indicated that sole provider was not a social role with its own unique responsibilities or a role that was subsumed by other roles. Rather it was described as an adult identity, how they viewed themselves in the social world and in relation to their children. The identity of sole provider was predicated by a second adaptive crisis, a shift in role salience, and the unfolding of their reshaped identity as seen in the figure Evolving Structure of Identity from Dependent Mother as Provider to Mother as Sole Provider (see Figure 5). This first major shift in the mother's adult identity is positioned in the middle of the life structure that was illustrated in Figure 4.

Second adaptive crisis. All of the dependent mothers had difficulty in maintaining their new structures and left or were forced out of their dependent live-in relationships. As each of the mothers were forced out of their homes and became sole providers, the termination of their existing life structures were the beginning of an extended turning point in their lives. Participants began a process of shifting their life structure and making choices to build new life structures, while experiencing anxiety and fear for being solely responsible for the financial care of their children.

Change in the life structure. The mothers sought to change their existing life structures by resuming the role of work and assuming or resuming the role of welfare recipient. Both transitions were emotionally difficult but supported their evolving identity as sole providers.

Figure 5
Evolving Structure of Identity from Dependent Mother as Provider
to Mother as Sole Provider



Each of the mothers had previously worked to co-provide for their children. Though some had breaks in employment, the idea of working, being self-sufficient, and providing for their children was not a new concept. However, as sole providers the mothers' low-wage jobs were unable to adequately provide for their children. Nancy described working to provide for her children, "I continued to work, cashier, customer service, like minimum wage jobs, and it was getting harder and harder." Those mothers who had never been on welfare before and those who used it intermittently now sought welfare as a part of their cash flow strategy. Tammy described her need to add welfare assistance, "It was hard, and then I started getting cash assistance, which I had never gotten before." The mothers also sought medical insurance through Medicaid for their children and some sought government subsidized housing. The inability of these mothers to meet the demands of being sole providers without the assistance of others created emotional distress.

Lisa and BJ had the most support from family and needed the least support from the government. However, they still encountered distress at not being able to meet the demands of their identity as a good mother. Lisa described an encounter with her siblings:

My brothers and sisters they don't belittle me, they just crack jokes every now and then My feelings get hurt very easily. I told mom that I know that I screwed up, but I'm busting my butt off right now to get it done and do it right I'm just sick of all the comments. They don't know what I go through. They

don't know what all I have to do. Yet they still have the audacity to pop off and make comments.

Tammy, Crystal, Nancy, and Catalina needed the most support and experienced the most emotional distress at being unable to fulfill their identities as good mothers. Crystal described her fear of failure as a sole provider, “I want to give her stuff, I want to do stuff with her . . . and it's not fair to her. Cause she didn't do anything.”

Previously the mothers as providers' salience shifted between their need to maintain their live-in dependent relationship and their role as a good mother. The conflict in salience between the roles was experienced differently for each mother depending on the relationship between the mother and her spouse, live-in boyfriend, or family member. However, as the mother's live-in dependent relationship was terminated, the role of mother shifted to become the most salient role.

Shifting role salience. As participants became sole providers, they described the shift in salience to the mother role and the subordination in salience of other roles as cash flow management.

The mother role. The mothers described their shift in salience as the children come first making the mother role the most important role. Catalina expanded on her outlook, “I'm not living for me and I'm living for my kids. Everything that I do in life, reflects them. All my decisions reflect how they're going to react to things, as they get older.” Lisa was most explicit in her description of shifting her salience to the mother role:

I was dating a guy and I would tend to put him before the kids. I am so much smarter now Yeah, I was very selfish back then, very selfish . . . but just to get your priorities in order. I mean . . . my priorities were totally whaberjewed.

The second adaptive crisis in creating a new life structure incorporated a new role as a welfare-recipient, replacing the live-in dependent role. The shift in salience to the mother role pushed the roles of worker and welfare recipient into a new perspective, subordinating them under the mother role and being viewed as a means to manage the cash flow to meet the physical needs of the children.

Cash flow management. Cash flow management now included the roles of worker and welfare recipient; however, their salience was determined by their contribution to the current cash flow. The shifting salience between the worker role and the welfare recipient role was dependent on their access to other resources.

Catalina, Nancy, Lisa, and BJ each had external support networks and access to resources through those networks. This allowed them to place a greater emphasis on the worker role in their cash flow management. Catalina related the importance of her role as a worker:

If I don't go to work, I lose my job, and . . . I have no money coming in You have no money for gas, no money for utilities, [and] no money to keep a roof over your head. I can get food stamps, but that's not money. I might get child support, but that's not guaranteed. At least if I'm working, I have some kind of income.

Although work was more salient for Nancy, she indicating the need for welfare as part of her income strategy. Nancy justified her decision, “I needed to seek out assistance to make sure that we will have enough for groceries and help with the health insurance.”

Tammy and Crystal, with little or no support network and the least access to additional resources, focused a greater emphasis on welfare assistance in their cash flow management and the continuous loop of not having enough. Crystal explained the complications of managing multiple sources in her cash flow, with welfare being the most salient resource. Crystal stated:

I always go into a negative with it [welfare assistance] Every so often you have to renew your food stamps, every so often you have to run renew your TANF, but they don't do it on the same day. So if my food [stamps] runs out, I have to use my TANF money to buy food And with your food money you can't use food stamps to buy anything or put gas in your car.

The evolution of the mothers' identity from dependent mothers as providers to mothers as sole providers was initiated by a second adaptive crisis resulting from leaving or being forced out of their dependent relationships. The shift in the mothers' identity from mothers as providers to mothers as sole providers changed the central components and salience from live-in dependent as the most salient role with mother and worker as subordinate roles to that of mother as the most salient role with worker and welfare recipient as subordinate roles. The new life structure and the shifted salience became the foundation of their emerging identity of mothers as sole providers.

Identity development of mothers as sole providers. The mothers' view of their unfolding identity sole providers embraced themselves as being solely responsible that was described through constructs of being alone and self-sacrifice.

Sole responsibility: Being alone. Participants described this first major shift in their perceptions of self in relation to their children as being solely responsible, but more precisely alone in the responsibility. They described being a sole provider as tiring, hard, and very stressful. It was about having to do everything alone, managing all of the demands alone, making all of the decisions alone, and feeling alone.

Tammy described her sense of being alone, "I better figure out how to feed the kids, because there's nobody here helping me do anything." BJ provided the most detailed account of feeling alone and solely responsible. She elaborated:

It is an overwhelming feeling of being alone and having to do everything alone Someone always needs something from you You breathe and smile and keep pushing forward hoping that someone will understand Sometimes you just need a good long cry, wipe the tears, and then go at it again.

Because being a sole provider was about being alone, the mothers also expressed the need to be self-sacrificing to meet their children's physical and emotional needs.

Sole responsibility: Self-sacrifice. Being sole providers was also about self-sacrifice. The sole provider was about doing what was right for everyone else and making sure all their needs are met. It was about putting the children and their needs before the mothers' needs or wants. More than that, as sole providers, they have to

ignore their own personal physical and emotional needs and wants and simply focus on the needs of their children and complete whatever task or sacrifice was required of them.

Catalina summed up the need to sacrifice for her children stating, "I've always made sure that my kids were taken care of, even now I have to do that. I've compromised and sacrificed a lot and gave up a lot because of I'm trying to take care of my kids." Lisa described her sacrifice as trying to meet her children's physical needs, "There have been times where I'll go without eating so they can and stuff like that . . . I don't think that I need any kind of special whatever, oh well you did that for your kids that's amazing good job." Likewise Tammy indicated that she sacrifices her own needs to meet the physical needs of her children as well. Tammy added, "Oh my God. I don't have any clothes. Like my kids look awesome . . . Every time I get [money] it goes to them or bills. I look like crap most the time, but I don't care."

Both BJ and Tammy described sacrifices to meet the emotional need of their children as well. Where BJ tries to manage time effectively to ensure quality of life for the children, Tammy has given up her personal needs to ensure the emotional needs of her children. BJ described her struggles, "when there are parent conferences, activities that your kids have, and we can't miss anything, but I can't miss work either. So it can be frustrating at times."

The new constructs of being alone and self-sacrificing epitomized how they chose define themselves in relation to their children, which underpinned the shift in their central components and role salience. However, the mothers found that they were not able to meet the needs of their children in their current life structure. This resulted in the

mothers working through a developmental crisis, which solidified their commitment to their identity as sole providers.

Second Major Shift: Commitment to Mothers as Sole Providers Identity

The mothers realized that the existing lives, utilizing welfare and working in low-wage jobs, would not increase their current cash flow to the needed levels. Being unable to fulfill their responsibilities as sole providers was experienced in (a) a culminating event making them aware of their failure, (b) a developmental crisis in questioning the viability of their life structure, and (c) that was resolved with a major life choice as a turning point in their lives.

Dissatisfaction with the life structure. The mothers were unsatisfied with the insufficient cash flow from their life structure. Their dissatisfaction was a product of either a gradual culmination of experiences or a culminating event.

For Lisa, Tammy, and Nancy the dissatisfaction of their life structure was experienced in a culmination of experiences, gradually falling further and further behind financially. Tammy described her situation, “Working like a slave, for barely making any money and . . . they (welfare) completely cut any type of benefit.” Nancy continued, “I have to struggle, I have to . . . juggle them [the bills] around.” Lisa, Tammy, and Nancy all worked in low-wage unskilled jobs and relied on welfare assistance to provide the shortfall in finances. However, the lack of sufficient funds gradually pushed them further and further financially behind until they realized they would not be able to pay their bills.

Catalina and BJ's dissatisfaction with their life structure was experienced as a culminating event that occurred when they were denied a desperately needed higher paying job based on their education level. Catalina rationalized, "Nobody nowadays, will hardly hire anybody unless you have some form of college. At least a decent paying job. And without that what do you have? You have nothing: you're stuck in the welfare department." Both mothers identified lack of sufficient education as the cause of their inability to meet the financial needs of their children through work alone.

The dissatisfaction with their life structures led the mothers to question their ability to adequately provide for their children at any point in the future. It also brought into question their ability to meet their own expectations of what they believed mothers should be as sole providers. The dissatisfaction with their life structure as a culmination of experiences or a culminating event created a developmental crisis.

Developmental crisis. As mothers acknowledged that they would not be able to meet the financial demands of their lives, they began to question the organization of their life structure and explore potential options.

During the crisis, the mothers identified an individual who influenced them to consider post-secondary education as an option. Lisa recalled, "My brother did graduate, got into graduate school, and he got the coaching job that he's always wanted. I think that kind of pushed me to go into that [college] again as well." Catalina recalled an encounter with a women counselor at a safe house. She said, "It is because of the safe house, is why I am where I am at now [in college]." Nancy identified a mentor that she met at work. She related:

I talked to another lady, kind of like a mentor She does social work and she was in her 40's. Her daughter graduated high school and that's when she went back to school for a master's Just meeting other people who were older than I am, who have gone back to school.

In addition to identifying someone who inspired them to seek college as an option, each mother expressed a high level of self-efficacy in educational tasks by identifying themselves as good students in high school. Crystal described herself, "I remember, just always in school making great grades. Like just A's in every class." Tammy who was forced to drop out of high school described herself, "When I was in school I made really good grades. No matter what was going on . . . I always read, I always wrote, [and] I would do research." Having an individual influence them and having high self-efficacy as potential students made post-secondary education a viable option to consider.

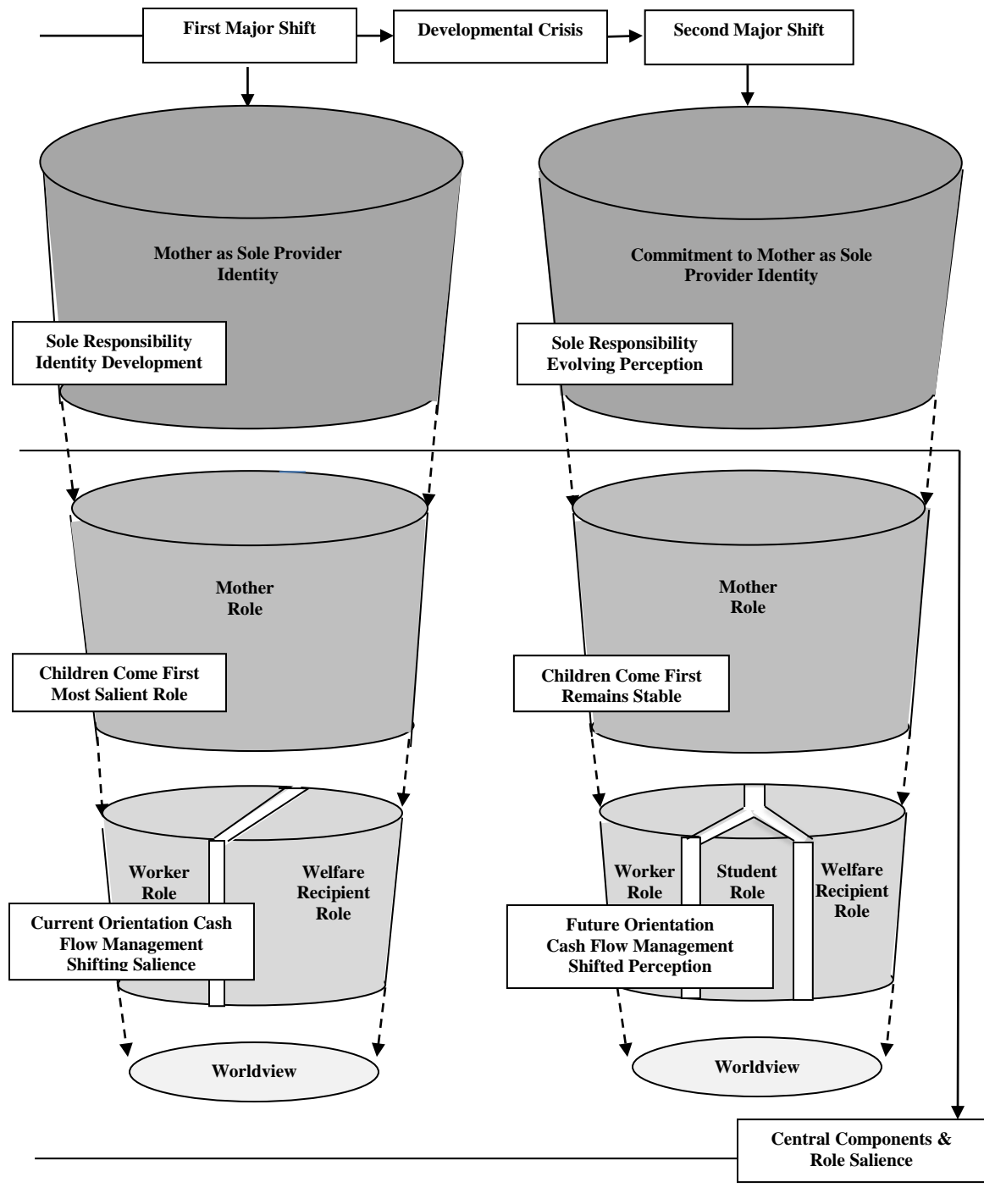
In weighting their choices the mothers commented on their present cash flow stream as the problem, and the future cash flow stream as the outcome of the solution. This was a distinct shift in their thinking, because previously the absence of money in the now overshadowed their thoughts of income/cash flow in the future. The developmental crisis was resolved by each mother making a major life choice that would substantially shift their current life structure.

Major life choice. Each of the mothers moved through the developmental crisis and came to the same conclusion, to adequately provide for their children in the future, they needed to acquire post-secondary education. Their thinking moved from managing

today's cash flow, to perceived possible cash flows and managing toward that income potential. Their identity as sole providers maintained the mother role as the most salient role. BJ, a full-time professional, maintained the work role as the second most salient role, while the other mothers repositioned the student role to the second most salient role or shifted between the worker role and student role depending on competing demands and conflicts. The mother's perception of each role, the role's salience within the group, and the mother's commitment to each role varied depending on each one's available resources and perceptions of the potential income stream. The mothers' identity is depicted in the figure *Evolving Structure & Identity Commitment to Mother as Sole Provider* (see Figure 6). This second major shift in the mothers' adult identity is positioned at the top of the life structure that was illustrated in Figure 4.

The student role. Four of the mothers, Lisa, Tammy, Nancy, and Catalina, described the student role as a full-time role that was very demanding. Catalina said, "It is a struggle . . . it takes time away from the kids." The student role encompassed mainly scheduling class times and scheduling enough time to study. Crystal added, "I try to stay as efficient as possible." There were a lot of early mornings and late nights. Nancy described it as "juggling and balancing." This role tended to conflict with other roles for most of the mothers. They struggled with managing between roles. Several of the mothers described homework as a shared time with their children. Lisa tried night classes and several others utilized online class formats to reduce conflict. Crystal choose a program with an online university to enable her to fit the student role around her other

Figure 6
Evolving Structure & Identity Commitment to Mother as Sole Provider



roles. She did not have a computer, so managed her time to utilize the local library's computers while her daughter was in school.

Current cash flow. For each of the students, entering post-secondary education resulted in the reduction of anxiety and fear about being a sole provider. Not only were they able to visualize a potential future where their profession was a part of a positive identity, they were also able to better maintain their current cash flow while in college.

Lisa, Tammy, Nancy, and Catalina all attributed welfare's exclusion of student loans, scholarships, financial aid, and work-study against income requirements as the source of their easing cash flow problems and moving them toward a stable life structure. Tammy described her change in situation, "This is like the most money that I've ever had." Nancy illustrated the combination of work study and welfare, "I get a lot more benefits now, because of the work-study It counts as part of your grant, so they don't count that as income against me I only get paid once a month from the school, and so . . . I put that in the bank."

Conflicts between the student role and the mother and worker roles were met with commitment to continue. Mothers held fast to the perspective that their future cash flows would allow them to meet their children's needs. Lisa was working a full-time position before getting a work study job. She related the difficulty she had in maintaining the full-time work role and the student role. However, she related her commitment to the sole provider role in her discussion of cash flow management:

One time when I was working full-time, and going to school full-time, and it was killing me It all boiled down to, do I want to continue going to school, or do

I just want to go halftime at school . . . , or do I want to work and make the money? But then I thought well you've got to go to school, to get a degree, to get a good job.

A noteworthy exception. Crystal was unique in that she chose to pursue post-secondary education as a result of a childhood in poverty and did not quit college when she encountered her first adaptive crisis. She was the only participant who, despite becoming a single parent and dealing with any other obstacle that occurred, maintained her enrollment in post-secondary education. She identified her experiences in childhood poverty as underpinning her choices. Crystal began working at the age of 16 to help feed her and her sister. She sought online education to allow her to work full-time while pursuing a degree. Crystal explained her continued commitment, “I do try to remember the reasons why I am doing the things I do. And it moves it along. You know, you will find ways to do stuff.” However, she is the only mother seeking employment who did not find a work-study position. At the time of the interview she was laid off from her previous job, exhausted unemployment benefits, seeking a new job, and surviving on welfare and student scholarships. Crystal portrayed her desperate situation and commitment to the sole provider role:

It's hard trying to keep the Internet on, so that you can do your homework. If you don't have a job, then . . . you don't have any gas to get you to the library Because when money is tight you have to put it toward the most demanding things. You try to sit down, and take a breath, and you try to think of ways you

can go around certain things so that you can at least keep this one thing consistent. Because if you don't then you're putting off your future.

Crystal was the only mother who was not working and held the welfare role as most salient in her current cash flow. The other mothers identified advice from welfare counselors, financial aid advisors, and their eventual attainment of a work study position as the reason for easing their current cash flow problems. Crystal's experience, being unique, was notable because she was the only mother to continue to have unresolved cash flow problems while attending post-secondary education.

Summary of the Findings

This study elucidated the evolution of the single welfare-reliant mother's identity development over their life. The assumption of their role as mother created an adaptive crisis of their life structures, which were resolved by becoming live-in dependent mothers. The creation and resolution of the first adaptive crisis was found to be catalyst for the initial shift toward their emerging adult identity of a dependent mother as a provider. The termination of their dependent relationship, becoming solely responsible for their children, created a second adaptive crisis of their live structure, which the mothers assuming or reassuming the role of welfare recipient. The creation and resolution of the second adaptive crisis was found to be the catalyst for the first major shift in their adult identity toward their evolving identity of being mothers as sole providers. The failure of mothers, as sole providers, to meet the needs of their children through their life structures created developmental crises, which the mothers resolved by choosing to pursue post-secondary education. The creation and resolution of the

developmental crisis was found to be the catalyst of the mothers' commitment to their identities as sole providers.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study described a unique population of women who were single mothers, welfare recipients, and attending post-secondary education. As a unique group that was also a vulnerable population, it was expected that the findings may not mirror a larger population of traditional post-secondary education students, married mothers, or single middle class mothers. Therefore, it was not surprising that this study both supported and contrasted with existing research on women's adult identity development. The most significant areas deserving discussion included the appropriateness of the life course approach in investigating women's identity development, anchoring, relationships, and multiplicity of identity.

Life Course Approach

Criticisms of developmental theories suggested that adult development theories and life course theories should bridge disciplines attending to both the inter-individual and individual-society interactions (Moore et al., 2007). Drawing from the developmental life course constructs allowed me to identify experiences that shaped the identity development of women in their shared pathways, incorporating the assumption and exit of social roles, transition events, developmental tasks, unexpected crisis, and major life choices framed within the developmental periods in the eras of pre-adulthood and early adulthood (Levinson, 1996). These findings depict the progression of mothers' identity development supported previous suggestions that developmental life

course was an appropriate framework for investigating adult identity development (Moore et al., 2007). One aspect imbedded in the tasks of the life course included individuation, which was expanded upon by Josselson (1983) who described it as including anchoring.

Anchoring

Josselson (1983) defined anchors as “primary family, husband/children, career, friends—or some combination of these” (p. 175). Unfortunately, Josselson’s list of anchors and their descriptions fell short of the primary anchor identified in this study, mothers’ children.

Josselson’s description of the husband/children anchor, which was most similar to mothers in this study, places husbands in supportive roles as their primary anchors and children as a recipient of mothers’ “active and creative interest” (1983, p. 176) as their secondary anchor. Although Lisa and BJ experienced anchoring as described by Josselson, in contrast, Tammy, Catalina, Crystal, and Nancy did not experience separation and repositioning. Each of these mothers survived as children seeking food and shelter from others when available. Their early separation from family included the society and authority figures that let them down. They developed a very strong sense of belief in relying on themselves. This may be explained drawing on previous research describing concept of truth for those who have been marginalized or abused as children as an internal intuited knowledge (Belenky et al., 1986). Expanding individuation, Josselson (1983) suggested that anchoring represented how women defined themselves though their relationships with others.

Relationships

Levinson's investigation of the life course discovered the construct of a "marriage enterprise" (1996, p. 40) from his homemaker sample. The marriage enterprise was entered by homemakers to establish a specific life structure that supported their children rather than on the foundations of love. Within the marriage enterprise, mothering work was based on traditional expectation of mothers as at-home caregivers of their children and home and fathers as the providers. Similar to Levinson's findings, mothers in this study sought dependent relationships with the goal of seeking providers for their children. Five of the women sought out men and one sought out friends. As the dependent relationships evolved they typically reflected the marriage enterprise as represented by Levinson. In contrast to Levinson's findings, mothers in this study left their spouses when spousal abuse began, knowledge of an affair started, or severe drug abuse occurred. However, drug abuse was more likely to be tolerated if it was casual use and not the manufacture and/or sale of drugs. Finally, mothers in this study left the marriage enterprise seeking to build a structure in their dual roles of mother as caregivers and mother as sole providers.

Gilligan (1982) added to the understanding of relationships, mother as the caregiver of others, embedded with the constructs of selfishness and self-sacrifice. She related that these concepts evolved and became more complex as women matured. However, Lisa was the only participant in this study to describe her early behaviors as selfish. All of the mothers described their relationships with their children as physical care and emotional care where self-sacrifice was a necessary part of the care. Initial

concepts of self-sacrifice began after they left the marriage enterprise or dependent relationships and were described as missing meals and spending money on their children rather than themselves. However, as mothers moved through their developmental crises, Lisa, BJ, and Tammy described self-sacrifice as compromising what they wanted and desired to provide better futures for their children.

Multiplicity of Identity

This study found that the composition of the mothers' multiple identities was an evolving construct with primary and subordinate components that shifted during crisis. Similar to Lee and Oyserman (2009), this study found that mothers' multiple identities included the roles of mother, where she provided physical and emotional care and cash flow management or as they described it making ends meet. In this study cash flow management included the roles of worker, welfare recipient, and student. However, in contrast to previous findings, this study determined that mothers sought to avoid negative possible identities, beginning with the birth of their child, which was reinforced in the second adaptive crisis and the developmental crisis (Lee & Oyserman). In addition, positive possible identities were explored and created as a result of their developmental crisis preceding their final commitment to pursuing and persisting in post-secondary education goals. It is likely these results differ because Lee and Oyserman investigated a narrow space of participants' lives encompassing only one year, while this study investigated participants' lives spanning as few as seven years to as many as 20 years, with a median of 15 years. Acknowledging that women's lives entail multiple identities, this study identified identities that represented the central

components of their lives. Missing from these multiple identities was indications of racial identity development, which is an acknowledged limitation of this study.

Conclusion

This descriptive study found that the life course and adult development of these mothers deviated from other less vulnerable women utilized in previous research, in both their demographics and subsequent adult identity development. This article provided the context and progress of single welfare-reliant mothers' life course and identity development that supported the contention that sole provider was an identity the participants sought to commit toward when making choices about post-secondary education. As sole providers, the anchoring of mothers in this study was found to be distinctly different from those anchors identified by Josselson (1983). The children as anchors contributed to role of mother as the most salient role in decision making, subordinating the roles of worker, welfare recipient, and student to a function of cash flow management. Finally, this study identified the three critical events in these women's life course (1) the first adaptive crisis, (2) the second adaptive crisis, and (3) the developmental crisis, which became turning points in their shared life course and identity development. This shared structure of the phenomenon of adult identity development found in this study suggested that future research may identify a transferable process of identity development for individuals in similar situations.

In conclusion, exploring adult identity development may lead to an understanding of women's identity at certain points that can predict their life structures and potential development in the next period of adult development (Josselson, 1983).

Although some research has been conducted that seeks to understand the adult development of women (Josselson, 1983; Levinson, 1996; Gilligan, 1982), few have included disadvantaged women (Belenky et al., 1986; Lee & Oyserman, 2009), but none of these have delineated single welfare-reliant mothers as college students. Therefore, because this group appears somewhat unique in demographics and development from the majority delineated in current research, future adult development research should investigate this marginalized group as a unique group of women rather than as a subset of the majority.

CHAPTER VI
THIRD MANUSCRIPT
**SINGLE WELFARE-RELAINT MOTHERS' PERSISTANCE IN POST-
SECONDARY EDUCATION: NEGOTIATING ROLE CONFLICT AND ROLE
SALIENCE**

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) in 1996 facilitated the success of society's War on Welfare. To meet the goals of PRWOA, single mothers were pushed off welfare rolls in droves, substantially reducing the number of those who remained as eligible welfare recipients (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Bezdek, 2001). PRWOA advocated economic self-sufficiency for single mothers through a work first ideology, espousing that work at any wage rate, even below poverty guidelines, would eventually lead hard working mothers to become economically self-sufficient (Christopher, 2005; Gueron & Hamilton, 2002). However, research shows that low-wage work does not inevitably lead to economic self-sufficiency (Fang & Keane, 2004); rather, work first without workforce skills or education generally forces single mothers to join the ranks of the working poor (Fletcher, Winter, & Shih, 2008).

Recent changes in welfare policy acknowledged the need of welfare mothers to gain workforce skills through post-secondary education (Federal Register 45, 2008). In 2008, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reinterpreted the provisions of the 2006 Deficit Reduction Act (DRA), allowing a limited pursuit of post-

secondary education in their 2008 final rule. Further, the DHHS suggested that participants could persist toward post-secondary educational goals if welfare mothers and their welfare counselors learned to better manage new requirements. However, very little research has investigated the persistence of single welfare-reliant mothers in post-secondary education since the 2008 DRA final rule. The purpose of this study was to understand the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course that influenced their decision to persist in post-secondary education from their perspective as sole providers.

Background of the Problem

The 2008 DRA final rule expanded access to post-secondary education for welfare-reliant mothers; however, it only allows 12 months of post-secondary education to substitute for work requirements (Federal Register 45, 2008). This means those mothers who choose to pursue adult education opportunities while receiving welfare benefits must either compromise their career aspirations and choose education programs that are 12 months or less (Dave, Reichman, & Corman, 2008; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003), or work while attending college and taking care of their children (Christopher, 2005). The context of the lives of single welfare-reliant mothers who choose to pursue post-secondary education beyond 12 months is described in this section considering (a) single parenthood, (b) increased role conflict, and (c) limited funds (Christopher, 2005).

Single Parenthood as Sole Providers

Being single parents and sole providers become barriers to educational goals when single parents do not have adequate social networks to substitute for absent

spouses (Bloom, 2009). As single parents and sole providers, the extent of their social networks have a direct relationship to the impact of barriers experienced in their lives (Bloom, 2009; Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Christopher, 2005; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Edin & Lein, 1997a; Hayes, 2003).

Social networks are essential for low-income mothers who must work and who choose to attend post-secondary education (Christopher, 2005; Edin & Lein, 1997a; Hayes, 2003). Alfred (2010) described social networks as a form of social capital entailing formal and informal relationships with family, friends, and associates that are built upon trust and shared values. Social networks are then essential sources of assistance during times of financial, emotional, or physical need as well as, providing insider knowledge, social status, and group identity (Alfred, 2010; Bloom 2009). Social networks can also include welfare counselors (Christopher, 2005), college financial aid representatives (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002), professors and student peers (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011) who have acquired insider knowledge of the post-secondary education system. However, their assistance within social networks is dependent on the positive or negative nature of individual relationships and the extent of their insider knowledge (Christopher, 2005). Further, those mothers who intentionally limit their social networks to only family and friends of similarly limited social and financial resources reduce the benefits that can be gained from such networks (Alfred, 2010).

Expanding social networks to include associates in help agencies, the college environment, and experienced mentors is essential to limiting the impact of

intergenerational poverty and enhancing opportunities for social mobility (Alfred, 2009, 2010). Therefore, the presence of strong social networks can mitigate some of the negative impacts of being single mothers through assistance with personal and family needs as well as group membership and support (Alfred, 2010). One of the most prevalent barriers of single motherhood that social networks can assist with arises from negative impacts of role conflict due to family needs.

Role Conflict

Role conflict for single parents stems from employment and/or student roles, inadequate finances, young children, and inadequate childcare (Christopher, 2005; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Kahn & Polakow, 2004). Role conflict is the experience of competing demands between two or more roles where the situation requires one role to win over another role, resulting in emotional strain (Buda & Lenaghan, 2005; Lopata, 1994). Welfare reform's work-first ideology requires welfare-reliant mothers to assume the role of worker to continue post-secondary education after 12 months, working at least 20 hours a week. This means single welfare-reliant mothers must manage role conflict and the resulting emotional strain between the roles of worker, student, and single mother (Christopher, 2005).

Mothers who become sole providers and choose to return to post-secondary education while working, often resulted in increased role conflict (Home, 1998). Buda and Lenaghan (2005) indicated that increased hours in the work role subsequently increased role conflict with the student role. When including the context of single parenthood, the presence of children limit available choices and increases barriers to

persisting in education due to increased role conflict (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Pare (2010) added that the role of student was most likely to cause role conflict due to feelings of selfishness and guilt when this student role conflicted with the role of mother.

Role conflict has the potential to act as a barrier to access and persistence in post-secondary education. For single mothers, the presence of strong social networks help to mitigate the negative effects of role conflict and are essential in assisting low-income mothers to acquire adequate childcare. Inadequate childcare was one of the most prevalent barriers to post-secondary education faced by single low-income mothers, which was one cause of financial strain experienced as a result of limited or a lack of adequate financial resources (Christopher, 2005; Collins, Lane, & Stevens, 2002; Corcoran, Danziger, Kalil, & Seefeldt, 2002; Dworsky & Courtney, 2007; Hauan & Douglas, 2004; Holyfield, 2002).

Limited or Lack of Funds

Often discussed in terms of other barriers such as adequate childcare, stable housing, transportation, and physical health, access to money is the underlying but widely recognized barrier to persistence in post-secondary education for low-income single mothers (Dworsky & Courtney, 2007; Gatta, 2008). Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) was the primary source of cash assistance provided by the government. However, the majority of state-administered welfare programs do not provide adequate financial resources to meet mothers' basic needs.

TANF was designed to assist welfare-reliant mothers who could demonstrate economic hardship (Corcoran et al., 2002). According to a study by The Urban Institute

(2010), 18 states used measures at or above the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) to determine economic hardship, while 29 states had thresholds below the FPL, and three states did not indicate their measures of economic hardship. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), the FPL was intended to be a threshold that identified families whose incomes were not sufficient to adequately meet the family's basic needs when accounting for family size and family members' ages and income (see also U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009). However, only 23 states provided sufficient cash assistance and near-cash assistance combined to sufficiently allow a family of three to afford basic needs within their geographic area (Council for Community and Economic Research, 2011). This implies single welfare-reliant mothers in 28 states do not have sufficient income even with TANF assistance to meet the basic needs for their children to live at or above the FPL.

Developing income strategies was essential for those mothers who were determined to pursue educational goals beyond 12 months. Heller and Bjorklund (2004) noted that financial aid provided by colleges and universities considered financial need of single adults but did not include the hidden cost of being single parents. Further they suggested that single parenthood substantially increased the cost of college attendance. Christopher (2005) found that mothers who persist in post-secondary education used a variety of strategies to "piece together some combination of student loans, Pell Grants or other grants, scholarships, or work-study income" (p. 172) to provide for their children. Heller and Bjorklund (2004) added that low-income mothers have used student loans to pay for non-education living expenses such as rent and childcare.

Despite the assistance of TANF and financial aid, low-income students face a gap of thousands of dollars annually to persist in post-secondary education (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004). Lack of existing financial resources for survival and adequate childcare was the most prevalent barrier to persisting in post-secondary education (Christopher, 2005; Collins, 2002; Corcoran et al., 2002; Dworsky & Courtney, 2007; Hauan & Douglas, 2004; Holyfield, 2002).

Summary

The experience of single low-income mothers are impacted by intersecting factors within their life course including their lower socioeconomic status, single marital status, sole parental status, and as subjects of welfare reform (Christopher, 2005), resulting in a meager 28% who overcome these barriers and access post-secondary education (Schneider, 2000). Single parenthood, then, amplifies existing barriers creating conflicts between roles such as wage-earner, mother, and student, which are compounded by limited funds for survival, lack of adequate childcare, and/or limited educational attainment (Christopher, 2005). As a result, single welfare-reliant mothers are a population of disadvantaged students that face multiple barriers in their decisions to persist toward post-secondary education goals.

Related Literature

This article is part of a larger study exploring single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in accessing and persisting in post-secondary education. Because this study sought experiences within the life course that focused on developmental elements impacting students' decisions to persist in post-secondary education, a developmental

life course framework was utilized as a scaffold for this study. In addition, non-traditional students' decisions to persist in post-secondary education were substantially impacted by their family responsibilities resulting in conflicting social roles (Bean, 1990). Therefore, this study also drew on previous literature investigating non-traditional students' decisions to persist in post-secondary education. This section describes literature contributing to developmental life course as a framework and reviews related research of factors influencing non-traditional students' decisions to persist in post-secondary education.

Developmental Life Course Framework

Developmental life course as a framework merged the sociology and psychology disciplines (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2002) and have bridged career theory (Moore, Gunz, & Hall, 2007) and human development (Yoshioka & Noguchi, 2009). This framework provides the context of individuals' lives where their decisions are influenced (Yoshioka & Noguchi) and provides a scaffold to explore participants' experiences through social roles that reflect pathways toward and through adult education (MacMillan & Copher, 2005).

Levinson's (1996) developmental life course framework segmented the life course and identified recurring cycles where individuals are expected to complete specific developmental tasks during these cycles. For example Levinson proposed that the era of early adulthood occurred from approximately 17 to 45 years old. In this era women would be expected to develop adult identities while completing educational goals, pursuing career aspirations, getting married, having children, and finding their

places in society. However, this era is also fraught with increased stress, increased financial obligations, and the realization of satisfaction or disappointment with the success or failure of major life ambitions. Levinson indicated that social roles emerge from tasks within the life course such as seeking education as a student, becoming a mother, or going to work.

Social role theory contributed to this framework by focusing on social interactions between multiple social roles and the social world, which results in negotiations between role salience and role conflict (Blumer, 1967; Lopata, 1994; Mead, 1934). Levinson (1996) indicated that social roles can be central components of the life course, those roles that are the most salient and receive the most time and consideration, or they can be peripheral components, those roles that are least salient and least time intensive. Central components can shift throughout the life course as new roles are assumed and others are exited. Recent scholarship suggested mother roles are generally the most salient roles and central components in the lives of women with children (Christopher, 2009; McCormack, 2005). Lopata (1994) added that role conflict between central components is most likely to result in emotional distress and increased stress. However, central components perceived to have approximately equal values by individuals may result in shifting role salience, where individuals negotiate resolutions based on their situations and structure of their lives.

Drawing on the life course works of Levinson (1996) and social role theory enabled an in-depth investigation of participants' experiences in role conflict and role salience that influenced their decisions to persist in post-secondary education. This

study also drew on existing literature informing persistence decisions in post-secondary education for non-traditional students.

Non-Traditional Students' Persistence Decisions

Failure to persist over the life course can be categorized as either stopping out (failing to enroll in consecutive semesters but re-enrolling at a later point) or dropping out (failing to enroll and not re-enrolling at a later point) (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The student factors that had the most impact on non-traditional students' decisions to persist included academic integration, social integration, and environmental context (Bean, 1990; Bean & Metzner, 1985). According to Bean (1990) academic integration included good study habits, relationships with faculty, confidence in selecting a degree program, and absenteeism, while social integration included the informal student peer and faculty relationships as well as social support systems (parents and friends). Further, environmental context included the external social context of finances, family responsibilities, and employment, but social context was expected to have a greater impact on non-traditional students' persistence decisions than social integration (Bean, 1990; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Peterson & delMas, 2002). This section reviews the relevant research on decisions to persist for non-traditional students related to (a) academic integration, (b) financial sustainability, and (c) family responsibilities.

Academic integration and persistence decisions. Conclusions from prior research emphasized the impact of academic integration on the non-traditional students' decisions to persist (Bean, 1990; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993, 1997). Academic integration for this student population included academic achievement (Bean, 1990;

Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Taylor, Scepansky, Lounsbury, & Gibson, 2010; Wintre & Bowers, 2007), choice of major (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Leppel, 2005), degree utility (Bean, 1990; Perry, Cabrera, & Vogt, 1999; Peterson & delMas, 2002), and career aspirations (Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Cox, 2010; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2003; Wintre & Bowers, 2007).

Past and current academic performance impacted students' decisions to drop out or persist. Students with a positive first year grade point average (GPA) (Bean, 1990; Chen & DesJardins, 2008) were more likely to persist, but poor academic preparation significantly decreased decisions to persist throughout the educational experience of low-income students (Chen & DesJardins, 2008). However, this negative effect was mitigated when high current post-secondary GPAs surpassed poor high school GPAs (Wintre & Bowers, 2007) and students had good study skills (Bean, 1990; Taylor et al., 2010). Yet Bean and Metzner (1985) found that negative environmental factors such as lack of finances, family responsibilities, or work obligations would be more salient than high GPAs in decisions to persist.

The choice of major, degree utility, and career aspirations also impact decisions to persist for non-traditional students. The choice of majors negatively influences decisions to persist when students value a higher prospective financial outcome over interests and ability in other subjects (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Leppel, 2005). Prior research emphasized that degree utility, believing that degree attainment will translate into better paying jobs or better lives, was essential for non-traditional students' persistence, contributing to academic integration (Bean, 1990; Perry et al., 1999;

Peterson & delMas, 2002). In addition, higher levels of educational aspirations impacted decisions to persist throughout educational experiences for women and low-income students (Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2003). The development of career aspirations was also an essential element in maintaining commitment toward completing educational goals (Cox, 2010; Wintre & Bowers, 2007).

Academic integration in post-secondary institutions was also impacted by external contexts of financial ability (Bean, 1990; Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2002; St. John, Cabera, Nora, & Asker, 2000), work obligations, and family obligations (Bean, 1990; Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2002).

Financial sustainability and persistence decisions. Financial sustainability of a post-secondary education program was an environmental factor directly linked to the decision to persist (Bean & Metzner, 1985). More than half of students' decisions to drop out or stop out were significantly influenced by the ability to pay for college (St. John et al., 2000).

DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (1999) suggested the type and timing of financial aid had differing effects on students' persistence decisions. They found that students who worked on campus were less likely to stop out or drop out. Other research, however, indicated full-time employment negatively affected academic performance (Astin, 1993), which was consistent with a negative impact of hours worked for women (Dave et al., 2011) and higher income from employment (Chen & DesJardins, 2008) on persistence. DesJardins et al. (1999) added students who received scholarships were less likely to drop out their first three years, but the receipt of grants had no effect on

persistence. However, Chen and DesJardins (2008) found that for low-income students who received grants throughout their educational experiences, they were more likely to persist. Students receiving work-study were less likely to drop out but only during their first year. Further DesJardins et al. (1999) indicated that student loans had no impact the first year of college persistence but increased the likelihood of dropping out as education experiences continued. In a longitudinal study, however, Chen and DesJardins (2008) determined that loans and work-study aid significantly increased persistence for low-income populations throughout educational experiences. While financial aid was found to be essential for students to persist in post-secondary education, for mothers, decisions to persist were also impacted by family obligations.

Family obligations and persistence decisions. Women as non-traditional students in martial or dependent relationships create a context where spouse and family obligations must be combined with college attendance and possibly work (Christopher, 2005; Haggstrom, Kanouse, & Morrison, 1986; Home, 1998; Jacobs & King, 2002).

Previous research revealed that women who were married or had family obligations were less likely to persist in educational goals (Christopher, 2005; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Home, 1998; Jacobs & King, 2002). In addition, women who had family obligations were more likely to delay accessing post-secondary education and choose to attend college part-time, which negatively impacted decisions to persist (Jacob & King, 2002). Further, mothers who assumed the parent, spouse, and worker roles were less likely to persist (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Dave et al., 2011; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Home, 1998; Jacobs & King, 2002; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003).

Even those women who worked only 20 hours a week were less likely to attend or persist in post-secondary education (Dave et al., 2011). In contrast, women who were divorced, separated, or widowed were more likely to return to formal adult education and persist toward completion of educational goals (Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McClain, 1995). Further, single welfare-reliant mothers were more likely to identify the presence of children as an incentive to persist in post-secondary education (Bloom, 2009; Bradburn et al., 1995; Christopher, 2005; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; Jennings, 2004).

Previous research has shown that family obligations negatively impact decisions to persist for women who were married (Christopher, 2005; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Home, 1998; Jacobs & King, 2002). However, women who were single mothers were more likely to persist despite the negative impacts of work and single parenting (Bloom, 2009; Bradburn et al., 1995; Christopher, 2005; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; Jennings, 2004).

Summary

In summary, Bean and Metzner (1985) determined that academic integration did not influence decisions to persist when negative environmental factors overshadowed other factors including lack of financial stability (Bean & Metzner, 1985; St. John et al., 2000), lack of financial aid including work-study (Chen & DesJardins, 2008; DesJardins et al., 1999; The Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002), being married (Bradburn et al., 1995), family obligations including children (Haggstrom et al., 1986; Home, 1998; Jacobs & King, 2002), and work obligations (Astin, 1993; Chen & DesJardins, 2008;

Dave et al., 2010). In addition, prior to 2008, research studies identified TANF and work-first programs as negative influences on decisions to persist for single welfare-reliant mothers (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Home, 1998; Jacobs & King, 2002; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). In contrast, a small group of literature identified the presence of children (Bloom, 2009; Christopher, 2005; Jennings, 2004) and social networks, including welfare counselors (Bloom, 2009; Christopher, 2005) as positive impacts on decisions to persist for single welfare-reliant mothers. Given that single welfare-reliant mothers appear to have unique influencers on their decisions to persist in post-secondary education, additional research is needed that delineates these influencers on their decisions to persist for this student population.

Methodology

The purpose of this study focused on the essence of participants' experiences within their life course that impacted their decisions to persist in post-secondary education. Research investigating the life course has included both quantitative and qualitative studies; however, those studies seeking to understand lived experiences within the life course have predominately utilized a qualitative methodology. The methodology selected for this study was a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design and a descriptive phenomenological method was selected to collect and analyze data.

Research Design

The qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach seeks to describe a phenomenon experienced by a group of individuals. Phenomenology themes

participants' experiences and builds a structure of the phenomenon describing their experiences in a "comprehensive sense" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 236).

Transcendental phenomenology, a Husserlian approach, represents the participant's experience as a co-construction between the researcher and the participant, where the participant ascribes meaning to the experience from his/her perspective (Giorgi, 2006). This approach includes the constructs of phenomenological reductions and free imaginative variation. Phenomenological reduction is an "attitudinal perspective" (p. 355) that includes epoche and bracketing. To seek the participant's perspective, epoche is employed by identifying the researcher's previous experience and potential bias of the sought phenomenon. Then, the researcher brackets by acknowledging and setting aside the identified biases. To seek the essence of the experience, this approach employs free imaginative variation. Giorgi clarified that free imaginative variation is the search for invariant meanings, a range of possible interpretations based on the participant's perspective, and the exploration of those meanings for essential elements that describe the phenomenon.

This study utilized the Husserlian-inspired transcendental phenomenological approach. However, Husserl indicated this phenomenological approach, designed for the psychology discipline, would need an adjusted method when crossing other disciplines (Kockelmans, 1994). Therefore, this study applied the existential phenomenological method, which was designed for research that crosses other disciplines.

Method

Giorgi (2009) described the existential phenomenological method as a set of procedures based on the works of Husserl that was “(1) descriptive (2) within the phenomenological reduction and (3) sought . . . free imaginative variations” (p. 249). Giorgi’s (2006) added to the phenomenological reduction by including a disciplinary perspective. Giorgi explained that the discipline’s orientation in the reduction elucidates the experience for the discipline, rather than for the individual participant. Therefore, the findings would have a disciplinary orientation that requires expertise in the discipline to fully understand the results. This section describes Giorgi’s existential phenomenological method as it was applied to this study including participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

Participant selection. Participants were solicited by email and flyers at junior colleges and welfare centers within Central Texas. To qualify, participants were required to be single mothers whose children lived with them; they had to be the sole provider, with no live-in boyfriend. Potential participants were required to be current welfare recipients or intermittent welfare recipients with their last welfare experience within the preceding 12 months. Potential participants were required to be current post-secondary education students expecting to graduate in the next 12 months, or who had graduated from a post-secondary education degree program within the last 12 months. Six participants met the required participant characteristics to participate in this study. To provide confidentiality, the participants chose pseudonyms (Tammy, Catalina, Nancy, Crystal, Lisa, and BJ) that were used to identify their responses. Demographics

for the six participants are reflected in the following table Participants' Profiles (see Table 5).

Table 5
Participants' Profiles

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Pseudonym	Lisa	Tammy	Crystal	BJ	Nancy	Catalina
Current Age	25-30	25-30	20-25	30-35	30-35	35-40
Race	White	White	Black	Black	Hispanic	White
Age at Birth of 1 st Child	Young Adult	Adolescent	Young Adult	Young Adult	Adolescent	Adolescent
Age ranges of children	6 & 8	6, 11, 13, & 15	4	2, 4, 6, & 11	6 & 10	13, 13, 19, & 17
Post-secondary educational goals	BA Business Alternate Teaching Cert.	AA Respiratory Therapist	BS Psychiatrist	MA Education and Counseling	BS Social Work	BS Criminal Justice
Career Aspirations	Secondary Education Teacher	Nurse LVN	Psychiatrist PhD	Academic Counselor	Social Worker	Medical Examiner

Participants initially experienced single motherhood at the birth of their first child, with participants' ages ranging from 14 to 20 years old at the time of their events. Three mothers became pregnant in high school and three mothers became pregnant while attending college. At the time of the interviews, participants were sole providers between the ages of 23 to 36, attending post-secondary education, and within one year of graduation. Participants' demographics included White, Black, and Hispanic racial identifications, as well as low-income generational poverty and middle class backgrounds.

Data collection and analysis. The collection and analysis of data for this study used Giorgi's (1997) following five stages: "(1) collection of verbal data, (2) reading of data, (3) breaking of the data into some kind of parts, (4) organization and expression of data from a disciplinary perspective, and (5) synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community" (p. 245).

Stage one: Collection of the data. Data was collected from the participants through two semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately one hour each. The first interview focused on participants' life course experiences that led to the assumption and exit of social roles and the development of their perspectives as sole providers. The second interview focused on experiences that influenced their access and persistence in post-secondary education including formations of career aspirations and negotiations of role conflict and role salience. The interviews were audio recorded and field notes were taken during each interview to capture the information that an audio recording could not. The first stage concluded with the transcription of the data resulting in 191 pages of raw data.

Stage two: Reading of the data. The second stage began by quickly reading each of the participant's transcripts to gain a holistic view of each transcript. Then a slower careful reading of each transcript was conducted to gain a holistic view of the combined transcripts. As gaps in the data or questions arose, participants were emailed with requests for additional information or clarification. Participants were given the option to reply by email or by telephone. For example, Nancy provided information about completing her general equivalency degree, accessing post-secondary education,

and having her second child. However the chronicle was not clear about the sequence of events. When asked to clarify, Nancy preferred to discuss the information by telephone. When requests for additional information and clarifications were provided by participants, the second stage closed with the addition of this information into individual transcripts.

Stage three: Breaking of the data into parts. The third stage began with rereading each individual transcript and breaking the transcript into individual meaning units. Information was blocked into separate meaning units as the information changed in meaning or topic. As the meaning units were broken into parts, labels were attached that identified the meaning unit as a chronicle identifying an event, a narrative that provided detail or a summary for an event, or an explanation describing the justification. A second label described the disciplinary perspective of the meaning unit. Finally a third label provided a concise descriptive summary of the meaning unit. For example, a meaning unit clarified by Nancy was labeled first as an explanation, then identified as early adulthood, and finally described as returning to college. When viewed sequentially, the labels provided a descriptive outline of the transcript that allowed me to identify additional gaps as well as meaning units that needed clarification. Once the additional information was provided by participants and merged, the meaning units totaled 935 at the conclusion of this stage.

Stage four: Organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective. In the fourth stage meaning units are placed in a table, reduced, and transformed using free imaginative variation. First, meaning units are placed

chronologically in a table. Meaning units that were not relevant to the study were left within the table but changed to a light grey to reduce them from the analysis. For example distractions and interruptions were placed in grey. Next, meaning units were transformed from first person to third person. Meaning units were then transformed again adding inferred context and disciplinary language to make meaning units more clear and explicit. Subsequent transformations of merging meaning units may occur if needed to render final clear concise meaning units (see Table 6). Following is the Stage Four: Transformation of Nancy's Meaning Unit:

Table 6
Stage Four: Transformation of Nancy's Meaning Unit

Label	Original Meaning Unit	First Transformation	Final Transformation
Explanation- Early Adulthood- Returning to Post-Secondary Education	Yeah, I just went and got the GED. Then I went to college. And then so finally, I had a girl, I really wanted a girl. I got me a daughter, and when she turned four, she went to pre-K and then that's when I decided that, it was enough time for, to give me to go school. But I still had to continue to work. Last year I still worked until this year.	P4 just went and got the GED. Then P4 went to college. And then so finally, P4 had a girl, P4 really wanted a girl. P4 got her a daughter, and when she turned four, she went to pre-K and then that's when P4 decided that, it was enough time for, to give her to go school. But P4 still had to continue to work. Last year P4 still worked until this year.	When P4's daughter turned four years old and went to pre-K, P4 decided that she would have enough time to contribute to being both a student and mother. At this time P4 accessed college her second time. However, P4 also had to continue to work full-time while she attended college until her last year of college.

Stage five: Synthesis or summary of the data. The fifth stage included side-by-side transformations of individual meaning units into shared meaning units, reductions of shared meaning units into the structure of the phenomenon, and an application of the finale structure to original data to describe the phenomenon. First, each individual's final meaning units were placed side-by-side in a table. Meaning units that identified

shared experiences were merged into shared meanings and made explicit using free imaginative variation with the final transformation becoming constituents. Constituents were arranged and reduced using free imaginative variation seeking to identify the constituents that were essential to the phenomenon. A constituent was not essential if removing it would not collapse the essence of the phenomenon. Once the structure of the phenomenon was identified, it was applied to the original data to draw out the findings of this study. The structure of the phenomenon is depicted in the findings.

Data trustworthiness. Addressing the trustworthiness of qualitative research is essential to support confidence in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure trustworthiness, Giorgi's (2006, 2009) existential phenomenological method was applied in a systematic manner throughout each stage. To ensure accuracy member checks were performed during stages one and two. However, as suggested by Giorgi, member checks were not performed in stage five as participants would only be able to establish accuracy of their own experiences. Rather, peer reviews were performed during stage five to ensure applicability within the adult learning discipline. This study is delimited to a small sample of single welfare-reliant mothers who have experienced welfare participation since the 2008 DRA final rule, and who have accessed and persisted in post-secondary education. Although the findings of the study may not be generalizable to a larger population, it is transferable to mothers as students in similar situations.

Presentation of Findings

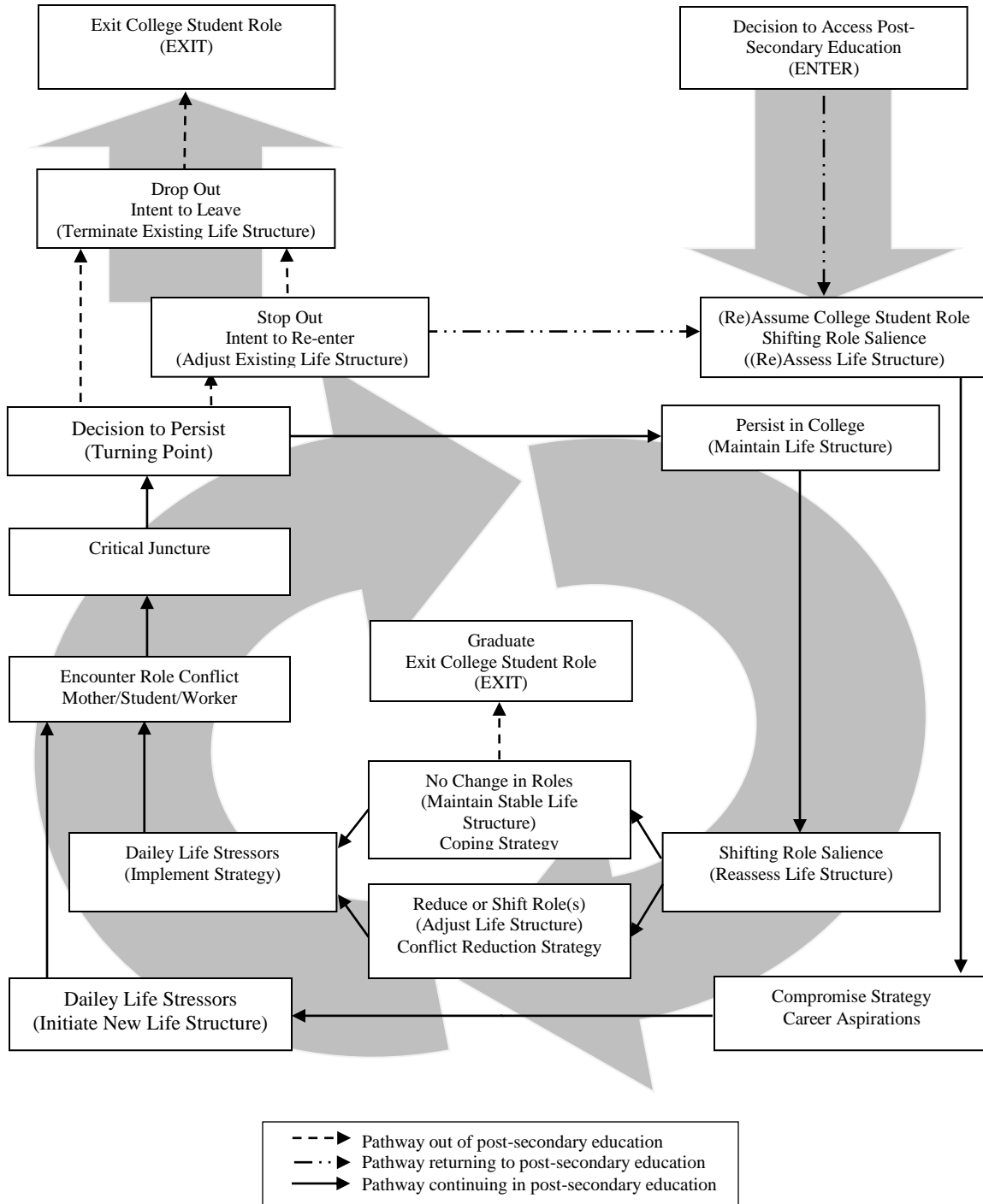
Decisions to persist in post-secondary education were shaped by the mothers' experiences in failing as sole providers, their evolving identity as sole providers, and

previous experiences in accessing post-secondary education. All of the mothers previously accessed post-secondary education as single mothers or dependents of a spouse or boyfriend. Lisa dropped out of post-secondary education; Nancy, Tammy, and Catalina stopped out; and BJ graduated with a bachelor's degree. Crystal accessed post-secondary education and continued throughout her educational experience. For these mothers, becoming sole providers and their evolving identity as sole providers resulted in their shift of role salience from mother and dependent being the most salient roles to mothers as sole providers being the most salient role. The mother's decision to persist in post-secondary education experienced a shared recurring pattern depicted in the figure *Decision to Persist: Recurring Pattern in Persisting Toward Post-Secondary Education Goals* (see Figure 7) including (a) entering post-secondary education and compromise, (b) role salience and reassessing the life structure, (c) initiating a new life structure and role conflict, (d) critical junctures, (e) adjustment and maintenance of the life structure, and (f) decision to persist.

Post-Secondary Education and Compromise as a Strategy

Mothers as sole providers returned to post-secondary education with inadequate finances that resulted in their decision to manage finances through work and welfare assistance. These mothers reentered college managing the roles of mother, worker, and welfare recipient. Adding the role of student meant initiating a new life structure that would successfully incorporate all of these roles. To do this, the mothers chose differing strategies to successfully complete post-secondary educational programs, including compromising in the formation of new career aspirations or seeking an alternative path

Figure 7
Decision to Persist: Recurring Pattern in Persisting Toward
Post-Secondary Education Goals



toward previous formed career aspirations.

Compromising career aspirations. Tammy, BJ, and Catalina chose to compromise their career aspirations and pursue a post-secondary degree that would lead them more quickly to a higher income and a sustainable life structure as sole providers.

For example, Tammy's early career interests focused on journalism. She explained, "I like, writing stories and reading and doing research." However, as a mother she said, "I am not going to make any money at that job." Assessing her options of degree programs related to income, Tammy decided she wanted to be a traveling nurse. She described her ideal job: "They pay for your house, they pay for your car, they pay for you to rent a house, and you just put the money in your pocket. And I want to do that." However, returning to school as a sole provider, Tammy noted that she did not have the time to wait for the next testing window that would allow her into the program and pursue her career dreams. Instead, she has decided to compromise her career aspirations and pursue a short-term certificate program to be a respiratory therapist. She rationalized her decision: "I have got all my basics knocked out. So it will only be like one more semester, and, well, maybe, two more semesters and that's it." Despite Tammy's interest in becoming a nurse, she had no current plans to return to college after the completion of her associate's degree.

BJ and Catalina compromised their career aspirations, but they planned to return later and pursue a high degree program. BJ chose to change her major when she became a single mother. She identified similar reasoning as Tammy, "I switched from nursing to business so that I could go ahead and graduate and start working." However, she noted

that not all degrees have the same value in the job market. As a result, she has returned to post-secondary education, selecting a master's degree program that combined with her experience to increase her income level. However, she does not plan to return to her original career aspirations.

Although Catalina also compromised her degree program, she planned to return later and pursue her career dreams. Catalina wanted to join the Air Force before becoming a single mother. As a dependent mother, her career interests evolved becoming interested in working as a medical examiner in forensics. However, as a sole provider, she decided to consolidate her credits and finish a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. She hoped to go back later and pursue her career interests as a medical examiner. Catalina supported this relating, "I still want to do medical, because I love forensics. I really wanted to go premed after I get my criminal justice degree . . . but, I really want to get out of the welfare system and become self-sufficient." Though each of these mothers chose differing levels of education, they each changed their majors to finish their education earlier.

Compromising educational goals. Lisa, Nancy and Crystal sought a different path to their career aspirations. Although they maintained their original career aspirations, Lisa chose a different degree program, Nancy chose a junior college, and Crystal chose an online educational institution.

Lisa wanted to be an elementary school teacher. She related that this was a career dream formulated her in her adolescence. Lisa explained, "It has always been my dream goal since I was 10 years old." Lisa dropped out of post-secondary education

when she became a single mother. Lisa rationalized, “So after I had my daughter, I was a single mom, and single moms don't go to school; they just don't do that.” After becoming a sole provider, Lisa decided that she needed to return to post-secondary education and complete her degree and become a teacher. While taking education courses at a local junior college, an academic advisor from a local four-year university informed Lisa that she only needed 15 hours to finish a business degree. Lisa decided to change her major to a business degree program to reduce the length of time required to graduate, but maintained her career aspirations to be a teacher. She justified her decision, “I only had 15 hours left to complete my bachelor’s degree in business. Whereas, a bachelor’s in education, I would still have 42 hours left . . . and I can teach business classes at a high school level.” Although Lisa originally wanted to teach elementary education, she believes compromising to teach high school will maintain her career aspirations to teach but would result in finishing her education earlier.

Unlike the other mothers, Nancy did not have childhood career aspirations. Rather she formed her aspirations in adulthood in the context of single parenthood. As a result, she maintained her career aspirations as a sole provider. Nancy wanted to be a social worker but did not choose to attend a traditional university. Nancy indicated that her compromise was in choosing a junior college because of financial concerns. She said, “The money part was an obstacle, because I didn't understand how all that worked, the Pell grant and the loans.” However, she planned to transfer to a four-year university. Nancy explained, “I am trying to get an associate’s of arts in general studies so that later I can transfer.” She was still investigating her options.

All of the mothers had previous experience in post-secondary education that informed their world view about the potential impact from the additional role of student. To reduce potential conflicts, Tammy, BJ, and Catalina compromised their career aspirations, whereas Lisa and Nancy sought the shortest means to completing their education while maintaining the essence of their career aspirations. Although each of the mothers compromised in different ways to initiate a stable maintainable life structure with the role of student, they all had the same goal of completing their educational programs as soon as possible and transitioning to full-time work.

Role Salience and (Re)Assessing the Life Structure

Within the shared recurring patterns, mothers' decisions about compromise and role conflict were viewed through their shifting roles salience depicted at the top of Figure 7. Mothers identified the mother role as the most salient role, while the student role and worker roles salience shifted depending on the mothers' resources.

The role of mother. The role of mother was the most salient role. BJ illustrated, "I would say that the parenting role takes precedence no matter what, all the time every day." The mothers noted that when making decisions about their life structure, the physical and emotional need of the children were the most salient factors. Crystal added, "The safety and security of the children take precedence over other roles." Tammy summarized when other roles conflict with the parent role, the parent role always wins. Each of the mothers described themselves as the person solely responsible for the children. Nancy explained that when she is working or attending classes and her children need her, she has to leave to take care of her children. She said

she has to rely on herself because “there is nobody who can get them for me.” In addition, each of the mothers described an expectation that their children deserved being the focal point of their lives. Crystal concluded, “My baby did not ask to come in this world, and I do love her . . . my baby deserves a certain kind of love and attention.” When making decisions about the life structure, the role of mother was the most salient role. However, the roles of student and worker shifted salience.

Shifting salience of student and worker roles. As sole providers for their children, the roles of welfare recipient, student, and worker were part of the mothers’ cash flow management strategy. Mothers noted that the welfare recipient role was not demanding of their time, and so it was the least salient in decision making. BJ noted, “The welfare recipient role is always on the bottom because it is there and it helps, but it is not anything to stress over.” The roles of student and worker shifted salience. Crystal acknowledged, “There are times when there are some roles that are more important than the others.” Catalina, who has fewer resources, indicated the worker role was more salient than the student role in decision making. She said, “I go to work in a conflict between the student and worker roles, because the fact that if I do not go to work, I lose my job and what can happen, I have no money coming in.” The mothers recognized that they needed the worker role to meet current income needs, but they also needed the student role as they expected the degree to transfer into economic mobility after graduation. The expectation that the degree would result in a better life after graduation solidified the mothers’ commitment to this role. Catalina concluded, “I choose to remain

in college to get a better paying job At least I know that I can actually take what I learned in college and put it to use.”

As sole providers, mothers’ role salience was impacted by their realization that they were alone in providing for their children’s needs. As the sole provider, the mother role was the most salient. However, being a sole provider also impacted the salience of the student role due to its potential utility in economic mobility and the worker role based on the immediate need of the child(ren). Adding and committing to the student role caused mothers to initiate a new structure and to reassess the existing structure as role conflict arose.

Role Conflict and Initiating a New Life Structure

Within the shared recurring pattern, mothers’ experience in role conflict and struggles to resolve those conflicts are depicted in Figure 7. Mothers’ life structures included the role of mother, worker, welfare recipient, and student. Mothers consistently related that there was no conflict between the welfare recipient role and other roles. However, the mothers’ initial life structure when entering post-secondary education included a work role away from the college that created role conflict. As mothers persisted in post-secondary education, role conflict between the student and mother roles were most common.

Work and student role conflict. Consistently mothers identified the role of worker outside the academic environment as conflicting with both the role of mother and student. These mothers worked full-time and tried to attend college full-time. As a result, they described a new life structure mired in work and student role conflict. Lisa

related that she tried to work full-time and go to college full-time, but found that she could not successfully maintain both full-time roles. She described looking for a job to meet her income needs but that would better meet her student role needs. Lisa said, “At that time I started back to college, I was thinking about going back to a large retailer, but they told me that they could not meet my schedule requests.” Catalina stated that as she returned to college, she found that her role as worker prevented her from studying and attending class consistently. Catalina related, “I go to work in a conflict between student and worker, because the fact that if I do not go to work, I lose my job and what can happen, I have no money coming in.” Nancy also worked full-time away from the academic environment. Like Lisa, she indicated the number of hours she was working and trying to attend college full-time was not working out. She clarified “I knew I could not work all those long hours anymore.” Mothers working full-time and away from the college environment sought to resolve their work-student role conflict but also faced mitigating potential conflict with the mother role.

Mother-student role conflict. Although the mother role was most salient, it was also the one that encountered the most role conflict. BJ, like many of the mothers, noted that the mother role conflicted most often with the student role. She identified time demands with the children’s needs and her need to do homework as the most frequent conflict. BJ said, “Sometimes I have to put the student role first to complete an assignment.” Crystal added, “Mommy and student conflict a lot. I miss out . . . if I do not get my essay done before the weekend, then we do not have time together.” Several of the mothers indicated that they struggle to meet the needs of both roles, but at times

one role will have to lose. Nancy explained, “At home the time that you have planned doesn't always go right, to study.” Catalina illustrated the conflict:

Time consuming. Whenever the kids want to bug you, they want to sit there and just go through the stages that kids do. That in itself is time consuming. Yet, you have to sit there and do this, this, and this, to try to get things to go the way you need them to, not the way the kids want them. Because you are trying to do something within a certain time, and sometimes it does not work out the way, and eventually it all winds up late.

Many of the mothers also indicated the children's activities complicated their schedules. Managing conflict between schedules was also a time pressure. BJ related:

For me, it is a fight because there's football practice, there's cheerleading practice, there's fight, fight, fight. I have to do a 1500 word research paper, I have to take a test, and I have two chapters to read when they are at the practice. You have to make sure you watch them because when they finish the practice or they'll say, ‘you weren't watching.’ What, are you serious? They will say, ‘when you go to practice you can't stay in the car, you have to stand out there with the rest of the mom's.’ Yeah so, there are a lot of 2:00 a.m. bedtimes for me and Saturday's a thing of the past.

When mothers initiated a new life structure, adding the student role, they were more likely to have conflicts between the work and student roles. As they persisted in post-secondary education, the mothers were more likely to have role conflict between the role of mother and student. Role conflict often accumulates into a critical juncture.

Critical Junctures

A critical juncture was the culmination of role conflict that resulted in a negative outcome forcing mothers to question the current life structure, which is shown in Figure 7 preceding the decision to persist. A critical juncture was experienced as a conflict within the existing structure of roles that culminated in a negative outcome. Most mothers described critical junctures as unresolvable time conflicts resulting in academic failures.

Time conflicts. Critical events were often the result of inability to resolve schedule conflicts, lack of time to attend class, and lack of sufficient time to study. Described as an outcome of not having enough time, Nancy expanded:

I am constantly struggling with the homework assignments. If I don't have time and then I go to class and I haven't done the assignment, I am not learning like I am supposed to do. Then I get disappointed in myself because I do not make the grades I want to make, because I do not have as much time to devote.

BJ contributed that for her critical junctures occurred mostly in the fall as struggles between work and the children. She elaborated, "In the fall...I have to be at work...until 7:30 p.m. Then I have to go home and get the kids done, and there's just really no time to do my school work, but I have to take these classes." Crystal also described a lack of time as an issue. Crystal related, "Not enough time . . . schoolwork and trying to pick up my daughter and just trying to get everything done. Trying to focus and remember, because I have to get an A." Tammy has a special needs child and finds time to attend classes her most difficult obstacle. However, she blames the

instructors for not being more understanding of her plight. Like Lisa, Tammy expressed critical junctures as a continuous unrelenting situation. As she explained:

My role as a student is hard; I can't focus. I can't focus most of the time, because I have so much stuff going on. When the kids are at school, I try to do her homework and everything. But I end up having to go to my son's school, go take my kids to the doctor, or get my sister's kids, or go pick up medicine; everyday it's something different. It's really hard to stay focused on anything. Its seven million things at once.

Whether events that led to critical junctures were intermittent or continuous, each of the mothers described the outcome as academic failures.

Academic failures. Critical junctures typically resulted in failing a test, class, or being put on probation. Nancy and BJ expressed disappointment and concerns with their grade-point average. Nancy said, "That is what discourages me. I think I should just quit., but then I am like no, I am passing." In addition, BJ mentioned keeping her grades above a 3.0 is required. Her time constraints forced her to choose between her children and her grades. Recently her grades fell below a 3.0, placing her on probation. As a result, she had to miss a semester. BJ described her situation:

Some of the obstacles that I face really come in when it comes to time management. Because, the master's program, you have to maintain a 3.0 GPA. But in the fall when I was stretched for time, one time I didn't make that 3.0 and it put me on probation. So I had to sit out, and that was one of my biggest obstacles because it was kind of like sitting out that time period.

Catalina and Crystal were concerned about failing tests and classes. Catalina stated, "Every time I fail a test, which I failed one yesterday, it makes me wonder, am I going to get this class done so I can graduate. Is this class going to be a hindrance to not completing what I need to do?" Like Catalina and Crystal, Tammy had problems failing tests. However, her academic failings resulted in probation like BJ. Tammy described her situation:

I am not passing everything this semester, I am screwed this semester. I passed everything last semester; I am good for that. I am screwed this semester; it's just that it's been bad, really bad. But I am confident that I will be all right. It's just probation. Next semester, I am taking some classes that I know I am going to do really good in.

At a critical juncture, the mothers faced multiple time constraints from unresolved role conflict. Time constraints resulted in poor grades, failing grades, and academic probation. The mothers were faced with the need to reassess their life structure to determine whether to adjust or retain the current structure.

Adjustment and Maintenance of the Life Structure

Mothers drew from their perspective as sole providers and shifting role salience to make decisions about adjusting or maintaining their current life structure that are illustrated in Figure 7. Most of the mothers resolved conflicts between the mother, worker, and student roles by adjusting the life structure through shifting or reducing their roles. Unresolved conflicts were addressed by maintaining the structure and implementing coping strategies.

Adjustment of the life structure: Conflict resolution strategies. Mothers tried to resolve role conflict so they would not continue to reoccur. Once the solution worked, the mothers typically did not face that particular problem again, or they were better able to manage it the next time. Crystal described this process:

After a while, you kind of get on a schedule and everything abides by it, but sometimes things will come up But a lot of things do not happen anymore; when something happens, I try to prepare for it to happen again. And if it does, I am prepared and I can keep moving. So it doesn't really mess up my schedule.

The mothers utilized creative strategies to manage the conflict among the various roles. These included shifting the worker or student role and reducing the role expectations.

Shifting the worker role. Several of the mothers initially encountered conflict between their work roles and the student role. Lisa, Tammy, Nancy, and Catalina were able to resolve this by shifting roles from work roles away from the academic environment to a work-study role within the academic environment. Lisa described the work-study position as a less demanding and more flexible position. This made the worker role more flexible and less salient. In addition, several of the mothers initially held full-time work roles. Several of the mothers were able to resolve their role conflict by reducing their hours in a work-study position. Catalina revealed, “I am grateful to finally have a job working Monday through Friday and not on the weekends.”

Shifting the student role. When the student role conflicted with the mother role, mothers were more likely to shift roles as a conflict reduction strategy. Some of the strategies employed included night classes, online classes, sharing homework time with

the children, or completing homework after the children were in bed. Lisa tried to study when the kids were in school and decided to take a combination of night classes and online classes to resolve role conflict. However, Lisa felt guilty for taking night classes. She said, "I decided to try night school, because she thought it would be easier for me and the kids. I thought I could work more during the day . . . I took three online classes and one night class, and it killed me." BJ also took online classes. She added, "I take as many classes online as possible. Like right now, the two classes that I am in right now, they are online." Catalina tries to do homework together with her children. She explained, "The student role takes time away from the kids. That is the reason why we sit down and try to do homework together . . . so I can help them." BJ and Nancy indicated that they try to do their homework after the kids were in bed. Nancy explained:

Last night, I was up till 11 o'clock doing my math because I have to get the midterms done. And my son was like, "What time did you go to bed?" I said that I was not up that late. But he knows I was awake late.

Similarly BJ added, "Usually I do a lot of my class work during down time at work or after the kids go to bed."

Reducing roles. Mothers who encountered a conflict with the mother role opted to reduce the conflicting role when possible. Lisa was working two jobs where her hours were conflicting with her role as a mother. She resolved this conflict by quitting one job and increasing her hours at another job. Lisa rationalized, "I resigned from the childcare center because the kids said to my mom . . . that they don't like it there and that

they would rather be home with me so that we have time to do stuff together.” This reduced her total hours worked, giving her more time with her children. Lisa added her daughter expressed that she disliked the childcare arrangement in the after-school program. She would rather be at home with her mother. Nancy was working full-time and also quit her job by taking out a loan to cover her bills. Lisa and BJ reduced their roles as mothers, allowing their parents to assist with childcare when needed. Lisa said that if she has a schedule conflict, then she calls her mother or sister to provide childcare. Lisa clarified, “It's either my mom or my sister that I call to resolve the conflict.” BJ said, “I have my family helping me with childcare.” Reducing roles and shifting roles helped mothers to reduce conflict between roles. However, not all of the role conflict was able to be resolved.

Maintenance of the life structure: Coping strategies. Role conflicts that mothers were unable to resolve were later addressed through coping strategies. Coping strategies allowed mothers to maintain the existing structure and persevere toward educational goals. Many of the mothers indicated that planning schedules in advance was their most effective coping strategy. Nancy explained that she tried to plan in advance and maintain her schedule. She completed time consuming chores on weekends so they would not take away from other responsibilities during the week. She maintained the kids’ schedules and tried to spend quality time as well. Nancy described it as a process of “juggling and balancing.” Crystal added she tries as much possible to plan and work in advance. Crystal described, “I try to write my essays by hand, like back in the day, I put it on paper . . . I am not at the computer more than 30 or 40

minutes at the most.” Several of the mothers indicated that they rely on social networks for emotional support. They indicated that sometimes strategies and planning does not work. There are just some issues that won’t go away and they simply have to be endured. In these cases they call for emotional support. BJ said that “I am talking to my support system; they can to keep me on track.” Crystal said that she relies on her sister’s support at times like these. She related, “My eldest sister, she is . . . the one that pushes me. Oh my God I love her for it, constantly pushing, constantly telling me I can do it.”

Mothers encountering role conflict must decide to adjust their current life structure or maintain their existing life structure. Mothers who choose to adjust their life structure do so by shifting or reducing their conflicting roles. However, when role conflict strategies do not work, mothers who choose to maintain their current life structure rely on coping strategies such as detailed planning and emotional support from support systems. Mothers indicated that within this pattern they encountered critical junctures that required them to make a decision to persist.

Decisions to Persist

Within the shared recurring pattern, mothers encountered critical junctures portrayed in Figure 7, where the mothers had to make a decision to drop out and terminate their existing life structure, to stop out temporarily until they were able to create a sustainable life structure, or to persist in post-secondary education toward graduation. None of the mothers considered dropping out of post-secondary education to pursue work. Only one mother indicated that she considered stopping out to pursue post-secondary education at a later time. However, all of the mothers choose to persist

toward graduation despite academic failures and unresolved role conflict, citing the salience of being solely responsible for their children's physical and emotional care.

Each of the mothers questioned if they would make it to graduation. Crystal explained, "I worry all of the time if I will make it to graduation. When a problem occurs it is usually huge. Most of the time it occurs all at once." Similarly, BJ feels the pressure from having to work full-time and providing for her kids is an obstacle to completing her degree. But she, like the other mothers, will do whatever it takes to get the work done and graduate. BJ said, "I have questioned if I will make it to graduation. I don't think that I can do this because I have to focus on my job and working and providing for my kids and all that good stuff." Crystal added, "I try to keep in mind why I am in college. I always manage to keep moving forward somehow."

Several of the mothers found inspiration in reviewing how far they have come. It helped to see an end of their struggles. Nancy concluded, "I am still in college despite thinking about quitting or delaying. I have already done more than half of it, why would I just throw that away? I am almost done; I am close to being almost finished with a two-year degree." Lisa contributed:

Quitting school never crossed my mind. I never thought about it. I am not sure why my choice was between graduating sooner or later, rather than graduating or not graduating. It is really just that I didn't have much more to go to finish college.

Despite the obstacles mothers as sole providers, several mother indicated that they felt they no other option but to complete their degrees. Nancy said, "I want a better

life for my son.” Tammy’s summary was reflective of the mothers’ views in coping and persisting toward graduation. Tammy summarized:

I have never doubted that I would finish, because I cannot not finish. It is not even like an option. It is not an option to even think that way. I have never thought that way. I know I am going to fail some classes or I am going to make some bad grades, but to generalize everything as I am just not going to do it; I do not have an option not to do it.

Each of the mothers is anticipating graduation. For some of the mothers it is a completion of the education goals and successfully moving toward their career aspirations. However, for other mothers the milestone is a longer path that was shortened or redirected so they could more quickly provide for their children. Regardless it is an exciting and emotional accomplishment they are proud of completing. Crystal is anticipating the completion of her goals. She said:

I am so glad I stayed in school, because now I can actually see an end. Goodness I can see an end. I am sorry it is exciting I am almost done. All that work, it is never ending, all the stress, all the late nights, and I am almost done.

Lisa is completing an associate’s degree toward her bachelor’s degree. She plan to continue toward her goals, but took a moment to celebrate her success. Lisa related:

I could not wait for that semester to be over so I could graduate in May. So there was always a time when I felt that graduating was going to take forever, this is gonna be horrible. But I did receive my certificate in business, which was just a

completion of one year of the studies. So when I did that, I felt that it was not going to be much longer, and so to me it was the light at the end of the tunnel.

Summary of Findings

The decision to persist in post-secondary education began with (re)entering post-secondary education and (re)assuming the role of post-secondary student. It was followed by mothers adjusting their life structure to include the student role, and the role of mother remained the most salient role impacting subsequent decisions. Mothers with previous educational experience sought compromises in career aspirations or pathways to completion of post-secondary education as a means to ensure success. The decision to persist was then experienced as a shared recurring pattern including: (a) role conflict where participants sought to mitigate potential negative outcome through conflict reduction or coping strategies, (b) unresolved conflict resulted in recurring time constraints leading to unsatisfactory academic performance, (c) poor grades, failed tests, and academic probation became subsequent critical junctures, that (d) led mothers to reevaluate existing life structure and their decision to persist in post-secondary education. The findings revealed that mother as sole providers continued in the shared recurring pattern with unresolved time conflicts anticipating an imminent graduation or continuing toward higher levels of post-secondary education.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study described experiences that influenced a small population of single welfare-reliant mothers who chose to persist in post-secondary education. The findings of this study were derived from a narrow segment of mothers'

life course after they became sole providers. These findings both support and contrast with existing research. The most significant findings that are discussed in this section include factors that had both a direct impact and an indirect impact on their decisions to persist in post-secondary education.

Most Influential Factors in Decisions to Persist

This study found two factors most directly influenced mothers' decisions to persist in post-secondary education, including family responsibilities and degree utility.

Family responsibilities. Previous research identified family responsibilities as an environmental component that impacted decisions to persist (Bean, 1990; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Peterson & delMas, 2002). For non-traditional students, family responsibilities were described as external roles that required time as a spouse or mother that reduced the students' available time to attend class and study. However, in this study the critical aspect of family responsibilities was the long-term financial care of children that the mother was solely responsible for providing, rather than the time commitment for their care.

Supporting previous research, this study found that the most influential factor in mothers' decisions to persist was the presence of their children (Bloom, 2009; Bradburn et al., 1995; Christopher, 2005; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; Jennings, 2004), but more specifically their status as sole providers. As sole providers, mothers acknowledged that they were alone in their responsibilities to care for their children's emotional and financial wellbeing. Their decisions to access post-secondary education were directly related to their previous financial failings as sole providers. Although

being sole providers was only partly about finance, as single parents, financial success was a crucial aspect of the mothers' decisions to access and persist in post-secondary education.

Financial success was a salient component in decision making, this component underpinned the life course and identity development of these single welfare-reliant mothers. First, mothers' life course became a scaffold for the evolving process of becoming sole providers. Mothers exited the role of dependent other and became solely responsible for their children. Although they were previously single mothers, they relied upon others to help meet the financial needs of their children. However, after becoming sole providers, mothers unsuccessfully attempted to utilize low-wage work and welfare benefits to financially provide for their children. Failing to financially provide for their children became the catalyst to accessing post-secondary education. In tandem with events in their life course, mothers developed identities as sole providers where the role of mother became most salient. Choosing to access post-secondary education was a commitment to their identities as sole providers. Therefore based on mothers' evolving life courses and identity development, mothers as sole providers chose to persist in post-secondary education despite substantial negative academic and environmental influencers, as a commitment to the long-term financial care of their children.

Degree utility. Previous research also identified degree utility as a psychological outcome that had a lesser impact on decisions to persist in post-secondary education for non-traditional students (Bean, 1990; Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2002). The findings of this study identified degree utility as an outcome of mothers' commitments

to career aspirations, which was supported by previous research as an essential component in commitments to persist (Cox, 2010; Wintre & Bowers, 2007).

Several mothers in this study returning to post-secondary education indicated the need for a degree that would provide a better paying job to financially provide for their children. In contrast to previous research, several mothers compromised their career aspirations to select a degree that would provide a better income and a better future life for their children, rather than the degree they were most interested in pursuing (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Leppel, 2005). However, several of the mothers also committed to previous career aspirations, citing the degree utility and the soundness of their previous decisions. Therefore, supporting previous research, expectations of their future was directly related to commitment to their selected degree programs (Bean, 1980; Perry et al., 1999; Peterson & delMas, 2002); however, in contrast (Bean, 1990) degree utility was a direct influencer related to decisions to persist despite substantial negative academic and environmental influencers.

The factors that directly impacted and were most influential for single welfare-reliant mothers' decisions to persist in post-secondary education was their status as sole providers seeking long-term solutions to the financial care of their children and expectations of degree utility in meeting their responsibilities as sole providers to their children. Decisions to persist were indirectly influenced by other factors including academic integration, environmental context, and social integration.

Most Impactful Factors in the Shared Recurring Pattern

Decisions to persist were part of a recurring pattern of experiences. Mothers rotated through the process and found that they were continually faced with situations resulting from role conflict that forced them to reevaluate their choices and recommit to persisting toward their educational goals. These situations were addressed through conflict reduction and coping strategies; however, they inevitably culminated in a critical juncture.

Conflict reduction strategies. Mothers experienced conflict between student and work roles and student and mother roles. Mothers entering college were currently working, so they previously negotiated conflicts between the mother and worker roles. Therefore, integrating the student role was the catalyst for the majority of role conflict that arose during their educational experiences.

Mothers who worked full-time outside the academic environment were most likely to have unmanageable conflicts between the worker and student roles. However, mothers also noted that conflicts between these roles impacted the mother role as well. The most successful strategy implemented by the mothers was reducing work roles and shifting work roles to work-study positions inside the academic environment. Previous research indicated that work-study was likely to only impact decisions to persist during the first year of post-secondary education (Chen & DesJardins, 2008). However, welfare-reliant mothers indicated that although their work hours substantially decreased, cash welfare assistance increased because work-study income was not counted against their benefits, as were their incomes from previous work roles. In addition, mothers

indicated that work-study positions were more flexible in when and how many hours were worked from week to week. The reduction in hours and increased flexibility afforded mothers more time to attend classes and more time to spend with children. Therefore, transitions to work-study positions effectively eliminated this role conflict and supported their decisions to persist throughout the educational experience.

Adding the role of student not only required time to attend classes; it also required time to study and complete homework. Time commitments to student roles generally conflicted with their mother roles. Mothers continuously struggled with time conflicts. They employed several strategies including online classes, night classes, studying after the children were in bed, and studying with the children. Similar to existing research, the mothers' own expectations of being good mothers in providing the emotional care for their children resulted in substantial frustration and guilt (Pare, 2010). The most commonly employed strategy to resolve this conflict was the use of online classes and studying after the children were in bed. Unfortunately, for most mothers these strategies did not resolve the conflicts and typically resulted in poor academic performance.

Poor academic outcomes. This study supports previous research that proposed for non-traditional students who experienced poor academic outcomes; emotional support from good support systems could minimize negative impacts on their decisions to persist (Bean, 1990). Single welfare-reliant mothers indicated that poor grades and failing tests were frequent outcomes of unresolvable role conflict, as well as less frequently academic probation. Poor academic outcomes were isolated events that were

viewed as recurring critical junctures in their educational experiences. With each event, mothers adjusted their life structures by employing different conflict reduction strategies. Some strategies were very successful and eliminated that particular conflict. However, all of the mothers related that not all conflicts had a resolution that would work. When mothers exhausted their available conflict reduction strategies, they faced a turning point in their decisions to persist. All of the mothers indicated that despite the impacts of conflicting environmental factors and negative academic outcomes, they simply had to persist toward the completion of their degrees. Mothers described these experiences as culminating in the choice of how to work around and accept negative academic outcomes yet still graduate. To do this, mothers employed a coping strategy by seeking emotional support from their social networks.

Social networks. Previous research indicated that social integration was not a critical factor in decisions to persist for non-traditional students because their contact and social networks were not at the college, but rather a part of their relationships with friends, family, children, and co-workers (Bean, 1990). Bean indicated that for non-traditional students, social integration should entail informal student-peer relationships, informal contact with faculty, and students' external support systems. This study found that social support systems had a direct impact on the emotional well-being of mothers and their ability to cope with critical junctures.

The most common coping strategy mothers employed when facing unresolvable conflicts that resulted in negative academic outcomes was to reach out to their social networks. Mothers identified immediate family members and their children as sources

of emotional support. However, in contrast to previous research these mothers did not identify faculty or student-peers as part of their social networks, even those mothers in work-study positions (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

A limitation of these findings is the inability to draw conclusions from this data to describe why mothers limited the emotional support of their social networks to immediate family members and children. It may be that the nature of the support needed was highly personal and emotionally difficult for these mothers. Some mothers indicated a need to keep their struggles as single welfare-reliant mothers private. It may also be that the mothers were not able to identify other students with similar difficulties to become part of their social networks. Previous research suggested that limiting social networks to family and friends also reduced the effectiveness of the social networks (Alfred, 2010). Therefore, future studies should investigate why welfare-reliant mothers may limit their emotional support to immediate family.

Conclusion

Understanding single welfare-reliant mothers' perspectives as sole providers was essential to understanding the essence of their experiences that impacted their decisions to persist in post-secondary education. The educational experiences of single welfare-reliant mothers were imbedded in the extended context of their life course from single parenthood through the completion of post-secondary educational goals, in conjunction with welfare reform's policy change in 2008 of increased but limited access to post-secondary education. Single welfare-reliant mothers in this study indicated that the

presence of welfare assistance in conjunction with a work-study position reduced the impacts of financial constraints on their decisions to persist in post-secondary education. However, their limited financial resources also resulted in the most destitute mothers compromising their career aspirations to ensure completion of post-secondary educational goals (Dave et al., 2008; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). This group of mothers displayed resolute persistence in post-secondary education despite critical junctures where other non-traditional students with family obligations waver (Christopher, 2005; Haggstrom et al., 1986; Home, 1998; Jacobs & King, 2002). This distinguishes the uniqueness of their experiences as an important element in evaluating the impact of welfare reform and informing future research in the adult learning and adult education disciplines and student development practices of colleges and university professionals.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course from poverty to post-secondary education. To better understand the essence of their experience, this study utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach to investigate experiences in their life course that influenced their (a) pathways and social roles, (b) perspectives as sole providers, and (c) decisions to persist in post-secondary education from their perspectives as sole providers. The findings of this study were presented and discussed in the context of a developmental life course framework supported by social role theory and women's identity development constructs. The major findings in this study included six single welfare-reliant mothers' structure of their life course, identity development as sole providers, and recurring patterns of role conflict negotiated through social role salience toward their persistence in post-secondary education. These findings contribute to existing research, practice, and policy and have implications for future research. This section presents a summary of the major findings contributing to research and implications for practice, policy, and future research.

Summary of Major Findings

This study contributed to existing research by (a) identifying the life course and pathways from poverty to post-secondary education for six single welfare-reliant mothers, (b) illuminating single welfare-reliant mothers' negotiation of social roles

toward adult identity development as sole providers, and (c) elucidating recurring patterns in their decision to persist in post-secondary education through negotiating role conflict and career aspirations.

Single Welfare-Reliant Mothers' Life Course: Pathways from Poverty to Post-Secondary Education

The first major finding entailed the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course that influenced their pathways and social roles from poverty to post-secondary education. This study found that experiences influencing the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers who became pregnant in high school were substantially different from those who became pregnant in college.

Two teen mothers' life courses were impacted by experiences in child abuse, which led to becoming single teen parents, dropping out of high school, leaving home early, emancipation, and welfare assistance. Teen mothers who sought access to post-secondary education experienced more difficulty persisting toward educational goals with recurring experiences of temporarily stopping out of college. In addition, supporting previous research, teen mothers' early motherhood resulted in premature, compacted, and truncated transitions to early adulthood (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Pallas, 1993). In this transition children leave childhood and form the basis of their adult identity (Levinson, 1996). They choose what parts of their childhood identity to keep or reject, explore potential adult identities, and evolve toward their preferred potential adult identity. For teen mothers in this study, becoming single mothers caused them to begin this process early; their turbulent environment retarded

their explorations between potential identities and selections of their preferred adult identities. Unlike the teen mothers, the mothers in this study who became pregnant in college had already begun their transitions to adulthood. They went through the process of choosing what parts of their childhood identity they wanted to keep or reject, exploring potential identities, and selecting their preferred adult identity. However, becoming single parents interrupted and truncated the developmental process of evolving toward their preferred adult identities.

Previous research drew conflicting conclusions about the impact of early parenthood on the extended life course (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Leadbeater & Way, 2010; Pallas, 1993). This study concluded that having a supportive environment mitigated some of the negative effects of single parenthood in the later eras of the life course, as suggested by Leadbeater and Way (2010). This study also supported previous research that suggested socioeconomic status was not the cause of delaying access to post-secondary education (Gorard & Smith, 2011).

This study contributed to existing literature, concluding that for participants in this study, becoming single mothers after beginning the transition to adulthood lessened or mitigated the negative impact of single motherhood throughout the era of early adulthood. In addition, this study concluded that to fully explore the life course and pathways of single welfare-reliant mothers, the additional transitions of emancipation, welfare assistance, becoming non-married dependents, and becoming sole providers are needed. Finally, this study determined that for this group of single welfare-reliant mothers, being victims of child abuse and living in non-supportive turbulent

environments resulted in withdrawing from secondary education. Moreover, their experiences with lack of shelter, lack of food, and lack of transportation delayed the attainment of general equivalency degrees and delayed access to post-secondary education.

Single Welfare-Reliant Mothers as Sole Providers: Negotiating Social Roles Toward Adult Identity Development

The second major finding elucidated the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course that influenced their perspectives as sole providers. This study found that mothers' perspectives as sole providers were experienced as an evolving adult identity, beginning with the birth of their first child and evolving throughout the era of early adulthood as mothers persisted in post-secondary education. This study contributed to existing literature by elucidating the unique and shared adult identity development as sole providers of these six single welfare-reliant mothers.

Mothers' experiences influencing identity development as sole providers included becoming single parents and experiencing an adaptive crises, becoming live-in dependents or spouses, becoming sole providers, shifting mother roles to their most salient roles, experiencing a second adaptive crises, seeking welfare assistance as sole providers, failing to adequately provide for their children, experiencing developmental crises, shifting perceptions of financial management from a present cash stream to a future potential cash stream, seeking a long-term solutions to financial problems, compromising career aspirations, choosing to return to post-secondary education,

committing to their evolving identities as sole providers, and choosing to persist in post-secondary education despite unresolvable conflicts.

This study supported existing research indicating that women's identity development was relationship based (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1983), centered on the role of mother (Lee & Oyserman, 2009), and sought dependent relationships to provide for their children (Levinson, 1996). However, in contrast to previous research, this study found that four of the six mothers did not have childhood anchors to separate from in their transitions to early adulthood, as suggested by Josselson (1983). Rather, as victims of child abuse, neglect, or unsupportive environments, they rejected adult authority figures in their early childhood. In addition, mothers in this study were not willing to accept adultery, drug abuse, or physical abuse to maintain the dependent relationships, as suggested by Levinson (1996).

This study contributed to existing research on the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers by identifying the following developmental events: (a) shared developmental crises, (b) the resumption of early adult transition developmental tasks that were previously compacted and truncated, and (c) the exploration of possible identities and commitment to selected identities.

Single Welfare-Reliant Mothers' Persistence in Post-Secondary Education: Negotiating Role Conflict and Career Aspirations

The third major finding identified the essence of single welfare-reliant mothers' experiences in their life course that influenced their decisions to persist in post-secondary education from their perspectives as sole providers. This study elucidated a

recurring pattern of negotiating between role conflict and role salience experienced by single welfare-reliant mothers that resulted in critical junctures and recurring commitments to their decisions to persist toward post-secondary education goals.

This study supports existing literature identifying the presence of children (Bloom, 2009; Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McClain, 1995; Christopher, 2005; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; Jennings, 2004) and work-study positions (Chen & DesJardins, 2008) as a major influencer in their decisions to persist. In addition, this study supported existing literature on non-traditional students that indicated social integration and poor academic outcomes would not have a major impact on their decisions to persist in post-secondary education (Bean, 1990; Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2002). However, in contrast to existing literature, degree utility, the belief that the selected degree major would eventually result in better paying jobs or better living circumstances, had a major impact rather than a lesser impact on mothers' decisions to access and persist in post-secondary education, despite negative external factors (Bean, 1990; Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2002). Finally, Bean (1990) suggested that social integration should be redefined for non-traditional students to include student-peer relationships, informal contact with faculty, and students' external support system. This study supported Bean's description of social integration for non-traditional students and existing literature indicating that social networks are essential for single welfare-reliant mothers' persistence in post-secondary education (Bloom, 2009; Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Christopher, 2005; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Edin & Lein, 1997a; Hayes, 2003).

The findings from this study contributed to existing literature by identifying social networks as a major influencer on mothers' ability to cope with recurring negative outcomes and continue to persist toward post-secondary education goals. In addition, this study elucidated a gap in these mothers' social networks lacking informal professor and student-peer relationships, despite the presence of work-study positions. The findings from this study also had implications for higher education practice, policy, and future research.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

One of President Obama's federal policies, the American Graduation Initiative, espoused intentions to increase post-secondary education and certificate graduation rates of workforce participants between the ages of 25 and 34 years old by 50% over the next eight years (Marcus, 2010). However, budgetary cuts reduced available funds for state and federal student grant programs dedicated to low-income students. In the midst of lower available funds, student enrollments substantially increased, further diluting the per-student grant given to low-income students. According to Hurley, McBain, Harnisch, Parker, and Russell (2012), accountability requirements have shifted the focus of state and higher education institutions' policies toward ensuring increased access to post-secondary education as well as increased graduation rates.

Implications for State and Higher Education Policy

The major findings of this study have implications for higher education policy in the topics of performance based accountability, financial aid and leadership in federal education policy, and social policy and its implications on higher education.

Performance based accountability. To meet graduation rate goals, several states are considering performance based funding as accountability measures to increase efficient use of funds (Hurley et al., 2012). Previously the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) incorporated similar performance based accountability measures. The consequence was stringent successful completion ratio goals that resulted in suitable participant constructs, which narrowly defined who was anticipated to be successful in post-secondary education. The WIA suitable participant constructs marginalized single welfare-reliant mothers by reducing their ability to qualify as suitable applicants for WIA funded education programs (Johnson Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2007; London, 2006; Sparks & Peterson, 2000). The findings of this study support previous research indicating that single welfare-reliant mothers can successfully complete post-secondary education programs despite similar situations that prevent them from meeting WIA suitable participant constructs including: (a) being single parents, (b) having reduced access to financial resources, and (c) having limited social networks (Christopher, 2005; London, 2006). Therefore, states and higher education institutions, which seek to increase access and persistence of disadvantaged populations, should be careful and cautious in constructing higher education policy that guides the implementation of performance based accountability measures, which may negatively impact disadvantaged student populations such as single welfare-reliant mothers. Performance based funding, which was suggested as a means to determine federal financial aid to states and higher education institutions, subsequently determines the available funds for students' potential financial aid awards.

Financial aid and leadership in federal education policy. The findings from this study support previous research indicating that low-income non-traditional students' decisions to persist were substantially impacted by financial aid. Single welfare-reliant mothers in this study identified grants, loans, and work-study positions as essential components of their income strategies to persist in post-secondary education. However, to encourage higher education institutions to move toward state accountability expectations, many states are deregulating the authority to set tuition levels. Hurley et al., (2012) noted states that have increased tuition rates have also increased the cost of higher education for all of the students in those states. Increased tuition rates combined with reduced and diluted grants to low-income students have further increased their cost of pursuing higher education. Therefore, reduced financial aid and/or increased tuition rates would negatively impact financially disadvantaged student population's ability to persist in post-secondary education. The findings from this study suggest that higher education institutions should support a policy of reduced tuition rates for financially disadvantaged populations as a means to maintain access and persistence in post-secondary education. Further higher education institutions should advocate for a leadership role in the evaluation of federal education policy that impacts financial aid to disadvantaged student populations as well as social policies that have similar implications for higher education.

Social policy's implications for higher education. Welfare reform as a social policy has implications for higher education policy. Levin, Montero-Hernandez, Cerven, and Shaker (2011) indicated that educational programs targeting welfare

participants often provide limited educational opportunities, mostly remedial skills development, and no opportunity for attaining degrees. However, recent changes in welfare reform resulted in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reinterpretation of the 2006 Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) in their 2008 final rule. The 2008 DRA final rule revised welfare reform's position on post-secondary education, allowing up to 12 months of post-secondary education to substitute for work requirements. Levin (2007) suggested that the DHHS's previous post-secondary education position made the development and implementation of educational programs difficult for colleges whose goal was to increase access and provide developmental opportunities. However, the DHHS suggested that mothers and welfare counselors become familiar with welfare rules to better take advantage of educational opportunities that would facilitate mothers becoming self-sufficient. The findings in this study support previous research (Chen & DesJardins, 2008) suggesting states' social policies and welfare administration should exclude or continue to exclude work-study income and financial aid grants and loans against income calculations as well as count or continue to count work-study hours as time worked to meet welfare work requirements. Subsequently, universities should implement complementary policies that designate work-study opportunities for welfare-reliant mothers in an effort to increase persistence and graduation rates of this disadvantaged population. In addition to implication for higher education and social policy, the findings of this study also have implications for higher education practice.

Implications for Higher Education Practice

This study informs practice in several ways. First, welfare-reliant mothers in this study were motivated to complete their educational programs based on perceptions of degree utility in both potential income and job availability. Second, welfare-reliant mothers in this study were able to meet family living expense needs and fund tuition through grants, loans, and work-study positions for low-income student populations. Finally, these students' persistence toward graduation was impacted by family responsibilities and the availability of online classes. This section will present the implications of this research for higher education practice.

Degree utility linkage. The findings of this study identified degree utility as a major influencer in the decision to persist in post-secondary education for these welfare-reliant mothers. In addition, several mothers in this study compromised their career aspirations, selecting degree programs with a perceived higher degree utility. The findings linking degree utility to the welfare-reliant mothers' decisions to persist coincides with the shift in public policy focusing on graduation rates and a national dialogue concerning the link of post-secondary education with the job market. Marcus (2010) suggested the growing number of jobs requiring a post-secondary degree as compared to the current graduation rates imply a potential future shortfall of three million educated workers. In addition, linking students' potential motivations for degree utility and the job market's need for educated workers has been a concern for workforce boards utilizing WIA funds distributed by the Department of Labor (Amstutz, 2001; Bezdek, 2001; Sparks & Peterson, 2000). The findings of this study suggest higher

education practice should develop programs at varying levels of degree attainment that meet educational requirements for job opportunities that bridge the low-income secondary labor market and the career advancing primary labor market. Higher education practice should also make these linkages between educational programs and potential degree utility in job markets transparent to the student. In addition to degree utility, low-income students are impacted by financial aid practices at their higher education institution.

Financial aid and work-study positions. Mothers in this study were able to maintain stable life structures and persist toward educational goals as a direct result of financial aid. They cited financial aid grants as a means to pay college tuition. Mothers also indicated work-study positions and loans were utilized to meet welfare work requirements and increase income to meet the financial needs of their children. Contrary to prior research, mothers in this study identified work-study positions as an influencer in their decisions to persist throughout their educational experiences (Chen & DesJardins, 2008). Therefore, decreased financial aid is likely to severely impact single welfare-reliant mothers' access to and persistence in post-secondary education. The findings of this study suggest higher education practice should be cautious of graduation rate accountability initiatives and reduced financial aid packages, especially work-study positions, which may push disadvantaged populations out of post-secondary education. While work-study was utilized as a financial strategy, mothers also identified the use of online courses as a means to reduce expenses as well as role conflict.

Online course availability. Mothers in this study identified the use of online courses as one of their most successful conflict reduction strategies to reduce social role conflict throughout their educational experience. Previous research supported mothers' conclusions that as students with family responsibilities online education reduced role conflict by eliminating travel time, offering flexible scheduling, reducing childcare costs, and increasing time with their children (Lyons, 2004; Park & Choi, 2009). However, previous research also noted that online education has been plagued with increased levels of dropping out by students between the ages of 25 and 50 due to poor course design, lack of curriculum relevance, and family responsibilities (Park & Choi, 2009). Other issues contributing to students dropping out included student isolation (Singh & Pan, 2004), inadequate technical skills (Davidson, 2005), and frustration from needing additional assistance with course content (Coyner & McCann, 2004). Given the advantages of online courses for single parents that was confirmed in these findings as well as previous research (Lyons, 2004; Park & Choi, 2009), higher education practice should evaluate educational programs, especially those targeted to disadvantaged student populations, to incorporate online or a mixed online and onsite course delivery formats. In addition to implication for higher education practice, the findings of this study also have implications for future research.

Implications for Future Research

The major findings of this study have implications for future research in the topics of social policy, degree utility, online education, and student support services.

Implications for social policy and future research. Although previous research has extensively investigated the impact of the 1996 PRWOA on access to and persistent in post-secondary education, recent scholarship has not adequately investigated the impact of expanded access to post-secondary education for welfare-reliant mothers since the 2008 DRA final rule.

Following up on current welfare reforms. The experiences of five mothers in this study suggest that welfare requirements may not be acting as a barrier to post-secondary education. However, future research should evaluate the long term impact of welfare reform's 2008 DRA final rule on the life course of welfare-reliant mothers including choices to pursue and persist in certificate programs, associate's degree programs, or bachelor's degree programs. Further, future research needs to investigate post-secondary education programs targeted to welfare-reliant students to determine what impact the 2008 DRA final rule had on the educational program curriculums, certificate and degree program offerings, links to career ladders providing economic mobility, and transfers to higher educational goals leading to associate's and bachelor's degrees. While future research should consider social policy's implications on degree programs; similarly, welfare counselors and WIA administrators should reconsider suitability constructs identifying potentially successful education program participants.

Welfare reform, WIA, and suitable participant constructs. The findings in this study elucidated the life course of six single welfare-reliant mothers. Three of the mothers became pregnant in high school, which resulted in their early transitions to adulthood being premature - beginning early, truncated - abruptly cut off, and

compacted - substantially shortened. Transitions to early adulthood entailed the developmental task of exploring possible selves. The premature, truncated, and compacted transitions to early adulthood resulted in these three mothers missing this developmental task. During their identity development as sole providers they returned to the task of exploring possible selves in their choices to access post-secondary education. Understanding the developmental cycle may help welfare counselors and WIA administrators understand why these women committed to educational programs at this time in their life course. Future research should explore the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers to determine if these findings can be generalized to a larger population of single welfare-reliant mothers. While future research should consider social policy implications of the life course of single welfare-reliant mothers in committing to educational programs, future research in higher education should investigate degree utility on decisions to persist.

Degree utility and persistence. In contrast to previous research, this study identified degree utility as a major influencer in participants' decisions to persist. However, this study did not distinguish the impact of degree utility at differing educational levels. Future career research should investigate the link between access to and persistence in post-secondary education programs and low-income students' perception of degree utility at various levels of educational attainment. In addition, future research should evaluate the impact of educational program's length versus degree utility for low-income students' decisions to compromise career aspirations, choice of majors, and choice of colleges. Although degree utility was a major influence in

mothers' decisions to persist, access to online education impacted decisions to persist as well as reduced role conflict.

Expanding low-income student access to online education opportunities.

Single welfare-reliant mothers identified online courses as essential to reducing role conflict. However, not all of the mothers had the financial resources to purchase a computer or maintain internet access. In these situations, mothers turned to computer labs provided by public libraries and their higher education institutions. Given the impact of online courses in the persistence of these single welfare-reliant mothers, future research should investigate the availability or lack of availability of required technology and internet access at public locations and in residences for low-income single parents that may mitigate the potential benefits of online classes including no travel time, flexible scheduling, reduced childcare costs, and increased time with their children (Lyons, 2004; Park & Choi, 2009). Although mothers identified online courses as a successful conflict reduction strategy, interventions offered by student support services were not utilized.

Student support services. The findings suggest single welfare-reliant mothers in this study did not seek assistance from student support services for academic assistance or mentoring, despite reoccurring experiences in failing tests, failing classes, and being placed on academic probation. Rather, mothers in this study acknowledged their lack of time and unresolved role conflict as their most significant factors impacting reoccurring negative academic outcomes. However, despite negative academic outcomes, mothers in this study continued to persist in post-secondary education.

The findings in this study concluded that these single welfare-reliant mothers lacked sufficient support networks during their educational experiences. Bean (1990) identified informal faculty and student peer relationships as a component of social integration for non-traditional students that would increase their support networks and subsequently increase graduation rates. While students may share similar reasons from dropping out, groups of students with similar demographics such as single welfare-reliant mothers may experience unique reasons for their attrition (Bean, 1990). Future research should investigate single welfare-reliant mothers' access to student support services such as entry points and availability of information, the type of services offered compared to their needs, and the impact of unique services on student retention and graduation rates.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study investigated the life course of six single welfare-reliant mothers from poverty through post-secondary education. The major findings of this study contributed to existing research by identifying the structures of their life courses, their identity development as sole providers, and recurring patterns of negotiating role salience and role conflict to persist in post-secondary education. This study contributed to higher education policy, suggesting caution in performance based accountability measures and enacting a leadership role in federal education policy research and advocacy. This study contributed to higher education practice, suggesting the creation of post-secondary education programs that bridge low-income populations to the primary labor market, designation of work-study positions for single welfare-

reliant mothers, and expansion of online course availability. This study suggested future research needs to identify perceptions of degree utility at varying levels of education programs for low-income students, further impacts from recent changes in welfare reform since 2008, access of low-income students to technology and internet access for online courses, and student support services that would expand social networks impacting the persistence of single welfare-reliant mothers in post-secondary education.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

First Interview

First objective.

What experiences within poverty have shaped the participants schema, social roles, and pathway within their life course from poverty to post-secondary education?

- Can you tell me a little about yourself, perhaps describe the path of your life?
- Can you tell me about your children?
- Can you describe your life before you became a single mother?
- Can you describe some of your experiences after becoming a single mother?
 - (At what point in her life did she become a single mother?)
- Can you tell me about some of the experiences in your life that can describe the impact money has had both in its absence or presence?
 - (Did financial hardship occur before or after becoming a single mother?)
- Can you tell me about your experiences that led you to seek welfare assistance?

Second objective.

What experiences in negotiating between the needs of their child(ren), career aspirations, and barriers to education contributed to the choice to access post-secondary education?

- Can you tell me about your career goals/dreams before you became a single mother?
 - Have your career goals/dreams changed?

- Can you tell me about your experiences that made you decide to go to college?
- Can you tell me about the problems or obstacles that you faced to get into college?
- Do you feel that you have compromised your career dreams? (If yes) Can you tell me what happened that made you feel you needed to compromise your dreams?
- Can you tell me about experiences with your children that have influenced your career goals or your choice to pursue a college education?

Second Interview

Third objective.

What experiences in negotiating salience and conflict between participant's role as a sole provider and other social roles affected the participant's choice to persist in post-secondary education at critical junctures?

- We have talked a bit about being a single mother. However, women tend to hold many roles that compete for their time and attention. Some of those roles may include being a welfare recipient, sole provider, student, and worker. Can you tell me about your other roles?
- Do you feel that one role is more important than the others, or are there times when different roles are more important to you?
 - What experiences can you describe that show which role or roles you feel are the most important to you?
 - What makes one role shift and become more important than another?

- Can you tell me about your experiences with competing demands on your time and attention between two or more roles?
 - Which roles do you feel experience the most conflict?
 - Can you describe typical incidents or events that trigger the conflict?
- Since becoming a college student, have you ever questioned if you will make it to graduation or perhaps why you are continuing to pursue a college education?
 - Can you recall this happening more than once?
 - (If yes) Can you describe what happened in each occurrence that made you question continuing in college?
 - Why did you choose to remain in college?

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

The Life Course of Single Welfare-Reliant Mothers:

Experiences in Seeking Access to and Persisting in Post-Secondary Education

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research study that investigates the experiences of single welfare-reliant mothers in post-secondary education. The purpose of this study is to investigate the college experiences of students who are single welfare-reliant mothers. It seeks to explore the student's experiences in developing career aspirations that led her to seek access to college and role conflict, if any, resulting from her persistence toward college goals. You were selected to be a possible participant because you indicated that you are a current college student who is within one year of graduation or a former college student who has graduated within the previous year. You indicated that you are a sole provider for your child(ren), a single mother with no live-in significant other, and the residential parent living with and caring for your child(ren). You also stated that you have participated in welfare benefits since welfare reform in 1996, while also seeking access to or participating in college.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two semi-structured in-depth interviews. You will be provided copies of the interview questions before each interview. After the interviews, you may be asked to clarify or expand upon an interview response at your convenience by email or phone. This study will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes for the first interview and 45 to 60 minutes for the second interview.

Your participation will be audio recorded. However, you may request the recorder to be turned off at any time.

What are the risks involved in this study?

The risks associated with this study include:

- The participants may recall emotional events associated with being a single mother, a student, and a welfare participant.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

The possible benefits of participation for you include:

- The participants may gain a feeling of empowerment by sharing their experiences and struggles in persisting toward their educational goals.
- This study will benefit student populations who are single welfare-reliant mothers by contributing to career literature and a better understanding of the shared experiences for this underrepresented and disadvantaged student population.

- This study will benefit student populations who are single welfare-reliant mothers by contributing to the literature that affects the creation of higher education policy for disadvantaged populations.
- This study benefits colleges, financial aid professionals, professors, and career counselors by informing practice through a unique understanding of situations faced by disadvantaged student populations, such as single welfare-reliant mothers.
- This study benefits society by challenging the concepts of who can be successful in post-secondary education and exploring factors that affect critical junctures of success, such as the choice to continue persisting toward stated educational goals.

Do I have to participate?

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University, Temple Jr. College, Texas A&M Central Texas, or Central Texas College being affected.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?

This study is confidential and I will not contact the source of your referral, if you inquired as a result of word-of-mouth solicitation. You will be asked to select a pseudonym prior to the interview. All data will be collected and stored under the pseudonym. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely on my personal computer, which is not part of a network, and password protected until destroyed. Responses that are printed will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office.

Committee members (Mary Alfred, Carolyn Clark, Jia Wang, and Elizabeth Umphress) will have access to the original records identified with the pseudonym.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely, only I will have access to the recordings. Any audio recordings will be kept for three years and then erased.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Rebecca Jo McPherson at beccamc01@tamu.edu or 49-0151-56698354 (Germany) or Dr. Mary Alfred at (979) 845-2718. If you would like to discuss this study by phone, please email me and include a phone number and a convenient time that I may contact you to prevent your incurring long distance phone expenses.

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

Consent Signature

Please initial here if you agree to be audio recorded during the interview. You can request the audio recording to be turned off at any time during the interview.

_____ I agree to be audio recorded.

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant: _____

Printed Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Printed Name: Date: _____

VITA

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Professional Affiliations: Society for Human Resource Management
 National Career Development Association
 United States Distance Learning Association