Balancing School, Work & Family in a Constant State of Crisis: The Experiences of Low-Income Student Mothers

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None of the images used in this presentation represent actual research participants in order to retain respect for participant confidentiality. The images used are either clip art or online images found in google image search. While these photos may represent real students and/or parents no image is portrayed of any research participant.

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Student Parents in Post-Secondary Education

- Non-Traditional Students are the Fastest-Growing Sub-Population of Students (National Center for Education Statistics)
- Student Parents represent 25% of U.S. undergraduate students (Miller 2011)
- 57% of Student Parents are Low-Income (Miller 2012)
- Among Low-Income Students Parents 68% are single parents and 92% are married (Calculated using data from Miller, Gault & Thorson 2012)

Student Parents in Post-Secondary Education

- Imperatives of Post-Secondary Education
- Effectiveness of Post-Secondary Education as anti-poverty strategy
- Difficulty of Obtaining Post-Secondary Education

Research Methodology

- Institutional Ethnography
- Feminist Methods (Stand-Point Epistemology)
- Participatory Action Research
Research Methods

- In-Depth Interviews (31 participants)
- Research Journals (20 participants)
- Interpretive Focus Groups (2 focus groups)
- Institutional Interviews & Secondary Data
- Public Policy Research

Demographics: Location

- Three Region Sampling (40 states represented)
  - West Coast (CA, OR, WA)
  - Mid-West (IL, IN, MI, OH)
  - Northeast (CT, MA, NY, PA)

Demographics

- Pell Grant
  - 80% received Pell Grant
- 40% Previous Bachelor’s Degree
- 8% Non-Financial Disqualification

- Public Assistance Programs
  - TANF 16%
  - EITC 46%
  - SNAP 64%
  - Medicaid & SCHIP 8%
  - Subsidized Housing 41%
  - Childcare Voucher 48%

Demographics: College Program

- Degree Program
  - 86% Undergraduate Students
  - 12% Graduate & Post Baccalaureate Students

- Type of College
  - Community Colleges (16 participants)
  - Public Universities (10 participants)
  - Private Universities (10 participants)
  - For-Profit/Proprietary Colleges (4 participants)

- Status & Course Type
  - Most full-time
  - Most took traditional in-person classes (4 participants took courses only online & 12 participants took courses both online & in-person)

Findings & Discussion

- Lifeworlds
- Role Strain
- Financial & Material Hardships
- Conflicts Between Higher Education & Public Assistance
- Dismissal of Women's Labor
- Academic Impacts & Outcomes

Lifeworlds

The lifeworld encompasses the overall set of feelings, values, and obligations that help a group define a collective identity (Habermas 1987)

What it means to be a low-income mother, and the mutual understanding and experiences shared between low-income mothers, comprise a distinct lifeworld experience. It involves their experiences as they engage with the social institutions that frame their efforts as mothers, students, and providers as well as the individual and communal sense of identity, prioritization of values and long-term aspirations.
Role Strain

- Role Conflict
- Role Overload
- Role Contagion

Role Strain

- Motherhood & Caregiving
- Academic Responsibilities
- Job/Work Requirements
- Public Assistance
- Household Labor

Financial & Material Hardships

- "At Risk" Students: Inability to meet basic needs
- Shifts Priority from Academics to Survival
- Laborious to strategize needs without money
- Unspoken Shift
- Financial hardships as a source of role contagion

Financial Aid is Not Enough

Financial Aid Cost of Attendance:
- Tuition & Fees: $3,913
- Books & Supplies: $152
- Room & Board (Housing, Utilities & Food): $6,984
- Transportation: $542
- Miscellaneous/Personal: $1612

Pell Grant $5,550 (Maximum Allowed)
Subsidized Stafford Loan $3,500 (Maximum Allowed)
Unsubsidized Stafford Loan $5,653 ($347 below maximum)
Total Award: $14,703

Financial Aid is Not Enough

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allowed Monthly Living Expenses</th>
<th>Actual Monthly Living Expenses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Room &amp; Board: $776</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation &amp; Misc: $352.66</td>
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</tbody>
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School is Not Work

- Welfare Agencies & Work-First Policies
- Cultural Iconography & Discourse
- Family & Family Supports
"Good Motherhood"
- Intensive Motherhood (Hays 1996)
  - Quality Time
  - Intensive Domesticity
  - Role Overload
  - Goal-Oriented Motherhood
  - Role Modeling
  - Providing a Better Future
  - "Deserving" of Help & Support

Academic Impact & Outcomes
- Textbooks, School Supplies, Computer Access
- Homework & Study Time
  - Childcare
  - Time Management
  - Sleep Deprivation
- Absence
  - Transportation Challenges
  - Sick Children
  - Time Conflicts & Inflexibility

Academic Impact & Outcomes
- Bringing Children to Class
  - Discretionary Policies
  - Stigma & Embarrassment
  - Challenges of Parenting in the Classroom
- Physical & Mental Health
  - Chronic Sleep Deprivation
  - Food Insecurity
  - Unaddressed physical & mental health needs

Academic Impact & Outcomes
- Success in the Face of Adversity:
  - Cumulative GPA: 3.53 (68/80)
  - Term GPA: 3.4 (86/100)
- Connections Between GPA & Stability or Hardship
  - Reh
  - Genetic

Long-Term Outcomes
- Still Enrolled in Post-Secondary Education: 37%
- Completed a Degree: 60%
- Graduating in 2013: 77%
- Advanced to Higher Level Degree Program: 92%
- Graduated From Higher Level Degree Program: 7%
- Still in a two-year associate's program: Molly, Ella, Cherry

Hardship & Success: Solving the Paradox
- Level of Motivation & Focus
- 6-Year Time Parameter
  - Statistical Measure
  - Satisfactory Academic Progress
  - Pell Title Limit
- Limiting Human Potential
Supporting Student Parents
- Interpersonal
- Ideological
- Institutional
- Public Policy Advocacy

The American Dream: A Double-Edged Sword
- Policies based on meritocracy limit choices and options for most low-income mothers
- Myth of Meritocracy
- Myth of Equality

The American Dream: A Double-Edged Sword
- Resilience & Perseverance
- Proving "Them" Wrong
- Motivation: driven by desire to provide "A Better Life" for Children

The American Dream: A Double-Edged Sword
- Belief in the power of higher education as positive an investment in the future
- Grassroots impact of higher education on extended families and communities
- Personal Empowerment

Conquering Goliath: Fighting for an Education
- Successive battles for the services, resources and supports necessary to persevere in college
- Battle Weariness over a long-term educational trajectory
- Implications for Educational Inequality
- Role of welfare stereotypes & controlling images in limiting opportunities
Demographics: Family

- Participants' Age Range: 18-45 (Median 25-30)
- Children's Ages Range: 5 months - 17 years (Median 4)
  - 2 participants Pregnant
- Number of Children: Range 1-5 (Median 1.5)
- Majority were single-mothers (71% / 12%)
  - Single/Separated (65%)
  - Married/Domestic Partnership (35%)

Demographics

- Race/Ethnicity
  - Caucasian/White (11)
  - Black/African-American (17)
  - Asian/Pacific Islander (6)
  - Native American (10)
  - Other (3)
  - Multi-Racial (Checked 2+ boxes) (6)
- Ethnicities: Latina (Mexican-American, Dominican-American), Jamaican, Cape Verdean. Participants also listed tribal identities including Lakota, Mohawk, Choctaw, Sioux, and Cherokee.

- Disability Status
  - Disability or Chronic Health Condition 46%
  - Child with Disability or Chronic Health Condition 25%

Demographics: Majors/Minors

- Art, Music or Arts Admin: 3
- Education: 3
- Humanities: 6
- Medical: 9
- Professional/Trades: 4
- Social Science: 12
- Social Work: 2
- STEM: 1
- Unknown/Unclassified: 11
- Students w/ Double Majors: 2
- Students w/ Minors: 9