BACK TO SCHOOL: THE BALANCING ACT GRADUATE STUDENT MOTHERS PLAY BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy.

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in the field of Health Education

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DENISE DEMERS, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in HEALTH EDUCATION, presented on March 31, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: BACK TO SCHOOL: THE BALANCING ACT GRADUATE STUDENT MOTHERS PLAY BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Kim Miller

More women than ever before are entering the halls of higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), more women than men are obtaining bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a).

According to Home (1998), at the end of the 20th century, women with families were the fastest growing population at the university level. At the beginning of the 20th century, students over the age of 25 were the fastest growing population in higher education (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). These statistics beg the question: Why do women return to school? What are their challenges? What are their stories? More importantly, how do they do it all? How do they balance the demands of home and school and, most often, employment as well?

My research examined the tensions women face going to school, specifically women who have children at home, commonly referred to as nontraditional age students. I was interested in the competitive demands of balancing two challenging roles, that of student and mother. Additionally, I wanted to know how these two roles affected their health and self-care.

I designed a qualitative study to explore life as a graduate student mother. I specifically sought to learn about strategies of balancing the challenges as well as how, or if, schooling affected their health and self-care. Using the Roy Adaptation Model, I searched for ways in which women balance their multiple roles. With this research, I aim to help these women in their efforts to be successful in school and in life. I utilized both individual interviews and a focus group. Themes for interviews included I’m a Mother first, I’m the Captain of the Ship, “We got there together,” the Adventure is Stressful, Finding Joy
in the Journey, Attitude Determines Altitude, and Letting Go. Additionally, two overarching themes surfaced from the focus group: 1. Stress is Ubiquitous and 2. Identity Crisis. From this study, health educators can begin to understand how graduate school mothers experience graduate school, thus obtain a greater ability to develop and implement strategies to help this population.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to the only rightful owners of such devotion, ALL my devotion – my family. For without them, each of them, I could not have accomplished so steep a task. So, thanks be to Scott, Jordan, Spencer, Kelsey, and Cody Demers
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a difficult thing to contemplate ALL the people I would like to acknowledge in my journey to this PhD. The list is FAR too long, starting with those who motivated me to begin this process, to those who have seen me through to the bittersweet end. I am a storyteller and would prefer this to be a 10 page story of those closest to me as well as those who merely said hi at integral times in my journey. However, I will keep it brief.

I will first acknowledge my Father in Heaven. This entire process has been seamless with His guidance. Gratefully, I have seen His hand at every intersection and in times where moving forward seemed too slow or difficult. My faith in His goodness, His guidance, His love, and His carrying of me has kept me on target succeeding when I felt I could go no further. Thanks be to Him!

Secondly, there is a list a mile long of those who helped me get to where I am today. I would feel remiss without naming a few with a brief sentence reminding me of what they did for me. The others I will just name. Without the words of Ray Price and Jake Emmett, I would not be where I am today. My first day on campus I met Pat. McNeil. Her aura set me on fire with the knowledge that I would succeed. Dr. Joyce Fetro made a positive impact that same day reminding me that I have four people that I am influencing outside of the teaching arena that are far more important when the day is done. Her guidance has remained a stronghold in my schooling. Dr. Teri Abrams walked me to the Printing Plant, beginning a friendship that strengthened me inside and out, in class and out. I sat with Helen Hogue in the student center having lunch where she was forthright in her acknowledgement to God. “Get out of His way and let Him take the lead in your life,” she stated. Thank you, Helen, for that reminder at such a crucial time in my life.
Next, my professors and advisors have influenced me beyond measure. This acknowledgments section would not be complete without mentioning Dr. Kathleen Welshimer. I sat in her office my second day of this PhD program wondering how I would go about my schooling. Her direction to study women like myself has become my passion. Dr. Roberta Ogletree has believed in me from the start. Her open door policy has given me time to gain advice and wisdom from someone I look up to and admire. I thank Dr. Saran Donahoo for her wisdom and friendship. Sitting in her office was a breath of fresh air, laughing and working all at the same time. Her faith in me and her prodding me to continue was just what I needed. She often knew just what I wanted to say and would help me say it in the best way. She kept things light when my world felt heavy. Lastly, without my Chair, Dr. Kim Miller, stepping in right before my Prelim Examinations, I would be sunk. I appreciate her way with words, her quotable moments, and the way in which she said just the right thing at the right moment to help me along. Many of her thoughts will remain with me forever because they were not dissertation specific, but life lessons. I will always be appreciative of her.

Of course, many colleagues of mine have traversed this road alongside me. I have learned the true meaning of a cohort, and expanded my definition of friendship. These folks laughed with me, cried with me, pushed me forward, and believed in me. Thank you to Matt Bice, Jared Bishop, Faustina Blankston, Wade Brown, Brett Burnham, Heather Carney, Martinique Free, Bethany Kies, Diane Land, Marc Lodyga, Vanessa Sneed, Peggy Sullivan, and Alycia Wodika, and many others. Carbondale has become my home away from home, and SIUC campus, that home. I will forever remember Dave, the custodian, who was in the building as long as I was each night and always greeted me with a smile and a motivational “You can do it!” I am grateful for Linda Schack who offered me a place to stay while at school. Last, but
certainly not least, the friendship and administrative help of Christine Cisco and Katy Green is indispensable. I thank them for all the detail help and friendship along the way.

I often felt like I led two completely separate lives – one at school and one at home. Thankfully, I have a super support system in both places. I could not go without saying thank you to my friends, confidants, and lunch buddies: Cindy Gadberry, Sandy Webb, Jill Jones, and Amy Packer. Friends are the family you choose!

My mother has always believed in me. Even when I was a selfish teenager, she believed I could do anything. Her constant faith in my abilities to accomplish more than I thought was possible will forever strengthen me and make my journey easier. Thank you, Mom.

In conclusion, I need to say a hefty word of gratitude for my husband and family. Once again, Scott has taken over the house and kitchen duties for me to finish a degree. When we first got married, I was finishing my thesis for my Master’s degree. Eighteen years later, I am finishing my dissertation for my doctoral degree. During both episodes, I worked like a crazy woman and through it all he has been supportive and taken on the household duties so I could finish a degree. For that, I will always be grateful. Thank you, Scott, for being a willing and supportive husband, for taking care of the house and family while I have been away. Without you, I could not have done ANY of this. Last but not least, my children. I have seen them grow, progress, and mature in a multitude of ways. Everyone said it would happen, but it took me until now to realize it. I have missed them terribly during this process. Thankfully, through it all we have weathered the storms and come out on the other side stronger.
Dressed in capris and a casual shirt, I made my way up the three flights of stairs. Was I really going back to school? Despite the nostalgia, I felt as I drove onto campus, I was filled with anxiety and fear. Was I good enough? My brain had long since turned to mush, I thought. I had not gone a day without forgetting where something important was located for I do not know how long. How on earth was I going to take classes if memory was paramount? Yet, I knew this was the right thing to do so I trudged ever upward. I stopped at the top of the stairs to catch my breath. I was no longer the young, fit graduate student I used to be, but so many friends had told me that did not matter. What was important, they said, was the experience I have. I longed for my friends to be right, but something still made me nervous. I have always been confident in doing what I know is right, so after a quick break to catch my breath and gain composure, I found the professor’s office and knocked.

While sitting on one of the couches in his office I began to feel good about this decision to uproot my relatively stable life and pursue a doctoral degree in Health Education. We spoke easily of school, family, life, and what this doctoral program expects of me. Although I felt good about it and knew it was the right thing to do, I still felt unsure almost to the point of doubting myself and turning back to my old established life as a stay at home mother. As I walked to another building and another administrator on campus my insides began again to feel the push, the yearning, the knowledge that what I was doing was right, regardless of how well I knew it.

While in that administrator’s office of the graduate school, my insides caught fire. I knew I was really going to do this and that I had what it took to succeed. That feeling was short lived, however, because no sooner had I returned home than all the doubt came back. The day I drove onto campus for my first class the same trepidation came back and fear engulfed me again.
The funny thing is that, although filled with fear, I could also feel excitement. Even though I questioned how in the world I was going to accomplish this new task, I knew that I would complete it with flying colors.

The professor in my second class seemed to bring so many questions and fears to the forefront of my mind and allay them all at the same time. Even though I was anxious to get back on the road and get home to my family, I stayed after class and met her in her office. I had no question other than, “HELP!” It was then that I realized many of my worries revolved around fulfilling someone else’s agenda. Somewhere inside I felt it necessary to do this school thing “their” way. My dissertation would be “their” idea. “They” would not approve of me going slowly through at my own pace and the pace of my family so this meeting was the beginning of a huge weight lifted. I could study anything I wanted. I could study the family. I could study women like me with a family and going back to school. I could take as long as I needed; after all, this professor had not graduated in three or four years, but six!

During this conversation, this professor suggested studying women like me with families traveling away from home to get an education. As I have gone to school, the experiences of nontraditional aged mothers intrigued me. Are all women like me? Do they feel the same stressors I do? Are they all as confident and successful as I am, yet simultaneously full of the same degree of fear and trepidation? This professor was quick to point out that although it was doable, it would be difficult, very difficult. In fact, she mentioned marriages falling apart, as well as trouble with spouse and children. Little did I know that this conversation would become my dissertation topic.

My interest in this topic began as I searched for a way to improve my own situation. I am specifically interested in how these women do it all – how they balance the demands of home
and student responsibilities. Studies show that support, especially from her spouse, plays a key role in a woman’s educational success (Home, 1998). However, few studies specify between emotional or instrumental support, as defined by Glanz and Rimer (2008). The day-to-day grind of household responsibilities added to the demands of a student multiply. How does she take care of her multiple roles AND herself, as well as her own health? I want to tell our story. I want to be able to show the world that we exist and will succeed for our families, and maybe in spite of our families, as well as for many other reasons. I know how this journey has affected my life and my health. It, no doubt, affects the lives and health of other women, too. How can I help to improve this experience for myself, and for others? One of the goals of this research is to tell the story of women like me with the aspiration of finding ways to improve the lives of this growing population, specifically relating to their health and the health of their families.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background of the problem

Historical

Throughout history, women have sought equity in the United States of America. In a letter dated as early as March 1776, Abigail Adams importuned her husband, John Adams, who at the time was gathering support in the Congress for a declaration of independence, recommending

In the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands (Roberts, 2004. p 72.).

Likewise, America sought for equality of education in universities. As early as the 18th century, education for women was an equal rights issue. In 1821, Emma Willard in New York founded Troy Female Seminary. It was the first American educational institution offering young women an equal college education to that of their male counterparts (Patterson, 2001). Additionally, not many years later in 1833, collegiate coeducation became available at Oberlin College, as well as a few others (Oberlin Heritage Center, n.d.). Thus we see that women have been going to school for a very long time. During the early years of women going to school, women were educated in order to be teachers. It has grown from there.

More women than ever before are entering the halls of higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), more women than men are obtaining
bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a). In fact, the percentage of women obtaining higher education degrees at all levels has steadily increased from 1970 (42.7%) until 2009 (59%) and researchers project it to rise to 60.8% by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b). Not only is the face of education changing according to gender, but also in regards to age. While the “traditional” college student is between the ages of 18 and 24, students today tend to be older. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2010), 31.5% of university students are between the age of 25 and 64. Not only are women obtaining the same degrees as their male counterparts, but nontraditional age women are also receiving similar degrees at all levels. According to Home (1998), at the end of the 20th century, women with families were the fastest growing population at the university level. At the beginning of the 20th century, students over the age of 25 were the fastest growing population in higher education (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). The United States Department of Education projects that the number of adult learners will increase at a greater percentage than the rate of students between the ages of 18 and 24 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

These statistics beg the question, Why do women return to school? What are their challenges? What are their stories? More importantly, how do they do it all? How do they balance the demands of home and school and, most often, employment as well? Researchers have studied some of these very questions. In 1993, Rosche replicated Smallwood’s (1977) study at Tarrant County Junior College in Fort Worth, Texas. As reported by Rosche (1993), according to researchers, the main motivation in the 1970s for women returning to school was to find themselves or for personal fulfillment (Brandenburg, 1974; Nichols, 1974; Shishkoff, 1972). Within 20 years, changes occurred in the motivations of women returning to school. By
1993, the main motivation for women returning to school was a hope of better employment opportunities (Rosche, 1993). Additionally, Rosche (1993) found that in 1993 the problems of women were similar to the problems of their counterparts 10 to 20 years earlier. Although Rosche’s more recent study showed a decrease in the number of married women, or the number of children women had, their struggles continued to be similar. These struggles revolved around coordinating studies with a job, a need for financial assistance, getting a good job after completing the program, coordinating studies with childcare and other family responsibilities, and relationships with their spouse and children because of becoming a student (Rosche, 1993).

**Personal Positionality Statement**

Being a nontraditional aged graduate student and mother myself, I am very interested in the effect going to school at such a stage in life has on a woman and her family. Do other women have the same experiences as I have? Why have they chosen to return to higher education? For me it was born out of necessity. My husband had lost his job and since he is disabled, it became imperative for me to become the breadwinner in our family. To follow my passion for teaching I needed to further my education and thus return to obtain a terminal degree. What about other women? Are their reasons for returning to higher education similar to mine?

Not only am I a nontraditional aged mother and in graduate school, but a health educator as well. However, my close-knit support system is strong and intact, household duties remain the biggest source of stress for me. Regardless how many hours I spend at school or doing homework, the general household care, including laundry and dishes, continues to be my responsibility. I feel in a very real way what Rosche (1993) stated as the problems and needs of women in higher education noted above. The stress on my family and me aligns with the research of the late 1980s and early 1990s in that my perception of the demands I have best
shows how stressed and overloaded I feel (Home, 1998; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Mallinckrodt, Leong, & Kralj, 1989). Home (1998), Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992), and Mallinckrodt et al, (1989) specifically speak to women being pulled in many directions as the primary caregivers at home regardless of any other roles. Likewise, I agree with the findings of Kirby, Biever, Martinez, and Gomez (2004) and Pearson (1986) as I rely heavily on a very close-knit support system of family and friends to see me through this journey of higher education. As I contemplated the changes I was making, and how to improve the stressful moments, I commenced on a journey to help this growing population and thus improve their health and the health of their families.

As I have spoken with many mothers who have either gone back to school or gone to work, their experiences are consistent with mine. For instance, they feel stressed and overwhelmed, shoulder most of the household duties, and make it through with a close-knit support group. Few articles address the instrumental support of family, such as household duties, that women may need in order to reduce the stressors of the multiple roles in which they engage. One such article interviews Gail Warrior, a single mother who owns her own construction company. She states that, “Juggling it all can be a little bit hairy – I need a wife!” (Turvett, 2011, p. 42). Occupying multiple roles causes stress, but women continue to enroll in school. They continue to attend to the multiple roles of mother, student, employee and others. Finding a way to balance each of their roles in conjunction with taking care of their own health is therefore part of the focus of this dissertation. A qualitative methodology served to examine the lives of nontraditional age mothers enrolled as graduate students in higher education as they attempt to balance doing it all.
Need for the Study

Although many authors write about nontraditional age women returning to higher education, their research revolves around services universities can provide such as flexible registration times, financial assistance, parking, and academic advisement and mentoring. Many researchers write about the multiple roles women play, whether at work or at school. However, very few researchers study the health of mothers who concurrently are attending school as a graduate student or the health their families and interventions result because of graduate student mother’s needs. Additionally, very few researchers write about a woman’s ability to adapt to her multiple roles as student and mother, of which only one, which I know of, uses the Roy Adaptation Model (RAM) as a conceptual framework (Lin, 2005).

In the past, researchers have shown that when women enroll in graduate school, it causes stress and that education is the greatest source of conflict in the home (Home, 1997; Mallinckrodt et al., 1989; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). More recently, Leisure (2007) pointed out the nature of women is to be driven, motivated, and determined. Leisure’s (2007) characteristics of a woman’s nature may be the driving force influencing a woman to take on additional responsibilities regardless of how busy she is in her life role. Within the last 30 years, research has begun to address the multiple roles women juggle simultaneously (Edwards, 1993; Gerson, 1985; Home, 1998, Mikolaj & Boggs, 1991). Recently, Lin (2005) assessed the adaptation of Taiwanese female registered nurses (RNs) with children who have returned to school to obtain further nursing degrees. Her study uses the RAM and reports role conflict and role strain with the accumulation of roles as student and mother. Other Taiwanese studies assess the response of women who assume maternal and student roles (Cheng, 2000; Chien, 1994). However, a limited number of researchers in America have studied this same phenomenon of
women who take on maternal and student roles concurrently while using the RAM. Therefore, this study will incorporate the RAM into the interview questions and during data analysis.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the lives of nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education. I explored how nontraditional aged mothers balance their multiple roles as well as how these multiple roles impact health. I inquired about each woman’s experience balancing the demands in multiple roles of mother and student. Furthermore, I sought a deeper understanding of the life and experiences of these women. I utilized a qualitative design in an effort to tap different aspects of the nontraditional age mother’s life and get deeper information as to how she balances the demands of home and student life.

**Research Questions**

The research questions that guide this research are:

1. How do nontraditional aged graduate student mothers balance the demands of home and student life responsibilities?
2. What are the challenges that nontraditional aged graduate student mothers face when returning to higher education?
3. How does going to school affect a woman’s health and self-care?

**Significance to Health Education**

The central role of public health is to promote and protect the health of the nation’s citizens, which includes supporting a positive health related quality of life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Foundation, 2013). The World Health Organization (WHO) considers women’s health an urgent priority (World Health Organization, 2009). Additionally, women’s health and quality of life is also a recent addition to Healthy People (HP) 2020 (U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services, 2013). Moreover, the leading health indicators listed in HP 2020 draw attention to sleep quality and the maternal functions a woman may play. As a mother’s roles increase to include not only maternal care giving and household demands but also employment and education, sleep quantity and quality cause strains, getting more done in less time, and the psychological strain involved in multiple roles and the stress therein (Bernstein, 2001; Goodwin, Garrett, & Galal, 2005).

Although Sieber (1974) expanded the role strain theory of Goode (1964) to include role gratification as well, stating that the accumulation of roles aids in the ability to manage stress, stresses nonetheless continue to pose health threats to women who continually add to their demands. The extra role as student can be a stressor. The greatest source of support for stress management is a close social support system made up of family and friends (Kirby et al., 2004; Pearson, 1986). Polasky and Holahan (1998) specifically label spousal support as one of the key factors in reducing stress in this population.

Stress is a risk factor for many health issues. Glanz, Rimer, and Viswanath (2008) state the crucial nature of understanding stress and coping strategies for health education, health promotion, and disease prevention. How an individual manages stress affects their health. With the influx of nontraditional aged mothers enrolling in higher education (Home, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2012), universities and health educators will profit from knowing and understanding the needs of these women and intervening in appropriate, suitable ways. While many options are available (i.e. distance learning, online classes) to help women balance the roles they have as wife, mother, and student, not all universities offer such options in their curricula. Although recent studies to date have examined women students, few of them offer information on the health of this population. Moreover, few, if any, researchers have captured
the essence of life as a student for nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education, specifically as graduate students on a traditional comprehensive college campus, and how a woman’s balancing and adapting strategies affect her health. Therefore, in this study I made an effort to shed light on the intimate experiences of this population and the needs associated therein by delving into the lives of women who have taken on the responsibility of home and school and what changes are occurring within their families. I utilized a qualitative methodology in order to reveal the specific experiences of this population. Health educators at the university level, as well as those working in a local health department, will benefit from this study as it will assist them in creating interventions that improve the health of the vast population of women returning to higher education. Additionally, it will expand their knowledge and understanding of adult women students. To begin, the results of this research may demonstrate how the addition of schoolwork has a potential to affect a woman’s health negatively. Also, with an increased understanding of how these women adapt to and create strategies to balance the demands of college and home life concurrently, health educators will be able to create interventions that serve to increase protective factors and to improve the health of the vast population of women returning to the college setting. Learning the language they use and their experiences will also give support to the improvement of health programs within a community.

**Theoretical Framework**

Roy graduated from Mount St. Mary’s University in nursing in 1963. She later received her master’s degree in nursing from the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA). While she attended UCLA, she studied Advanced Pediatric Nursing and her mentor was Dorothy Johnson. It was during this process that Roy became convinced that a general model of nursing needed to have a goal so nursing knowledge could be better put into practice. Although she had
read only one paragraph on adaptation, she was always aware of the great resiliency of children with whom she worked in pediatrics. They could adapt to difficult changes with the help of a nurse. It was with this silent discovery that she asserted to her mentor, Johnson, that patient adaptation should be the goal of nursing. After this claim, Johnson challenged her to develop a conceptual model for nursing. Roy went on to develop, and then publish, her complete nursing model called the Roy Adaptation Model (RAM) in 1970 while she was a graduate student at UCLA. Roy credits many early researchers in her development of her conceptual model. For instance, her credits include Helson’s (1948) adaptation theory, Bertalanffy’s (1968) definition of systems theory, and the concepts about stress and coping from Lazarus and Selye.

The definition of the RAM is clear and consistent and is easy to understand regardless of its multiple complex concepts, subconcepts and relational statements (Phillips, 2010). The RAM describes an individual as a holistic adaptive system constantly interacting with both its internal and external environment in order to maintain integrity. When this adaption is successful, it leads to optimal health, well-being, and quality of life (Roy & Andrews, 1991). Simply put, the RAM concentrates on a patient’s adaptation to a constantly changing environment and guides how a nurse will assess such adaptation. It began with large theoretical concepts including the Theory of Cognator of Roy Adaptation Model and the Theory of Coping in the Four Adaptive Processes (Roy, 2011). The Theory of Cognator involves ways in which patients adapt to environmental changes through cognitive and emotional avenues. These include personal perception, information processing, learning, judgment, and emotion. The four adaptive processes will be described below and consist of physiological, self-concept, role function, and interdependence. From these two large theoretical concepts, middle range theories were created: 1. Cognitive Processing and 2. Coping and Adaptation Processing. The development of the
former was to outline the methods involved in cognitive processing. The four adaptive modes represent categories describing how individuals cope with their internal and external environment. Nurses must monitor and assess behaviors in these four categories. From these mid-range theories, research projects are designed. Refinements continue as redefinitions improve the model that is now used in many different settings, with many different populations, and in many different ways. Phillip’s (2010) critique also states that its complexity is what makes it broad in scope and easily generalizable to both practice as well as research. Its uses include an organizational model or framework for quantitative studies ranging from coping strategies of women with breast cancer (Henderson, Fogel, & Edwards, 2003) to examining the effect of certain medical instruments and techniques (Wendler, 2003). Qualitatively, most researchers use the RAM as a template for interview questions. The RAM is also used qualitatively to generate and guide an interview based on the four adaptive modes.

Roy describes a person as a “holistic adaptive system in constant interaction with the internal and the external environment” (Roy & Andrews, 1991, p. 128). Adaptation occurs through coping mechanisms categorized into four adaptive modes: physiological, self-concept, role function, and interdependence (Andrews & Roy, 1986). How a person responds physically to environmental stimuli describes the physiological mode. The self-concept mode focuses on a person’s spiritual and psychological facets. Role function involves role expectations and interdependence takes into account an individual’s interactions with others relating to the reciprocity of love, respect, and value. In this last mode, interdependence, Roy and Andrews (1999) posit that all multiple role situations exist within a social context and, therefore, relationships with others, including support systems, are important pieces of social interactions.
Coping is vital and, from a nursing standpoint, is of greatest concern as a nurse helps a patient to cope and adapt with injury, illness, and disability. Aldwin (2007) suggests that coping is essential to understanding the effects of stress on physical and mental health. Roy (2011) states that coping is an individual event and that responses to stress are very personal to each individual. Thus, the RAM is useful when examining how a nontraditional aged mother enrolled in higher education balances the demands of her two greedy institutions, home and school. In this study, I used the RAM to guide the semi-structured in-depth interview questions as well as in the data analysis process.

**Research Design**

Because this study sought to uncover a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education, I employed a qualitative methodology using semi-structured recorded interviews and a focus group to obtain data. Moustakas (1994) indicates that once collection of data has occurred in a qualitative study, a complex explanation of the essence of each participant’s specific experience is then developed consisting of “what” they experienced as well as “how” they experienced it.

I hoped to share a greater depth within the data by using a qualitative methodology. Moreover, individual semi-structured in-depth interviews provided important information regarding the lives and health of these women. Furthermore, focus groups are particularly empowering and validating (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I used a focus group in an effort to build camaraderie around a common cause as well as an environment for individual change and improvement (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Kozol, 1985). I had also hoped that being part of the population would create an advantage by giving me entrance into this group of women. The connection made because of motherhood opened a level of sharing because of greater
understanding due to similar experiences. Motherhood transcends all boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or creed and opens the doors to a woman’s heart in ways I share in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. Likewise, as I reviewed the transcripts, caution was paramount so my own experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and feelings did not influence what each participant had shared.

**Participants**

Upon approval via the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted the appropriate office at the research site to seek a list of names of women fitting the criteria of my study (i.e. nontraditional aged (25-64) mothers in graduate school (OECD, 2010) with children still in the home). A general email was sent to each of them asking for participation in my study. Additionally, I contacted graduate organizations at the research site. I asked each organization to post flyers inviting nontraditional aged mothers who fit the study criteria to contact me via the email or phone number provided. As an incentive, I entered each woman who chose to participate into a drawing to receive one of two $50 gift cards to Walmart as an incentive to participation. Because these women were very busy and often disregarded taking time for them, I offered an additional incentive of a gift certificate to a local spa offering their choice of a massage, pedicure, manicure, or anything the spa offered if they also volunteered to participate in the focus group after all the interviews were completed.

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) suggest the term criterion sampling since each of the participants must fit the specified criteria in order to present data that is full of substance and depth, such as sharing the participant’s perceptions, the meanings she attaches to her experiences, and her reactions to her multiple roles. Criteria for this study are: 1) participants need to be nontraditional aged mothers enrolled in higher education as noted previously; 2) they
need to have school age children in the home, and 3) each participant needs to be married and living with her spouse. Therefore, I will use criterion sampling to choose the participants from whom I can collect this type of data.

**Data Collection**

As mentioned above, I interviewed each participant using a semi-structured in-depth interview. In an effort to create comfort as well as convenience, I conducted each interview in a spot on campus according to the desires of the participant. A default location was a study room at the campus library. Likewise, one of the larger study rooms available at the campus library will house the focus group. If this location is not available at the specific time the participants are available, the conference room in the researcher’s department will be an alternate location. I recorded the interviews and focus group with a handheld audio recording device. During the interviews, I was the only researcher in the room. However, during the focus group I had a colleague present to help with note taking, subtle nuances between participants and the primary researcher, any nonverbal cues that seem applicable to the depth of the data, as well as any audio equipment maintenance. This ensured that I, the primary researcher, was able to give my full attention to the participants and the direction of the focus group.

The RAM guided development of interview and focus group questions, particularly, the primary, secondary, and tertiary roles within the role function mode of the RAM (Roy & Andrews, 1999). Roy and Andrews (1999) consider primary roles as those roles that occupy a majority of a person’s time. Age, sex, and developmental role can also be included in the determination of a primary role. In this study, I specifically asked about roles as a student and mother. Roles that relate to the developmental stage or primary role defines a secondary role. For the purpose of this study, I asked each participant how she divides her time and if she
believes one role takes precedence over another. Lastly, tertiary roles relate to secondary roles and can be easily modified, freely chosen, or temporary. Additionally, the role function mode includes two types of behaviors: instrumental and expressive. I asked interview questions according to these behaviors and which of the participants multiple roles she considers primary, secondary, and tertiary. Furthermore, I dug a little deeper with probing questions to see how each participant feels about each role noting her perceptions, meanings, and reactions.

Data analysis

I applied a three-step axial coding analysis of the process after each interview. To gain a greater understanding of each individual participant and her unique experience as a nontraditional mother enrolled in graduate school, I revised and improved interview questions as needed. The focus group took place after all the interviews. Focus group questions emerged from the interview data in order to get deeper meanings.

Following the interviews, a transcriptionist transcribed the data verbatim. Participants received a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. I reviewed each transcription multiple times while listening to recordings of each interview as well as the focus group in order to gain a general feeling for the data and each participant. During each listening and reviewing event, I used a general analytic approach of the data utilizing the theoretic lenses of the RAM in order to find significant statements about the experience of each of the participants. I then grouped each statement into themes common to all participants. Finally, I wrote a description of the phenomenon according the themes I found. In order to have a credible and dependable portrayal of the lived experience and balancing techniques of mothers in graduate school, I gave an internal committee my coding process notes and themes.
Moreover, following the focus group I listened multiple times, searching for an overarching theme. I did not use the RAM as a theoretical lens during data analysis at this point. Instead, because I tried to get each participant to do something we did not necessarily do in the interview, such as to focus on themselves as individuals, I asked questions specifically about their identity as I sought to evaluate their self-concept. Thus, I used the self-concept mode of the RAM as a template for focus group questions. I did this because during the interviews I saw the connection between the participant’s self-concept and identity.

Assumptions

I made the following assumptions in this study. For one, with a qualitative study all data is subjective to the reality of each participant. Data is also a construct of each person’s reality (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003) and therefore not generalizable to a larger audience, or a different audience. Moreover, assumptions particular to this specific study include appropriate questions for the collection of information that will adequately describe nontraditional age mothers, clear wording of each question so that participants understand each question in the interview and focus group and can give open and honest responses.

Limitations

As with all studies, there are limitations to my study. These include what I did not investigate, such as the families of each participant. I only interviewed the women, and thus did not incorporate how each family member felt. Nor did I include much about the relationship between the participant and her husband, other than what is directly applicable to adapting to her multiple roles. While both the family members and the relationship between the participant and her husband may affect how she adapts and copes with her multiple roles, this information was not included herein. Moreover, certain issues may hinder my work. These include any
subjectivity on my part as the primary researcher that falls into the direct criteria of this population as a nontraditional aged mother in graduate school, as well as any difficulty in recruiting participants that tend to be very busy as both mothers and graduate students.

**Delimitations**

A conscious exclusion of certain elements exists for this study. For example, I only incorporated mothers attending one mid-size rural university. As noted above, the criteria for this study are mothers between the ages of 25 and 64 (OECD, 2010), those with school age children in the home, and those mothers who are married and living with their husband. Therefore, I did not include single mothers or mothers that have no school age children in the home. Nor did I include mothers who are younger than age 25. I chose to use nontraditional aged mothers because of the increased number of graduate degrees obtained by this population in recent years. As far as school age children in the home and those mothers living with their husbands, multiple roles are most demanding for women when children are at home. Moreover, I chose to delimit the study to only mothers with husbands because the experiences of single mothers is vastly different, as I found in my preliminary study and while talking to friends, students, and colleagues. Therefore, to simplify the process I chose only one section of the population.

**Definition of Terms**

*Adaptation:* Each person adapts to certain situations in a very personal way. Although definitions of adaption exist throughout literature, I chose Roy and Andrews (1999) definition which states, “The process and outcome whereby thinking and feeling persons as individuals or in groups, use conscious awareness and choice to create human and environmental integration” (p. 54). I chose this definition because it aligns with the RAM, which I used as my theoretical
framework. As I interact with women who have multiple roles, specifically graduate school and motherhood, I want to uncover their deeper meanings to life as a student mother, their perceptions of balancing multiple roles, and the meanings they attach to their specific ways of adapting.

Coping: Coping, as with adaptation, is a very personal effort (Roy, 2011). To me, it implies more work than adaptation. However, in the literature others define it as the efforts or strategies used when stressors are present (Glanz & Schwartz, 2008). Because in my preliminary study stress was present in the lives of the participants, as well as with others I have spoken with, and prolific in the literature that discusses women attending school (Home, 1998; Mallinckrodt et al., 1989; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Wright, 2007), the definition of coping with stressful experiences is included. I attached coping strategies to each woman’s perceptions of her balancing act, specifically, as it relates to the RAM’s role function mode of primary, secondary, and tertiary roles each woman plays.

Emotional Support: Throughout the literature (Kirby et al., 2004; Pearson, 1986) and in my preliminary study, support was a key factor in adaption and coping. However, support is more than a blanket definition that for all situations. Likewise, there are differing types of support that help people in various events. One such type of support is emotional support. According to House (1981) it includes providing empathy, love, trust, and caring.

Instrumental Support: Moreover, instrumental support is a key factor in coping or adapting as there are times when a person’s resources run out and they need help (House, 1981). Sometimes people do not have the time and therefore need more than a pat on the back as with emotional support. At times, only a helping hand to get certain jobs done will be what helps, or supports,
the most. With that, I used House’s (1981) definition of instrumental support as tangible aid provided when a person needs direct assistance.

**Nontraditional age:** As noted above, the OECD (2010) has defined nontraditional age as students between the age of 25 and 64. I used that definition for this study.

**Roy Adaptation Model (RAM):** The RAM is a nursing model developed by Roy (Roy & Andrews, 1999) used in various nursing research and practice. For the purpose of this study, I used the role function mode in generating questions for the interviews and focus groups as well as data analysis as described further in Chapter Three.

**Social network:** As stated in the literature, social support is one of the best ways to cope with stressful life experiences (Kirby et al., 2004; Pearson, 1986). Heaney and Israel (2008) uses social network to refer to the group of social relationships surrounding each participant. A close-knit group of family members, friends, or classmates offers a level of support that is hard to define. This social network can give either emotional or instrumental support, or both. How each participant uses their own social network will help to suggest their ability to adapt, to balance, the demands of their multiple roles.

**Social support:** House (1981) categorizes the functional content of social support into four types of supportive behaviors or acts that include emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. In this study, I specifically defined just two types of support, emotional and instrumental. For my purposes, social support was a broad term used interchangeably to mean any support the participant receives from family, friends, or others.

**Stressors:** Any demand that upsets an individual’s balance or homeostasis in life, which, in turn, affects both the physical and psychological well-being of that individual, is what Lazarus and Cohen (1977) describe as a stressor. They also state that such an event requires some type of
action to restore equilibrium. This study concentrated on those experiences or situations that each participant feels to be difficult in any way, thus affecting her ability to balance her multiple roles.

Summary

Researchers have shown various reasons for women returning to higher education. In fact, these researchers point out statistics that the number of women receiving degrees has exceeded the number of bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees by their male counterparts. As one of the fastest growing populations on university campuses, some universities have implemented strategies to improve the lives of this population such as flexible registrations times, financial assistance, parking, and academic advisement and mentoring.

This qualitative study sought to uncover the essence of the lives of nontraditional aged graduate student mothers as they balance the demands of their multiple roles as student and mother. This chapter included a background of the problem, need for the study, purpose of the study, the research questions that will guide the study, significance to health education, the theoretical framework, research design, participants, data collection and analysis, assumptions, limitations and delimitations, and a definition of relevant terms. The following chapter will review the relevant literature and synthesize the existing research concerning multiple roles. It will also review how women balance their multiple roles simultaneously. Furthermore, it will describe the gap in the literature that this study seeks to fill.

The remaining chapters will be as follows. Chapter Three will outline the method I used for the entire study. Moreover, Chapter Three also outlined procedures used to recruit participants, as well as obtain and analyze data. Because I used both interviews and focus groups, I have two data chapters. Chapter Four will give the results of the interviews and give
themes. Chapter Five will outline results and present themes from the focus groups. In Chapter Six I will discuss the findings/themes from both the interviews and focus groups, how they relate, how they are different, and any further recommendations for further research, as well as for health educators.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

For more than 30 years, research has delved into the work family conflict/balance trying to find ways to cope with and/or improve its dynamics (Fox & Hesse-Biber, 1984; Hoschild & Machung, 1989; Voydanoff, 1984). It is difficult to write about work and family issues as mutually exclusive from multiple role situations. Literature on work and family often relates to multiple roles played by women (Bianchi, 2011; Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Cheng & McCarthy, 2013; Cumming, Lazer, & Chisholm, 1975; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Therefore, the two intertwined in many respects in this chapter and throughout this research study. Women who return to higher education at a nontraditional age often have multiple overlapping roles. Although research on the phenomenon of nontraditional aged mothers returning to higher education is plentiful, only within the last 15 years have researchers begun to study how adding school to the equation of work and family affects a woman and her health (Home, 1998; Lin, 2005). This chapter will give an in-depth review of the literature surrounding multiple roles of women, the work family balance, women in college, the Roy Adaptation Model, and the role accumulation theory. Additionally, because stress and coping and social support systems are integral components of a woman balancing multiple roles as shown in much of the literature (Home, 1997; Spurlock, 1995), I will include a short analysis of these topics.

The purpose of this study is to examine the lives of nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education. I explored how nontraditional aged mothers balance their multiple roles as well as how these multiple roles impact health. I inquired about each woman’s experience balancing the demands in multiple roles of mother and student. Furthermore, I sought a deeper
understanding of the life and experiences of these women. I utilized a qualitative design in an effort to tap different aspects of the nontraditional age mother’s life and get deeper information as to how she balances the demands of home and student life.

The research questions that guide this research are:

1. How do nontraditional aged graduate student mothers balance the demands of home and student life responsibilities?
2. What are the challenges that nontraditional aged graduate student mothers face when returning to higher education?
3. How does going to school affect a woman’s health and self-care?

**Multiple Roles**

Historically, a woman’s role as wife and mother has been, and remains, socially accepted (Barnett & Baruch, 1983; Helson, & Picano, 1990; Lin, 2005). As noted by Barnett and Baruch (1983), “wife” and “mother” are traditional social roles for women and the role of paid worker is the add-on role. In the 30 years since that article, change has occurred, but not in all arenas or with all people. In a recent study assessing how African American men perceive their wives’ influence on their eating and dietary behavior, Allen, Griffith, and Gaines (2013) found men believe their wife’s role is to look out for the meals, “period,” a very traditional attitude. Additionally, Mosser and Hanson Frieze (2012) indicated they no longer consider women to be a homogenous group but rather a group of either Traditional or Nontraditional women. They based their division upon Hakim’s Preference Theory (2000). The researchers categorized each according to whether or not she wanted to work full time, part time, or not at all after marriage. A woman’s desire to work only part time, or not at all, indicated that she desired family life over work life and thus was Traditional. While today women more readily enter the work force
outside the home, views associated with a woman remaining at home continue as noted by literature (Helson & Picano, 1990; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010).

As women enter the labor force, they face multiple roles at each juncture of their lives. Verburgge (1987) defines role involvement as the number of roles with which a person identifies; women occupy many roles as suggested by the literature. For instance, a woman’s role can include spouse, mother, employee, caretaker to an elder (Eliot, 1994; Kenney, 2000; Sahibzada, Hammer, & Neal, 2005; Stephens & Franks, 1999; Verburgge, 1987), as well as leisure and community roles (Amatea & Fong, 1991). Responsibilities of the woman outside of work include childcare, transportation of children, volunteering, caring for the elderly, social/political commitments such as carpooling, after school or respite care, participating in community activities such as Parent Teacher Associations, and cultivating and managing socio-political relationships with colleagues (Kahn-Hut, Daniels, & Colvard, 1982; Max, Webber & Fox, 1995).

The old rhyming couplet “Man works from sun to sun, but a woman’s work is never done” can best apply to the roles a woman plays upon stating “I do” at the altar of marriage. A recent article search for that phrase produced 2,826,959 results. However, searching for the same phrase using a broader search engine (i.e google) elicited 26,000,000 more results. Suffice it to say, the topic is one at the forefront of the public. Only recently has the term “househusband” taken hold. Rather, “housewife” is a well-known and accepted word in American society. Moreover, when a couple has children a woman’s role continues to multiply to include that of mother as women have historically been the caregivers. From earliest time, in some American cultures men were the hunters and gatherers while a woman’s “job” was homebound as she cared for the home and the family. (Arnold, 1992; Bodley, 1988; Diamond,
However, women were also gatherers as well during that earliest time of history (Bowdler & Balme, 2010), showing that even at the earliest time in history women performed multiple roles. Throughout the closing of the 20th century, and even into the 21st, regardless of the changes that have been made in relation to gender equality, a woman still tends to put herself aside as she cares for the needs of others (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010).

Barnett (2004) and Sayer (2005) show that time allocation in household chores, cooking, and childcare has actually become more similar between a man and a woman. This is partially due to an increase in time spent in those roles on the man’s part as well as a large decline in time spent in those roles for women as they entered the workforce (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006). Although time in housework declined for women, within the last ten years the average time a woman spends in childcare activities remains higher than her male counterpart (Bianchi, 2000; Bianchi et al., 2006; Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001, 2005; Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Further, despite the increasing involvement of fathers, childcare is still largely under the attention of mothers (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). The last decade of research leaves one unanswered question about housework and childcare: “Why were men’s and women’s time allocation to the home – although more similar now than in the past – still so dissimilar, especially in families with children?” (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010, p. 708).

Sasaki, Hazen, and Swann, (2010) even go so far as to state how this multiple role (they call it the “supermom trap”) affects a woman’s psyche by eroding her self-competence when her husband is skilled and involved at childcare. Social ideology suggests mothers place a higher priority on childrearing than their own wishes (Arendell, 2000) and the role congruity theory (Diekman & Eagly, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002) suggests that society takes for granted a
mother’s principal share of childcare, despite her employment status. Role congruity theory also states that women suffer when they fail to live up to social expectations.

Thus, despite increasingly egalitarian sex roles, employed mothers (but not their husbands) seem to be trapped between their desire for help with childrearing and the threat to their personal competence posed by failure to meet socially constructed ideals of motherhood (Sasaki, Hazen, & Swann, 2010, p. 71).

If that is not enough, cultural assumptions put pressure on a woman to navigate her multiple roles with success (Lynch, 2008).

In 1983, nearly 30 years earlier than Bianchi and Milkie’s (2010) most recent article about work and family, Barnett and Baruch found mounting evidence that the single role of mother, which includes numerous roles, may be the most significant source of stress in a woman’s life (Baruch, Barnett, & Rivers, 1983; Belle, 1982; Veroff, Douvan & Kulka, 1980). Ample research today seems to state the same, that when a mother adds a job or career to her mix of roles, a certain level of role strain, role conflict, role overload, and anxiety can exist. Additionally, researchers show that a woman and her family’s health is both affected and affected when she takes on multiple roles. Despite the compelling argument Sieber (1974) gives in his seminal work which disputes the assumption that multiple roles causes strain, conflict, and overload, the effect of multiple roles on women continues to be a debate since the early 1960s (Marshall & Barnett, 1993). Most specifically, multiple roles have been studied in relation to role conflict and role strain (Goode, 1960; Marshall & Barnett, 1993;), consequences (Hong & Seltzer, 1995; Marshall & Barnett, 1993; Waldron, Weiss, & Hughes, 1998), the benefits of role accumulation (Martikainen, 1995; Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002; Seiber, 1974;). how
it affects self-esteem (Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Reitzes & Mutran, 1994), and even how suicide may be an index of role strain in unemployed women (Cumming et al., 1975).

Although much research surrounds the idea of role conflict and role overload, a large body of research opposes the role strain stance mentioned above. Many researchers have studied how women balance their multiple roles. Marks and MacDermid (1996) consider role balance to be the result of a woman’s level of organization as she attends to her multiple demands in a manner that minimizes role overload. Additionally, researchers seek to find out whether women are capable of balancing multiple roles and if involvement in multiple roles is hazardous or beneficial to women’s mental health. Some of these studies include how multiple roles correlate with anxiety (Barnett & Baruch, 1983), daily mood states (Williams, Suls, Alliger, Learner, & Wan, 1991), well-being (Baruch & Barnett, 1986), self-esteem (Reitzes & Mutran, 1994), and resilience (Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1989), as well as health in general (Waldron et al., 1998). Thus, they show the hazardous side of a woman taking on multiple roles.

Likewise, researchers show that multiple roles can be beneficial to her health. In a study of 95 managerial women, quantitative results showed a positive relationship between work and life satisfaction, self-esteem, and self-acceptance (Ruderman et al., 2002). Qualitative results from the same study propose that a woman’s multiple roles in her personal life give benefits psychologically as well, such as emotional advice and support. While this study mentioned above conclude that multiple roles actually enhance psychological well-being, thus supporting Seiber’s (1974) role accumulation theory, they also state that women’s perceptions determine her level of balance or overload, which is consistent with the research of Home (1998). Thus, women’s multiple roles can be either stressful or psychologically enhancing as found by Stephens, Franks, & Townsend (1994).
As the equity of women continues to advance, more and more researchers target women in their multiple roles. The research is replete with findings about women at work and in the family. Bianchi and Milkie (2010) outline an in-depth overview of 800 articles between 1999 and 2009 focused on work and family. They state that innovative research took place within the first decade of the 21st century. A majority of the research concerning a woman’s ability to balance multiple roles involves the work family balance. For that reason, a review of women in the workplace follows.

**Women in the Workplace**

Women have been part of the United States Labor Force for many years (Barnett, 2004; Goldin, 2006). The work family balance is not new to literature as noted above. For nearly three decades, scholars have researched the intersection between work and family (Barling & Sorenson, 1997; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Because the work family balance and multiple roles knit themselves almost seamlessly throughout the literature, this section of the review will begin by documenting a history of women in the workplace in this nation followed by current literature about how women in the workplace and multiple roles mesh.

A recent Ely Lecture given by Claudia Goldin (2006) outlines the change in the history of women in the workforce. Four distinct phases, the first three evolutionary and the last revolutionary characterize her explanation of the growth of women in the labor force. The evolutionary phase includes three aspects: horizons, identity, and decision-making. How long does the woman see herself working or will it be intermittent? How does she define herself? Finally, how does she make decisions (i.e. static versus dynamic decision-making)? She suggests that prior to the revolutionary phase women did not see themselves in careers, but jobs.
This suggests the intermittent nature of her labor. A woman did not define her identity by her work or by her position in the workplace, but rather at home. Further, prior to the revolutionary phase, defined by Goldin (2006) as being from the late 1970s to the present, decisions were not made jointly between a woman and her husband, or longtime partner. On the contrary, a woman was a “secondary worker” taking the plight her husband gave to her. Goldin (2006) describes the revolutionary phase as quiet where changes were more subtle and growing than a big bang identified by a greater horizon in view for employment, greater identity from a career, and joint decision-making between partners. While women’s participation in the labor force was large in earlier years and phases, the rate of a woman’s participation increased from 0.20 in 1973 to 0.62 in 2000 (Goldin, 2006). Today 53.1% of the labor force population is females over the age of 16 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

Barnett (2004), a leading work and family researcher, likewise provides an in-depth history of women in the workforce, where we are now, where we have been, and where we are going. However, her account puts forth the obstacles women faced, and still face, as they enter the workforce. She describes how family and marriage-friendly jobs were, or were not, in the past. Additionally, she believes that history is repeating itself; however, not because of inequality with gender and jobs but rather because of the attitudes toward the roles of men and women (Angus, 1994; Barnett, 2004; Melieis & Lindgren, 2002; Winkler, 1998). Men are contributing more in household duties and childcare and are just as likely to take time away from work for elder care (Barnett, 2004; Bianchi, 2011; Bianchi et al., 2000; Bianchi et al., 2006; Sayer, 2005;). However, the duties of childcare and the household remain the woman’s (Barnett, 2004; Goldin, 2006; Melieis & Lindgren, 2002; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). She sees the biggest obstacle being the social norm belief system that the sexes are vastly different with different
needs, values and abilities. Barnett and Rivers (2004) consider these beliefs to be the most detrimental hindrance to greater equality in the workforce. Melieis and Lindgren (2002) agree with Barnett (2004) and Winkler (1998) stating that although the trend for greater gender equity in the workplace is progressing, the second shift, as described by Hochschild (1989), as well as multiple other responsibilities to the community (Angus, 1994), remains the woman’s responsibility. Strickland (2000) argues that although gender inequality remains in the workforce as evidenced by differences in the earning ability of men versus women, the number of economically productive women is increasing. Nonetheless, it is still the expectation that they shoulder the unpaid work at home that is associated with their gender role thus causing them to work with a double burden of two to three full time jobs (Strickland, 2000).

Research of the mid-20th century concentrated on how a woman’s multiple roles affected the woman and the family (Seiber, 1974). It was Goode (1960), during that same time that developed the role strain theory. He based his theory on the idea that people over-perform at work and therefore under-perform in their other roles based on the demands and definitions of societal norms (Goode, 1960). Spurlock (1995) echoes his idea of role strain as she cites various vignettes of working women who experience overlapping roles that causes stress. The demands placed on women because of multiple roles are well studied in relation to health (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). The study of the stress response also began around the mid-20th century (Antonovsky, 1979; Lazarus, 1966). Holmes and Rahe (1967) also developed the Social Readjustment Rating Scale to measure stressful life events; a great amount of research came from the development of this tool (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1981). House (1974) began to study occupational stress. These studies led researchers to study the role of social support in
relation to coping with stressful life events (Cohen & Wills, 1985). A more in-depth review of stress, coping, and social support will follow later in this chapter.

Research shows that women continue to add to their workloads regardless of how many more responsibilities they take upon themselves. For instance, Pleck (1977) shows that, as of 1977, the increase in women’s employment, resulting in a decrease in her family role, is not reciprocated with an increase in the male family role, thus causing strain and exhaustion in both a woman’s work and family roles. Conversely, more recently Bianci (2011) found that the increase in women work hours was accompanied by an increase in the amount of time fathers with children living in the home spend on both housework and childcare. While this is encouraging, mothers still spend the greater amount of time caring for the home and children. Leisure (2007) states that women rarely give up one role in order to accomplish another. Instead, they incorporate the new role into an already busy life. Bennett (1980) also states this when she says that the “role of worker is superimposed over an already complex mosaic” (p. 503). Bianci (2011), taking from the work of Sharon Hays (1996), agrees with Leisure as she describes this cultural contradiction of recent working mothers. Mothers, regardless of the added workload of school or work, while stepping out into the co-provider role continue to assume the “all giving” and “ever available” role to their children. “Being a good mother, devoted to one’s children, is a core identity that does not change when women take on more hours of paid work” (Bianci, 2011, p. 20). However, though working outside the home could be stressful for a woman with multiple roles, Seiber (1974) and Strickland (1993) found rewards for the same work.

As the 20th century ended women remained wanting to have it all, meaning they wanted to be the mother as well as have a successful career. Research continues to study how women balance their multiple roles (Napholz, 2000) and how it affects their health. Stark and Cimprich
speak of making health something women focus their attention on in order to increase health benefits and decrease health risks. Furthermore, the significance of understanding mental health is important in health education. Healthy People (HP) 2020 adds it as a leading health indicator stating that it is “strongly associated with the risk, occurrence, management, progression, and outcome of serious chronic diseases and health conditions” (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013, p. 5). Moreover, the mere fact that many authors (Voydanoff, 1984; Hoschild, 1989; Fox & Hesse-Biber, 1984; Sandburg, 2013), beginning in the early 1980s until the present, outline how women, not men, deal with the balance between work and home speaks to the traditional role of women being in the home, taking care of home and child matters, and the difficulty faced in doing so. One such book, Lean In (Sandberg, 2013), seeks to dispel the myth that women feel that they have to “do it all” or “have it all.” In her book, Sandberg urges women to Lean In, or to try harder to be present and thus rise to the top of the career ladder. But even she is plagued by the typical attitudes of women. She states,

Like me, most of the women I know do a great job worrying that we don’t measure up.

We compare our efforts at work to those of our colleagues, usually men, who typically have far fewer responsibilities at home. Then we compare our efforts at home to those of mothers who dedicate themselves solely to their families. (p. 123)

Likewise, Sandberg (2013) references Tina Fey’s book Bossypants (2011). In Fey’s book she says that the hardest question a woman fields is how she juggles it all, because often women feel as if they are failing at both work and motherhood.

Furthermore, another advocate of the feminist movement, Slaughter (2012), writes specifically about why women still cannot have it all. Her main points are that there must be a sacrifice of something, support is absolutely necessary, and regardless of the feminist movement
and egalitarian views, a woman’s heart really is at home. However, she argues vehemently for greater female positions of power as a way to have a greater balance for women and to make the world a better place for women. She is quick to acknowledge the help of her husband, as is Sandberg (2013). They both are well aware of their elite status acknowledging how it has launched them in directions otherwise not available to some women. However, in all the talk of wanting a better family AND a career, Marche (2013) makes a viable argument against both authors when he states that all these voices are women speaking out for women rather than the family. He believes that if the work family balance conversation remains that of women, it will be perpetuated as a woman’s problem not a family dilemma. He asserts that true balance will never exist until the establishment of social support allows families to function.

As has been shown above, the work family balance is abundant in the literature dating all the way back to the mid-1900s. Home (1998) adds school to the blend of roles a woman possesses. In her study of 443 mothers who were employed, as well as enrolled in school, she found that income, perceived intensity of schoolwork, family demands, and job demands all were strong predictors of role conflict, role contagion, and role overload. A short history of women in college as well as a review of the current literature about women in college follows.

Women in College

Another role that women have occupied for many years, though only recently researched in relation to multiple roles, is that of student. The 19th century showed an increase in women entering colleges and universities. The most compelling motivations in the early 19th century for a woman’s higher education included the emergent need for women teachers (Rosenberg, 1988). Literature prior to the early 1980s suggests that women went to school for personal fulfillment (Brandenburg, 1974; Nichols; 1974, Shishkoff; 1972). Brandenberg’s (1974) study reported
women’s quest for identity as they sought to find themselves after their children had all gone to school. Echoing her findings, Manis and Mochizuki (1972) also added a sense of dependency with statements from the women such as, “I want to do something, but I don’t know what” (p. 594). As with Brandenberg’s participants after their children had gone to school, the “empty nest syndrome” characterized many adult women students in several studies (Branden, 1973; Carlsen, 1974; Dobson, 1975; Greenspan, 1975; Harmon, 1970; Nichols, 1974; and Oliver, 1975). These motivations evolved into better job opportunities and updating job skills because of divorce, separation, or widowhood (Brooks, 1976). Shishkoff (1973) found a change in marital relationships to be a leading motivator for women to return to school.

While motivations during this time were both situational and developmental, as time marched on and society changed, a shift occurred to a more situational motivation. Divorce rates increased (Singli & Yal, 1996) and thus a “have to” situation forced more women to return to school. Literature defining reasons for a woman’s return to school began to decrease as research shifted toward the needs and challenges of this population. Ford found in her 1998 dissertation that for adult women students at the University of South Carolina the greatest motivations included gaining a degree, getting a better job, changing jobs, earning their own respect, feeling better about themselves, and doing something for themselves instead of for their family. At the close of the 20th century, literature on the subject of a woman’s motivation for returning to school hovered around job loss, divorce, death of a spouse, and career limitations due to lack of education (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000).

At a Press Conference a decade later, President Barack Obama announced a new website for dislocated workers thus increasing the number of adult learners at the community college level who return to school to increase their education who then either return to their original job
or advance to another career (Eberts, 2009). Additionally, Miles (2009) specifically targeted 159 African American women enrolled at the University of Memphis. A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) determined that motivators for pursuing an education included professional advancement, cognitive interest, and educational preparation. A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with alpha level set at .05 showed no significant difference in the reasons women return to school when comparing a university versus a community college. Included at the conclusion of the questionnaire was an optional comment section identified two new motivations: 1. the fulfillment of a personal goal and 2. being a role model for their children.

Furthermore, challenges have arisen in the lives of female students from the onset of their enrollment. Such challenges began with minority status and open disdain from some professors and male students. Gratefully those days are largely behind us and such challenges have decreased. However, challenges to the female student are still evident. While women of today meet only rarely with disdain from professors and are no longer minorities in most university settings, today’s challenges differ only slightly from the challenges in the beginning of the 19th century. Rosche, in her study of women in school, found that in 1993 the problems of women were similar to the problems of their counterparts 20 years earlier (Rosche, 1993). Although Rosche’s study showed a decrease in the number of married women, or the number of children, their struggles continued to be similar. Struggles revolved around coordinating studies with a job, a need for financial assistance, getting a good job after completing the program, coordinating studies with childcare and other family responsibilities, and relationships with their spouse and children because of becoming a student (Rosche, 1993).
More recently, Guidos and Dooris (2008) found that obstacles of nontraditional students hover around two main sources – time and money. Concerns about balancing work and family and school also plague the mind of these older students, balancing work and family being of higher weight than actual performance in the classroom (Chao & Good, 2004; Guidos & Dooris, 2008; Kasworm, 2008; Mbiliny, 2006; Prusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007; Tannehill, 2006; Wonacott, 2011). Moreover, Stimpson and Filer (2011) found that women perceive a lack of institutional support from student affairs. Lack of support from their schools has led to a decreased life satisfaction as they try to balance the multiple roles of family and student. As noted previously, numerous researchers have studied the effects of multiple roles and role strain (Goode, 1960; Seiber, 1974; Spurlock, 1995). Those specific to women in higher education state that graduate students need help (Caple, 1995), that marriage has a negative effect on female graduate students (McLaughlin, 1985), and because women are generally the primary caregivers, multiple role strain comes into play (Dublon, 1983; Hite, 1985; McCaffrey, Miller, & Winston, 1984, Sharf & Bishop, 1995). Each of the aforementioned studies also found role conflict to be a struggle for these students. Adapting to the ever demanding multiple roles women face as mother, wife, employee, as well as student is imperative. This body of research aligns itself nicely with that of the work family balance/conflict as well as the multiple roles and role strain, conflict, overload, and anxiety literature. However, role accumulation theory states that as a woman engages in multiple roles psychological benefits occur (Seiber, 1974). Meisenhelder (1986) and Malin, Bray, Dougherty, and Skinner (1980) found that an autonomous sense of self is acquired when women are employed, thus enhancing a woman’s self-concept as well as relieving feelings of stress. If that
is the case with multiple roles and with work outside the home, is it the same with women in college?

A group of researchers prior to 1990 found that concurrent enrollment in college at a nontraditional age while being a mother has in fact brought beneficial outcomes. For instance, interviews with 212 women of whom 41% were at least 40 years old showed similarities with working women of the same time period that included an increased self-esteem, self-awareness, an enthusiasm for learning, and a heightened openness to new ideas and diversity (Katz, 1976). Berkove (1979) also found an increase of self-esteem in reentry women students. Although some reports show marriages failing when a mature woman enters college (McCloughlin, 1985), Astin (1976), Ballmer and Cozby (1981), and Berkove (1979) all found improved relations with both children and spouse. As noted by Polasky and Holahan (1998), spousal support is the greatest source of support for most women enrolling in college. Support from friends, coworkers, classmates, and family all serve to buoy a mother in college and help her to succeed (Kirby, 2004; Polasky & Holahan, 1998; Pearson, 1986, Roehl & Okun, 1985; Sosdian & Sharp, 1978).

However, recent literature explains obstacles and strategies that help women enrolled in higher education (Guidos & Dooris, 2008; Cheng & McCarthy, 2013). School is definitely an additional role for women. Home (1998) asserts that a balance between work and family and school and family is inherently different. From her study involving 443 women a consensus was that while one can come home from a job, family and school work “just never end” (Home, 1998, pg 93). She even suggests that support may not even help in certain situations.
stress and coping

Demands made to an individual’s internal or external environment disrupting balance or homeostasis are stressors (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). These demands affect a person’s well-being thus the person needs to take some sort of action to restore balance. Canon (1932) was an early researcher who focused his research on the physiological responses to stress. He is responsible for describing the “fight or flight” reaction. Selye (1956) extended Canon’s research explaining how all living organisms react to stress in three stages, called the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS). These three stages include alarm reaction, resistance, and exhaustion. While school may not initially produce an alarm reaction, resistance and exhaustion are characteristics found in adult women students (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Wright, 2007). A great body of literature came out of the mid-1900s. These researchers define stressful life events and measured them using Holmes and Rahe’s Social Readjustment Rating Scale (1967). Later, the development of the transactional model of stress and coping added meaning to stressors within stressful life events. For the sake of this research, as will be shown below, I will consider school and the events therein, along with the multiple roles women play as mother and student concurrently, to be stressors that are in need of constant work to restore balance.

Some studies speak of the added measures of stress upon women, specifically nontraditional aged mothers in school (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Wright, 2007). Researchers show that school is one of the greatest causes of stress for women in school and that education is the greatest source of conflict in the home (Home, 1998, Mallinckrodt et al., 1989; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Leisure (2007) points out the nature of women as being driven, motivated, and determined. These characteristics may be the driving force influencing women to take on additional responsibilities regardless of how busy they are in their life roles; hence, the extra role
of student is a stressor. Berkove (1976) studies how families react to the considerable strain on the established family routine and how the women (nontraditional aged mothers) react to these challenges. More specifically, Berkove studies how it affects whether they successfully graduate or drop out. Johnson et al., (2000) echo the finding that college life produces stress. Cohen and Wills (1985) focused on moderating factors to stressful life events and stressors. They emphasized the buffering affect of social support. Chronic stressors can lead to exhaustion (Selye, 1956). Researchers within the last 10 years show that when stressors go on for a long time without relief or a return to a form of homeostasis or balance, it affects the sympathetic nervous system and endocrine systems of the body, thus leading to progressive health problems (Glaser & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2005). Therefore, the following section will discuss social support networks.

**Social Support Networks**

The greatest source of support for the stressors encountered come from within a close social support system made up of family and friends (Kirby, 2004; Pearson, 1986). Polasky and Holahan (1998) specifically label spousal support as one of the key factors in reducing stress in women who return to school. Some studies also show that despite the stress, the satisfaction with emotional and instrumental support plays a part in better psychological functioning (Leavitt, 1989; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Roehl & Okun, 1984). Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) compared traditional age students and nontraditional age students and found that though the numbers of sources for emotional support are fewer for nontraditional age women, the nontraditional aged women actually performed better academically. Hence, in the current study an examination of social support networks will be included in the template of interview questions. Most specifically, I will use the four broad types of support, as noted by House
(1981), to analyze answers to interview questions. These four types of support include emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. From the early works of Cassel (1976), support is a protective factor that helps to reduce the negative effects of stress on health. As shown above, support may be a very critical piece of the puzzle to a woman balancing her multiple roles and demands as student and mother.

**Roy Adaptation Model**

The Roy Adaptation Model (RAM) is a complex model from the nursing profession with many facets. Roy developed and published it in 1970. Since that time, she has continued to refine and redefine the conceptual model (Roy, 2009; Roy & Andrews, 1991, 1999). As a nursing model, the RAM is clear and consistent in its definition. Although complex with multiple major concepts, subconcepts, and relational statements, Phillip’s (2010) critique of the model shows that it is also easy to understand once it is learned. Likewise, Phillip (2010) states that the RAM has a complexity that makes it both broad in scope as well as generalizable for both practice and research.

Roy describes a person as a “holistic adaptive system in constant interaction with the internal and the external environment” (Roy & Andrews, 1991, pg 128). Adaptation occurs through coping mechanisms categorized into four modes: physiological, self-concept, role function, and interdependence (Roy & Andrews, 1986).

The physiological mode refers to how a person responds physically to environmental stimuli. Roy & Andrews (1999) categorize these stimuli as focal (major stimuli with immediate need for response from the person), contextual (all other stimuli affecting the person or situation), and residual (those stimuli with unclear effects). This study will use a woman with children in the home who has returned to higher education as a graduate student as the focal
stimuli. Contextual stimuli will include any further characteristics of the mother, such as employment status, number of children in the home, age of children, amount of support from spouse and children, employment status of her husband and emotional well-being of the woman and/or her family. A person’s spiritual and psychological facets make up the self-concept mode of the RAM. An important component of the self-concept mode is a person’s interpretations of role perceptions (Roy & Andrews, 1999).

Role expectations determine the role function mode. Roy (2009) outlines the basic requirements of the role function mode as being social integrity – “that is, the need to know who one is in relation to others so that one will know how to act” (p. 44). Role function is comprised of three major roles: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary roles are roles that determine a majority of a person’s behaviors. Additionally, age, sex, and developmental role help determine this role (Roy & Andrews, 1999). The secondary role relates to either the developmental stage or the primary role. Tertiary roles relate to the secondary roles and can be easily modified, freely chosen, or temporary. Lastly, the interdependence mode aims specifically on interactions identified with giving and receiving love, respect, and value (Lin, 2005). As the social context is where all multiple role situations occur, relationships and support systems are essential elements in social interactions (Roy & Andrews, 1999). All of these categories have remained useful in education, practice, and research until the current time (Roy, 2009).

Coping, from a nursing standpoint, is paramount. Aldwin (2007) adds to the stress and nursing literature by suggesting that coping is crucial to understanding the effects of stress both on the physical and mental health of individuals. Coping and adaptation are middle range theories guided by the grand theories within the RAM (Roy, 2011). Moreover, Roy (2011) states that the ways in which a person copes is very individualistic. The debate as to whether coping
strategies are dependent upon the person/personality or the environment is ongoing (Aldwin 2007). Moreover, propositions of the RAM include, but are not limited to, adaptation within individuals, families, groups, and organization, when they recognize changes in the environment (Roy & Andrews, 1999). Roy and Andrews (1999) also propose that an individual’s ability to adapt affects their ability to respond positively to situations. Hence, as a woman enrolls in higher education and her environment is changed, her level of adaptability will affect how she responds, copes, and seizes the opportunity to grow, develop, and enhance herself (Roy & Andrews, 1991).

This research will focus on two facets of the RAM. First, I will use the role function mode of the RAM to guide interview questions (Roy & Andrews, 1999), specifically the primary, secondary, tertiary roles. Secondly, as part of the role function mode, the RAM suggests two types of behaviors: instrumental and expressive behaviors. Instrumental behaviors are goal oriented, performed as part of a goal, usually require physical action, have a long term orientation, and have a goal of role mastery (Roy & Andrews, 1999). Expressive behaviors are described as feelings and attitudes about role and performance, a behavior with direct or immediate feedback as the goal, or behaviors that are emotional or result from interactions. As data analysis occurs, I will be looking for these types of behaviors in each participant’s lived experience.

Countless studies utilize the RAM. A recent Google Scholar search came up with over 350,000 articles. From 2000 until the present day over 105,000 articles have been written concerning this nursing model. Researchers have used the RAM as a theoretical framework (Henderson et al, 2003; Huang, Carter, and Guo, 2004; Poirer, 2007; Polluck, Amankwaa, & Amankwaa, 2005; Posmontier, 2008; Starner & Peters, 2004; Waweru, Reynolds, & Buckner,
2008; Wendler, 2003), development of measurement instruments (Lee, Tsang, Wong, & Lee, 2011), and as a template for interview questions (Ramini, Brown, & Buckner, 2008; Zeigler, Smith, & Fawcett, 2004). Additionally, the RAM has been used outside the typical nursing literature to include management techniques (Hanna, 2006) and research on the family (Hanna & Roy, 2001). Moreover, the majority of the research has been quantitative with only a few being qualitative. In qualitative studies, the RAM has most often been used to generate open-ended interview questions based on the four adaptive processes (Ramini et al., 2008; Zeigler et al., 2004). Zeigler et al (2004) used the RAM to name and describe the experiences of participants and facilitators of a community breast cancer support group. Likewise, Ramini et al (2008) also sought to identify experiences of adolescents with cancer as they attempted to adapt to this new life. Furthermore, in a recent descriptive study assessing the perception of self-concept and associated emotional indicators of children living with AIDS in the United States and Kenya, Waweru et al. (2008) used a mixed method approach. The qualitative piece of that study dealt with the self-concept mode of the RAM.

Only one study I know of uses the RAM as a theoretical framework when studying the adaptation and balance strategies of mothers going to school. Lin (2005) assessed multiple role adaptation in Taiwanese mothers who returned to school as registered nurses (RNs). Her quantitative study examined the relationships between multiple role adaptation and physical, psychosocial, and demographic variables in female RNs. She used a cross-section correlation (ex post facto) design on 118 questionnaires received and found that age of the youngest child was significantly related to role strain and role accumulation. Likewise, she found a strong positive correlation between multiple roles and quality of sleep, health perception, and activity.
Additionally, the three main variables that explain 43% of the variance in role accumulation were activity, sleep quality, and maternal expectation explaining.

Therefore, as no studies using the RAM or the role accumulation theory to assess adaptation and balancing of multiple roles of mothers returning to school have been qualitative and in the US, this study seeks to gain a more comprehensive understanding of women who go to school and attempt to balance the demanding roles of both home and school, and sometimes work as well.

Role Accumulation Theory

Moreover, I will add two components of the role accumulation theory (Sieber, 1974) to the RAM as data describing the adaptation to and balance of multiple roles in mothers enrolled in higher education is analyzed: role strain and role gratification. Sieber (1974) expanded Goode’s (1960) role strain theory in his seminal work of developing the role accumulation theory. As was the assumption to date, most theories of that time saw multiple roles as a cause for psychological stress and social instability. Goode (1960) states:

The individual is likely to face a wide, distracting, and sometimes conflicting array of role obligation. If he conforms fully or adequately in one direction, fulfillment will be difficult in another …. Role strain – difficulty in meeting given role demands – is therefore normal (page 485).

Attempting to balance multiple roles may be one cause for this difficulty for mothers enrolled as graduate students in higher education. The normality of role strain must first examine role overload and role conflict (Seiber, 1974). Role overload has to do with time. Eventually we all run out of time and must forego some roles in order to honor others. Moreover, a finite amount of resources is available to each individual (Seiber, 1974). When resources are depleted, an
overload situation arises within roles. Furthermore, role conflict refers to conflicting or contradictory expectations regardless of time. Individuals must choose between certain roles or expectations because the two will at some time violate one another. Hence, how do women balance their sometimes contradictory roles as mother and student when both time and expectations run out or are in violation of the other?

Most role accumulation studies to date research the work family conflict or balance. Likewise, Sieber (1974) expected there to be a role strain when accumulating roles. However, the role gratification portion of Sieber’s role accumulation theory states that multiple roles are beneficial. For instance, status and privileges are inherent to occupying multiple roles simultaneously. He suggests a greater ability to balance distress when difficulties arise in other roles. Additionally, personality improvements and satisfaction to one’s sense of self are benefits Sieber (1974) claims because of role accumulation.

Summary

While the reasons for a woman’s choice to go to school are vast, as shown above, it remains that women add to their already heavy load in order to do so. Motherhood is historically one of the major roles of women. Adding multiple roles to the already arduous maternal roles creates a delicate and often challenging balancing act. The work family balance is extensively researched. Likewise, many studies have recently researched the female student. However, past research has centered itself around stress and coping and social support networks. A recent grounded theory study even asserts self-investment as a reason for female student success (Vacarro & Lovell, 2010). As has been shown above, multiple roles are in need of balance especially with the nontraditional age mother enrolled in higher education. However, only one speaks of the multiple roles a woman plays as she engages in two or more demanding roles using
the RAM as a conceptual model (Lin, 2005). This research will focus on the experiences of women as they adapt to the demanding roles of mother and student simultaneously. I will use the RAM to inform interview questions. Likewise, as has been shown above, support is a key factor in the success of balancing home and school. It will therefore also be incorporated into my interview questions and while analyzing the interview narratives. Similarly, as stress and coping cannot go without mention with multiple roles, inclusion within the interview questions and analyzing process will take place. A detailed account of my method for this study follows.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Nontraditional aged mothers occupy a large percentage of students enrolled in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a & b); yet, little is written about nontraditional aged mothers enrolled in higher education. Furthermore, school-family balance has not been well-researched. This study focused on nontraditional aged mothers enrolled in higher education, specifically graduate students. The purpose of this study was to examine the lives of nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education. I explored how nontraditional aged mothers balance their multiple roles as well as how these multiple roles impact health. I also inquired about each woman’s experience balancing the demands in multiple roles of mother and student seeking a deeper understanding of the life and experiences of these women. I utilized a qualitative design in an effort to tap different aspects of the nontraditional age mother’s life and get deeper information as to how she balances the demands of home and student life.

This chapter includes a review of the research questions I asked, as well as how I found the answers and will outline a qualitative research design. A brief description and account of my preliminary study will follow explaining some of the reasons I chose my research questions, how my preliminary study influenced my dissertation, and how I altered, or modified, some of my interview techniques and questions because of it. For my dissertation, I chose a different sample than my preliminary study. A detailed description of how and where I received names to contact will follow, as well as a description of the criteria for inclusion in this study. Data collection methods will follow which will include explanations of both forms of interviews that I utilized in my study, individual as well as focus group. Because my theoretical framework informs and
guides my interview questions, as well will be used in data analysis, a brief description of the Roy Adaptation Model will follow the data collection section. Following the description of data collection methods, a section indicating how I analyzed my data comes next, followed by the eight strategies Merriam (2009) outlines to promote validity and reliability.

**Research Questions**

The research questions that outline this study are:

1. How do nontraditional aged graduate student mothers balance the demands of home and student life responsibilities?
2. What are the challenges that nontraditional aged graduate student mothers face when returning to higher education?
3. How does going to school affect a woman’s health and self-care?

**Preliminary Study**

According to Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), a pilot study refers to a “mini study” done by a researcher for the purpose of checking feasibility and/or testing a research instrument or interview schedule. As I was not testing a research instrument, but an interview schedule for feasibility, I will label my pilot study a preliminary study because it was merely introductory. Teijlingen and Hundley(2001) also suggest that pilot studies can provide critical foundations for a good design. I used my preliminary study as a trial run in preparation for my dissertation, something Polit (2001) suggests as important. In their article, Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) offer 16 reasons for pilot studies. Six of them were applicable reasons for my preliminary study. These reasons include:

- Assessing the feasibility of a (fullscale) study/survey
- Assessing whether the research protocol is realistic and workable
• Establishing whether the sampling frame and technique are effective
• Assessing the likely success of proposed recruitment approaches
• Identifying logistical problems which might occur using proposed methods
• Assessing the proposed data analysis techniques to uncover potential problems
• Developing a research question and research plan

Likewise, Kim (2011) conducted a pilot study for her qualitative dissertation about Korean-American family dementia caregiving. She offers four essential reasons for pilot studies: (1) the discovery of recruiting issues or barriers, (2) learning to act in a culturally appropriate way as a researcher during a qualitative study, (3) coming to terms with the time issues when conducting qualitative inquiry, and (4) adjusting interview questions and/or methods. While my study is different from Kim’s, the qualitative principles remain the same. I, too, used my preliminary study for the same reasons that I will explain in this section.

During the Fall 2012 semester I conducted a preliminary study in which I interviewed three women enrolled at a community college. The purpose of the preliminary study was to examine the lives of nontraditional aged mothers at a Midwestern community college. I explored the issues of their family, life at home, roles, stressors, sacrifices, benefits, transition to college life, and reasons attending college. Furthermore, it was my intent to find out and understand to a greater degree the life and experience of these women. Ultimately, the purpose of my preliminary study was to share the experiences of nontraditional aged mothers in college. However, my personal purpose was to prepare for my dissertation. My preparation was two-fold. First, as suggested by Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), I wanted to see if the topic proposed a viable study. A study can be feasible in many ways. I wanted to know if the topic was researchable, as I had found in the literature. I also wanted to see if women today were similar to
those studied in the literature from the past, or even recently, in their motivations or reasons for returning to school and how they balanced the challenges they face. Were the challenges today the same? Do women handle their challenges in the same way? Lastly, what coping strategies do they use to manage their load? Research questions for the preliminary study were:

1. How do mothers decide to go to college?
2. How do mothers experience the transition into college life?
3. How do mothers balance of school and family responsibilities?

Both Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) and Kim (2011) state that trying out a study to check for logistical integrity is important. This was another reason for my preliminary study. From the amount of time I stated interviews would last to recruiting participants, I was looking to see if what I had planned would work. One of the purposes for the preliminary study was to determine that amount of time needed to conduct the interviews. I found that recruiting through social media proved to be beneficial. However, the most useful technique of enlisting participants was going through colleagues and an administrator over a campus organization.

The second purpose of the preliminary study was to improve my interviewing skills at the same time I was furthering my dissertation preparation. Kim (2011) speaks of learning to act in culturally appropriate ways as a qualitative researcher. Prior to my preliminary study, I thought I was good at interviewing. After all, as Dexter (1970) said, an interview is merely a “conversation with a purpose” (p. 136). I found that I needed improvement and am glad I learned that lesson before I got into my dissertation interviews. With this knowledge and improved skill, I will be able to stimulate more in-depth data from my participants.

Each of the four reasons for conducting pilot studies described by Kim (2011) and Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), were advantageous in my preliminary study. From it, I learned
that timing needs to be flexible. Women are very busy; their timetable takes precedence over mine. As stated previously, I also learned pertinent interview skills that will help me as I seek more in-depth data. Likewise, being a member of the population has its advantages, but I need to listen without any pretenses or offering words that then become the focus of the interview. Not all women are exactly like me. Furthermore, although my preliminary study interview questions were fine, I made some necessary adjustments to suit the purpose of my dissertation.

I used the same qualitative method in my preliminary study as I am using in my dissertation. Similarly, I used semi-structured interviews to gain information from my participants. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. Each participant met in a conference room on campus for the interview and was audio recorded. This set up worked out well and I am mirroring it in my dissertation. One thing I wish I would have found out in my preliminary study is how all the participants reacted together and if this sort of a group setting would give me further information, and likewise, be of value to the participants. Therefore, I added a focus group to my dissertation for those purposes as well as to triangulate the data.

Six themes emerged in my preliminary study as I asked each woman about her decision to return to school, her transition to college life, and how she balanced the demands of home and school. I found that mothers make decisions with the long-term effects in mind regardless of the difficulty it may pose in her life. Additionally, her return to school brings chaos into her life, both at home as well as at school. Both are important, and both demand a lot of time and energy. Sacrifices are necessary, as family remained the most important ideal to each of the three women I interviewed. Furthermore, one participant said it best, “Family support is key to going back to school as a mother” (“Heidi,” personal communication, October 25, 2012). Lastly, as each
woman I interviewed had to make a specific decision to return to school for their own personal reasons, each sought her own identity.

From these findings, I chose to concentrate my dissertation specifically on how nontraditional aged mothers enrolled in graduate school balance the demands of home and school. I want to learn whether graduate school is any different from community college when it comes to how women perceive the demands placed upon them. Thus, my research questions changed minimally. I wanted to concentrate on the balancing of, or adapting to, multiple roles as part of the RAM, my theoretical framework. With such a change, my interview questions changed a little. They are essentially the same, but with some additions that follow the RAM.

Women want to share their story. I believe it makes them feel good that someone wants to listen, is on their side, and knows what they are going through. I understood them because I am one of them. Each woman was different, yet the same in many aspects. Although each came from a vastly different background, something about going to school bound them together where similarities were more prevalent and in focus than differences. The themes from my preliminary study were also similar to research from the past.

**Research Design**

To understand the participants in my study more fully, I used a qualitative design. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research has two main characteristics: 1) it focuses on meaning and understanding, and 2) the researcher is the primary instrument. Maanen (1979) defines qualitative research as “An umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (p. 520). He mentions decreasing the distance between the indicator and the indicated. In other words, he
means gaining a greater appreciation for the life and experiences of the participant. In my study, I wanted to understand how women enrolled in higher education make meaning out of their lifestyles as they try to balance the demands of both education and home life.

Likewise, Patton (1985) adds to Maanen’s definition when he defines qualitative research as:

An effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting – and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting….The analysis strives for depth of understanding (p. 1).

Patton’s addition includes a greater understanding of the participant. As I have spoken with multiple women going to school in their later years, I have come to understand that struggles exist for each of them. Moreover, to combat the individual stressors each of them have a very specific support network, or seek one if it is not present. In my preliminary study, I interviewed nontraditional aged mothers enrolled at a community college and found that support was a key to their success in managing the stress and challenges of going to school; support also played an integral part in their overall happiness. I found this in my preliminary study, and it is evident when I speak with mothers enrolled in higher education, Patton’s definition speaks of not exerting that prediction upon my new participants in this particular study. Thus, my qualitative study sought understanding of how these women find meaning, describe, and live out their
current situation as students enrolled in graduate school. An in-depth explanation of my preliminary study will be given in the next section.

Most recently, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) add that as research happens within the natural setting, qualitative researchers attempt to “make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Ultimately, Merriam (2009) states it best, and most succinctly, when she states, “all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (p. 24). Essentially, qualitative research is a story of how participants establish and find meaning in their specific situations. Therefore, because in this study I aimed to describe, decode, translate, and come to terms with the depth of meaning for each participant, I will use a qualitative research design in this study. According to Maanen (1990), qualitative researchers seek for the “lived experience” of people within certain situations, or phenomena (p. 9). Moustakas (1994) indicates that once collection of data has occurred in a phenomenological, or qualitative, study, a detailed description of the essence of each participant’s experience is then developed consisting of “what” they experienced as well as “how” they experienced it. This study focused on the “everyday life and social action” (Schram, 2003, p. 71) of a nontraditional aged mother in graduate school. Patton (2002) emphasizes the “assumption of essence” (p. 106). Therefore, inasmuch as I sought for a greater understanding of the essence of how mothers balance the demanding and rigorous roles of home and student life, I guided this study in a qualitative manner.

In order to obtain such personal information, mere observation is not adequate. Instead, I used interviews to uncover deeper meaning. In my study I used both individual and focus group interviews to access personal information about how the women balance their multiple roles as
well as what their particular experiences are as a student and mother simultaneously. Recruiting participants came first followed by interviews and then a focus group. Throughout the interviewing and focus group process, I kept a journal to bracket my own experiences and feelings. Likewise, I journaled after each interview in case modifying interview questions to better access the perceptive data that fits the RAM is necessary. Lastly, I utilized both closed and open coding in the analysis phase of my research design.

**Participants**

This research project focused on the experiences of nontraditional aged mothers enrolled in graduate school at a mid-sized Midwestern comprehensive university. Following IRB approval, I contacted the appropriate office to seek a list of names of women fitting the criteria of my study which is mothers of nontraditional age (25-64) (OECD, 2010) with children still in the home and living with their husband. A staff member from the appropriate department sent a general email to women on campus who fit my criteria asking for participation in my study. Additionally, I contacted other graduate organizations seeking to obtain permission for an advertisement to be sent out (email), or posted (flyer), asking for volunteers. The email and flyer stated that if they are interested in participating in the research study they should contact me via the phone number listed, or through email. If they grant me permission, an additional recruiting tool will be any graduate organization’s monthly newsletter. As an incentive for participation, each woman who chooses to volunteer had her name entered into a drawing to receive one of two $50 gift cards to Walmart. I offered an additional incentive if they also volunteer to participate in the focus group on a gift certificate package to a local spa, offering a massage or pedicure or like procedure.
LeCompte and Preissle (1993) suggest the term criterion sampling since each of the participants must fit the specified criteria in order to present data full of substance, depth, and detail. This includes sharing the participant’s perceptions of the meanings she attaches to her experiences and how she reacts to each. Criteria for this study are: 1) they need to be nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education as defined by OECD (2010) as aged 25-64, 2) they need to have children in the home, and 3) each of the participants needs to be married and living with their spouse. Thus, I used criterion sampling to choose participants from whom I can gain this type of information.

**Data Collection**

As stated previously, data collection includes both interviews and a focus group. In-depth interviews are the primary source of data used in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). First, I interviewed participants to find out how they experience their current roles as students and mothers as well as their strategies for balancing the roles concurrently. The amount of structure within an interview (highly structured standardized, semi-structured, and unstructured/informal), as well as its theoretical stance, defines the type of interview (Merriam, 2009). In a semi-structured interview, a lack of rigidity exists within the questions. Not using an exact predetermined script allows the participant’s perspectives and understandings of the world to take shape. The informality of an interview of this sort is what Dexter (1970) calls having a “conversation with a purpose” (p. 136). Therefore, I utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews to obtain the information needed to adequately portray and understand the intricacies of a nontraditional age mother enrolled in higher education, specifically the women chosen. Questions explored the issues of their family, life at home, roles, stressors, sacrifices, benefits, and reasons for returning to school in an effort to understand each participant’s experience.
After each interview, I reviewed the interview searching for ways to gain a greater understanding of each individual participant and her unique experience as a nontraditional aged mother enrolled in graduate school. As necessary, I revised and improved interview questions to gain this depth, detail, and substance in the data.

Furthermore, after all of the interviews, I also used a focus group. Using a dialogue, or many people talking together, is extremely empowering (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A group of mothers in school talking together has the potential to liberate and empower participants as they share success stories and coping strategies to aid in their own balance of the demands of their multiple roles. Kozol (1985) was convinced that getting a group of “friends and neighbors” together produces a “common cause” more readily than a one on one interview (p. 108). Additionally, focus groups can build camaraderie within participants (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). It also validates, empowers, and creates an environment that fosters change. Likewise, a focus group gives the participants in this study a chance to think about their interview answers and then respond further if necessary. Since building these characteristics within the sample group participants of this study is important, I utilized a focus group.

One of the characteristics of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument. Merriam (2009) gives three advantages as the primary instrument. These include that as the primary instrument I have an advantage in that I can respond immediately to what a participant says or as I see nonverbal cues. I will be also able to respond to how the participant’s views and perceptions emerge. Moreover, if any new ideas surface, as the primary instrument, I can respond to them in the moment. Because I am part of the same group of nontraditional aged mothers enrolled in higher education, I need to bracket my own experiences acting more as a listener than a participant does. To bracket my own experience means that I temporarily put
aside any prior judgments or beliefs about the phenomenon. Merriam (2009) suggests that as researchers put their own feelings aside, a heightened consciousness takes its place. Regardless of my own experiences, being able to create a relationship of trust and empathy will aid as a personal instrument.

As stated above, interviews are divided into theoretical lenses. While there are many theoretical lenses and philosophical or disciplinary orientations, I chose a constructivist lens as described by Roulston (2007). In such an interview “how” is an operative word, such as “how” the individual constructs his/her reality, or “how” data is constructed. It fits nicely with the interpretive paradigm of qualitative research in which there will be many answers to one question. This is paramount because I wanted to find out the truth according to the specific individual and all individuals are different and respond differently to the same situations. Hence, as participants explain their experiences I was better able to understand what their specific situation is like for them.

After receiving names of interested volunteers, I contacted each one to set up interviews. Upon meeting the participant, I gave her a consent form to read and sign outlining the procedure I followed, the time to expect to be in the interview, that I would be recording the interview, how she will be anonymous, and that she is able to decline response to any question. Following her signature, we proceeded to the interview.

In an effort to create comfort as well as convenience, I conducted each interview in a spot on campus according to the desires of the participant. A default location was a study room at the Morris Library. Likewise, the conference room in the researcher’s department housed the focus group. I used a handheld audio recording device in each interview. I took minimal to no notes during the interview in order to give full attention to and make eye contact made with each
participant. This was intentional to understand each participant’s experience at a deeper level. I took notes only on nonverbal instances as opposed to what the participant said, to prompt my memory while analyzing the data.

The focus group took place after all the interviews. Focus group questions emerged from the interview data in order to get deeper meanings. As the primary researcher, I guided the focus group discussion, which I also recorded using a handheld audio recording device. As with the interviews, I did not take notes during the focus group. Instead, I focused my undivided attention on the group, the dynamics, and leading the discussion in the appropriate direction. A colleague was present to take notes to catch the subtle nuances of group interaction that I may miss in general observation. This additional researcher also operated the audio recording device, making sure it was running and did not run out of batteries. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the role function mode will guide my interview questions, specifically, participant’s perceptions of the primary, secondary, and tertiary roles that they play. Roy and Andrews (1999) consider primary roles as those roles that occupy a majority of a person’s time. Age, sex, and developmental role can also determine the primary role. In this study, I specifically asked about roles as a student and mother. Secondary roles include roles that relate to the developmental stage or primary role. For the purpose of this study, I asked each participant how she divided her time and if she believed that one role took precedence over another. Lastly, tertiary roles relate to secondary roles and can be easily modified, freely chosen, or temporary. Additionally, the role function mode includes two types of behaviors: instrumental and expressive. I asked interview questions according to these behaviors and which of the participants multiple roles she considered primary, secondary, and tertiary. Furthermore, I dug a little deeper with probing
questions to see how each participant felt about each role noting her perceptions, meanings, and reactions. Interview and focus group questions are located in the Appendices section.

**Roy Adaptation Model**

I will use the RAM in data collection and analysis. Past studies that utilize the RAM qualitatively use it specifically to guide interview questions within the four adaptive modes. As described in Chapter One, the four adaptive modes include physiological, self-concept, role function, and interdependence. Each of these four modes is interrelated and an individual’s adaptation to his or her environment or environmental stimuli (Roy & Andrews, 1999) manifests itself through them. Following is a brief explanation of each adaptive mode, as well as how I will use it to guide interview questions. The physiological mode refers to how a person responds physically to their environment, be that internal or external. Roy and Andrews (1999) label environmental stimuli as focal, contextual, or residual. Focal stimuli immediately confront an individual. Other factors that add to the focal stimuli are contextual stimuli. Lastly, residual stimuli include any other unknown environmental factors. As I interviewed students, I searched for how she physically responded to her multiple roles. Specifically, the focal stimuli in my study will be women returning to school. How each woman reacts physically to her new situation will be one focus of my interview questions. Each participant’s individual characteristics, such as age, employment status, number of children, age of children, employment status of husband, and others define contextual stimuli. The opening question is a get to know you type question that will directly access the information of contextual stimuli. I will utilize the physiological mode further in data analysis.

Psychological and spiritual aspects of a person make up the self-concept mode with the person’s interpretation of role perception as the most important element. Interview questions did
not directly inquire about this mode, but I used them more definitively in data analysis. Role function is directly involved with role expectations. Interview questions focused on this mode, particularly, the primary, secondary, and tertiary roles within the role function mode of the RAM (Roy & Andrews, 1999). Roy and Andrews (1999) consider primary roles as those roles that occupy a majority of a person’s time. Age, sex, and developmental role can also be included in the determination of a primary role. In this study, I specifically asked about roles as a student and mother. Roles that relate to the developmental stage or primary role defines a secondary role. In this study, I asked each participant about her division of time between roles and if one role takes precedence over another. Lastly, tertiary roles relate to secondary roles and can be easily modified, freely chosen, or temporary. Additionally, the role function mode includes two types of behaviors: instrumental and expressive. I asked interview questions according to these behaviors and which of the participants multiple roles she considered primary, secondary, and tertiary. Furthermore, I dug a little deeper with probing questions to see how each participant felt about each role noting her perceptions, meanings, and reactions.

The last adaptive mode is the interdependence mode. This mode includes social interactions, especially the exchange of love, respect, and value. It also comprises social relationships of support. As found in my preliminary study, support was a key factor in coping with the multiple roles that mothers in school have. I directed interview questions at coping as well as how each participant handled the burdens and joys of her situation as mother and student.

Likewise, part of the procedure of nurses that the RAM originally outlined is to assess a patient’s reactions to their internal and external environment within the four adaptive modes. These behaviors stem from what Roy (date) classifies two subsystems of central coping processes, which includes regulator and cognator. The regulator subsystem is a person’s
automatic responses to the environment. The cognator subsystem encompasses methods that patients use to adapt to environmental changes through cognitive and emotional avenues. These include personal perception, information processing, learning, judgment, and emotion. Direct interview questions did not involve the regulator or cognator subsystem as much as I used them to analyze responses. Moreover, I used the above mentioned adaptive modes and environmental stimuli along with the regulator and cognator subsystems in data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Following the interviews and the focus group, a transcriptionist transcribed the data verbatim. Participants received a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. I reviewed each transcription multiple times while listening to recordings of each interview as well as the focus group in order to gain a general feeling for the data and each participant. After receiving a general feeling for the data, during the subsequent listening events I applied both closed and open coding in the analysis. First, I applied a three-step axial closed coding analysis process. My review process elicited words or phrases common among all transcripts. I used a general analytic approach of the data utilizing the theoretic lenses of the RAM in order to find significant words or phrases about the experience of each of the participants.

Specifically, I used the four adaptive modes as follows in data analysis. During my reviewing process, after I went through the transcript once to find common words or phrases each participant used, I grouped those words or phrases into one of the four adaptive modes. When a participant talked about her body or physical feelings, I clustered them under the physiologic mode. Words associated with the participant’s self-concept included her perceptions of her roles, any expectations she had, and how psychological means or spirituality affected her ability to adapt. The role function bunch included words or phrases dealing specifically with the
participant’s primary, secondary, and tertiary roles. The last collection of words or phrases was the interdependence group. This group’s words hovered around all social interactions. It included support, lack of support, and the exchange love, value, and respect. The four adaptive modes are interrelated and thus some of the words or phrases fell under more than just one category. Likewise, I used the environmental stimuli as I wrote up the analysis.

I added two parts of the Role Accumulation Theory (Sieber, 1974) to the RAM, role strain and role gratification. I did not use them in generating interview questions, but used them in data analysis. I linked any difficulties the participants expressed that they have, or perceived, as they attempted to fulfill their multiple roles as role strain. Additionally, I connected words and phrases the participants said that implied that going to school has benefits under role gratification. According to Sieber (1974), the accumulation of roles is beneficial to mental health. Therefore, I grouped words and phrases indicating an improvement in self-esteem, status, personality enhancement or ego gratification, or role performance under role gratification. Role strain and role gratification groupings were an overlay to the adaptive mode listed above.

I then grouped each section of words or phrases into statements within each adaptive mode. Following grouping words into statements, I combined the statements into themes common to all participants within each adaptive mode, with the overlay of role strain, role gratification, stimuli, and behaviors mentioned in the data collection section. Finally, I wrote a description of the phenomenon according the themes I found.

Secondly, I used an open coding process to find further information that did not fit into the RAM. I used a similar process as with the closed coding process outlined above. However, instead of placing common words into specific adaptive modes from the RAM, I placed the words and phrases common to each participant into a group of likeness. Afterwards, within each
group, I combined the words or phrases into statements. Lastly, I grouped the statements into themes common to all participants. Efforts to have a credible and dependable portrayal included member checks where I gave an internal committee my coding process notes and themes of both open and closed coding processes to review to see if they come up with the same or similar themes.

**Data Trustworthiness/Credibility**

All research attempts to be internally and externally valid as well as reliable. However, alternative terms are used in place of internal and external validity and reliability: credibility; applicability, or transferability; consistency, or dependability; and confirmability, or neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative research, reliability refers to obtaining the same results in a replication study. Validity seeks accurate reflection of the phenomenon studied.

Merriam (2009) explains eight strategies that promote validity and reliability, hence, ensuring a greater extent of credibility, transferability, consistency, and confirmability. They include: triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, researcher’s position or reflexivity, peer review/examination, audit trail, rich and thick descriptions, and maximum variation. Those used in this study are as follows:

1. **Triangulation:** Triangulation consists of using multiple methods, investigators, and sources of data explain triangulation. In this study, instead of only interviewing participants, I added a focus group to data collection to triangulate the data further. A focus group added to and improved the data by promoting camaraderie (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005), by empowering participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and lastly, by promoting a “common cause” (Kozol, 1985, p. 108).
2. **Member checks:** Using a focus group gave each of the participants that volunteered an opportunity to think about their interview responses and then reply differently if necessary. They were able to check what they had said and add to, or take away, from their earlier responses. Thus, the focus group in this study served not only to triangulate the data, but also as a form of member checking.

3. **Adequate engagement in data collection:** Originally, I had planned to interview between 12 and 15 women. However, if I did not reach a saturation of data with that amount of participants through in-depth semi-structured interviews and a focus group, I planned to recruit and interview additional participants until saturation occurred. In the end, a sample of 15 participants was scheduled. However, two did not fit the criteria and thus only 13 volunteers participated in this study.

4. **Researcher’s position or reflexivity:** I am not a participant in this study, but I fit the criteria exactly. As such, I spent ample time writing in a research journal about my feelings concerning my own experience as well as how the project is going. After each interview, I wrote in this journal in an attempt to bracket my own experiences that may relate to each of the participant’s experiences. Additionally, this journal served as a personal interpretation of each interview, which I included in the final interpretation of the data. Because I am also a nontraditional age mother in higher education I have much to offer the participants. I am one of them and thus can understand, to an extent, what they are going through. Thus, I may be biased, but as I kept a journal and did my best to put aside my own assumptions, I was better able to analyze the data appropriately.
5. **Peer review/examination:** Colleagues within the Health Education and Recreation Department served as a review board in an effort to keep the process as clean as possible. I asked them to review data to see if they got the same themes as I found.

6. **Audit trail:** An effective audit trail includes documenting each step of the way in a research journal. I utilized handwritten notes and an excel spreadsheet to track the participants, interviews, focus groups, personal findings, and themes I analyzed from the data.

7. **Rich and thick description:** To obtain and subsequently give a description that is thick and rich requires an accurate account of each participant’s story with substance, detail, and depth. It also includes their personal context of their lives. This includes their perceptions, reactions, and meanings attached to each experience. However, in an effort to have each participant remain anonymous, I gave each participant a pseudonym and withheld any further information that could define a participant too explicitly from another.

8. **Maximum variation:** To gain maximum variation I included women of differing ages (within the prescribed age range) as well as women from different academic departments to the best of my ability.

**Summary**

This chapter explained the methods of this study. A qualitative approach sought through semi-structured in-depth interviews and a focus group to understand the lived experience, or essence, of nontraditional age mothers at a comprehensive university. I used criterion sampling as a method of determining who participated. Likewise, this chapter included information about the recruiting and data collection processes. Additionally, this chapter described the data
analysis procedures of transcription, constant comparison, open coding, axial coding, and finding an overall theme. Furthermore, included within this chapter was a detailed description of trustworthiness and strategies I used for this study. The following chapters will describe the results of this study and offer conclusions and recommendations for utilizing this research.
CHAPTER 4
PARTICIPANT PROFILES

*Motherhood was the great equaliser for me; I started to identify with everybody.*

— Annie Lennox

The purpose of this study was to examine the lives of nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education. I explored how nontraditional aged mothers balance their multiple roles as well as how these multiple roles affect health. In this chapter, I provide an in-depth description of each participant who volunteered to take part in this study. I have given each woman a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

Following are the profiles of the 13 women I interviewed in this study. Rather than combine their profiles with another chapter, I chose to use this chapter as a discussion of their individuality. It is symbolic of who they are as mothers, professionals, and students, but mostly who they are as individuals. Daily they are lumped into their various identities as their children’s mother, or spouse’s wife, or a student. I want to take this time to separate them into individual people. This idea of having their own voices heard in academia, of being personalized, was one of the reasons they offered in their emails to me as they volunteered for these interviews. Therefore, this chapter includes only participant profiles. My findings of their interviews and focus group will follow in Chapter 5 and 6 respectively.

**Recruiting Participants**

My journey to this study began as a nontraditional mother myself, harried, hurried, and overwhelmed with the task in front of me. As soon as I received approval from IRB, I set to work getting flyers to places on campus as well as contacting the appropriate avenues to get an
email sent out to the general student population that fit the criteria for this study. I put flyers around campus, at daycares that students used, at graduate and family housing, and on a graduate organization’s Facebook page. I hoped for some response, knowing that face-to-face contact was much more effective. While I waited for any response, I contacted a few friends who might know women who fit the criteria. Before anyone responded to a flyer, I had five interviews lined up with friends of friends. Another means of getting names was through a mass email to the general student population fitting the criteria of this study. After contacting one person who sent me to another person, I finally got through to the man in charge of this type of recruiting. A staff member at the institution sent out a mass email five days after I requested it. It happened to go out on my second day of interviews. Honestly, it was my last resort, as I truly believed I would not get much response. However, to my astonishment, within 30 minutes I already had eight respondents. The email went to 642 women between the ages of 25 and 64 who either marked married on their school application or had left it blank. The application offered no space for number of children living in the home so each woman had to read my solicitation email to find out the more detailed parameters. Furthermore, when I returned from a day of interviewing, I found another 10+ responses filling my email inbox. To say I was excited would be a drastic understatement. Some replied with an apology for not fitting my parameters, but wished me luck. Others fit the criteria and were excited to participate. At first, I sent out replies individually, but ended up sending a group email to all respondents telling them to indicate on an attached excel spreadsheet a time that they would be willing to meet. When they sent a reply through email, I asked where they would like to meet, with a default location in a study room at the campus library. I purposely chose a room with windows and couches in an effort to make the room as homey and comfortable as possible. The next day, I had the bulk of my participants
scheduled and I was ready to move forth with data collection. A few stragglers came in later and I fit them in to diversify my population. Each woman was gracious and eager to participate. It warmed my heart to have such a response from women who were, as I well knew, already very busy with home and school. I believe partly that the topic of this study prompted these women to step outside the busyness of their lives to take an hour to talk with me. Each was excited about the topic, wanted her voice heard, and wanted to help a fellow mother. The following email response is one I received after all my interviews were scheduled. It depicts best the collective response of the whole. It shows very specifically the attitudes of my participants and I believe it was a big reason I was able to get such a dynamic response from an email.

My name is XXX. I am a 37 year old married mother of 2 (with two additional step kids) enrolled in a PhD program. It is tempting to say that one of the ways I manage things is to say no to requests like this, but I also believe it is important to help my peers in their research endeavors. If you are still in need of interview participants, we can try to set up a time to work together.

This email resembles many of the offers of help regardless of the schedules these women are keeping. It also speaks to the camaraderie and connection of mothers and of graduate students.

Demographics

Originally, I scheduled interviews with 15 women, however, one ended up being a single mother, and another had to cancel at the last moment due to marital issues. I reflected upon the advice given to me during my PhD orientation to my department. The professor stated that relationships during this doctoral process would be difficult so we needed to spend ample time nurturing these relationships weekly. I was more than willing to cancel knowing that this woman’s marriage and family meant a great deal more than this study.
However, the next day I received another email of a woman wanting to participate. She was from a different college than most of the others, so I added her in place of the cancellations to create greater variety in my population. In the end, I interviewed 13 women. Their ages ranged from 26 to 59 and the number of children ranged from seven months to 18 years of age. Of the 13 women, three were international students (one Asian born living in Central America, one Middle Eastern, and the last from South America), nine were Caucasian, and one was African American. All were married with the most recent marriage taking place within the last two years. The woman married the longest has been married for nearly 30 years. Lastly, nine were from one specific college, two from another college, and one from a third college within the university. Originally, I hoped to have a wide range of diversity, but was happy to get at least three international students, and one African American student regardless of the greatest number being from one college. Additionally, the wide range of ages was pleasing.

Regardless of their differences, all 13 women were alike in a realm that ties many women together throughout the nation, and even throughout the world. They are all mothers. Somehow, that title and role transcends all differences of race, religion, or cultural background. With each interview, I gained a friend. We developed a connection through not only motherhood and the experiences therein, but were tied by a deep understanding of the graduate school process amidst the other demands of life. With each participant, our conversation lasted longer than the recorded version. After pushing stop on the recorder, we continued in our friendly exchange for a few minutes, one lasting another 45 minutes. This is an indication of a connection of some sort. It was refreshing and empowering. To say I have an endearing place inside for mothers is an understatement. I believe mothers have the ability to transform society. Women are empowering. They are the protectors of life, the connectors of family, and are thus the strength
of the future. Educating women, educating mothers, therefore is one of the greatest needs we have in this nation, in the world.

I am pleased to present my 13 wonder women – the 13 women who sacrificed sacred time to be a part of a greater good. I introduce them in the order in which they interviewed.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the total sample of my study participants.

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>MS/PhD</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
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<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicky</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefanie</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3?</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy</td>
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<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>37?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Profiles

Emily

My first participant is a high school teacher. We met on a holiday when she was not teaching. Because it would be quiet and easy, we met in her classroom at the high school out of ease and comfort for Emily. She was in her element. While I was enamored of the high school setting, she walked confidently down the halls on the way to her classroom. As we walked into her classroom, she set two desks facing one another as she would during a parent teacher conference. She said she does this to maintain a place to talk freely without any barriers. I was grateful for such thought on her part. It was perfect. Two facing desks allowed enough space for a recording device as well as a paper on which I could take notes on if needed. Prior to beginning, she tended to her plethora of plants sunning themselves in her classroom window. She also checked the homemade concoction to rid her room of the annoying fruit flies. To her disappointment, it was still full of her homemade remedy but no fruit flies. Consequently, we spent some of our interview time swatting at one or two fruit flies that would not leave us alone.

Emily is very driven and organized. From the time she was in high school, she knew she would be a high school teacher. She even knew exactly at what school she wanted to teach eventually. She went away to study, but planned her time effectively so she would be available to teach, with a Master’s degree, when a position opened up. As I listened to her describe her road to her PhD, I was struck by her drive, her will to accomplish exactly what she sets out to do. Nothing stands in her way because she is constantly planning. She has a mental to-do list about a month long running through her mind at all times, even when she wakes up in the middle of the night. She says,
I am comfortable doing so many things in life as long as I can control them. To stay on track, I have to have everything planned out at least a month in advance. My mental list is about one month long, and then separated into this day, and this week also.

Emily entered the doctoral program for a somewhat unorthodox reason, but it describes her personality perfectly. She noticed another teacher at the high school was getting a PhD and thought that if this teacher could do it then so could she. She is also creating the perfect resume for future teaching plans. Although that may seem a bit arrogant, she is able to back up her words with actions. A busy mother of a toddler with a husband who is also in school, Emily runs a tight ship at home. She squeezes every minute out of every day completing the many tasks she has before her each day.

Debbie

Debbie is a mother of two teenagers who, with the help of her family, decided to quit working and use the family’s savings to go to school full-time in pursuit of a PhD. This degree, she hoped, would catapult her out of the overworked lifestyle of her employment. After working full time on her doctoral degree, she went back to work full-time in order to contribute to her family’s financial disposition. She is writing her dissertation, but not working as fast as she prefers. We decided to interview at her office. Because she is a manager, we could shut the door and have an uninterrupted block of time. Her office is off the beaten path and I had to call a couple times to find the place. When I arrived, she was waiting for me dressed in her professional attire. I noticed how confidently she walked me back to her office. This was her domain and she had full control of the situation.

Regardless of her status at work, she is not happy there. Her office has pictures of her children and family and is free of clutter. With two computer monitors, she is obviously at her
desk doing lots of work all the time. However, she would much prefer to be writing on her
dissertation, progressing toward the career she desires, rather than what she is doing now, which
is similar to her previous career. However, it is quickly draining her of the joy she wants in her
family. Her family made the decision to be present for each other. However, with unrelenting
bursar bills skyrocketing and the family’s savings continuing to dwindle, she was not
comfortable with dipping further into their savings. Still, looking back, she would forget all of
that and plow through her dissertation and the completion of her doctoral degree to the end.
Nevertheless, she is good at what she does and is in a healthy environment that allows her to
value family time most. I was happy that she carved out a pocket of time to participate in this
study.

I sat across from her at her desk. She offered me an exercise ball chair, but I chose a
regular chair. Her desk had nowhere for my knees so I sat semi uncomfortably as we chatted at
ease about family, school, and professional roles. As with Emily, I felt completely comfortable
and connected to her immediately.

Nicky

Nicky is a mother of two toddlers, each of whom was born with medical issues. Because
of the many doctors’ appointments, Nicky is ultra-organized using two planners for her life, one
for home, and one for school. We met in an office in her academic department. While I waited
outside her office, she was rushing from home after trying to calm a crying son. Her hopes were
to get to the office earlier, to have plenty of time to get some work done before our interview.

As we conversed in the office, she spoke of the organization she has always been
accustomed to that aids in getting things done in her life when there is too much to do. With the
demands of being the mother of two children with medical needs, as well as being a doctoral
student, and all while teaching five online classes, it is no wonder she has adopted more than one planner. Although apparent she had some stress prior to coming, she was relaxed and professional, evidence that she is capable of this academic journey she is traversing with her family.

Because her children are still small, carving out time for schoolwork is not always easy. This year they have hired a babysitter to watch the children for 10 hours a week so she can get her grading and dissertation done. Otherwise, she finds little hands and fingers under the closed door begging for mommy’s time as she works in a closed off closet at home. However, those interruptions are rarer now that she has a babysitter. She schedules her time such that she is entirely present for her children while they are at home. Thankfully, her husband helps out with cleaning up dinner and getting the children bathed so if Nicky has extra work that she needs to get done she can do it then, or after the children are in bed. “I couldn’t do it without the help of my husband!” she states gratefully.

Rebecca

I met Rebecca at a coffee shop outside of town. Her directions were not perfect so it took me a little longer than expected to get there. I have known Rebecca for some time, but we have not been in contact for a while. It was nice to meet again and talk about something for which we both are passionate. Initially, the coffee shop was relatively empty making it easy to communicate without worrying about too much background noise on the recorder. She purchased me a hot chocolate and we began talking.

Rebecca is very contemplative and a strong advocate for children. Although she has never given birth, she has fostered children throughout her married life. She has two adopted children, a 15-year-old daughter and a seven-year-old son. She is in her 40s and eight months
ago received another opportunity to foster children. Instead of separating two sisters, she and her husband accepted them both lovingly into their home. Now they are in the process of adopting these two little girls, the oldest is three years old and the youngest just eight months old. Her love and advocacy for children is as apparent as her love of motherhood. However, she is also a full-time employee and full-time doctoral student working on her dissertation.

Sitting and talking with Rebecca was enlightening and empowering. Although she said that our interview helped her to accept where she is in her doctoral process, it helped me to see many qualities in myself that I had forgotten, as well as some I want to improve upon.

Sally

Sally is an Asian student who went straight from her Master’s Degree to her PhD, getting married in the interim between the two degrees. She has two children, a little girl, and a little boy, both born during her doctoral program. She believes it best to get all the difficult things done at the same time, early in life, and thus enjoy the rest of life with her passions. They are now three years old and one year old, respectively. She smiles broadly, as she speaks of her children and her excitement to finish her PhD. She is writing her dissertation now. She and her husband are both international students, but he is from a different country than she originates. He graduated a couple years after she began her doctoral degree and promptly took a job, moving back to his native country. His job acquisition in a different country did not stop her from finishing her degree. Regardless of the separation between she and her husband, her drive to finish is commendable. Thankfully, he is willing to keep the kids for extended periods so she can travel to and from the United States and the university campus finishing the tasks involved with doctoral work. At first, she took some time with her husband in Central America away from campus as she prepared for Prelim Examinations, sending the children to daycare during
the day so she could study. Now she does the same thing, sending them to daycare in Central America where she lives, as she writes her dissertation.

Because she is living in Central America, our interview took place via Skype. I was a little nervous about how it would work and what it would be like to meet a new person through cyberspace, but it was wonderful. Since she is in a foreign country, the connection was a little blurry at times, but the sound was perfect.

Sally likes to travel and although she is a mother first, she loves to try new restaurants, shop, and travel to new countries. This is evident by her broad smile as we talk about her, what she likes to do and time for herself if, and when, she gets that luxurious time. However, trying new restaurants is the only one of those three she is feasibly able to do while in this stage of life.

Our conversation did not last long, but we made a connection. Because we both plan to graduate at the same time, and are in the same college and both getting a PhD, we talked of seeing one another and congratulating one another. I think we both ended the interview a little more motivated to complete the final additions to our research.

**Stefanie**

I received Stefanie’s name from another doctoral student friend. She, too, was a Skype interview who is living outside the state because her husband got a job at a university. She is still working hard to finish her PhD, but it must now be in chunks of time here and there, as she attempts the difficult balancing act between motherhood and the PhD amid a full time job.

Her attitude is one of her strongest characteristics in finishing the journey she began years before. While she cannot spend the time she desires on physical health, such as working out, in order to decrease the stress she often feels while managing her household, she does spend time
with friends winding down and just “chilling.” Additionally, she feels lucky to have a husband who has always been helpful, sharing half the duties around the house including childcare.

Our interview was like no other. While it was Skyped like Sally’s, it occurred on a Sunday afternoon when both of our families were present. With Stefanie, there was an instant connection as we initially talked about where we were in our respective houses. I was in my recliner in a remote basement bedroom far away from the noise of children, while she sat on her bed with the door closed, two children napping, and one on the other side of the wall to her bedroom. We both joked that there is a certain benefit to Skyping an interview in that the other person only sees a certain part of where you are located. Mutual laughter resulted as we chuckled about the messes that each of us were missing in the other’s house.

Driven by a will to finish a degree she never really started out wanting, she is grateful for the change of plans because the adjustment has produced personal as well as family benefits. Being an example for her children spurs her ever onward to use “windows of time” to write and complete a marvelous journey. She loves her family. She loves her job. She loves her PhD. While she is busy with a physically heavy schedule, emotionally she realizes that her sacrifices of time with her family and in personal pursuits will not be for long, but a short moment. She mentioned her mother’s early onset Alzheimer’s disease and the lack of ability to see her more often as one of the small sacrifices. My heart went out to her. She lives far away from her mother and does not have the time, or money, to travel back and forth to be with her mother at this time. However, “soon,” she says she will.

While talking with Stefanie, her three year old, Cody, interrupted us three times. First, he needed a glass of water. She gently led him out of the room, having her husband lock the door behind them. However, he was back just as quickly, coming through her closet this time. After
taking a short time for me to meet Cody over the computer screen, she ushered him out the
bedroom door, calling for her husband to take care of him. In the background, I could hear her
husband yelling for her son to come to him and then talking loudly, explaining that he could not
go in with mommy. We continued our conversation, trying to start again at the place we left off.
However, we both were aware of Cody’s meltdown outside the bedroom. When she paused for a
second I asked if she needed to take care of her son to which she replied that her husband had it
under control. I understood all too well this experience of getting on the phone and children
needing me, melting down, or someone getting hurt. It was not long before Cody entered
through the closet once again, this time without pants. We both chuckled as she once again led
him out the door calling for her husband. Stefanie and I chuckled again at the irony of the
situation. Here we were in an interview about how mothers in graduate school balance the
demands of home and school simultaneously and our children prove first hand that it is never an
easy walk in the park, but one of juggling, flexibility in scheduling, and an overabundance of
patience when you feel you have none to give.

Our interview lasted about 45 minutes, longer than most. It may have been because of
our four child interruptions, but I could have spent a lot longer talking to her. She was full of
motivation and positive affirmations for this journey. In the end, after I shut the recorder off, we
talked a little more. She told me to contact her if I needed any further information. Her words
were a balm to my soul that craves positive affirmations to a sometimes arduous journey. I
clicked “end” and sat there for a moment, grateful for the renewed energy I felt to finish this
study.
Donna

I met Donna directly after I finished teaching a class. Because her office is in the same building that I teach in, I knew I could give myself 10 minutes to arrive and still make it with time to spare. However, my class went a little over and some students needed to talk to me. Still, I was not concerned. However, as I rushed up the stairs I realized I did not write down the exact number of her office and the email was long enough in the past that my phone no longer kept a record of it. I walked the hall in the direction I assumed was her office looking for her name on the door, hoping she was not a Graduate Teaching Assistant without a name specifying her exact office. I was in luck, but as I walked in she was checking her phone and mentioned she was wondering where I was or if she had said a different time. Her instant large captivating smile assured me that it was no problem, but I did see the super scheduled regime she keeps come at me full force as I walked in the door.

I chose to sit across from her, which was a mistake. Her desk, though not cluttered, was filled with knick-knacks, pictures, and a monitor that stood between us. I ended up placing the recording device in between her keyboard and monitor so it would record both of us. However, during the entire interview I wished I had sat on the other wall where we could have a direct line of communication. Thankfully, I do not think it affected the interview, nor her responses.

Donna was a pleasure to get to know. Her captivating smile, easy banter, and witty personality kept us both in a comfortable easy place. She would often chuckle at her stark honesty at wanting to quit her doctoral program “every single day.” Nevertheless, she said, “I do it because ‘can’t’ can’t live in our home.” Finishing is a personal mission to show her children that regardless of what is going on, how tired or exhausted you are, or the struggles you encounter along the way, “if I can do it then so can you.” She related a story of being home with
her extended family on a time when she felt especially keen on quitting. Her niece came up to her and said that she hopes that one day she will get a doctorate like her auntie. “Aw, dang! Now I can’t quit!” she thought.

However, throughout our interview it was apparent that quitting was not an option. She moved north to get out of a bad situation with a divorce from her two children’s father. She was not sure how she would get along but quitting was not an option. She has since married again. Her present husband is also a student. Although he is past military, she says she is “captain of the ship.” While this is sometimes a tiring role, someone must do it. She doles out responsibilities and is grateful for help. When asked if she actually does get help at home she paused for quite a while, face scrunched as if trying to decide how to say what she was thinking. Eventually she offered that while she often believes that she does everything around the house, and that no one does anything without her hovering over top, her husband and two teenage children actually do help a lot around the house.

Donna is an African American 40-year-old doctoral student working toward completing her Prelim Examinations in a few weeks. She is also a full-time teacher in her department. Originally, Donna did not intend to receive a terminal degree, but little by little, the academic lifestyle and the thought of furthering her education crept into her mind as people would talk to her about going forward with a PhD. One day she finally said, “Ok, let’s do this.” This is how Donna leads her life, jumping into opportunities with both feet and an “ok, let’s do this” attitude. She has learned to calm down and unwind by taking time for herself doing what she enjoys so she is better able to focus on what matters most in her life.
Cheryl

Cheryl and I met in the Library Café prior to walking upstairs to a study room. I was not sure what she looked like, so waiting in the café was a little awkward. Initially I was waiting upstairs but did not receive an email response letting me know that she knew where I was waiting. I thought it would be easier and make the guessing game less awkward. In the end, I went back downstairs to wait only to find out she had gone upstairs. I was not worried about it at all; it was just a little awkward for the both of us. At least that is how it seemed for me. When we finally met, she was all smiles suggesting that it was not a problem for her either.

Getting to know Cheryl was sheer delight. Her face radiated as she spoke. Her dark brown eyes were kind and compassionate, almost childlike. She held my gaze and smiled brightly throughout the interview. As an international student from the Middle East with her husband remaining in their native country, she functions most often as a single mother. She counteracts the time crunch and overwhelming lifestyle of single parenthood with charts, task lists, and schedules adorning the walls of her apartment. With two little ones, a daughter who is four and a son who is two years old, her evenings are filled with childcare, meal preparation, and cleaning. However, she does find little chunks of time to read or write while dinner is cooking or while she is doing laundry.

Cheryl loves school and her program in general. She wants to go on to get a PhD after completing her Master’s Degree. She believes she has changed a lot since coming to the United States and studying without her husband. She feels like she can do more and is less dependent on others. She has gained a few new friends who have brightened her life and who give help along her journey. When I turned the recorder off, we remained in the study room talking about her country and other cultures. It was a pleasure to meet such a warm and kind soul. I learned
about another country and how a young 26 year old mother of two can leave her native country, as well as her husband, to study something for which she has a great deal of passion. She inspired me to be happier and enjoy the experiences I have because they may never come again.

Tammy

Tammy and I met at a local restaurant for lunch. We introduced ourselves and got to know one another a little while we waited for seating. Tammy is studying in the sciences as a Master’s student. She is 30 years old and has been married for about five years. Prior to moving here for school, or even deciding upon a graduate degree, she had her little girl. Her husband is a baseball coach and they moved to this university for his job the day after her daughter was born. She would say that it was the perfect time to move since she could not lift and therefore everyone else packed up and cleaned her house for her. She has a point.

Getting a graduate degree was never in Tammy’s plan. She left a good job to move here with her husband and was unable to find work. Almost out of desperation, she emailed a professor who was advertising for a job for which she had no qualifications. In her email, she asked if he knew anyone who needed her skill set. Gratefully, he steered her to another professor with whom she now works. She began working with no intention of getting a graduate degree because she did not need the extra education and did not like the long hours at school lifestyle that many graduate students lead. However, during the course of working with this professor, he convinced her that a Master’s degree would be advantageous for her future. As a coach, her husband’s job requires a great deal of travel, as well as job changes, until he gets a head coach position. With the graduate degree, she is better suited for what lies ahead with the transient lifestyle.
Because her husband is often gone, Tammy takes advantage of every moment of the day to get things done prior to getting home to take care of her two and a half-year-old daughter. Consequently, she said more than once how scheduled she has to be. Still, she finds time for Tammy. Recently she has begun to exercise at the university’s Recreation Center for 20 minutes every evening prior to picking up her daughter from daycare. She also enjoys getting out with friends and having some quiet alone time after her daughter goes to bed.

Because we were at a local restaurant it felt very casual, like friends having lunch together. Thankfully, we were able to complete most of the interview prior to our food arriving at our table. This allowed for conversation without breaks for bites, although I did stop the recording once to allow her to eat her soup before it got cold. I ended up turning the recorder right back on since the conversation remained constant and continuing in the direction of my interview questions. When we parted, I was grateful to have met Tammy and shared a lunch together while getting to know each other. Having the interview mostly done before our meals arrived allowed for greater depth in getting to know one another where she was able to get to know me instead of just the other way around. It was nice for me to be able to share my own thoughts, since most of the time I try to keep them to myself and just listen.

Tammy is studying science. Therefore, she spends a lot of time in the lab. Her thesis, which she is currently working on, involves crops and rainfall. In order to get the correct readings the conditions need to be ideal. It has to be a nice day right after it has rained. Because of the unpredictability of the weather, scheduling her readings is out of the question. Therefore, while she schedules her entire day so she can spend quality time with her daughter, certain situations come up that throw her scheduling off track and chaos follows. Her husband travels a great deal for his work so, although he is one of her biggest supporters, he cannot help watch
her daughter while she is away. She scrambles at the last moment, but she says that it still works; it just takes time, effort, and energy.

**Amy**

Amy is another student I knew prior to this interview. While it was great to see her again, I learned many new things. She is a 28-year-old mother of one three-year-old son. She and her husband were childhood neighbors and friends and have been married for seven years. Amy is very driven to succeed and is a chronic work-a-holic, working long hours because she is “uber responsible!” She holds down three jobs as well as a practicum for her Master’s degree just to “go home to my [her] fourth job” of taking care of her son and the house. I could tell in the way she said that statement that she vacillated between loving it and hating it. Being a mother is top on her priority list. However, making money and providing for their son is also the most important aspect of her life. She cannot distinguish between them in importance or priority. EVERYTHING revolves around her son and thus everything she does is for him, from working to going to school, and even exercising. Her graduate degree is leading her to further degrees, which will ultimately lead to a good paying job so that her son will have a secure life.

We met at a local cafe and she brought her son. He sat and watched a show on her phone as we talked. Periodically he would need her attention and she would give it. At one point in the conversation, she mentioned that she was not the disciplinarian in the home as she waved away the straw he was using annoyingly. However, I saw her patience with her three-year-old son. I was grateful that in the end she was able to articulate that she knew she was patient as well.

Amy had previously studied to be a social worker then came back home to further her education with her ultimate goal to become a physician. Everything she does is for this end, to have a good paying job that she loves so she can support her son and her family. Although she
struggles at times with her husband and marriage, she works hard to accomplish what she believes is best for her family. Her drive and dedication are evident from the words she chooses as well as how she speaks them. Her love for her son trumps all else. The look in her eyes as she tended to him could melt anyone’s heart, yet she spoke often about how she is very tired. I am amazed that although exhaustion rears its ugly head in her life at frequent intervals, she speaks lovingly and gently to her son. She also seems to accomplish so much in such a short amount of time. I worried that she may crack soon under the pressure because personal time to take care of herself appears to be non-existent to minimal at best.

**Miriam**

As I drove to visit with Miriam in her home, I knew of her South American heritage. As I walked into her immaculately kept apartment, her warmth and hospitality oozed. She offered me a drink, as I had assumed she would. It made me smile and I accepted knowing how declining would feel in her culture.

We sat at her kitchen table across from one another. Our conversation began about the cold weather. I noticed that even though we were inside, she still had on a winter headband to keep her ears warm, evidence of the recent cold temperatures and perhaps her difficulty in adapting to another climate. She also wore a flannel shirt with a turtleneck underneath. Regardless of how cold it was outside, her warmth and hospitality made me feel very comfortable.

Miriam is a 37-year-old mother of two boys, 11 and four years old. She has been married for 14 years, but has been with her husband for much longer. Her journey to graduate school was a little different from the others. In her home country, she was a lecturer at a local university. One day she received an application for a Fulbright grant to study in the U.S.
Usually only professors who are tenured receive these applications. However, this specific year she, as a lecturer, received an application. She took it home and showed her husband, not expecting him to tell her she should apply. In fact, she did not plan on it at all. Nevertheless, her husband encouraged her to try. “What will I do if I get it?” she thought. Her cultural belief system was such that she believed she was not good enough, or smart enough, to study in another country, especially the United States. This belief system made the news her husband gave her that she received the grant all the much more exciting. It was a sensation of “I’m good enough!” From that point on, she and her husband prepared to move their family to America.

Her humility for the opportunity to study in the United States was evident. Her drive to succeed is partly due to this feeling of being privileged to be here, however, it is very difficult for her. While in her native country, her husband had a secure job. She had extended family surrounding her, as well as a housemaid to not just help with the housework, but actually do all of the housework. She almost cringed when she related also having a cooking lady. “And now I am without any extended family and working more yet have less help, and have to do ALL of the work and cooking.” I sat captivated by her strength as she related getting to a point where she told her husband that unless she had more help at home she “was going to die. I will literally die,” she told him. Therefore, she made a plan where each of the four family members has specific chores around the house to help to create a clean and uncluttered living space for her family. Her gratitude for her husband’s support is tender, yet she feels guilty and wishes he would do more for himself because she believes he is much smarter than he is giving himself credit. I was amazed. The drive of a graduate student mother was evident to me by this point in my data collection, but here I find that same drive with a load of compassion that was larger than her small frame. When asked what she would tell new graduate student mothers, the first words
out of her mouth, gently of course, were to not just ask for help, but demand it. She repeated it twice for effect because to her, this is the most important for a mother in graduate school. A close second is spending personal time for them. Although I was older than Miriam, she considers herself old, at least older than the students with whom she attends classes. Regardless of her age, her wisdom was unmistakable.

**Carla**

Carla is an office manager in a department on campus. The office I sat in while waiting for our appointment time was very small, but seemed comfortable. As I walked into Carla’s office to introduce myself, she was one huge smile. When I asked how she was, the smile remained but the reply was “crazy!” As a mother, I understood completely what that meant. A graduate student mother is busy and Carla is no different. She is a 59-year-old mother of three children. Her oldest son, 18 years old and out of the house, is her only biological child. Carla felt it important to tell me that after her son, she was pregnant with twins but miscarried. It obviously still affects her. Since that time, she and her husband have fostered two little girls, now 11 and 13, who they have since adopted as their own. Both girls have some learning disabilities and behavioral issues causing stress to Carla’s life. Nevertheless, Carla is a “doer,” a woman who values learning and always progressing. Thus, beginning a graduate degree at 57 was not difficult. Because she works at the university the price is right so “why not?”

Although she spoke of being a mother first, her previous night of having her husband away for a family emergency, having a paper due and girls who would not sit and do homework was taxing and wore on her nerves. It seemed to have left a bad taste in her mouth. Her daughters’ learning disabilities and behavior issues expended the little energy she felt she had and therefore, talking of home did not bring the smile, but the benefits she was receiving as a
student. She feels worth something again. She was quick to reach into her bag to show me a recent paper she had written with positive remarks her professor had written on the back. Yet, in the same breath, she spoke of learning to let things go better than ever before. “It is what it is,” she said. Learning that you cannot change certain situations but just roll with the punches is how she has learned to live her life.

I sat across from her as she sat at her desk. Her computer screen was facing her with family pictures scrolling across the screen as a screen saver. It did not distract her much, but occasionally in the middle of a statement, she would comment about the picture she was viewing. I was grateful that I am able to continue a conversation regardless of the interruptions. I never mentioned anything about it but she told me that she “jump[s] around a lot when I talk. I hope that is ok with you. Now what was the question again? Did I answer it well enough?” I chalked it up to being a graduate school mother at an older age.

Cindy

As I sat waiting in the library about to stand and go back to the room I had reserved, a woman walked up and was about to pass me. I do not know how to describe it, but I knew it was Cindy. I knew it was my next interview. “Are you Cindy?” I asked. “Are you Denise?” she responded. From the moment our eyes met, there was an undeniable connection. This connection drove the remainder of the interview, which seemed more like a conversation than an interview. I am not sure the reason for such a connection. I only know that it existed and that she felt it too. At one point she said, “Is your name Cindy?” By this, she meant that she felt like what I was saying resonated with exactness to her life experience. It was the same for me, as if I was looking in a mirror.
Cindy is a 51-year-old mother of two who will be married for 30 years in a few months. After congratulating her, we began. Cindy was very put together and relaxed. As we sat on the soft couch and chair in the study room, the ease with which we spoke made communication comfortable. She is an educator in biological sciences and loves what she teaches, but helping her students is her highest priority at work. She is also a typical guilt ridden mother who puts motherhood at the top of her chart. To have a secure and happy family is most important to her. She has taught in the same department for over 20 years. She says she stopped counting after 20. As she began to see professors leave and new ones hired she realized that no one with a Master’s degree was a new hire. With the many changes she saw at the university, the writing was on the wall and definitely was filtering into her thought process and down into her heart. Therefore, she began her journey as a doctoral student joking with colleagues and family members that she hoped to graduate before she retired. She just received word that she is able to retire in two years. We chuckled that maybe she should throw a graduation and retirement party simultaneously. Cindy is on the one class a semester program, inching her way through one class at a time. When asked how she does it, she related a story that the Dean of the college where she teaches told at a recent lunch meeting. He told the story we have all heard about how to eat an elephant, one bite at a time. With her hands cupped, palms down, in front of her, she made little scooping motions implying digging one scoop at a time to accomplish a much bigger task than can easily be reckoned with, such as eating an elephant, or obtaining a PhD as a mother and a professional. However, she does it by “not looking where [I] am at each moment, but plowing onward.” As she said this, her hand shot out ahead of her as if to use it to plow through anything in her way. Her eyes are on her goal and she will continue scooping away until she is hooded Dr. Cindy.
Summary

This chapter focused on the profiles of the 13 women I interviewed for this study. Of the 13, nine were in the same college, yet studying in different departments throughout the college. Each is compelled to succeed, evidence of what Leisure (2007) states about women being driven regardless of the extra hats they wear. Additionally, most women in this study are Caucasian, only one is an African American, and three are international students. However, as noted above, this cultural difference did not separate the 13 mothers one from another. Instead, motherhood concurrent with a graduate degree offered a unifying effect between them. Here are 13 mothers of different ages, stages within their graduate studies, cultures, and programs of study, yet it is easy to see so much similarity within each of their profiles. They are time managers, organizers, connectors, protectors, homemakers, professionals, and students. Some were wound tightly, others calm and relaxed. They are all individuals with commonalities that bind them together as one.

With the many differences in respect to each other, I found their answers to my questions to be another area of similarity. As mothers and graduate students, they each shared with me similar strategies in managing the two greedy institutions of family and education. Chapter 4 offers a look into each woman’s responses and how she perceives her balancing act between home and school.
CHAPTER 5

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

"A woman is like a tea bag: you cannot tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water." Nancy Reagan

The purpose of this study was to examine the lives of nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education. I explored how nontraditional aged mothers balance their multiple roles as well as how these multiple roles impact health. I inquired about each woman’s experience balancing the demands in multiple roles of mother and student. Furthermore, I sought a deeper understanding of the life and experiences of these women. This chapter presents a summary of the findings of the interviews. I present the themes that emerged from these interviews according to the RAM model. Additionally, participants provided data that did not fit within the specifications of RAM that I will also address.

Overview of Interview Data

Themes outlined in this chapter depict the lives of 13 mothers in graduate school. These themes describe the lived experience of graduate school as a mother. Additionally, the themes show how the participants balance the demands of the two very greedy institutions, namely home and school, concurrently. Moreover, many are full-time employees as well.

Although situations differed for each mother interviewed, themes common to all of them emerged following considerable time reviewing the transcripts and listening to each interview again. Additionally, looking over my reflexivity journal, field notes, and preliminary study helped me analyze the data and then consequently identify the seven themes common in the lives of the 13 graduate school mothers who participated in this study. The first five themes fit
succinctly within the constructs of the RAM and include, I’m a mother first, “We got there together,” I am the Captain of the Ship, the Adventure is Stressful, and Finding Joy in the Journey. Although the last two themes, Attitude Determines Altitude, and Letting Go emerged with the second analysis of themes that did not fit within the RAM’s parameters, they fit across the spectrum of how graduate school mothers balance the demands of home and school concurrently.

Thematic Approach to Data

Initially, I divided themes into each respective construct of the RAM, specifically the four adaptive modes including 1. Physiologic – themes about body, or physical feelings, 2. Self-concept – themes about perception of roles, expectations, and psychological or spiritual adapting strategies, 3. Role function (i.e. primary, secondary, and tertiary) – themes about what role is most prominent and how other roles relate to that role, and 4. Interdependence – themes recounting social interactions, support (or lack of it), and the exchange of love, value, and respect. Additionally, themes fit within the umbrella of the role strain and role gratification theories. Roy’s adaptation model is all about adapting to stress. Secondly, I analyzed the data searching for common themes that did not surface within the boundaries of the RAM.

Figure 1 outlines themes I found in this study in relation to the model Roy (1999) presented. Her model relies heavily on adaptation and stress theories with an emphasis on the ability of individuals to cope and adapt in order to achieve health. The figure below is an adaptation of her model in which she used stressor, stress, and adaption from the stress theory. I outline the stressors, or inputs, stress, or control processes, the four modes of the RAM as effectors, followed by the output, or ability to adapt to the stressors of multiple roles. The output feeds back into the stressor and the cycle of coping, or adapting, continues.
Figure 1. Roy Adaptation Model Adapted.

I’m a Mother First

Roy’s Adaptation Model speaks of the role function mode, specifically the primary, secondary, and tertiary roles a patient plays as they adapt to the changes in their lives. Likewise, women also play similar roles as they adapt to the additional needs in their lives. Roy defines a primary role as what takes the majority of a person’s time (Roy, 2009). A secondary role relates to the primary role, and tertiary roles relate to the secondary roles. In my analysis, the role function and self-concept adaptive modes intertwined together to the extent it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. Because each participant was a mother, similarities existed in their life experiences. Furthermore, each woman’s self-concept was a product of her roles as well as her perceptions of those roles.

Although each mother differed in her perceptions, attitudes and styles of parenting, without hesitation, each participant declared motherhood her most important role. Even though
some talked about work or even school being their primary role where they spend a majority of their time now, each acknowledged the reason they do anything is for the benefit of their family. All other roles are the spokes of a wheel where motherhood is at the hub. Because it is central to each of the participant’s lives, secondary and tertiary roles only serve to support such a large role.

Amy does everything in her life, from extra jobs to going on to get a graduate degree, for the sole purpose of “bringing in enough money to live comfortably.” She goes on to say that everything includes what she does for herself, such as exercise, is actually for her son so she is around and present longer in his life. While Sally is focusing mostly on finishing her degree right now, she has her children on her mind constantly and feels guilty not being with them. Her children are most important so “everything I do in my schooling is for them.” Cindy is similar to Amy and Sally. Although Cindy spends the majority of her time at school either teaching or taking classes, her most important role is to “have a safe, healthy, and happy family. I provide the necessities like food and clothes and, it’s all about being there if they need me.” As employees of the university, Cindy, Donna, and Carla all spend the majority of their time at work. Additional hours are spent in classes as well as doing any work those classes require. Yet each of them did not hesitate when asked to identify the most important role. “Mom!” each of them said with emphasis. Donna says she made a promise after moving away from her home state following her divorce. She promised to put her children first, regardless of what else was going on in her life. She has become her children’s friend, their “biggest cheerleader.” Although Carla does not consider herself “the kind of mother who’s completely into my kids…they are my responsibility. It’s all about responsibility.” Carla takes this responsibility seriously, regardless of the time she spends on her schoolwork.
Miriam may articulate it best as she paused after I asked her primary role. She took time to think and say what she was feeling. She finally answered,

To keep my family here and to have a better future. Looking in perspective, my main role here is being a good student, to have a good performance in my program because it allows me to have a better job opportunity in my country. It is very important for me to concentrate on my studies. That is more than important.

Yet when asked how she makes it possible to make school her number one priority, she was quick to say,

I would feel awful as a mother. I would feel very frustrated. It happened because I was taking care of my studies very hard at the beginning. And my oldest boy, he didn’t have any problems. But the little one, he is struggling with reading English. So I have seen some progress since the time I said, “No, I have to be at home” which was normally a time which I was in the library, to help him getting better at reading and also at spelling. I change my schedule a little bit so now I am home when my son needs help with his homework and everything. And I have seen some progress.

Although she takes time away from her own schoolwork she says,

No, I really feel so much better, because I am with my sons and it gives me more rewarding feelings than an ‘A,’ for example. For me it is more rewarding to see my kids doing well. That is like most rewarding. And then, if I got an ‘A’ it’s rewarding too but what I can handle better, if I got for example, if I got a ‘C’ if my children is getting a ‘C’ as well. So if he got a ‘C,’ my fault. So it’s what I did wrong that I’m not helping him? If I got a ‘C’ in school, I know what I did wrong and I can fix it but he cannot. He needs me, until he can work by himself
Therefore, a woman’s self-concept is undeniably coupled to her role of mother. Any guilt or organization, drive or success, faith or confidence is only magnified because of what she is working for. Stefanie speaks of distraction to her process of completing her dissertation, which she affectionately has termed “The Beast.” She cannot do anything free of guilt until she is finished with “The Beast.” However, she states, “who I am affects ALL of my roles. I am in survival mode, but would rather have quality time with my kids than my dissertation.” She is doing all of this as an example for her children. She wants them to have an opportunity for a good education as well as a broad view of the world in general. Stefanie relies on the help of her husband to accomplish all she is doing, especially completion of “The Beast.” Even as we interviewed, her husband was taking care of her son who popped in a few times.

“We got there together…”

Each woman talked of the help she receives on a daily basis. For the most part, this support comes from their husbands, but it also emanates from their children, extended family, friends, and departments. Although some women may have stated their husbands do not support them, in another breath they said that their husbands are their biggest cheerleaders, evidence of emotional versus instrumental support. Specifically, Nicky speaks of teamwork and that her husband is the “go to guy at home. He does the dishes, cleans the house, and does the laundry. He also helps with bath time so I can get work done. I couldn’t do it without him.” Carla was also quick to point out the instrumental support her husband offers by cooking dinner. She also mentioned more than once how supportive he was even “making an effort to give more feedback” on her papers. To her he said, “Go for it,” which often gives her the motivation and strength to continue the journey.
Stefanie’s husband also offers instrumental support. She is grateful for the nontraditional roles she and her husband have always had in their marriage. Because she is in a dual academic marriage where both spouses were students at one time, and now working in academia, she says he understands what she is going through better than others, thus giving emotional support as well. She is grateful that traditional societal roles are not the rule in their home. Even before the degree, she was not the chef in the house. Stefanie’s husband not only helps around the house with the housekeeping as well as the childcare, he understands where she is, and where she needs to be in the process and thus offers motivation and a pat on the back when needed. Of her husband she says when she graduates, she will be able to say, “We got there together.”

Both Cheryl and Miriam are international students who, when in their native country, lived a very traditional lifestyle where their husbands were the providers and they took a secondary role. While both of them worked, it was supplemental only. However, for each of them, their husbands encouraged them to apply for the international grant. Moreover, their husbands were the ones to help them believe in themselves as they took on the challenge of a graduate degree in a new country. Cheryl’s husband could not come with her and her children, but still encourages her each time he speaks with her. As for Miriam’s husband, he came with her and their two boys to the United States. Because they no longer have a nanny, a housemaid, or a cook, Miriam feels like all of that responsibility has been shifted to her shoulders. In desperation, Miriam went to her husband and said, “If I do not get some help, I will die. I will literally die.” Consequently, she made a plan and he now is part of the help and support that enables Miriam to accomplish her schoolwork.

Furthermore, the children of my participants support their mothers while in graduate school. While some have small children, the older children who are capable of helping out, even
a little, with the instrumental support of the household do so. Miriam’s two boys have their daily chores. Donna’s children are learning to clean their rooms and help with the responsibilities she “doles out.” Rebecca has a teenager as well as very small children. She is grateful for her oldest daughter babysitting when she needs to be at a class.

Babysitting is a big part of the support some of these mothers needed and received. Amy, Tammy, Cheryl, Emily, Nicky, Sally, and Tammy depend on daycare to help watch their children while they attend to the duties of work and school. Although this is most often a professional organization or paid babysitter, it is occasionally an extended family member. Likewise, when one of these mothers cannot pick their child up from daycare, they have the support of family or close friends to help in that specific time of need. Many mothers need a backup plan in case of emergency. Tammy feels lucky saying,

I'm just lucky. I work with really good people. Everybody that I work with is awesome. One of the girls has watched [daughter] for me a few times. When we have conferences and stuff, I usually get my mother-in-law, she's retired, so she'll come down and watch [daughter], which is good.

Nicky also feels lucky to have her grandparents living next door where she can utilize their babysitting services when moments arise and she needs extra time to write or grade papers. Additionally, close friends also offered support to these graduate school mothers. Whether it was in the form of babysitting or just spending time together, they offered support. Because Cheryl is far from any extended family, even her husband, she relies on close friends to help with her children when needed. However, most of the support from close friends in Cheryl’s life comes from “getting ice cream and just talking after the children have gone to bed.” Stefanie is quick to point out that a weekly time with friends is one of the greatest sources of support to get her
through her PhD adventure. Donna “hang[s] out with friends laughing and griping about [our] lives and how hard they [are].” Sometimes that is all it takes for these women, a little interaction and time away from the grind of all they do as “multitaskers extraordinaire.”

**I’m the Captain of the Ship**

Without fail, each woman used words such as prioritize, organize, structure, schedule, and focus. They are the managers of the home, making sure all the tasks are completed, even though sometimes not by them. When asked how they balance the demands of home and school, almost without a breath they say one of these words. Nicky has two planners, one for home, and one for school/work. Nicky chuckles to herself as she says,

My husband cracks up laughing at me because I have two planners. I have a planner for all of the home stuff because our kids have so many doctors’ appointments and so many things and so I have a schedule for our home stuff and for all of my online classes and my other classes and keeping it. So it keeps us on a very strict routine and so the kids are very routine based. You know, they nap at not necessarily the same time every day, but I know that in the afternoon I’m going to get an hour nap out of [daughter] and a two hour nap out of [son]. …I prioritize so every night before I go to bed I sit down with my planner that’s huge. (she gets it out and shows me) It’s like, MY monster planner. …I color code it (she says while laughing). …I sit down and make a to-do list for the next day and I prioritize what has to be done, like what HAS to be done. …and then I give [husband] a list “Okay, this is the list of things you have to do.” And so I send him to the bank and that’s what we do every day.

Nicky says she gets the double planner strategy from her father. As such, this also allows him to support Nicky indirectly as she seeks to take care of home, work, and school.
Similar to Nicky, Emily also emphasizes the value of planning. Emily has always gotten what she seeks in life because of this over planning mentality.

I am comfortable doing so many things in life as long as I can control them. When something comes up that I cannot control, it takes me several days to figure it out and get the rest of my life back on track. …To stay on track, I have to have everything planned out at least a month in advance. My mental list is about one month long, and then separated into this day, and this week also.

This speaks of what Cheryl says helps to accomplish a graduate degree as a mother. “You must be strong willed and goal-oriented.” Like Nicky and Emily, Cheryl is also very organized. While Nicky uses two planners and Emily’s mental to-do list is a month long, Cheryl posts her to-do lists throughout her living space. She says,

Whenever you go to my apartment, you’ll just find tables, planning tables, organizers or to-do lists. Because if I don’t have these, my day will turn out to be really bad. So I go home, I’ll just see whatever I have to do. I have to be really organized.

While Nicky, Emily, and Cheryl tout being on a strict routine with two planners, mental to-do lists a month long broken into weeks and days, or organization tables adorning their walls at home, others consider themselves to be very structured as well. However, Amy uses words such as “uber-responsible” or perfectionist, meticulous. Stefanie finishes the tasks on her organized schedule by making “intentional choices with pockets of time.” Donna considers herself an “extreme balance master” as she manages her family’s life at home, her children’s schooling, her schooling, her profession, and any extracurricular activities her children have in the evenings. Although Donna may consider herself a “control freak,” she also has learned that her household is “controlled chaos,” as she prefers her home to be a lot cleaner than it is. “It works,” she says.
Donna is learning what Tammy says has helped her as she attempts to balance the demands of her daily life. Tammy has learned to be flexible with her schedule because of her young daughter and the responsibilities therein.

Lastly, Rebecca explains what most of the women alluded to when she says, I am the manager of the home. I structure everything. My husband lived away for a year and a half on a job in construction. So I’m the person who just keeps everything organized, the bills paid, the tasks of registering kids, just any of that. My husband’s highly involved, highly interactive but I would have to remind him to do that or tell him to do that.

Although her husband was away on business for a year and the other participant’s husbands were not, Rebecca is similar to all participants interviewed. She is the one organizing. She uses the term “manager,” which emphasizes the responsibility she has in her home. Mothers are the managers of the home. They are the organizers, responsible for the bulk of what happens inside the walls of the home, regardless of whether they accomplish the task or not or whether they have outside responsibilities or not. These women have shown that in order to “power through it” it takes a great deal of effort and drive, as well as structure and organization. Prioritizing what is most important is necessary to succeed in graduate school.

The Adventure is Stressful

Unanimously, each woman spoke of their specific multiple roles as being stressful. Donna was intense when she talked about stress in her life. She said, “On a scale from one to 10, I’m a 12!” This was not to say the participants did not gain satisfaction and gratification from their journey. Nor did they believe it was not worth the stress they encounter. Yet, it was stressful for each of them. Many of them had similar stresses. This theme is broken up into four
subthemes outlining the most predominant stressors for these women. They include 1. Finances, 2. Time, 3. Sleep, and 4. Guilt. This theme stems from the role strain theory, made popular by Sieber (1974) as part of his role accumulation theory. For the purpose of this study, I used role strain as an overlay to the four adaptive modes of the RAM. In other words, many of the issues that these women highlighted that illustrate role strain also depict elements of the RAM. As such, my presentation and analysis of these issues considers them within both contexts.

Roy’s Adaptation Model (2009) suggests a patient has adapted to a new situation when he/she is able to balance the effects of stress via the four adaptive modes. Sieber’s (1974) Role Accumulation speaks of strain with the accumulation of roles. In my interviews, I found that as graduate school mothers attempt to balance their lives as mothers and student, strain, or stress, results. The strain is not unmanageable, nor is it paralyzing. Yet, for all, it exists in one form or another, often in many forms. According to Cindy,

I guess there are times when you just feel the anxiety, that stress building, and there are times when I think, I'm looking like this where I've got my eyebrows wrinkled. It feels like it's stuck there. That's not good. I can't tell you how long it's been like that, but when I finally realize it's like that. But there does come a point where I do realize that I'm pushing the boundaries.

Similarly, Miriam refers to this moment as her “Kaboom” moment, where she could no longer accomplish the necessary duties in every aspect of her life and needed help. The following subthemes relate the universality of stress within these women’s lives.
Finances

While most college students know the feeling of making do with less than what is normally adequate financially, for some it was more stressful than for the others. Both Emily and Debbie were quick to mention that finances were their biggest stressors. Emily mentioned never having enough money with everything else involved in her doctoral program as well as having her husband as a student at the same time. While Diane’s family may have had enough money, to her it was a source of stress because going to school was too expensive. It was draining their savings past her comfort level. Consequently, she went back to work. “Without the stress of money,” she says, “I would have had this dissertation finished long ago.” She looks away as if in a far off place as she talks about wishing she would have done it differently. Originally, she quit a job to pursue a different course in life. At her previous job, she realized that she was not heading in the direction she enjoyed as it was taking a toll on her emotional and physical health. That job also did not provide the time Debbie desired with her children outside of work because she had to take her work home all the time. After talking it over with her husband, they agreed she would go to school full time while living off his income and their savings. She was nearly finished with her PhD when their savings was dwindling, quickly approaching an amount below her mental safety net. She took a job where she was doing an assistantship then quickly moved up to manager. “It’s what I’m good at,” she explained. However, in retrospect she is drawing out her schooling doing a job very similar to the one she originally quit. While they are very family friendly, Debbie is not progressing toward her ultimate goal as quickly as she had hoped, “all in the name of money.” She sighs, resigning herself to the stress of succumbing to financial strain instead of trudging onward toward completion, minus a few dollars.
Like Debbie, money is constantly a worry on Amy’s mind. She works three jobs and picks up side jobs here and there to make ends meet because she wants to be able to make more money. She says that making enough money for a comfortable life is her number one priority so that she can raise her son comfortably. However, being so busy is also the greatest source of pressure and stress. Sally feels guilty spending money saying that all she is doing, without being extravagant and shopping to ease the stress takes a lot of money. It is hard for her because although her husband has a good job and supports the family, she is traveling back and forth to the U.S. and has the children enrolled in daycare every day. She feels bad about spending any extra money.

Donna also speaks about money woes. Every penny she and her husband bring in is allotted to something specific to keep everyone fed, clothed, and the utilities working in her home. Sacrificing necessities to pay for other necessities is a job Donna knows well. Because she and her husband are both students, their income is not what they would prefer. Their children are teenagers and need things for school, which is when Donna “robs Peter to pay Paul,” and the cycle of figuring out her “controlled chaos” begins again. “It’s hard,” she said. “I would love to visit family but I just don’t have the money.” Because her extended family lives far away, taking money to go visit is difficult. Donna bemoans the rising gas prices because she “just can’t get down there.” Her sister is her support, the one in her family who can make anything light hearted and funny, thus dispelling some of the stress. Furthermore, her grandmother’s house is in a very small town where the lifestyle is quiet and peaceful where “all I can do is sit on her porch and watch the Walmart trucks go by.” Going “home” is a stress reliever for her, yet she cannot go home because of the lack of funds. Sadly, the relief for the stress she feels is unavailable to her because of the cost, thus causing even more stress.
Time

Negotiating time and making sacrifices therein was universal among the participants. A distinct pressure manifested itself in each woman as she sought to fulfill both the role of motherhood as well as student successfully. It is very overwhelming. Often, they are doing many things at once and trying to juggle all things simultaneously. Many of them said they were tired, exhausted, and that the whole routine of school was getting old. They speak of not having enough time to accomplish all they have to do, a lack of time to spend with family or friends, and lack of time for themselves.

Carla explicitly says that there is just not enough time in the day to get everything done. Rebecca echoes Carla’s thoughts as she says, “There’s just too much, it’s like being stretched and you’re stretched too thin, so how do you do everything well?” Cheryl wishes days could have 48 hours instead of just 24. While each of them used the term “prioritize,” each graduate school mother does so a little differently. Stefanie makes intentional choices with her time and uses “windows of time” very deliberately.

Emily and Nicky miss time with family and/or friends. Nicky and her husband used to have a weekly date that has turned into “ships passing in the night,” or a to-do list passed between them. Thankfully, they shift their paradigm of taking care of their little children’s bath and mealtime from a chore to their personal time together. This luxury just does not exist for many of them.

Equally as stressful was the participants’ expression of the lack of time for themselves as they pursue the elusive “me” time or give it up all together. While Stefanie wants to exercise and eat right, that lifestyle has fallen by the wayside with her lack of time. She says, “Negotiating time to be at certain places and missing moments in my children’s lives is the
hardest.” The single event in Amy’s life that she relates doing in the last month for herself is buying make-up. “I have no time for me! No time for my husband! No extra time at all!” She clutches her chest and describes this time as pressure. “It’s a burden that (she takes a deep breath) takes my breath away. It is crushing.”

The search for fragments of time now and then is a lifestyle to which these women have grown accustomed. Part of being the manager of the home for these women is organizing and scheduling time so that they can squeeze as much into the 24-hour day that is humanly possible. Cheryl will read while doing the laundry or write a little while cooking dinner. Emily cleans the bathroom while her son watches TV prior to a nighttime bath. Katie finds an hour here or there to study. Amid finding time for schoolwork, each woman scheduled time for her daily tasks.

Sleep

All 13 women mentioned sleep at some point in the interview. Each mentioned some form of sleep, either not getting enough, or needing it more than they used to when they were younger. For Carla it was a form of stress because

I just can’t get everything done. I am doing too many things at once. By the time I go to bed I just can’t do another thing. Like last night I just ran out of juice. I was exhausted with trying to help the girls with their homework and do my own at the same time after working all day. And my husband had a family emergency so he was gone.

Carla is the oldest of the participants and talked extensively about being older. She talked about students looking at her differently, but mostly about how she just cannot stay up as late as her younger counterparts.

Miriam just wishes she got more sleep. She and Sally both love sleep and do not get enough during the week. Rebecca says, “I have finally learned to sleep.” However, it used to be
a bigger source of stress for her. Previously in her program she was under such stress that she was not sleeping at all. She had an anxiety attack and ended up at the doctor and thus in counseling, which in her opinion was the best part of her doctoral program. Only through this counseling did she learn to turn her brain off at night. “It’s a skill,” she says, “of turning my mind off when I go to sleep.” She sighs deeply, remembering the days during counseling in which she learned this skill. Although she is better able now to turn her brain off when she goes to sleep, it is a skill she said she must continue to practice.

Sleep is such a sought after commodity that Nicky also had troubles early on in her graduate program. Like many other of the younger mothers under 40, she could not turn her brain off and was losing precious sleep. What helped during her Master’s degree is not available now because of having little children.

I have a hard time turning my brain off when I go to bed, so when I was doing my Master’s thesis, and I had that problem, I would take Tylenol PM or something to kind of help calm myself down. In fact, I even got a prescription from the Health Center for like. Because I just couldn’t….my doctor was like it’s easier on your liver and stuff than, and you don’t wake up with that groggy nasty feeling in the morning. So I took, for the last semester of my master’s degree I took valium to help me sleep. But I can’t do that with kids because I do have to get up in the middle of the night and I don’t want to be uuuuuuhhh….and that is one thing, [husband] is great about everything, but he does not hear the kids in the middle of the night.

Now Nicky says, “I just try to prepare myself to go to sleep. I try to shut everything off.” Although she is no better now than before at shutting her brain down before she falls asleep, she
says she’s “to the point of being completely exhausted so I tend to fall asleep faster than I used to in my Master’s.”

Nicky was not alone in her sleep struggles. Exhaustion was in each woman’s life. As I spoke with Cheryl about her sleep, or lack of it, she said she goes to bed between 11pm and 12am only to arise between four and five am. “There is no other way to do it. I am tired, but there is no other way,” she says. These participants, although tired, still forge the trail ahead to successful completion of their graduate degree.

**Guilt**

A recent Google search of the phrase “guilt in motherhood” elicited 2,460,000 results. I think it safe to say that guilt in motherhood is a given. It is something all mothers go through for some reason or another at one point or another in their lives. Occasionally it is pervasive and remains for a long periods. Varieties of people write blogs, books, articles, and forums with purposes anywhere on the spectrum of guilt free motherhood to the guilt cure. When I conducted a more advanced Google search, I found that within that past hour over 10 online blogs or sites posted something about motherhood and guilt, one of which was about splitting time between motherhood and studying, all the while her “bloody floors are not being cleaned.”

Likewise, guilt was a very real emotion for the majority of mothers who participated in this study. Guilt ranged from spending too much time with family or on schoolwork, to not getting their houses clean enough, or having a short fuse with their spouse or children. Sally feels guilty when she spends time with her children and is not working on her dissertation. Yet, she also feels guilty when she is writing her dissertation and not spending time with her children. It is a double-edged sword for Sally. Although Amy has three jobs with little help from her husband, when she is doing something else besides spending time with her son, she feels “like I
am cheating my child of time.” Donna feels guilty that the housework must wait until the weekends and that sometimes she would rather watch her TV shows than do anything else. When asked what was the biggest challenge to getting a graduate degree as a mother, Stefanie’s immediate response was “a sense of guilt. I mean, what did I trade all this for? If I don’t finish, the guilt doesn’t go away.” Stefanie wanted to be doing so many other things with her time. However, she realizes that this is not the time. Regardless of her attitude or knowledge of how life must be right now in order to finish, she still feels guilty when she cannot be the one to take her children somewhere. Ultimately, she misses spending time with them and feels guilty when she spend the quality time she desires.

Guilt also reared its ugly head in Tammy’s life because she has her daughter in daycare. Although she is pleased with the daycare’s focus on curriculum and teaching the children, she says,

My daughter learned all these things and I’m embarrassed that I didn’t teach her her colors, shapes, ABCs. We’ll be out and someone will go “Oh, that’s great she knows this or that,” and I’m like, “Yeah, I didn’t teach her that.”

Tammy felt guilty not teaching her daughter simple preschool principles. Any deviation from the societal norm of mothers staying home to rear their children, teaching them and spending time with them evoked guilt from these women.

Furthermore, along with deviations from the societal norms, any action contrary to a woman who looks as if everything is put together and functioning perfectly, as well as one who is kind at all costs, brought guilt to the participants. Specifically, my initial question to Cindy was “How are you … really?” After she drew out the pat answer “fine,” as if to say, I am healthy and happy and doing well, she sighed and relinquished that “if you were to ask those that
love me most, I’m wound a little tight.” Regardless of whether it is being “wound tight” that causes the irritability and “short fuse” she says she sometimes has, it causes her guilt. She is laden with guilt because her son moved out, and because

I have not given my kids the chance to rise to the occasion of learning to get things done. My daughter will come up with a wrinkly shirt and ask if it is too wrinkly to wear to school. (She wrinkles her nose up and says) Uh, yeah! She looks at me with the “will you iron it for me?” look and I begrudgingly say, “I need to teach her to iron her own clothes.

Cindy says, “I blame my mother!” when she speaks of letting down societal expectations of “doing it all,” or when she hears “bad mommy” inside her head whenever she is not doing for her children all that she feels her mother did for her, and what women are supposed to do. Regardless of whether the guilt comes from societal roles or from some other avenue, it is present as a ubiquitous factor in each mother’s life.

Finding Joy in the Journey

The role gratification is also an appendage of Sieber’s (1974) Role Accumulation theory and acts as an intersection for the four adaptive modes of the RAM as the self-concept and interdependence mode lead to satisfaction, enjoyment, and pleasure within a woman’s multiple roles. Subthemes within this theme include 1. Relationships, 2. Who I am becoming, and 3. Learning.

Relationships

By far, relationships were the greatest source of gratification the 13 graduate school mothers stated as I interviewed them. Relationships within their immediate family improved. Stefanie met “amazing people” in her journey of graduate school, both in and outside of her
program of study. Each time one of the participants mentioned relationships it was always with a profound sense of joy and gratitude, stated as an exclamation. Some exclamations were exuberant, some humble and grateful. Regardless of the tone in which each spoke of relationships, each found joy in their graduate school journey through their relationships.

Since Miriam is in another country than her own, she is without the help and support of extended family. Because of this, her immediate family relationships are growing stronger. Miriam is happy to report that they are “learning to take care of themselves.” Nicky is working hard to keep the relationship with her husband as it was before where they had a date night each week. They may not get a date night each week alone, but she says her “priority is [her] kids.” They still spend time together but she describes it like this.

It’s just a little different. Not so much one on one time. But I don’t think, I think we both love having the kids and having the family responsibilities. We do bath time. We’ll put the kids in the bath and we’ll both be in there playing with them or we’ll both put them to bed together. We spend…instead of spending time together on Sunday afternoons, we spend time with the kids doing stuff. It’s just a little different and I think we both know that in three months it’s all be over and then we can get back to some kind of normal.

The relationship between Nicky and her husband is still important. In this way, her husband still supports her educational endeavors by helping out around the house and with childcare, but he also continues to help maintain their marriage relationship.

Gaining relationships with new people at school or because of school is another way to find joy in the journey. With excitement in her voice, Donna says she has “met really good people!” That thought is echoed throughout Amy’s, Tammy’s, and Rebecca’s experience as well
as they speak of making connections and networking, or just merely of having an intimacy with colleagues they have found in no other place. As I sat with Rebecca across a table at a local coffee shop, it was evident relationships meant a lot to her. We could have met anywhere, but she wanted to meet in a place that highlighted a relationship. She said,

The relationships you make during that time when people are struggling, you know each other in person in an intense way. … I think about my close friends that have lasted a long time, closest to my heart. It’s through trial that you make these relationships. It’s when you travel life with someone, you go through hard times or high times, but most of mine are difficult times. And you have those sympathies together.

Furthermore, relationships made through networking are another benefit of the graduate school journey. Amy is happy about the connections she is making because of her program of study. Joy is evident in Tammy’s voice as she relates, “I love going to conferences, meeting people. It’s definitely been good networking for me. I’ve met people from cool companies that I would love to work for.” Suffice it to say, relationships have brought joy to the journey for the participants in this study.

**Who I am becoming**

Sometimes the greatest enhancement of a relationship came from within. Evidence that Carla’s self-worth is increasing shines, as she cannot just tell me of getting good feedback on a recent paper she wrote. Instead, she reaches into her bag to dig out the paper to show me. Her face lights up as she says, “my confidence is growing. If I set my mind to it I can get a lot done.”

Likewise, Debbie, Emily, Nicky, and Amy mentioned getting their graduate degree has improved their self-esteem as well as their internal validation of worth and sense of accomplishment. Stefanie’s paradigm is shifting. Her graduate work is shaping the way she
thinks about everything in life. “It’s about the journey, about why, and it’s shaping who I am becoming,” she says. Immersed in a new culture and new country without the companionship of her husband, Cheryl believes she is doing well. She recounts,

My personality changed a lot because before I was shy. I was really shy at first. Especially asking people questions. I was dependent on him mostly. For car insurance, for example, or something. He has to finish all of that. But now I have to finish up everything, and I think I’m doing well. I think one of the most benefits that I see is becoming an independent person. Here in America, it’s much different than back home.

I think it’s a great opportunity to become a more of an independent woman.

Cheryl’s eyes shone and her smile radiated as she talked about becoming someone better. She can now board an airplane and fly 30+ hours to her home country without any problem, a task that terrified her prior to her schooling in the U.S.

Cindy also believes her graduate degree is improving her in many ways. Although at the beginning of her degree Cindy thought it was “awesome, but I think my mind might explode,” she sees how graduate school has shifted her paradigm of herself. In her words, “All of these new ideas that I've never thought about and I'm having some thoughts and it's changing me. It's not changing me into some crazy academic. It's a good change. It's enriching my life.”

Becoming someone new is exciting for her. She thinks it is also improving her teaching.

Rebecca, like Cindy, also considers the benefits internal rather than external. For her, it is all about who she is becoming as she continues to define her own identity as a mother and a student. It has been the process of learning and knowing that pleases her most, which leads me to the last subtheme within Finding Joy in the Journey.
Learning

Many of the participants shared how their graduate studies are enriching their learning, knowledge, and skills. Emily considers herself a better teacher now. Cheryl is excited about what she is learning. She wants to be better for her job and is planning to go on to get her PhD. Tammy almost jumped out of her chair in the restaurant with this exclamation, “I love everything I am learning. It’s interesting!”

Miriam also loves the principles she is learning in her graduate program. In her native country, Miriam relates the lack of theory taught in their universities. Her eyes light up as she explains the theory behind the principles she has been teaching for a long time as a university lecturer in South America.

Oh! (it is easy to see that she is excited to talk about the benefits of her graduate experience thus far because she is fidgeting in her chair and talking with her hands more than she has previously in the interview). Well, I have learned a lot of the theory I didn’t have because in our programs we are more practical than theoretical. For example, in this program I will have five hours of teaching practice, only five. When I was in my undergrad, which is the same one, it was the same. In my undergrad we had 160 hours of teaching practice. Yes, it’s a lot of difference. But I just had to teach according to my instructors, my supervisor’s instructions. I never asked why and what is the theoretical background but now I KNOW the theory all what I have read in books to become a good English teacher. So it was like to have more, a very good base in the theory and when I come back to my program (in her native country) I will let them know that we need our students, for example, to have a better understanding of theory.
In the end, it is about what we gain from the experiences we have in life. These graduate school mothers demonstrated their ability to find joy in their individual journeys. They have taken graduate school by the proverbial reigns and did not just hold on, they are excelling and succeeding. Through their relationships, who they are becoming, and their learning they showed that although life is sometimes stressful, there are also many good points that make it worth it, and each is able to make the most out of their occasional difficult situations.

**Attitude Determines Altitude**

Leisure (2007) points out the fact that women rarely substitute one role for another. She points out the nature of women as being driven, motivated, and determined. Rather than trade responsibilities, they simply keep adding new things to their plates as they strive to reach new heights. These characteristics may be the driving force influencing women to not give up one responsibility to complete, or take on, another regardless of how busy they are in their life roles. I found that same drive to be ubiquitous within the group of 13 graduate school mothers involved with this study; their drive and attitude were palpable. From the approach with which they manage their home, scheduling everything so they have time to fit it all in, to their care for their family and schoolwork simultaneously, it is evident this group of women was bound for success.

A drive for success showed in Miriam’s attitude when deciding to pack up her family and move to the U.S. to study. “No more talk,” she said, “Let’s go!” Sally’s advice to anyone following in her shoes is that “it is hard but nothing is impossible.” Sally is one who believes that the biggest benefit of simultaneously getting a PhD and having children is that she got everything done in five years. In that time she got married, began her PhD, had a child, her husband moved to another country, had another child, and now she is preparing to graduate in a few months. Putting their heads down and plowing through was an oft quoted phrase throughout
the interviews when I asked how they balanced it all. Seeing that it will not be forever may be one reason for this attitude. Nevertheless, each exhibited such qualities of character.

For some, the drive was in pursuit of success. Others’ drive was because they saw a light at the end of the tunnel and could “power through it” for a short amount of time, setting aside all personal desires for the greater good. Yet others’ motivation came because they saw themselves as a role model for their children. Moreover, some received motivation from all of these sources. Stefanie declares, “If I don’t finish the guilt doesn’t go away.” Freeing herself of “The Beast” is plenty of motivation, not to mention regaining some sense of normalcy in her life. Nicky also uttered such a sentiment, “I can’t wait to just get back to normal life.” She may still be using the two-planner system she has been using but believes that “anyone can do college. If you have the drive. I think the organization helps.” She says she has always remembered what her dad told her, “college is like 95% ambition.” She is an avid believer in getting up every day with a to-do list and then powering through it. Other mothers “power through it” as well. With her hand shooting forward, Cindy says “momentum is taking me.”

Because of the drive, the women in this study were willing to give up some important aspects of their lives. “Letting go” was an axiom that permeated the interviews.

Letting Go

This quest to finish was a catalyst for my last theme of letting go. There comes a point in a person’s life when the daily tasks of life are such that dropping any of them would be disastrous. Instead, one drops minor things from the balance scales. Thus, letting go is the final theme. It serves as a stress reliever as well as a facilitator to role gratification. Likewise, each woman’s self-concept improved as she let go of some things. When each participant said she did not sweat the small stuff, she found greater joy in her journey.
From the outset of my interview with Stefanie, it was evident that housework was one of the aspects of her life that she has learned to let go. She desires a tidy house, but priorities do not allow for such a luxury. Our interview was via Skype, perfect for not seeing any clutter around each other’s houses. We chuckled at the irony and moved on, knowing that each was in the midst of writing a dissertation that she states, “consumes my every waking moment, and sometimes the middle of the night moments too.” She hopes to gain some sense of normalcy when she is finished.

Likewise, during this busy time many of the other mothers felt the same way. Laundry was a big topic for this group of mothers. “I don’t know when you consider laundry done,” said Cindy, “but for our family it is when it is clean and in a basket…not folded. I tell my kids to wear it dirty or do it yourself. I’m learning to let it go.” Debbie laughed as she thought of her laundry room full of clean unfolded clothes. Tammy’s husband is gone a lot. When he is home, they divvy up the chores around the house. However, when he is away she is learning to let it go for a while in order to spend time with her daughter and get her schoolwork finished.

Without fail, the guilt visibly rose as each woman spoke of her home. While Stefanie enjoys entertaining and spending time with friends, she had to let her expectations go a little in order to remain sane. Rebecca lamented about the disaster in which she lives. “It’s very disorganized right now, very chaotic.” Donna says her chaos is “controlled chaos.” She has let it go so she can accomplish what she needs to during the week. “Now on the weekends that’s a different story,” she says. “I run around like a banshee – but it works.” Her smile broadened as she saw me smile with understanding. We shared a laugh, knowing that each of us understood the harried lifestyle of trying to keep a house clean only on the weekends with children who may not want to jump aboard the housecleaning wave.
Nicky also speaks about housework. She says, “Sometimes it just doesn’t get done,” For Carla, letting things go is a source of gratification. It is a way to stay afloat amid surging waters. “I have to prioritize and some things can just be let go. It’s ok that it doesn’t get done,” she says talking about her housework.

Whether this skill of letting things go comes as a product of graduate school or motherhood, or the combination of both, I do not know. What is evident is that letting go is a pervasive strategy these 13 women utilized as they sought to adapt to and balance the demands of home and school.

**Summary**

This chapter presented seven themes that were common to each of the women interviewed for this study. Meeting each of these women showed me the strength in each of them has as they pursue a graduate degree as a mother. I felt an instant connection as I, too, was making an effort to balance the demands in my own life. Cheryl related something her friend once told her that sums up these women’s ability to adapt and balance to a tee. “You don’t be strong until the last option is being strong.” While I would not say any of these women are at their last straw, they ARE strong. They plow and power through, letting things go when needed and ultra-organizing the rest. They consider motherhood their most important role that filters into their self-concept, stress, and joy all at the same time.
CHAPTER 6

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

“Any woman can face the world alone, but why should we have to?”

— N.K. Jemisin, The Shadowed Sun

I established in Chapter Five that each of the participants of this study were very busy, often having no extra time for anything besides the necessities of home and school. Knowing that, I had to ask myself why six very busy women would come to a focus group at all. Although a few were sliding in at the last possible moment, a little late, or held up at a previous engagement, they did come. All six of them showed up excited and ready to participate. What Kozol (1985) said about getting a group of “friends and neighbors” together producing a “common cause” happened during our focus group. Likewise, the camaraderie felt was palpable, just as Kamberlis and Dimitriadis (2005) stated. In many ways, my focus group was a textbook example in how the participants expressed themselves. Additionally, they modeled the camaraderie and support addressed above. Truly, getting this group of graduate school mothers together liberated and empowered each one of them in individual ways. Amy commented, “It made me feel like I’m not alone. It didn’t necessarily lessen the burden, but it did,” as if to say that spending the time with others talking about being a mother in graduate school actually did lesson the burden, if only slightly for the moment. Miriam added, “I learned so much. I am so grateful. I was able to let it out but also take some in. It’s a bit of perspective.” Rebecca gained perspective knowing that she should not feel guilty if she needs to take time for herself. After our time together, they all left a little lighter on their feet, ready to face the remaining pressures and tasks of the day.
Focus Group Participants

Following the completion of the interviews, I polled each participant to ask for additional participation in the focus group. A majority of the participants were willing but unable to participate due to time constraints. In the end, six women were able to participate in the focus group. They included Cindy, Miriam, Tammy, Rebecca, Amy, and Nicky. As a reminder, I share a brief profile of each focus group participant.

Cindy

When Cindy walked in the first thing I noticed was her new hairstyle. Before the focus group began we talked about how “changing it up a bit” always gives a fresh new outlook to life. A 51-year-old mother of two who teaches full-time on campus, Cindy is busy. She is getting her PhD and is nearing completion of her classes. While older than most of the focus group participants, she participated and shared her thoughts openly. She was grateful to have come to the focus group and said, “In spite of age, as I am listening to the things we all deal with, life really does repeat itself.” She kept some generational comments to a minimum, not wanting to reveal too much about how her perception of her mother’s detail to the “wifey duties” has affected her negatively.

Miriam

Miriam was the first to show up to the focus group. She immediately explained how she leaves extra early when she heads to a building she does not know so she can be on time. She took off her coat and scarf and promptly pulled out a big book from her bag. She did not open it, but put it next to her at the table. It was evidence of what she said later about loving when she can study from big books. She does that one thing for herself. Her humble quiet nature was apparent as she sat back and listened at first. She said it was because she wanted to hear the
others’ stories first. I wondered if it was because of her English. As an international student from South America, she speaks good English. However, during analysis of the interview data the transcriptionist was confused about one word Miriam used, not completely understanding Miriam’s pronunciation. After listening to the interview, I emailed her to make sure I had it written correctly. Her speaking confidence seemed to wane as she apologized for not being able to speak correctly. I wondered if that was the reason for waiting. However, I do not believe so. She is quiet and contemplative. She speaks deliberately, making sure she says exactly what she intends with the words she uses. Often the other participants were sitting on the edge of their seats attentively listening to her explanation of ways in which she copes with stress.

**Tammy**

Tammy is a 30 year old mother of a two year old daughter. Her husband coaches baseball at the college. She is getting a Master’s degree in the sciences. When I interviewed Tammy, she was very calm and confident. In the focus group, she seemed a little less calm. Although she was first to start the conversation, showing her confidence, she constantly played with her hair. I wondered if she was nervous or felt something I could not get at in the focus group. It did not seem to squelch her from participating, but she may have felt a little different. When the focus group ended she immediately got up and left, having another appointment. Maybe that was the reason for the behavior I saw as different from the interview.

**Rebecca**

Sliding in at the last possible moment, Rebecca apologized for being late. We had not begun yet so I assured her it was alright. She seemed excited to be there and promptly sat down to include herself in the group. As contemplative as ever, Rebecca sat across from me with a pensive look on her face. She was intent on listening to each participant’s stories, subsequently
offering her reflective words. She would begin her statements with, “Hmmm (with a thoughtful look), that helps me put it in perspective for myself.” Alternatively, she would begin by saying, “Wow, I hadn’t thought of that.” Rebecca is a mother of four children, all adopted. She has a 16 year old who “has just started dating,” and “we just finished the process of permanency (adopting) with our six year old son.” She also has recently adopted two more little girls. Her life is much different than Cindy’s, who is about the same age. Rebecca is busy with school and a profession, but she also has a three year old and a nine-month-old infant at home as well. Her busyness is similar, but different. Rebecca is quick to share how beneficial the focus group is for her. She shares this thought more than once. As she talks about the inability to sleep or get things done as she would prefer, she says, “I would have to say, I’m really excited to do this focus group. It is outside time to talk to people who understand and are going through it.” The others echo that thought as well.

Amy

Before the focus group began, I received a text message from Amy stating she was held up at a previous engagement and would be late. I assured her it was no problem, but I reflected briefly on our interview experience. She had stated, “I have no time for me. I have no time for anything. I am constantly running from here to there without a break to think straight.” She had missed our first interview and lamented during our actual interview that she is “uber responsible…except for missing our first interview.” As a 28-year-old mother of a three-year-old son, she is busy as a graduate student holding down an assistantship and two additional jobs. As I looked at her face, she seemed stressed and tired. I felt for her as I know the feeling of running myself ragged doing everything for everybody else and not feeling like any one task can
be let go in order to take care of myself. I worried about her health. I was concerned about where her hustle and bustle lifestyle is leading.

**Nicky**

Nicky came in just as we were beginning. We introduced everyone and began. Regardless of how comfortable she looked, her foot bounced under the table constantly for the first few minutes. I brushed it off as her non-stop organized personality. However, she may have been a little nervous because she has a condition with her eyes that as an onlooker, it is hard to tell which eye to look at, or which eye she is using to look at you. She has always had this condition, but it may have been something she was more conscientious about being in a new group. With two young children, Nicky is busy at home, at school, and professionally. She is finishing her dissertation and teaching five online classes in addition to her motherhood roles. Her two-planner organization tactic works for her.

**Focus Group Themes**

Following analysis of the interview data, two thoughts surfaced that I wanted to know more about. One dealt with the time that each woman spent taking care of herself. An answer to this question would more adequately answer my third research question, which inquires about how going to school affects women’s health and self-care. The second emerging thought was about the influence of the participant’s mothers. Throughout the interviews, many of the women spoke of their mothers in one sense or another. For some, it was positive and for others it was negative. For a complete list of my focus group questions see Appendix F.

Originally, as stated in Chapter Three, I planned to analyze the focus group the same way in which I analyzed the interviews. I planned to use both open and closed coding, using the closed coding to place words, statements, and themes within the RAM. However, I did not use
the RAM to analyze the focus group data. Alternatively, I tried to get each participant to do something we did not necessarily do in the interviews. I specifically wanted them to focus on themselves as individuals. I wanted each to concentrate on her own identity not tied to others. As part of the RAM, the self-concept mode was my catalyst for this line of questioning. Throughout the interview data, I saw how the participants irrefutably linked their self-concept, and thus their identities, to their roles as mothers and students. I wanted to evaluate their self-concept. My hunch was that it was present but not completely healthy because so much of their identity was dependent upon others and their multiple roles.

The data from the focus group only cemented the themes that emerged from the interviews. Specifically, without even asking questions regarding stress or support, these two themes were pervasive. Additionally, guilt played a part in our focus group. So, instead of plugging each word or statement into the RAM, I used open coding, looking for themes outside the realm of RAM, yet connected in some way to the self-concept adaptive mode. I sought for a deeper meaning into the lives of these six women.

Based on this focus group, a woman’s self-concept is still undeniably connected to her roles. However, through the focus group, I found that a woman’s identity is an integral part of her self-concept, as well as how she handles both support and stress. Without a lengthy discourse on the differences between identity and self-concept, I define them simply as follows. According to Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith (2012), identity is how we define ourselves according to our “traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships” (p. 69). Our identity orients us and helps us find meaning (Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). According to Roy (1984), self-concept focuses on the personal spiritual and psychological facets of a woman’s life. In other words, how she feels and thinks about herself
and who she is. Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith (2012) agree with Roy (1984) as they describe self-concept as a conglomeration of one’s identities or what comes to mind when one thinks of one’s self. Simply put, our identities are embedded within our self-concept. Figure 2 shows how identities nest within a person’s self-concept.

![Figure 2](image)

*Figure 2.* Identities make up Self-Concept.

The nesting of identities within self-concept helps to illustrate why it may be difficult for these women and many others to define themselves without considering the roles that they occupy in relationship to others.

Moreover, a woman’s actions often show what she is supposed to do more than what she desires. This happens through either guilt or a conscious choice to make decisions beneficial to the family, the greater good. Lastly, as I asked about how each participant’s mother influenced them, the atmosphere immediately changed within the room. When followed up with a question regarding whether the way their mother handles stress affects the way they handle stress, it appeared as though it had touched a nerve. Their eyes got bigger and chuckles erupted as they each thought of how they were going to say what they were thinking. Thus, I share information about the two themes that emerged from the focus group. They include: 1. Focus Group =
Support Group and 2. The Identity Crisis. The second theme is divided into three subthemes: a. The Uncertain Group, b. “Thank you, Mom,” And c. Who I am Supposed to Be.

**Focus Group = Support Group**

As noted in Chapter Five, support is important to each one of these women’s lives as she endeavors to balance her multiple roles. Aside from the way in which their husbands or mothers support them, this focus group helped each participant to gain support from others like themselves who are going through exactly what they are going through and thus, able to offer understanding.

Many of the focus group members spoke abundantly of support from loved ones. Cindy, Miriam, and Tammy shared their gratitude for the help and support of their mothers and families. Cindy was happy that her husband helped with dinner and offered emotional support, regardless of the length of time it was taking to finish her degree. He reminded her that he is behind her in everything and that she is being a good example to their children. At that comment, Rebecca chuckled and said, “It is my daughter who says ‘finish what you started.’ I felt like it was me repeating it back to me. Now I’m finishing for other reasons instead of just the degree.” Each of these women was grateful for the support of their immediate family. Tammy was also grateful for the support of her mother. She considered her mother a “superwoman” saying,

I don’t know how she does it. In all the stressful times of our lives, she’s there. When I had [daughter], or when we moved, she is right here helping us unpack or whatever. Whenever I need something, I’ll call her. She’ll even, she gets forced to take time off so she’ll just come down randomly during the week and she’ll just make dinners and stuff, which is really nice. So, I don’t know, I am definitely jealous of my siblings who live in the same town and who definitely get a lot more.
Miriam was also happy for her mother’s support. When she talks to her mom, she feels a lot better about her situation. Miriam said of her mother, “She is a mother, friend, and everything I could ask for.”

However, as wonderful as support from loved ones may be, the support the women craved most was support from female friends. Rebecca stated she is most in need to time to talk to outside people who “understand and are going through it (speaking of the process of a graduate degree).” I believe this focus group accomplished that for all six focus group participants. It was a support group for them in which the women offered suggestions not as recommendations, but as strategies utilized to help the process run smoother. After Miriam spoke about doing things for herself because she loves who she is and wants to be better for her family, it is apparent that Rebecca feels the same way. Rebecca is reflective when she says, “Hmmm, that helps me put it in perspective for myself. The decisions I am making are not just affecting me. Everyone’s (speaking of her family) traveling this road with me.” The women appeared to take these suggestions as gospel, as ways to improve their own situations. For example, after listening to the group talk about the lack of sleep and being tired, Miriam offers her strategy. In her home country, they have a general naptime that every household follows. She teaches her children to be quiet so she can take a nap in the afternoon. She asks her children

What do you prefer, a very happy mom at 3:00 pm or a very angry mom at 3:00 pm?

“Well we want a happy mom!” Enough said. “Well, you’re going to watch a program on TV and I’m going to my room to take a nap. When the program is done, come get me.” It’s a whole ritual, they watch a program and come wake me when it’s done. Thirty minutes is all, no longer or you wake up even worse. You need to sleep in the afternoon. It’s really, really important.
Each woman was intently listening. It was evident in their faces that this was something either unheard of in their paradigm or an indulgence about which they would feel guilty.

Adhering to healthy eating behaviors was a challenge for many of the women in the focus group. Tammy tries frantically in the mornings as she runs late to “at least get something, you know, because breakfast is so important.” Cindy also tries to be diligent when family nutrition is involved. What goes into her family’s body is important to her. She laughed as she stated, “I’ve got my whole family saying, fiber is our friend.” As the topic of nutritious meals came up, Amy offered getting her recommended daily allowance of fruits and vegetables in a smoothie each day. Nicky’s demeanor changed noticeably as excitement for her suggestion surfaced, “Yeah, I pre-make them. I cut up fruits and vegetables and put them in a freezer bag so I can just take one out for me or my kids when I need it.” At this point, Cindy, an older mother, says, “Wow!” as if wondering how they get this done. She continued, “Avoid McDonald’s” to which Tammy lamented at her daughter’s recent affinity for fast food. A healthy diet is hard for these time starved women, yet they try to do their best and were happy for the suggestions.

With each offering of a strategy, nods, laughter, and general consent followed. At one point Rebecca said, “I hadn’t thought about that.” This reflective grateful attitude was apparent with each of the focus group participants. As Nicky talked about how her husband relieves his own stress by getting out of the house to go to a “dart board league, not because he likes dart boards so much, but because he’s a guy’s guy and likes to get out of the land of fairy princesses,” Tammy visibly shifts uncomfortably in her chair, playing with her hair even more than usual. Almost before Nicky has finished her thought, Tammy blurts out,

I do wish I could get out and do like something like that, just something to go out. I don’t have a ton of girl friends here. I used to get together with the pitching coach’s wife. She
and I used to get together a lot. We are the same age, but now that we both have kids, it’s hard. I just want something, just to get out of the house and enjoy time without… When I go out in public with my daughter it’s like “what is she doing?” So that’s been hard. I just want time to go out and do something girly.

She talks about being able to have girls’ weekends with her old college friends once in a while, but she does wish she had a little bit more of a social life.

The idea of girls’ night out is familiar to all of them. Rebecca reminisces, “I remember girls’ night out. I don’t do it anymore. I feel like I’ve lost those relationships. I miss that too.” Rebecca talks of the unique time she has had with her husband as he has been home with their infant daughter. However, she laments, “I would like to go out and do girly things. I still have friends but they don’t understand my choices. It’s not that they aren’t supportive, they just don’t understand. Life is different now. I wish I had a buddy to go through school with.” Each woman nodded her head in agreement.

While support from loved ones is important and necessary, their identities have changed such that time with female friends is limited and support from their social circles is the support they crave; this social outlet seems to make each of them stronger when it happens. They spoke of rejuvenating when they spend time with friends. As the focus group ended, all were relaxed. Cindy summed it all up as she offered one last bit of advice saying, “Thank goodness there is support out there. There’s not for everybody. If we have it we’re lucky.” As the other older mother in the group, Rebecca spoke of asking for help as an individual responsibility and said, “Value what you have.”
The Identity Crisis

Aside from self-concept being connected to a mother’s multiple roles in guilt and how she organizes her life as reviewed in Chapter Five, during the focus group, I found that the participants were going through some sort of identity crisis during this stage of life. While her most important role may be that of a mother, she craves her own personal identity outside motherhood or studenthood. Their willingness to take precious time out of their overscheduled and hectic day to participate in a focus group is a demonstration of this need. It was a time where they could solely talk about them instead of doing for others. Their self-concept connects to both their ability to cope with stress as well as accept support. The first subtheme relates to their immediate identity crisis of being in the middle with no specific group of belonging.

The Uncertain Group. It was interesting for me to see how the energy and feeling of the room changed as we began to talk about the difficulty of lacking the social interactions that they need. After Tammy and Rebecca discussed their difficulty with no social life, or remembering times past when going out with their female friends was more commonplace, the floodgates opened. Nicky said, “My social life is with my kids.” This is the point at which Rebecca shared how grateful she was for the focus group. She sighed and said, “Ahhh, you guys just know and understand.” Amy agreed with Rebecca, nodding her head in a slow methodical way. She then stated melancholically,

I relate it to being married and then having children. You fall off the radar with your friends. You find out you are not as cool as you used to be once you are changing diapers (all laugh and Nicky chimes in, chuckling as she talks about snot on her shoulder from a child). Then especially as you start back to school then if you do have friends that are married with children, um, you know, they’re maybe a stay at home mom or working or
something, but you’re like, “I have so much more on my plate” that when I do get invited I
normally can’t go because I have other things that HAVE to come first. And they don’t understand that. So I think it’s almost (long pause as she thinks)…it’s almost like being exiled in a way. And it’s unfortunate, but I really feel like that’s what it is. I know they’re not doing it to be mean, but it’s just because our lives are SO much different right now than what everyone else’s are.

After that confession, Nicky inserts, “I keep telling myself that it will go back to normal after I graduate.” The group chuckles with understanding as Amy continues, “Right, it’s like where do I go from here? What do I do now?” The identity crisis engulfing Amy at this moment of her life obviously affects her.

Miriam, always the caregiver and counselor, agrees. However, this time, she speaks of a similar hardship. One day she realized just how old she was in comparison to her classmates. She recounts her undergraduate degree saying she used to go out partying with her friends and spending time with her girlfriends. She tells of a story with a younger classmate who was in a hurry to get back to her native country directly following graduation because she was getting too old for hiring at the job she desired. Her classmate was 30. That experience struck Miriam. She says, “At that moment I realized that, Oh my goodness, there is a kind of separation because it is not just that we are married with children. We are also perceived as (she pauses before she says) old.” Everyone chimes in laughing and joking about not being old, or feeling old. Although she is usually the one who seems to have everything in control and offers her strategies in a way that makes it seem like she knows just how to do this graduate school adventure as a mother very well, her next statement reveals just how challenging it is, even for her. Miriam continues,
Yeah, so I think it is also difficult to pass through this period because, uhh, because you
don’t belong to any group. You are not with the moms because you are a student. You
are not with the students because you are a mom. And if you are in the group of moms
with student, you can’t be there because you have to be home with your kids. So your
relationships, your friendships are not there anymore.

Everyone emphatically nods in agreement. However, Rebecca sums it up by saying, “I think
that’s exactly it. We don’t belong to a group anymore.” Although they all begin to talk at once
offering suggestions of what group they would fit into on campus, Amy says, “There’s not grad
school moms group.” When someone suggests an organization on campus that caters to
nontraditional aged students, just hearing the word “nontraditional” elicits a negative connotation
for Rebecca. She says, “It is a hard title to hear. Not that I’m bothered by it, but it makes me
think, What’s wrong with me?” Some of the older generation mothers in the group talk about
not feeling old, but that title makes them seem old to themselves.

Again, their age ostracizes them from their peers. Although Amy is just 28, one of the
youngest in the focus group, she feels the sting of being old. Rebecca agrees that it does not
matter how old you are, if you are the oldest in the group “you feel kind of odd.” Amy continues
to speak heavy heartedly about the lack of social interactions. When trying to work with a group
of students who are much younger than she and who are participating in extracurricular activities
and service groups, she says, “They just don’t get it.” As they excitedly share their experiences
all she can think is, “I brushed my hair today.” Although this may not have been a universal
feeling, the others within the focus group definitely understood the mantra of “I accomplished
SOMETHING today.” Nicky laughs saying, “I took a shower.” Both never felt old inside their
own brains until, as Amy states, “Huh, I’m different. I never knew I was different until like…” She pauses and puts her hand up to her face as if to say, “it’s right in my face…like a wall.”

Being different is not what each of them considered difficult. Rather, it was not fitting into any specific place where they could find the support they needed. Each is a mother, and thus automatically fits into a group of mothers. However, often, this group is a demanding institution needing every drop of their energy. It is not that they do not want to expend that energy on their children in fact, it was moving to listen to both Amy and Cindy talk of what they want for their own children in the midst of their harried lives. Amy says, “I want him [her son] to look back and say, You know, my mommy really loved me.” Although Cindy’s children are grown, she chuckles to herself and says to the group, “You know, I hope to this day, and my son’s almost 21, that when he thinks about me he can say, Mom loves me.” Clearly, motherhood continues to define how these women view themselves in the present and the future.

Despite the opportunity to develop friendships with their classmates, motherhood limited peer groups and peer interactions for these women. Maternal responsibilities were ever-present.

“Thank you, Mom.” The pervasiveness of motherhood in the lives of these women led me to inquire about how their own mothers influenced their arriving to the point of pursuing degrees after having children. I also inquired about how their mother’s influenced their own perceptions of their roles and how they react to the demands placed upon them. Each participant spoke of the effect her mother had upon her. For most, just thinking about their mother elicited feelings of happiness and gratitude. However, for others, the affect was more negative. Miriam was first to jump in and praise her mother for the support she has given her throughout the years, especially now in her graduate program away from her native country. She has purchased a special adapter for her computer so she can talk to her mom internationally every day, just as she
did when she was at home. However, her husband is most excited to have his mother-in-law not so close. Although Miriam says of her mother, “she is my mother and friend and everything I could ask for,” she also is aware of how her mother oversteps the boundaries of her family. Miriam has learned to listen to her mother, but only applies what she needs from the conversation, even though her mother continues to tell her what to do.

Nicky and Tammy are also quick to praise their mothers. Tammy feels laid back like her parents. However, her mother was a “supermom” and Tammy often wishes she could be just like her. Similarly, Nicky wants to incorporate some of her mother’s free-spiritedness into her own mothering. When things were stressed in Nicky’s life, or the life of her siblings, her mother would stop by the school and take them out of school to go on a bike ride or a walk to talk things over. Nicky’s mother has always had a very open relationship with each of her children. While Nicky is not sure she will be as relaxed as her mother because of her organized side, she would like to meet somewhere in the middle. Mostly, she wants to instill the amount of quality time her mother spent with her into the lives of her own small children. Moreover, her mother was the one to push education, finishing her degree just a couple years ago to show her children that they can do anything they want if they will put their minds to it. Nicky is grateful for her mother’s influence and help in times of need.

As mothers, each woman had a role model in her mother. Sometimes that was positive and sometimes it was negative. The older generation of students saw their mothers as supportive as with Tammy and Nicky above. Additionally, the mothers of the older generation of women in the focus group saw their mothers as one who instilled the “wifey duties,” as Cindy put them. By this, Cindy meant the household chores that were a girl’s work instead of a boy’s work. Cindy also considers her mother a “superwoman.” Her mother was born in the 1920s and was
the one to work outside the home while her father was home as a farmer. Even though her mother would be gone all day at work, she would also come home and do all the “wifey duties,” taking care of the laundry, cooking, and cleaning. It translated to Cindy’s home life by having her mother make her do all the “girl” chores in the name of helping her mother out. Even though her brothers could, and maybe should, have learned those same skills, her mother did not expect it of them. Instead, Cindy reiterates over again the statement from her mother that still sits bitterly in her heart, “You’re helping me.” Although it is nearly 40 years later, the words slide with resentment to the table,

    Fast forward to present day. I kind of feel like I have to do everything, the laundry and meals, etc, to keep the house running. I feel guilty. I’ve gotten over some of that, but I just feel like it’s my responsibility in addition to these other things.

Cindy pauses, almost to let us all know she is done. She will not go any further with that thought, although we all know she could. Instead of going on, she puts an unmistakable exclamation point on her thoughts by saying, “Thank you, Mom.”

    Rebecca, who is similar in age to Cindy, indicates that that she understands, on a level deeper than some of the younger participants, what Cindy is saying. She follows up by repeating Cindy’s sentiments of the “superwoman” mom. She says, “She did everything.” However, that has equated to Rebecca feeling like she is not a good mom unless she is doing all those things. She has learned to try to balance being a mother and being an individual, but her mother’s influence remains. Often, the mothers in the focus group felt that they were “supposed” to do things, and thus, they did them. This affected who they were as mothers, as students, and how they saw themselves.
**Who I am Supposed to Be.** ‘Supposed to’ is a nasty phrase for anyone trying to feel good about themselves. This phrase appeared to cause visible stress within the focus group participants. Sometimes women do things because they sincerely believe they have to do them or no one else will. They do things because they “should.” Amy aptly illustrates this as she speaks of adapting to her son’s nap schedules. She cannot take a nap, as Miriam advised, when she is tired, but must “be able to relax when the conditions aren’t necessarily good.” For Amy, she is ‘supposed’ to be tired at the appropriate time that is conducive to others, specifically her son, instead of when she actually is tired. Although this is difficult, she manages, often getting no rest. Suffice it to say, ‘supposed to’ is a phrase that caused added stress to the already challenging lives of these women. Although Miriam knows that exercise is good for her, she feels guilty because she should be doing other things. However, exercise helps her allergies so “I do it because I am supposed to do it. It is really so much better for my family.” Rebecca has sacrificed relationships with others because it does not fit what she has decided is best for her family and getting her workload at school accomplished.

It is almost as if they feel out of control over their own lives, acting and doing things for others before taking care of themselves. I noticed that asking about what they did for themselves was almost more stressful to talk about than the other experiences of the focus group. It was as if they were saying to me with the feelings portrayed, “How can I possibly think of myself?”

It was easier to talk about stresses and listen to the others offer both challenges as well as coping strategies than have me ask and have to come up with an answer. Each knew that the others were just as overwhelmed as they felt. In fact, before the focus group even began Miriam and Cindy were the only two present. They began talking to one another, Miriam expressing just how overwhelming this process is and Cindy agreeing.
In addition to parenting and school, extra pressure comes to Tammy’s life in the form of her husband’s stress. She states,

My husband stresses me out. I have to be relaxed because my husband’s wound so tight. He’s been tough lately. That’s probably been the hardest thing on me lately. His stress level and me trying to constantly get him to cheer up.

Likewise, Amy “moonlights as a therapist” for her husband. She gets many laughs from this comment. Like Tammy, the stress of others increases Amy’s stress. From the looks in the room, everyone can relate. Amy continues, “His problems are my problems. My problems are my problems. But my problems are not his problems, if you know what I mean. So, I feel like I’m the master problem solver at home.” When I asked how that felt for her, it was as if I was asking the question resting on everyone’s lips. By this point in our focus group, everyone had become friends. It had become the textbook focus group where a shared purpose and support took place. Everyone echoed Amy’s sentiments through their body language and sighs. “It’s stressful,” she said, “It’s a big burden. I have to take care of them before I can take care of me.” She sighs deeply and finishes, shaking her head, “Golly, (followed by a long pause) it’s a lot.”

Although it is different in every home, each woman was able to gain something from each other and the experiences they had to offer. By the end, they seemed like friends. The focus group, I believe from their comments, made them feel better. Miriam was grateful for the focus group saying, “I learned. I learned so much. For example I learned that keeping a journal could disconnect you from your problems.” She spoke about how to better take care of her husband since she believes he is the one to help her through her stressful situations. Lastly, she is grateful for an afternoon to learn how to pass through this new experience. The nods around
the room spoke volumes. They all agreed with Miriam as she closed with, “It gave me an opportunity to let it out but also take some in. It gave me a bit of perspective.”

**Summary**

In conclusion, this chapter reviewed the two overarching themes I found as I analyzed the focus group data. Those themes emphasized the support needed by graduate school mothers. It also highlighted the reasons for the identity crisis each faces daily as a mother in graduate school trying to balance the demands of multiple roles. I listened as they shared their heartfelt feelings, as they gained support and friendship from one another, and as we laughed together as supporters to one another in our own causes as mothers and students. When I turned the recorder off, each turned to thank me and then asked me what I planned to do for *me* when this was all over. This touched my heart, and was sure evidence that the connections were real. They knew I cared about them, but the feeling was mutual. Each woman involved in the focus group took time to talk about themselves and gain support, evidence to why six very busy women would take precious time out of their day to come to a focus group. During the last five minutes of the focus group, my attention turned to the need for support groups for women on university campuses.
CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter offers a synopsis of the results of the research. The purpose of this study was to examine the lives of nontraditional age mothers enrolled in higher education. I explored how nontraditional aged mothers balance their multiple roles as well as how these multiple roles impact health. Additionally, this chapter also presents conclusions, discussion, and recommendations. In this chapter, I will also answer my three research questions, which are,

4. How do nontraditional aged graduate student mothers balance the demands of home and student life responsibilities?
5. What are the challenges that nontraditional aged graduate student mothers face when returning to higher education?
6. How does going to school affect a woman’s health and self-care?

Summary of Study

I designed a qualitative study to explore life as a graduate student mother. I specifically sought to learn about strategies of balancing the challenges they face as well as how, or if, schooling affected their health and self-care. To this end, I utilized both individual interviews and a focus group. I interviewed 13 graduate school mothers who ranged from 26 to 59. From the interview process and subsequent evaluation and analysis of their personal stories, I was able to identify seven common themes, five related specifically to the RAM. Themes relating to the RAM include: 1) I am a mother first, 2) “We got there together,” 3) I am the Captain of the Ship, 4) the Adventure is Stressful, and 5) Finding Joy in the Journey. The remaining two surfaced after a second analysis of the data. These themes include 6) Attitude Determines Altitude and 7)
Letting Go. Each of these themes gives light and understanding to the lives of graduate school mothers as they balance the demands of home and school.

Following the interviews, six of the original 13 women gathered for a focus group in which I sought to uncover information not gleaned in the interviews. Because, as stated in Chapter Five, a woman’s self-concept is undeniably connected to her role, I sought after how the participants’ identity fit into their self-concept and subsequently aided in their attempts to cope with stress and balance the demands of their multiple roles. I specifically asked about self-care and the influence of their own mothers on their lives. Following data analysis of the focus group, two overarching themes emerged. First, support continued to be a strong topic of conversation during the focus group as well as the interviews. Furthermore, the focus group served as a support group, a textbook experience where a common cause (Kozol, 1985) and camaraderie (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) enveloped the participants in the type of support they craved. Thus the theme of Focus Group = Support Group arose. Second, each participant spoke of the identity crisis of existing somewhere in the middle while in graduate school. Three subthemes emerged from the Identity Crisis theme. They include 1) The Uncertain Group – these women have no group, 2) “Thank you, Mom” – their mothers influenced their identities, whether positive or negative, and 3) Who I am “Supposed” to Be – often the participants did what they felt they were supposed to do.

Conclusions

From the themes I derived from both the individual interviews and focus group, there are four take away points from this study. These points are: 1) Stress is ubiquitous, 2) Coping strategies, 3) Support, and 4) Identity – where do I fit and why do I act as I do?
Stress is ubiquitous

It is no surprise that graduate school mothers experience a variety of stresses in their lives as they try to balance multiple roles, a finding that is a well-documented fact in the literature (Caple, 1995; Dublon, 1983; Hite, 1985; Home, 1998; Johnson, 2000; Mallinckrodt et al., 1989; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; McCaffrey, Miller, & Winston, 1984; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Sharf & Bishop, 1995; Wright, 2007), as well as within this study. As shown by the participants, adding school to the mix of home life is stressful. While a woman can come home from employment, Home (1998) states that family and schoolwork “just never end” (p. 93). Participants in this study often felt like they had too many irons in the fire and were not able to do any of them to their liking. Likewise, their tasks often collided, leaving them overwhelmed and exhausted. This aligns with the findings of Burke (2010) as she recounts some of the trials of being a mother in graduate school. She says

I have indeed found it painful and troublesome to negotiate the demands and expectations of both. … I have felt like a time and space traveler as I move between and across these spaces and moments in two worlds that often seemed to be in collision and sometimes in parallel. Moving across and between the competing demands of higher education and home (formed through institutional structures and discourses and through processes of self-discipline and regulation) created a sense of discontinuous, fragmented and unstable subject positions. … Becoming an academic, is not a simple, straightforward and linear journey of self-determination and progress, as neoliberal discourses might suggest. It is fraught with contradictions, emotional struggles and problematic assumptions, which create challenges of submission, resistance and mastery. (Burke, 2010, pp 38-39)
Burke’s explanation of the stress involved with becoming an academic summarizes what I found in both my preliminary study and this research study.

From the initiation of my preliminary study, I found that stress was a large part of a mother’s life when she returns to higher education. Thus, in this study I added the role strain portion of Sieber’s (1974) Role Accumulation theory as an overlay to Roy’s adaptation model. The addition of Role Strain and Role Gratification helped to describe adaptation to and balance of the multiple roles of graduate school mothers. However, as noted in Chapter Two, I cannot talk about role strain without first talking about role overload and role conflict. It was evident that these mothers had limited time and limited resources. Additionally, each faced conflicting expectations. However, regardless of their struggles, the women pulled through using their varied coping mechanisms.

Nonetheless, my preliminary study was not the only research showing that stress increases with the additional role of school. While Quimby and O’Brien (2006) and Wright (2007) consider the addition of graduate school to mothers’ roles to be stressful, some consider school to the greatest source of stress in a mother’s life (Home, 1998, Mallinckrodt et al., 1989; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Most recently, Eisenbach (2013) wrote a narrative autoethnography of her experience as a new mother while in her doctoral studies. She describes her struggles of higher education amidst the desire to remain devoted to her family obligations. Her journal entries are explicit, showing her drive and determination amid her break down moments where she succumbed to negative thoughts, only to arise and begin again. Phone calls to her mother, help from her husband, and a social support network of close friends kept her afloat when times got tough. The value of a support network of close friends aligned with what I found in my focus group. Support from familial loved ones was necessary, but what they craved
most was the network of close friends. Eisenbach’s (2013) hope in writing her article was to
investigate causes of stress and tension in a doctoral student’s life as she tries to balance her need
to love and care for her child, preserve a relationship with her husband, and flourish in her
graduate program.

Some of the largest stressors for my participants included not enough time to do
everything they desire with family, school, work, and self. Additionally, financial matters, guilt,
the lack of sleep, and the lack of a concrete identity were also causes of stress in my study
participants. Graduate studies often require the creation of a new professional identity. Yet, the
confrontation of maintaining current roles in the home of wife and mother often cause confusion
for many women because a woman’s place in the home and academia are often at odds
(Eisenbach, 2013).

Coping Mechanisms

Because stress was universal with my participants, I also heard many ways in which each
participant handled the challenges that came her way. Most talked of being organized and
scheduling every moment of every day, similar to what Marks and MacDermid (2006) found.
However, coping strategies also included minimal personal time and letting things go that could
not get done, or did not matter.

Many of the participants talked of plowing through to the end, knowing it was not far off.
This attitude determined a lot of the success of my participants. It did not matter that they were
tired or exhausted, they had responsibilities and thus performed them to the best of their abilities.
Leisure (2007) describes this phenomenon as a woman’s nature to be driven, motivated, and
determined. Leisure’s description fits my participants because even when adding roles to their
already full lives, they did not drop other roles. Instead, through their drive, motivation, and
determination found ways to cope with the added stress placed upon them. For instance, although personal time was limited and often fell into the “letting go” category, the participants also learned to let other things go so that they could focus on what was most important at the specific time. This was an important feature of their organization and scheduling. Contrarily, others utilized their organization and scheduling prowess to insert small bouts of personal time to relax. While these participants tend to spend less personal time than they may have spent on themselves prior to graduate school, they have learned to balance other aspects of their health. Physical health may be low on the list, but each has learned to let some things go in order to maintain more stable psychological and mental health. For example, Amy occasionally would hide herself in her room at night and “read a good book.” Cindy directs her church choir. Miriam likes to crochet. Tammy finds a mere 20 minutes to work out before picking her daughter up from daycare. Each participant had little things she would do to cope with stress by taking care of herself.

Additionally, each has a very stable support system, which improves her social health. As Miriam stated in her interview as well as the focus group, she had to ask for help from her family in order to handle the overwhelming tasks in front of her. Rebecca agreed by saying, “It’s my fault if I don’t ask for help. I need to be responsible enough to ask for help.” Support was, therefore, a strategy each woman utilized in coping with the stress of school.

Support

One of the strongest coping mechanisms for people in general is support. Polasky and Holahan (1998) found that spousal support was central to mothers in higher education. Additionally, Kirby (2004) and Pearson (1986) also found that support from a close social support group made up of family and friends is important. However, the support that I found
most influential was support that came from peers. Time with female friends means a lot to this population. I believe it helps these women focus on themselves a little. It gives them time to be someone other than mom, or student, or professional. They can “let their hair down,” so to speak, and just be an individual who has thoughts and feelings and ideas outside the realm of some of their more traditional identities.

I believe the reason that the six women participated in the focus group was for support. They desired, and received, a support group environment. Although each spoke of familial support and even the support of close friends, the support of women going through the same process meant the most to them. As I asked about self-care, it was more stressful for them than I had imagined. In fact, most did not want to talk about it, brushing it off with simple answers without going in depth. Instead, they talked about those who helped them through the process. They spoke of their husbands, their children, their church family, their close friends, but mostly they had the deepest feeling for talking to this group of similar women, despite the age difference, going through the same journey. In fact, in one of Eisenbach’s (2013) journal entries she recounts a lunch date with a friend who was also a working mother in graduate school. Having this friend tell Eisenbach she was a hero and that she could do it meant more than anything else did. It gave her the assurance she needed. She states, “If Tiffany could balance motherhood and school, I could too!” (pg. 8). Through the interviews, and especially the focus group, I saw this phenomenon take shape. Indeed, as Chartrand (1992) explains, having a close friend who understands the journey and can provide support when quitting is at the forefront of a graduate school mother’s mind is indispensable to success.

However, as mentioned by many of the focus group participants, time with their friends, or in such a support network setting, is infrequent. Rebecca has to make sacrifices of such
occasions because her decisions on her time affect her family as well. She puts her family first and therefore must sacrifice some of what will help her most as she tries to cope with her challenges in school. Moreover, often time to relax with good friends or alone is limited because of the workload in their classes. I was pleased that most of the participants in this study found time for little occasions, regardless of how often taking time away from school or family bumped heads with needed support that time away provided.

**Identity – Where do I fit and why do I act as I do?**

As mentioned above, one must fashion a new identity when beginning graduate studies, and this can pose a struggle in order to maintain a current role of mother, wife, caregiver, and other home identities. This clash of identities often causes confusion and conflict within the life of the student because the two roles of mother and student are often at odds (Eisenbach, 2013). Although women are a growing force in higher education, they sometimes feel left in the middle with no specific group with which to belong. I found this to be true from focus group results.

It was amazing to have the focus group uncover such rich data about the ways graduate school mothers perceive their identity. While each has a healthy self-concept, their self-efficacy, which Bandura (1997) defines as belief of successful accomplishment in specific situations, is also high resulting in their drive for success, motivation and determination. However, with multiple roles, and thus multiple identities that often conflict, a crisis resulted in their lives. They do not fit anywhere and therefore, are without a group to call their own. Shifting from one identity to another and back again begins to wear on their psyche until their exhaustion finally wins. I saw this firsthand in the focus group as the mood changed from jovial to heavy as participants spoke of not belonging. It wore on them and caused visible sadness. Likewise, I saw the support each participant needed beyond the spousal or familial support. While support
from spouse and family is important, talking to others who are going through the same ordeal is cathartic and empowering.

As the American culture continues to evolve, as well as with the ever changing definitions of family and motherhood, women are often caught in the middle. They continue to take on extra roles and thus extra identities. When society says one thing and their morals another, they are in conflict. Regardless of the modifications these women make to their individual paradigm, as well as the changes societal norms follow, roles will forever clash when mixing motherhood and work or school, thus adding another identity, and thus more stress. Until a climate exists where support groups are in place for women, be that individually formed or through an organization, mothers will continue to stand alone in their identity crises.

**Applying RAM to Graduate Student Mothers**

The RAM is set up as a model to help nurses assist patients in their recovery and adaptation to new situations in which they may find themselves after diagnosis and relies heavily on stress theory and coping mechanisms. As I have assessed the data from both the interviews and the focus group, Roy’s Adaptation Model has limitations for considering multiple roles. The RAM adequately offers adaptation modes; however, I found that for graduate school mothers, the interdependence and self-concept mode were most prominent. For instance, to balance her multiple roles, each woman needed support. Furthermore, each needed to believe in her own self-concept of who she was in order to become who she needed to be to rise to the occasion of graduate school in conjunction with motherhood. However, indelibly coupled with a woman’s self-concept is the role function mode. As a mother first, all other roles stemmed from mother as the primary concern. Likewise, her role as well as concept of herself fueled actions and accomplishments of each participant. As noted in the focus group, regardless of the self-
concept each of these women had in order to persist to their degree, they experienced an identity crisis as they tried to balance each of their identities amid the cultural norms and society’s customs.

Adding the role strain and gratification to the RAM was helpful because these two theories served to bind the RAM together. While analyzing the data, I created a model of the RAM as a framework showing how graduate school mothers balance home and academia. It is similar to the RAM, but represents a scale indicating which parts of the RAM, Role Strain and Role Gratification Theories go on each side of the scale. Additionally, each piece of the scale represents a portion of how a mother balances school and home at the same time. Unlike the RAM, my model is in color representing a value beyond the two-dimensional. Such are women as well, multidimensional. Furthermore, in color, it is easier to view the exact pieces of the model as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Multiple dimensions of graduate school mothers.
As shown in Figure 3, ultimately, woman can effectively balance multiple roles amid the challenges and also take care of their health. How they accomplished this is shown in the figure which explains the themes inherent in this study (I’m a Mother First, I am the Captain of the Ship, “We got here Together,” The Adventure is Stressful, Attitude Determines Altitude, and Letting Go). Although this study showed similar results as those reported by other researchers (Guidos & Dooris, 2008; Home, 1998; Johnson, 2000), in which stress is a large part of a graduate school mother’s life, participants in my study accomplish their own type of balance by organizing everything, finding support along the way, and having a drive toward their cause. Their coping strategies align with researchers views on social support groups made up of spouse, family, and friends (Kirby, 2004; Pearson, 1986; Polasky & Holahan, 1998; Roehl & Okun, 1985; Sosdian & Sharp, 1978). Furthermore, the participants in my study showed a great deal of drive, motivation, and determination, characteristics Leisure (2007) points out that bring success to female graduate students.

**Research Questions Summary**

This study sought to answer three research questions about the lived experience of graduate school mothers. This section offers a brief summary about answers to those questions. The research questions that guided this study were

1. How do nontraditional aged graduate student mothers balance the demands of home and student life responsibilities?

2. What are the challenges that nontraditional aged graduate student mothers face when returning to higher education?

3. How does going to school affect a woman’s health and self-care?
First, each woman balanced their multiple roles as student and mother with similar strategies in yet individual ways. As shown in Chapters Five and Six, organization and scheduling was imperative to the participants’ well-being. Likewise, having a strong support group made up of family and close friends helped these women to cope with the challenges they face. Each found joy in her journey through relationships, becoming whom they desired, and through learning. Lastly, each had to learn to let go of certain aspects and attitudes in her life as she sought to balance the many demands on her time effectively.

Challenges in the higher education process for a mother are ubiquitous. Stress was an obvious challenge brought on by finances, time, sleep, and guilt. Furthermore, navigating through the demands of her day brought each a measure of strain that she tried to dispel through certain activities. Letting go of parts of life was one way to dissipate stress. Additionally, taking time for her was an important aspect that each woman desired, yet rarely enacted. Through the analysis of individual interview and focus group data, I found that these women spend less time than they desire for themselves. The participants in this study desired time for self, to take care of and replenish themselves. However, what they desired most in taking care of themselves was time with friends who understood the struggles they are going through at this juncture of their lives.

Thus, women are capable of balancing the challenges of their multiple roles. Each accomplishes this in various individual ways. Although self-care may not seem important to them by their actions, the participants value themselves and do their best to take care of themselves appropriately.
My Perceptions

Based on my personal experiences, I knew of the vast possibilities for stress within this population, but I did not set out to study stress. Instead, I wanted to know about strategies used to adapt to multiple roles and the strain caused by these roles. In the end, I came away with a list of ways in which mothers in graduate school balance their multiple demands at home and school, and often work. From the literature, it is apparent that support is a major factor in a woman’s coping skills. I found the same principle important in my study. Each woman talked about the support she received, whether it was in the form of instrumental support (their husband or family helping with chores around the house) or emotional support from social networks. This aligns with Roy’s Adaptation Model under the interdependence mode where social interactions that portray love, respect, and value benefit patients in their recovery. In this study, interdependence, or social support, likewise aided the participants in their quest to balance the demands of their multiple roles.

Interestingly, during the focus group, I found that whereas support from spouse, family, and close friends was most important from the interview data, the focus group served as a support group. I found that the support graduate school mothers crave the most is from each other, from women in their same shoes who understand the journey.

Moreover, it was an interesting phenomenon for me to gain a connection with each of these women. I do not know whether that connection emanated from commonalities in motherhood or graduate school or some combination of both. I believe this study served as a support for each of the participants. Each was able to spend time talking about themselves and how they do things. They were free to share the hardships and struggles along with the joys and benefits. Likewise, we talked about their experiences with motherhood and how it affects them
as a student. Although they do not really ever put their motherhood responsibilities aside, this was a time where it was acceptable to talk openly about their experiences while in their student role. Moreover, each of the six focus group participants came as a participant, but some left empowered as they talked about how life as a mother and student affects their health and wellbeing.

Another facet of these women’s lives was their drive, motivation, and determination. I completely expected this but it still surprised me to see such fervency in their expressions of these attributes. It is hard to put aside these attributes when each used not only words to describe this, such as “power through it,” or “plow through,” but also used hand gestures and body language. Many of them shot out their hands in a forward motion, indicating the straightforwardness of their progression towards completion of their graduate degree.

One theme that I did not expect, yet did not surprise me, included being organized. Just as each individual participant had her own method of organizing her world, they all organized their multiple roles in order to accomplish everything expected of them. Another theme that intrigued me was that of the identity crisis of the focus group participants. As a commuting student, I often said my life was on the interstate, I lived partially at school and partially at home. Because of such a lifestyle, I also felt that I did not fit into a group, per se. Each interview I conducted, along with the focus group, solidified the need for support in this group of women.

One last thought-provoking point I wish to speak about is how none of the women spoke of going back to school solely for themselves. As a mother, I understood the sentiments of my participants. Nevertheless, as I have stepped back and spoken with other health educators, the motivations these women gave for returning to school may seem to rationalize it being strictly for their families instead of for themselves. Is this because of social acceptability or the nature of
women, or both? From my preliminary study, motivations included financial needs, career advancement, and something they just knew they had to do to get ahead. This topic is worth studying in the future. However, the participants in this study did not speak much about motivations or going to school for personal reasons, which intrigued me. I began to think about the identity crisis may have played an integral role in the women’s responses. If they do not feel like they fit anywhere, where do they feel they do fit? Additionally, what do they consider their identity? Each spoke of being a mother first, but the fact that they did not speak about self-care also intrigues me. I wonder why. I wonder if it has to do with their identity or the social norms that influence their perceptions of their identities. Learning how women view their roles, lives, identities, and how they fit into their community will be an influencing factor in the programs health educators develop and implement regarding graduate student mothers.

**Recommendations for Health Educators**

When I first began to share my dissertation topic with others, the big question was how it relates to health education, in my mind, it was clear. Women are receiving more of every degree than men (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a) and will continue (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b). Moreover, school causes stress (Home, 1998; Johnson, 2000). Furthermore, mothers with multiple roles also experience high levels of stress or strain (Dublon, 1983; Hite, 1985; McCaffrey, Miller, & Winston, 1984; Sharf & Bishop, 1995; Spurlock, 1995). Additionally, stress is a health risk for many detrimental diseases, psychological and physical health effects, and even premature mortality (Braveman, Egerter, &Mockenhaupt, 2011; Lantz, House, Mero, & Williams, 2005; McEwen, 1998; McEwen & Seeman, 1999; Miller, Cohen, & Ritchey, 2002). Since the 1970s, the U. S. Public Health Service (1979) has requested a reduction of stress because of its effects on well-being.
Furthermore, benefitting this population not only improves the health of a vast number of people, it improves their schooling, families, and lives in general. As health educators, we are ethically bound to contribute to the health of the population through research and evaluation in our field (National Commission of Health Education Credentialing, 2008). Because the number of mothers attending a college or university continues to increase (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b), this population cannot be overlooked. The findings of this study, and others (Guidos & Dooris, 2008; Home, 1998; Johnson, 2000) indicate that stress is a byproduct of the multiple roles women engage in as mothers and students, and often professionals as well.

Teaming with organizations on campuses that accommodate mothers will be beneficial in an effort to improve the health of this population.

Within the university where the study took place, one of the organizations that provide service to nontraditional aged students hired a health educator as an intern. I believe this is valuable for a myriad of reasons, four of which I will discuss here. For one, with a health educator tied to an organization such as this, he/she can help to create specific programs tailored to the specific health needs of this population. Second, while the organization strives to improve the students’ experiences, a health educator can plan each program with specific health outcomes in mind, using well-tested theories for improving health behaviors. Third, as health educators, our main purpose is to promote and protect the health and wellbeing of individuals. If our university programs provide only those programs that apply to single undergraduate students, they will miss this vast, and growing, population and thus miss the opportunity to promote and protect the health of women. Lastly, as the focus group aptly displayed, this population of women is in dire need of support groups. As health educators, programs designed directly
around a support group for graduate school mothers could enhance this group who feels they have no group.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings and conclusions of the interviews and focus group, I make the following recommendations for future research with mothers in higher education.

1. I believe that the stress of mixing motherhood and education is universal. However, I did not include undergraduate mothers in my study. It would be beneficial to see if stress is ubiquitous or if it is different from an undergraduate to a graduate school perspective. Is there a difference between undergraduate and graduate mothers in 1. Decision or motivation to return, 2. How they balance their multiple roles, and 3. The challenges they face?

2. Likewise, my study also did not include single mothers. From a stress standpoint and strategies of coping with stress, single mothers do not have spousal support to aid their journey. Yet, studies show that support is a key element in a woman managing stress while in higher education (Kirby, 2006; Pearson, 1998; Slaughter, 2012). What avenues of support do single mothers utilize while enrolled in higher education? Is their stress the same as a married mother’s stress?

3. Each woman I interviewed experienced stress. It is a universal principle of going to school. However, each handled it a little differently. While there is no one specific way to cope with stress, is there a personality type that tends to handle it better while in school?

4. Many women drop out of graduate school before they finish. Lynch (2008) shows that one of the reasons women do not complete graduate school is familial obligations. Is
there a formula for success in relation to mothers in graduate school adapting to multiple roles effectively, and thus completing their graduate degree successfully?

5. Ultimately, a mother who attends school does not only influence herself, nor will the affect be solely individual. Thus, how her enrollment in higher education affects her family merits additional study.

6. What is a woman’s motivation for getting a graduate degree? Why does she knowingly subject herself to the stress?

7. How does a woman make the decision to return to school?

8. Do the demographics (age, number of children) at which a mother is enrolled in higher education make a difference in persistence, academic performance, and degree completion?

9. Most students change along the journey of higher education. Therefore, I believe a longitudinal study of women attending higher education in any capacity or level needs further study. Specifically, a study relating to a woman’s health at the beginning, middle, and completion of her degree would benefit health educators and university staff in knowing how and when to intervene into a woman’s life. Health factors would include height, weight, blood pressure, nutrition, stress, and self-esteem. An analysis of the differences between ages of children or of mothers, along with whether the mother is an undergraduate vs graduate student may prove beneficial. Lastly, will the number of children or the program of study change how a woman’s health changes during her schooling?
Reflective Positionality

While writing these last few chapters I have been in a mode of existence that is not conducive to family life. Prior to diving into this process, we sat down as a family to discuss why I was going to be gone so much. Each of my children understood that I needed to do this in order to end this journey we call “Mom’s Adventure.” I knew it would not be easy, but have since reflected upon the journey of each one of my family members. I chuckled inside as I remembered my first semester where at each mid-class break I would check my phone messages only to have 10-15 messages from my children either crying and wanting me to come home, hating the babysitter (something they had never really had in their lives), or fighting with each another. Times have certainly changed. I no longer receive negative phone calls from my children. Although they may call when they need something, most often it is just to say hi and I love you. We have all matured and changed for the better.

My husband has taken a lot of the brunt of my schooling. While I am gone, his role has been mother and housekeeper, along with employee and coach. At the beginning, we both struggled with our opposite roles a lot. However, I have seen both of us settle into our respective roles, however begrudgingly. I recently received a text message from two friends, independent of one another, on the same day stating how well my husband is doing. I sat back and again reflected upon our journey of this graduate degree. Not only have my children matured and grown into the adventure we have taken on, but my husband has, as well. So have I. He can cook more than Ramen now. In fact, my children absolutely love his meals. Whereas in the past warmed up chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese or nachos were staples at our home, he now fixes a well-balanced meal including fruits and vegetables. Of all the meals he was most
frightened of fixing, it was chicken. It is now the meal my children love best. Needless to say, he and I have both changed for the better.

This research topic has been my passion. Thankfully, I found it early on, standing in the office of one of my professors who told me studying women like me would be a great idea. My passion for my family, for women, and for improving the health of each has grown. This research study has taught me many lessons. First and foremost, it has solidified within my soul that I can do anything. When I put my mind to something, I can accomplish more than even I can comprehend or expect. As I interviewed these 13 women, I found a similar attitude. I found myself wanting to instill confidence in each of them. During the focus group, as Miriam said, “I learned so much,” the thought came so forcefully to my mind that these women need a support group specifically for them. I want to be an integral part of that movement on campus.

Other lessons from this research study stem from the process. To begin with, the nasty taste of research I had from my Master’s degree is no longer evident. Finding a topic and issue that I love and am passionate about made all the difference. It has also helped to redefine myself as a researcher. From the introduction to the concluding word I will soon write, I have learned that in order to finish, I must put one foot in front of the other and keep on writing. As I researched women in graduate school, I found that I am not alone. As I interviewed each of the 13 participants, I found that my experiences are not singular. Likewise, the focus group cemented that knowledge. I am not alone. I am one of many graduate school mothers who sacrifice time and energy as we organize and schedule every moment of our lives in order to succeed. I am also not alone in feeling out of place, or without a group. The identity crisis of a graduate school mother is not new. It surfaced in my focus group, but also within recent literature (Eisenbach, 2013).
Equally, the process of recruiting participants, scheduling interviews and a focus group, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the conclusions has improved me. Everything ran smoothly. However, I, like my focus group participants, know that it takes work for life to run that smoothly. Thomas Jefferson (Oberg & Looney, 2008.) has been quoted to say, “I am a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it.” Therefore, it has run so smoothly because I have worked hard.

The response I received to an email sent to the general student population of mothers in graduate school surprised me. Knowing how busy I am and how often I disregard such emails because of time, I fully expected no response. However, I believe it was the topic that caused the many graduate school mothers to click respond to my email. Not only would their participation help a fellow mother in graduate school, but also give them a well-needed break to talk about how life is for them. Within a week, I had the interviews all scheduled and within two weeks the they were complete. The connection I felt while interviewing motivated me to complete and then to seek greater support for this population in the future.

As I analyzed the data and subsequently wrote up the conclusions, it was easy to put myself in the participant’s shoes and therefore describe them accurately. I believe this representation of the women who participated in this research study is correct and tells the deeper story of the lived experience of graduate school mothers.

This journey began with confident trepidation. While it originated with the goal of finishing so I could become the breadwinner in our family, it has transformed into something far more. Likewise, it has changed me into someone different. I have gained a greater appreciation for people in general, for professors, for students, and for knowledge. Like the women in the study desired, I have found a voice. Upon beginning this journey of a PhD, my mother remarked
that I had come back to myself. I did not fully understand this concept until now. After hearing the focus group participants speak of the identity crisis each faces, I realized that meshing motherhood and a PhD has been difficult, but has given me a voice and I am pleased with who I have become.
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Appendix A

Interview Protocol:

It’s ________(time) and I am (Denise Demers) here with ___________(name, interviewee states their name)

Thank you for coming today to this interview about non traditional aged mothers enrolled as a graduate student in higher education. **I am doing research as part of my degree requirements at Southern Illinois University Carbondale** for my doctoral dissertation. This interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Your participation is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question without penalty. All responses will be confidential. They will be audio taped then transcribed by me personally. The files will be kept on a flash drive in a locked cabinet. With these parameters, are you willing to follow through with the interview?

1. Tell me about you and your family a little bit – how many children? How old are they? How long have you been married? And what life is like in your family, roles, etc – now and before grad school?

2. How did you decide to get a graduate degree?

3. How was the transition to college life?

4. How has going back to school affected you and your family?

   (Probing questions)

   a. What have been the sacrifices? (to you as well as your family)

   b. What have been the benefits? (to you as well as your family)

   c. Did anything happen you did not anticipate?

   d. What changes in the routine of the family?

   e. What changes in communication?
f. What is the difference now?

5. How do you fit it all in? How do you do it all and stay afloat?

6. How much time do you spend on housework and the home, including childcare?

7. How much time do you spend on your schoolwork?

8. How much time do you spend at work?

9. How much time do you spend for yourself and for your health? What do you want to do for yourself that you can’t, or don’t, because you don’t have time for it right now?

10. How do you decide which role, which responsibility, takes precedence over another, or is most important?

11. What was your greatest fear going back to school?

12. If you had to do it all over again, would you?

13. What are you thinking when you go to bed at night? How does that make you feel?
Appendix B

Cover Letter – Focus Group

Dear Participant:

I am a graduate student seeking my Doctoral degree in the Department of Health Education and Recreation at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

The purpose of an interview will be to gain your personal insights into how nontraditional aged mothers (25-64 years of age) balance the demands of both home and school simultaneously.

You were selected to participate in this study because of your experience as a nontraditional aged mother enrolled at Southern Illinois University.

The focus group will take approximately 1 hour to complete. All your responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits. All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the group. Only group data will be reported and no names will be used. Since a focus group involves a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, absolute confidentiality on the part of the participants, themselves, may be difficult to ensure.

Questions about this study can be directed to me or to my supervising professor, Dr Kim Miller, Associate Professor Health Education and Recreation, 618-453-2777, kmiller@siu.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Denise Demers
217-343-4332
ddemers@siu.edu

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Research Development and Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
Appendix C

Cover Letter - Interview

Dear Participant:

I am a graduate student seeking my Doctoral degree in the Department of Health Education and Recreation at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

The purpose of an interview will be to gain your personal insights into how nontraditional aged mothers (25-64 years of age) balance the demands of both home and school simultaneously.

You were selected to participate in this study because of your experience as a nontraditional aged mother enrolled at Southern Illinois University.

The interview will take approximately 1 hour to complete. All your responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits. When the interview is transcribed it will be done so with your name at the top. However, within the document itself you will receive a pseudonym. You may choose to have your interview recorded anonymously.

Questions about this study can be directed to me or to my supervising professor, Dr Kim Miller, Associate Professor Health Education and Recreation, 618-453-2777, kmiller@siu.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Denise Demers
217-343-4332
ddemers@siu.edu

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Research Development and Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
Appendix D

Consent to Participate in Research

I ___________________________, agree to participate in this research project conducted by Denise Demers, Doctoral student, Health Education and Recreation Department, SIUC.

I understand the purpose of this study is to gain my personal insights into how mothers of nontraditional age (25-64 years of age) in graduate school balance the demands of both home and school simultaneously.

I understand my participation is strictly voluntary and that I may refuse to answer any question without penalty. I have also been informed that my participation will last approximately 1 hour.

I understand that my responses to the questions will be audio recorded, and that these files will be transcribed/stored for three years on a flash drive and locked in a file cabinet. Participation in this research project is part of a dissertation that will be completed in the spring of 2014. Afterward, these files will be destroyed.

I understand questions or concerns about this study are to be directed to Denise Demers, 217-343-4332, ddemers@siu.edu or her advisor, Dr Kim Miller, Associate Professor Health Education and Recreation, 618-453-2777, kmiller@siu.edu.

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research project and know my responses will be audio recorded. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers.

“I agree _____ I disagree _____ to have my responses recorded on audio file.”

“I agree_____ I disagree ____ that Denise Demers may quote me in her paper”

“I agree_____ I disagree ____ that Denise Demers may keep the audio files until her Dissertation is complete (~Spring 2014)”

Participant signature and date

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
Appendix E

E-MAIL SOLICITATION REQUEST

From: Denise Demers

Subject: Research Request

Dear Participant:

I am a Doctoral student in the Department of Health Education and Recreation at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Your e-mail address was obtained from the institutional research on SIUC campus. A blind copy format was used so that the list of recipients will not appear in the header.

The purpose of my research project is to find out how a nontraditional aged mother in graduate school balances the demands of home and school simultaneously.

The purpose of your participation in my research project will be to access experiences from students fit the criteria of being a nontraditional aged mother (25-64) with children in the home.

The interview will take approximately 1 hour to complete. All responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Denise Demers
217-343-4332
ddemers@siu.edu

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
Appendix F

Focus Group Protocol:

Thank you for coming today to this focus group about non traditional aged mothers enrolled as a graduate student in higher education. As each of you already know, **I am doing research as part of my degree requirements at Southern Illinois University Carbondale** for my doctoral dissertation. This focus group will take approximately 90 minutes. Your participation is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question without penalty. All responses will be confidential. As such, I ask that each of you remember the confidentiality and loyalty you give to one another at the end of this focus group. This focus group will be audio recorded then transcribed. The files will be kept on a flash drive in a locked cabinet.

1. During this time where you are a mother and a graduate student, what do you do for YOU? Maybe this is something little, unexplainable to others.
   (Probing questions)
   a. Self care
   b. How do you turn everything off?
   c. Is self-care even on your radar?
   d. How would you define health or self-care?
   e. How do you cope with the stress?

   If we have time….

2. How has YOUR mother influenced you? (In graduate school as a student, as a mother, the way you juggle tasks, or cope with stress.) Does the way she performed her role as a mother influence how you perform your role as a mother….and while you are a student also? How does this affect you?
VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Denise Demers
denise_demers@hotmail.com

Southern Utah University
Bachelor of Science, Physical Education, June 1990

Brigham Young University
Master of Science in Exercise Science, Health & Fitness Promotion, April 1996

Special Honors and Awards:
Graduate Deans Fellowship, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2010-2012

Dissertation Title:
BACK TO SCHOOL: THE BALANCING ACT GRADUATE STUDENT MOTHERS PLAY BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

Major Professor: Kim Miller

Publications:

