

**Understanding the Experiences of Student Parents in Master's
Counseling Graduate Programs**

by

Hillary P. Ellerman

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Approved by

Nicholas Derzis, Chair, Associate Clinical Professor of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and
Counseling

Rebecca Curtis, Associate Professor of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling

Malti Tuttle, Assistant Professor of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling

Heather Delgado, Assistant Professor of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the experiences that student parents have in master's counseling graduate programs and fill the gap of student parent research that exists (Trepal et al., 2014). Participants of this study included six student parents from the southern region of the United States enrolled in CACREP accredited master's counseling programs. The data collected from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the social role theory to understand how gender roles impact the experiences of student parents. Results from this study provide implications for counselor education programs and faculty to provide support to this student population are discussed as well as recommendations for future research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Student parents in graduate programs are a population that are often overlooked by research and underserved by institutions. Graduate student parents are individuals enrolled in a graduate program at an institution who are also responsible for children whether biological, step, or adopted (Theisen et al., 2017). These students in a counselor education program offer a unique perspective on what life is like as a parent and as an aspiring educator and counselor. This population faces challenges such as juggling a rigorous academic workload, parenting demands, and personal and professional growth.

Graduate students' struggles include but are not limited to relationships with advisors, financial insecurity, career uncertainty, and strict timelines (Springer et al., 2009). On top of assignments, major projects, and internships, graduate students feel pressured to demonstrate their commitments and competencies to their professors and advisors (Brus, 2006). While it seems that these stressors are consuming enough, student parents also integrate their student responsibilities with their parenting responsibilities. Concerns that parents face include the emotional, financial, educational, and physical needs of the children such as childcare and school schedules (Ruppanner, 2018). Due to these concerns, graduate student parents may feel unable to share in the same experiences as their graduate student peers and ultimately feel disconnected personally and professionally (Khadjooi et al., 2012). In many cases, these students are not provided support in the home or by the institution thus creating extra stress on the student

(Yusufov et al., 2019). This can result in mental health concerns and can also provide insight into specific issues graduate students face.

Addressing the needs of the graduate student parents is reflected in the ACA code of ethics through promoting acceptance, educating students on multicultural competencies, and advocating for oppressed populations (Kooyman, et al., 2010). According to the American Counseling Association's (2014) code of ethics, code F.11.b states that counselor educators are to recognize and value diverse cultures and abilities of their students as well as provide accommodations and support to these students in their programs. Therefore it is important for counselor educators to be aware of these students in their classrooms so that they are better able to serve and support the student parent population.

There is a wealth of research examining the experiences of mothers in counseling doctoral programs (Appling, 2015; Haynes et al., 2012; Holm et al., 2015; Trepal et al., 2014); however, there is a gap in the literature when considering master's level student parents. There is also little research on understanding fathers' experiences as a graduate student parent in a counseling program. Research that has been conducted on doctoral student mothers (Appling, 2015; Holm et al., 2015; Trepal et al., 2014), point out the importance of "further research on other students who are parents (e.g., doctoral students who are fathers, master's-level students) are also needed to help educators best understand the experiences and needs" (Trepal et al., 2014, p. 44) of the student parent population. It is important that research is conducted on diverse student parents to help educators best understand the needs and experiences of the culturally diverse student parent population (Trepal et al., 2014) to promote acceptance of student parents in the classroom leading to improved attrition rates.

In order to fill this gap, this study sought to explore and understand the phenomenon of student parents in a master's counseling graduate program. For the purpose of this study, counseling graduate programs included CACREP accredited master's programs in school counseling, rehabilitation counseling, and clinical mental health counseling in the southern region of the United States. A phenomenological design was employed to describe the lived experiences of participants who have lived similar phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this phenomenological study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 participants, when saturation was met (Guest et al., 2020). Participants included individuals who identified as student parents who were enrolled in a CACREP accredited master's counseling graduate program. The interview protocol included questions about participants' experiences as a student parent in their programs as well as how they felt supported and how they are balancing their roles as a student and parent. The researcher practiced reflexivity throughout this research process using journaling and consulted with colleagues to ensure awareness of my bias and its impact on the study. Self-reflective journaling is a reflexive strategy where a researcher writes about their position, thoughts, and feelings associated with the topic and processes of the research study (Ortlipp, 2008). Reflective journaling enabled the researcher to acknowledge her personal experiences, feelings, and opinions through the research design, data collection, and analysis phase without it being silenced or interfering with the participants' experiences (Ortlipp, 2008). During the analysis phase, an auditor was utilized to ensure the experiences reported were those truly reflected and emphasized by the participants.

When conducting this type of data analysis, it is important to note the researcher's paradigm and worldview. The researcher conducts research from a social constructivist

perspective which frames the understanding of participants and their experiences. Social constructivism, founded by Lev Vygotsky, proposes that learning and knowledge is based on social interactions and experiences with the culture around an individual (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Therefore, when conducting this study, the researcher allowed the participants to teach what life was like being a student parent in a master's level counseling program and how their social interactions impacted their experiences. The researcher's goal was to allow the participants to communicate and illustrate their experiences through the interviews so that it can then be communicated the meaning they have about their world to others (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is important to note that the deductive analysis of the study will utilize a social role theory framework. Having utilized this framework, the researcher attempted to capture how gender role stereotypes have impacted the experiences of the student parents. The researcher's position in this research is participant and observer, conducting insider work and outsider work (Bettez, 2015). This means that because researcher identified as a student parent in a counseling graduate program similar to the participants, the researcher was able to engage in deeper dialogue during the interview process. The researcher recognized similar experiences but also learned from new experiences that the participants had shared. As a student parent in a counseling graduate program it is nearly impossible to completely remove myself from this study. Therefore, monitoring the researcher's view and experiences and keeping them separate from those of my participants through the use of journaling is important.

The motivational factors for this research are personal and professional. The researcher's personal experience as a student parent in a counseling graduate program and the limited research and support of this population has empowered me to be an advocate for graduate

student parents. The other motivational factor for this study is the counselor education profession. The enhancement of our understanding of student parents in counseling graduate programs will allow counselor educators to better mediate barriers, foster meaningful mentorships, and advocate for greater systemic change in academia (Holm et al., 2015). “It is important that institutions see the importance of providing adequate mentoring and support for *all parents* as they pursue their graduate studies” (Springer et al., 2009, p. 454).

Theoretical Framework

Gender roles are demonstrated and encouraged at a young age in many homes. Children observe women carrying out household duties more often than their counterparts (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Even the toys children play with and the books they read portray specific gender roles and traits for each gender (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Diekman & Murnen, 2004). The differences in gender are also enhanced in educational settings when instructors separate the class by “boys” and “girls” (Eliot, 2011). It is clear that gender roles are prominent in many children’s lives. These gender roles continue into adulthood and will be explored further.

While the traditional division of labor amongst genders has declined, it is apparent that they exist within society (Wood & Eagly, 2012). Women still assume the majority of household and caretaking responsibilities while engaged in the paid labor force (Yavorsky et al., 2015), while men still occupy the majority of leadership driven occupations (Hegewich et al., 2010). In addition, gender-based stereotypes are reinforced by socialization of expected traits and behaviors that men and women are traditionally associated with based on their sex (Wood & Eagly, 2012). These traits and behaviors include submissiveness, emotional connectedness, and domestic abilities for women and leadership, strength, and decision-making skills for men

(Lorenzi-Cioldi & Kulich, 2015). Turner and Norwood (2013) conducted a study to understand how mothers navigate motherhood in the workplace. They found that in order to maintain a professional identity, mothers practiced *bounded and unbounded motherhood*, meaning in some instances, women restrained themselves from maternal practices such as breastfeeding at the workplace in order to maintain a professional identity. Some women experienced embarrassment when their bodies or practices violated the boundaries of professionalism at the workplace (Turner & Norwood, 2013).

Societal pressures of gender roles can impact the mental health of women and men (Christ, 2019). The pressure that men may feel to exhibit strength and dominance can result in high rates of aggression or suppressed emotions. The pressure that women may feel to be nurturing and feminine could lead to instances of domestic violence, sexual abuse, anxiety or depressive disorders (Christ, 2019). Social role theory highlights the division of labor due to gender role beliefs which then transfer to socialization processes in society (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Eagly and Wood (2012) suppose that these beliefs are formed by hormonal changes, others' expectations, and self-standards. Gender roles, in turn, influence an individual's self-concept, identities, and behaviors. As long as individuals feel that they align with their corresponding gender role, they are more likely to have increased self-esteem and positive emotions. However, when their occupations or life situations challenge the traditional gender roles, individuals are more likely to have a decreased self-esteem and alter their behavior to align more with societal standards (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This phenomenon is known as a gender role violation (Burgess, 2013). This impact of gender role stereotypes applies to various institutions and structures within society that are gendered and have specific inferences for men

and women (Beckwith, 2005), like higher education. For example, Fox (2004) discusses how women doctoral students are often not as supported as their male counterparts by their advisors and overall feel less respect from others in their doctoral programs. Other areas of gender inequity include research funding, financial support, and leadership responsibilities (Sari et al., 2015). It is important to understand gender roles and how they impact individuals who adhere and oppose the gender role norms so that we do not place assumptions or stereotypes on gendered populations. Having this understanding can also better inform institutions and faculty of how to accommodate students who may not fit the mold of a particular gender, especially when it comes to parental responsibilities, as well as how to support them in and outside of the classroom. Therefore, social role theory is the lens I will use to understand the role that gender plays in the life of a student parent and when analyzing the data collected for this study.

Parenting

Parenting has been defined as the interactions among multiple layers in a system including individual, interpersonal, societal, and cultural factors between an adult and a child (Belsky, 1984). It is often characterized in terms of styles. These styles were originally identified by Baumrind (1971) after her research observing children and parental interactions for 3 months. Her model of parenting styles originally included authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles (Baumrind, 1971). Maccoby and Martin (1983) expounded on Baumrind's idea of permissive parenting to include a fourth style, rejecting-neglecting parenting. Authoritarian parenting is rigid and is dedicated to abiding by a set of rules created by a higher authority (Baumrind, 1971). Oppositely, the permissive parenting is nonpunitive and is more collaborative with the parent representing as a resource to the child. The rejecting-neglecting parenting is

absent from rule setting or collaboration and demonstrates little involvement (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Authoritative parenting attempts direction of the child in a rational and somewhat collaborative manner (Baumrind, 1971). Baumrind (1971) suggests that authoritative parenting is most likely to facilitate a child's development of competency, responsibility, and independent behavior. This may be because the authoritative approach to parenting attempts to direct the child in a rational and somewhat collaborative manner (Baumrind, 1971). Regardless of parenting style, the balance of authority and warmth is considered ideal and, in some studies, has been shown to be the "best" way to parent (Niarki & Rahimi, 2012). This idea of the "best" parenting style can then negatively impact student parents when trying to meet societal expectations of this ideal. Styles are sometimes used as a way to determine "good parenting" from "bad parenting". Several studies have been conducted to determine how "good parenting" is defined (Eve et al., 2014; Pedersen, 2011; Smith, 2010). These ideals of being a good parent and practicing authoritative parenting can bombard the minds of many parents. In fact, publications critiquing motherhood and maternal ideology can contribute to feelings of isolation and anxiety (Henderson et al., 2016). A study conducted to understand the relationship between parenting and maternal mental health found a link between intensive mothering practices and increased stress and depression (Rizzo et al., 2013).

Societal ideas of parenting can push men and women into intense thoughts and behaviors as parents. For example, even though women are now encouraged to join the workforce, they are still often seen as the main caretaker of children and are expected to uphold the same emotional and physical attention to them (Guendouzi, 2006). This leads to "intensive mothering" where the mother is expected to put her child's needs above her own (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Cultural

messages due to gender-based stereotypes communicate the expectation that women's first priority should be caring for her family instead of personal or career aspirations (Coogan & Chen, 2007). Elliot, Powell, and Brenton (2013) conducted a study by interviewing 16 low-income, Black single mothers that focused on intensive mothering, gender, class, and race and how these aspects impacted their parenting. The results indicated that structural barriers, absence of social supports, and institutional advocacy, where the mothers fight for their own rights and the welfare of their children, all impact their ability to parent. Aligning with the implications of social role theory, many of the participants sacrificed their education and careers to provide for their children and uphold societal pressures of being a "perfect mother" (Elliott et al., 2013). This research provided insight into the experiences of Black, single mothers and the sacrifices they made for their families; however, the participants utilized for this study were limited to those who were currently parenting teenage children and did not address specifically the school and family life balance that this current study seeks to find.

Fathers remain seen as the bread-winner in the family and come second to mothers in regards to routine caretaking (Arendell, 2000; Fagan, 2016) despite their desires to hold a larger role and be emotionally invested in their children and their care (Bulanda, 2004; Dermott & Miller, 2015). Locke and Yarwood (2017) interviewed participants who were fathers in order to understand how societal discourses impacted the discourses in parenting and their careers. Some participants stated that with their careers or occupations, there were no options to take more time off to play a bigger role in caring for their children. Others discussed how masculinity is tied to working status and how leaving work for childcare responsibilities can damage that identity. The researchers found that fathers who were the primary caretakers took on this role for various

reasons despite societal gendered expectations of parenting. Fathers in the study discussed how societal pressures of being the “breadwinner” and having a masculine identity sometimes prevented them from being the caretakers they wished to be for their families (Locke & Yarwood, 2017).

These societal ideologies of parenthood can add stress to both mother and fathers. It can also hinder them from deciding to pursue a career or educational degree. Parents who take on careers or academic endeavors struggle with societal pressures to be the best parents. For example, mothers may experience a phenomenon known as “mom guilt”. Mom guilt is defined as feelings of inadequacy due to spending more time at or doing work than with one’s children (Zimmerman et al., 2008). These experiences have been documented in studies featuring moms in academic roles (Gilbert, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2008). However, despite the societal ideologies and demands of parenthood, some parents pursue graduate degrees.

Graduate Student Parents

Student parents make up a silent population in research and one that many do not know prominently exist. During the 2015–2016 academic year, it is estimated that nearly 3.8 million parents were pursuing a college degree (Cruse et al., 2019). Many of these students are pursuing graduate degrees in their specific fields of study and continue to manage the responsibilities of parenting dependent children (Theisen et al., 2018). Although an under-researched population, they account for a considerable amount of student populations across institutions. The U.S. Department of Education (2015) found that nearly 8% of students had three or more children. It is estimated that 33% of master’s level students and 25% of doctoral students in the United States are parents (Mason & Frash, 2007; Springer et al., 2009).

As a parent, the responsibilities can seem endless with scheduling doctor's appointments, helping with homework, clothes shopping, ensuring a healthy diet and keeping a sleep routine. While being a full-time parent is a demanding job, many students still take on a full course load in their programs which can range from 9-15 credit hours a semester (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). In fact, a total of 19.6% of graduate students with children were enrolled as full time students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Unfortunately, past research suggests that having children is a factor associated with attrition and success rates, specifically for female graduate students (Green, 2015; Mason et al., 2009). Springer et al. (2009) suggest that the archetype of being an ideal academic and parent is incompatible and, for women, can often lead to struggles and failure. Even still, the drive for student parents to seek out graduate degrees fuels them to achieve their career goals while allowing them some flexibility in scheduling time with family (Trepal et al., 2014).

Prikhidko and Haynes (2018) conducted a study to explore the challenges that graduate student mothers faced while balancing school and parenting responsibilities. They interviewed eight graduate student mothers who were attending research-intensive universities and found four themes that conceptualized how graduate student mothers balanced academia and motherhood: experiencing cognitive dissonance, feelings of guilt, the use of compartmentalization, and coping with perfectionism. Through these themes, the researchers felt that choosing between the attitudes and behaviors of one role over the other created enhanced discomfort. However, participants stated that positive appraisal helped them to overcome the challenges of balancing both roles (Prikhidko & Haynes, 2018). Graduate student mothers are not the only ones challenged in these dual roles. Dillon (2012) discusses his experiences as a

graduate student parent in his autoethnography. Many of his challenges stemmed from being the provider of the family and living up to the expectations of his superiors. Some student parents have to prioritize their roles to navigate the challenges of multiple roles. Sallee (2015) conducted a study to discover ways in which graduate student parents navigated their various responsibilities in the academic, professional, and familial domains. She interviewed 18 participants, 12 women and 6 men, from 10 different universities in the United States. The interviews focused on the benefits and challenges parents felt while pursuing a graduate degree. She found that time management, support from colleagues and faculty, strategic professional decisions, and prioritizing roles contributed to student parents' ability to manage the demands of multiple roles. Sallee (2015) noted that the participants reported that regardless of how their time was spent, their roles as parents were always put ahead of their other roles as students and employees. While Sallee's research highlights the purpose of the current study, it does not specifically look at the experiences of graduate students in counseling graduate programs which may provide a different perspective than those in other fields of study.

Counseling Graduate Students

The rigor and requirements of a counseling graduate program can be overwhelming for many students (Clarke, 2018). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs ([CACREP], 2016) accredited institutions require a minimum of 60 semester credit hours for all entry-level counseling programs. The master's level programs focus on eight core areas in their curriculum: professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, counseling and helping relationships, group counseling and group work, assessment and testing, and

research and program evaluation. The doctoral program curriculum focuses on five pillars: counseling practice, supervision, teaching, leadership and advocacy, and scholarship and research. During these programs, students are required to complete 100 supervised practicum hours and 600 supervised internship hours in a clinical setting. Throughout the student's journey in the program, they are evaluated by instructors and supervisors to ensure minimum competencies and a professional disposition for the field (CACREP, 2016).

The nature of clinical work alone can create stress that could affect a student's academic and personal life (Fuenfahausen & Cashwell, 2013). As novice clinicians, students may experience anxiety and increased stress to achieve minimum standards required during clinical practice. Helping professions alone are associated with stress and an increased risk of compassion fatigue (Stebnicki, 2007), the added stress of course work could take a toll on some students. In fact, research shows that students who are enrolled in graduate programs containing a clinical human service component report more stress than those who are in purely academic fields (Dziegliewski et al., 2004; Polson & Nida, 1998). A study conducted by Jungbluth, MacFarlane, Veach, and LeRoy (2011) investigated sources of stress and anxiety experienced by genetic counseling graduate students, specifically in their first and second years. The researchers surveyed 225 participants using a 112 item survey that included demographic information, a report of day-to-day activities, frequency and intensity of 24 potential sources of stress, other self-report measures, and an opportunity for participants to elaborate on their experiences with stress. The participants reported high levels of stress and anxiety. Many stated that academic workload and time management in the program were the most challenging aspects. A way to combat stress is through the use of self-care. Self-care, a major focus in counseling coursework,

is emphasized to counselors in training to manage the stress and demands of counselor education programs (Nelson et al., 2018; Newsome et al., 2012). Self-care is showing care and concern towards oneself through activities such as mindfulness and exercise (Nelson et al., 2018). Self-care can be time consuming and dependent upon the availability of time an individual has to themselves, however can be beneficial if utilized during stressful academic times. Despite the stress and anxiety participants felt in the previous study, the participants reported rewarding aspects of the program which included self-growth, career affirmation, and increased competence and confidence in the field (Jungbluth et al., 2011). This study looks at the overall experiences of counseling graduate students; however, it does not take into account parental responsibilities that some students may have to manage while completing their programs.

Academic rigor is not the only factor that can impact a counseling graduate student's well-being. Students enrolled in a counseling graduate program engage in clinical practice at some point during their degree programs. Although this practice is meant to help aide in education and experience for the counselor in training, some experiences can be traumatic and life changing for students. Lu, Zhou, and Pillay (2017) conducted a study to explore the clinical training of doctoral students in a counseling graduate program and their experiences with vicarious trauma. They conducted semi-structured interviews with eight doctoral students, four men and four women. The researchers found three themes during their clinical training experiences: immediate reactions, information processing, and post-exposure development. When considering the students' immediate reactions, they experienced adverse emotional effects and decreased self-efficacy. These students also had difficulty understanding and processing clients' traumatic experiences outside of provided supervision. Despite these negative effects,

students also reported rewarding feelings and positive career development after the traumatic exposure in clinical practice. The researchers also found that there was an increased motivation for learning in the area of vicarious trauma amongst the students (Lu et al., 2017). It is evident that engaging in a counseling graduate program presents its challenges via academic rigor and clinical practice, however, students report that the rewarding feeling of self-growth and understanding outweigh the challenges presented (Baker, 2012; Lu et al., 2017).

Student Parents in Counseling Graduate Programs

Various research studies on doctoral student parents in counseling graduate programs exist within the literature (Appling, 2015; Brown & Watson, 2010; Haynes et al., 2012; Holm et al., 2015; Lynch, 2008; Trepal et al., 2014). Several researchers have found that women completing their doctoral degree felt that completing a graduate degree would bring a better life for their family, but it also brought about guilt for doing so because it took time away from their role as a parent (Brown & Watson, 2010; Haynes et al., 2012; Lynch, 2008; Trepal et al., 2014). Holm, Prosek, and Godwin Weisberger (2015) conducted a phenomenological study on counseling doctoral students becoming mothers during their programs. Three central themes emerged from the study: protective factors, evolving identity, and hindrances. Participants stated that in terms of protective factors, mentors were the most salient feature in their experiences; however, the lack of university policies to support graduate student parents created setbacks for some. The researchers found that personal values and self-determination created resiliency within the participants to overcome adversity and succeed in their programs. Despite this resiliency, some identities of student parents in counseling graduate programs can become stressful and conflicted. Another study conducted by Appling (2015) sought to understand the

lived experiences of African American doctoral student mothers in counselor education programs. She too found that her participants utilized resilience and adaptation to persevere in their counselor education programs. Participants also discussed work life balance challenges that included the intersectionality of gender, race, and motherhood. The previous research discussed takes doctoral mothers into consideration but does not address the experiences of student fathers or students enrolled in counseling master's programs.

Research conducted by Lynch (2008) supports the assumption that students who are also mothers are concerned about not being taken seriously in their role as an academic, also known as "mommy-tracking". The mommy track concept was originally defined as women who are taken less seriously than their male counterparts due to choosing to contribute more hours with their families instead of their work (Cummins, 2005). Mothers in academia hold the same concerns about their academic and professional identity when compared to their male counterparts (Sari et al., 2015). These concerns extend to professional opportunities, funding, and other resources. Studies have found that although some counseling programs and faculty are supportive of their students, participants still feel limited due to discrimination barriers and traditional gender roles (Lynch, 2008; Trepal et al., 2014).

Importance of the Study

Several studies stress the lack of research and importance of looking into the experiences of fathers in counseling graduate programs as well as master's level counseling student parents (Holm et al., 2015; Springer et al., 2009; Trepal et al., 2014). While they may share similar experiences with mothers who are also students, fathers may have some differing points of view or concerns related to the balance of roles. These differing experiences are supported by research

on fatherhood and work-life balance (Duckworth & Buzzanell, 2009; Williams et al., 2006). Sallee, Ward, and Wolf-Wendel (2016) analyzed two previous qualitative studies that focused on faculty parents: one of faculty mothers (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012) and the other on faculty fathers (Sallee, 2014). They wanted to examine any differences and similarities in the perspectives of how the participants navigated their roles as parents and faculty members (Sallee et al., 2016). The results indicated some important similarities and differences among the fathers and the mothers. Both genders mentioned the ability to have flexible schedules as faculty, but noted a sense of guilt whenever one responsibility was impacted by the other. However, while the mothers in the study felt more of a need to apologize when temporarily abandoning one responsibility for the other, fathers reported a sense of pride for being dedicated to the responsibilities. Both genders reported hesitancy to take advantage of family accommodations and policies at their workplace but for different reasons. Women reported that utilizing the policies could impact the way others viewed them and ultimately impact their careers. Many men in the study reflected on gender appropriate norms and the idea of masculinity coming into question when considering utilizing family-friendly policies. These factors can negatively influence fathers, when attempting to adjust work schedules or requesting leave for caregiving responsibilities, because they are viewed as a sign of a lack of commitment in the workforce (Williams et al., 2006).

The limited research on student fathers indicates important differences in the student parent experience from mothers in various college programs. Theisen et al. (2018) found that graduate student mothers placed more value on outside resources than graduate student fathers. The researchers suggest that this could be due to gender schemas, or socially constructed

expectations of the individual roles based on gender (Theisen et al., 2018). These gender schemas could place more pressure on mothers to find and utilize resources which can create stress. A study conducted by Price (2006) suggests that the impact of marriage and parenthood on student parents vary due to the married male graduate student population having increased and faster graduation rates. Another study also shows a difference among graduate student mothers and fathers in that men consider leaving graduate school due to job concerns while women consider leaving more so for family concerns or problems with advisors (Holmes & O'Connell, 2007). Dillon (2012) described a battle with his roles as a conflict between the demand the program requires and the desire to be a “supportive partner, involved parent, role model, and nurturing caregiver” (p. 292).

There is also very limited research on graduate student parents in master's programs (Sallee, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education (2018) reports that the number of completed master's degrees rose by 66 percent between the academic years of 2000–2001 to 2015–2016. This statistic indicates the need to know more about master's level students, as many of these students will fill the classrooms of various institutions. In addition, master's degree students have a higher percentage of students who are married and have dependents than doctoral students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). While many studies focus on doctoral students (Haynes et al., 2012; Holm et al., 2015; Treapal et al., 2014), it is important that we understand the experiences of master's level student parents in counseling graduate programs as well in order to provide counselor educators the tools and resources they need to help their students be successful.

It is important to understand how student parents manage both roles since it is linked to negative impacts on mental health. Student parents in the research conducted by Holm et al. (2015) reported unexpected mental health experiences that included exhaustion and postpartum depressive symptoms while completing their counseling doctoral programs. Landgraf (2015) completed a study on student parents to determine if role conflict affected the mental health and retention rate of student parents in higher education. The study found that a significant portion of student parents had high levels of depression and anxiety with 23% of participants scoring above 50 on the depression scale and 38% scoring above 36 on the anxiety scale. The results of this study indicate a need for further research to determine the academic and mental health needs of student parents in higher education. In addition, it is important to bring awareness to the struggles and needs of this population in order to effectively change policies that better address this population's concerns. Unfortunately, universities overlook graduate student parents when establishing family-friendly policies and resources (Springer et al., 2009). Student parents often do not feel supported in their programs or at their institutions. Khadjooi, Scott, & Jones (2012) reported that 89% of students in their study were unable to identify any support available to student parents at their institutions. There are many gaps in the literature concerning this population and these include exploring the experiences of student parents in master's counseling programs as well as exploring the experiences of student fathers. In order to address these gaps, a phenomenological study exploring the experiences of student parents in counseling graduate programs will be conducted.

Research Question

The primary focus and central question driving this study was: What are the experiences of student parents in master's counseling graduate programs? The purpose of this study was to help fill the gaps of varied student parents mentioned in literature (Holm et al., 2015; Sallee, 2015; Springer et al., 2009; Trepal et al., 2014). This study is similar to that of Trepal and colleagues (2014) in that it utilized a phenomenological approach to describe the essence of the experiences of student parents in a counseling graduate program.

Summary

It is evident that the student parent population is one that faces many challenges. Obtaining a counseling graduate degree adds another challenge on top of balancing the multiple roles. These students face societal pressures to be a good parent and uphold traditional gender roles while attempting to complete a graduate degree program. In order to better understand the impact of gender roles on student parents, this chapter highlighted the social role theory and the importance of understanding implicit gender role theories when investigating professional and parental roles. This chapter also reviewed existing literature regarding the various challenges that student parents encounter and ways to overcome these obstacles. However, there is a gap in the literature examining the specific challenges that student parents experience while in a master's counseling graduate program. There is also limited research on the experiences of fathers who are graduate students. This study will examine these experiences, specifically experiences related to being in a counseling graduate program while considering both fathers and mothers manage their multiple roles as students and parents.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Research Questions

The central question for this study was “What are the experiences of student parents in master’s counseling graduate programs?”

Research Methodology

Phenomenology

Qualitative research seeks to find meaning in the experiences of individuals in order to make sense of the world around us (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The core of this research includes sociological practice, interests, methods, and theory (Berg & Lune, 2012).

Phenomenology, an approach to qualitative research, describes lived experiences of individuals based on a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and is divided into two major variants: hermeneutic and existential (Schwandt, 2015). The hermeneutic variant focuses on collective features such as communication while existential focuses on describing the experience of everyday life internalized by individuals (Schwandt, 2015). More specifically, phenomenology looks to understand an issue by asking those who have lived the experience (Hopkins et al., 2017). The participants develop meaning from their experiences that are often socially and historically constructed, thus a social constructivist worldview as a researcher will be beneficial (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological inquiry focuses on the description of the participants’ experiences and achieving understanding through interpretation. The goal of phenomenological research is to elicit rich descriptions of the experiences of the participants in

the study (Adams & van Manen, 2017). These descriptions are based on perceptions, feelings, evaluations, and beliefs (Schwandt, 2015). For the purpose of this study, I utilized descriptive phenomenology focusing on the hermeneutic variant to synthesize meaning, possible psychological components, and descriptions provided by the participants of being a student parent in a counseling graduate program (Giorgi, 2009).

It is important to address my paradigmatic view when conducting qualitative research. Paradigms are “assumptions that are inherently coherent about the nature of reality and the researcher’s role in constructing it that is agreed upon by a community of scholars” (Creamer, 2018, p. 43). My epistemological view is empiricist meaning that I believe knowledge comes from experience (Creamer, 2018). Specifically, the researcher believes that it is subjective and that there are multiple truths and realities of a phenomenon. Using this paradigm provides a depth to understanding the phenomenon of student parents in counseling graduate programs and gives voice to participants. As a student parent, it was important for the researcher to highlight the individual experiences of the participants to show the shed light on the multiple realities that student parents face in a counseling graduate program.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, social role theory functions as the conceptual framework to understand how society views gender roles and behaviors. Social role theory proposes that shared gender stereotypes develop due to the division of labor amongst genders that characterize a society (Eagly, 1987). For example, in western societies men occupy higher power positions while women take on a nurturing role in the household. Stereotypes and pressures applied by society can elicit anxiety and depression (Christ, 2019) in individuals who violate gender norms. Social

role theory helped to guide interview question formation as well as informed the understanding of data analysis. Integrating this theory will allow me to see the challenges that the student parents may face while occupying gender roles.

Rationale

Phenomenology asks the question, “what is it like” (Giorgi, 2009). That is what the purpose of this research entails, what it is like for student parents in a counseling graduate program. This approach allowed me to look at a few students’ experiences and provide rich data to help the audience understand the essence of their experiences. Interviews allow for participants to elaborate on specific topics that they would otherwise not be able to do in a survey. This provides more depth to the study.

Participants

Procedures. The recruitment process for this study was criterion-based sampling. One method used was through the use of email. I composed an email with the details of my study and sent it to the department heads and CACREP liaisons of universities with master’s level counseling programs in the southern region of the United States. Another method to recruit participants was by snowballing the information of the study to known faculty and people who were current students. I asked current faculty members if they are aware of any student parents in their graduate courses that may be interested in sharing their experiences with me for research purposes. I sent the faculty members the same email I sent to department heads and CACREP liaisons so that they could then send it to students who may be interested in participating.

Once the participants contacted me via email, the researcher sent out access to the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) through Qualtrics by emailing the participants the

direct url link. The number of participants for this study were informed based on the data, meaning that data collection continued until saturation had been met. Saturation refers to a point in data collection where no additional data collected contain properties to justify new categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For the purpose of this study, 6-10 participants served as a guide until saturation was reached. This range was determined after reviewing empirical research on saturation in qualitative studies. Morgan et al. (2002) found that the first five to six interviews produced in studies contained most of the new information needed in a dataset. Galvin (2015) conducted a meta-analysis reviewing 54 qualitative studies. He found that identifying a thematic concept among six individuals is greater than 99% of the larger study population. Similarly, Guest et al. (2006) found that out of 60 interviews, 70% of the themes identified appeared within the first six interviews, 92% within the first 12. For the current study, participants included students who were currently enrolled in a master's level CACREP-accredited counseling graduate program. Participants were included if they were responsible for children ranging from infancy to 19 years of age. This criteria was used to capture the experience of being responsible for children while enrolled in the academic program. The participants selected for the study represented a variety of backgrounds and living situations (i.e., race, age, number of children, socioeconomic status, relationship status, and sexual orientation) to offer as many experiences as possible.

Institutional review board (IRB) process. The institutional review board is a group of scholarly members whose focus is to protect human subjects in research (Hays & Singh, 2012). The board reviews research of potential risks or harm that may come against participants. Due to this research focusing on the experiences of human subjects, it is pertinent that the study gained

approval from the IRB. An application explaining this study was submitted for approval to the board and was approved by the Auburn University IRB.

Data Collection

The data collection process began with a questionnaire that collected participants' demographic information using the Qualtrics platform. This information gathered reflected cultural backgrounds and factors that impact student parents' experiences. For example, the questions included how many dependents the student parent was responsible for and their current marital status. Before beginning data collection through interviews, the participants were provided with an informed consent form of the study through email (see Appendix B). Informed consent informs the participants of the study as well as any potential risks or benefits of completing the study (American Counseling Association, 2014). Once informed consent was gained from the participants, the data was generated through face-to-face interviews that lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted using the video streaming software Zoom due to individuals living a good distance away from the interviewer and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the interviews the researcher asked the participants to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity and respect their confidentiality during the research process. The interviews were a semi-structured format consisting of 8 questions. These questions were created with social role theory concepts in mind. For instance, one interview question was "How has each of the roles impacted the other?". This question would shed light into how the participants expectation of being a parent and being a student is actually impacted by the other role which would ultimately be a gender role violation for either gender. This was also included in the question: "What challenges have you experienced as a student parent in your counseling

graduate program?”. Using a semi-structured format allows the interviewer to ask follow up questions and follow the direction of the conversation the participant provides while still addressing the content needed for the study which results in rich and textured data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participants all received the same 8 questions (see Appendix C) in order to maintain consistency in the data collection process.

Data Analysis

After the individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, recordings were then transcribed. Transcribing provided another opportunity for the researcher to hear the interviews and listen for any nuances missed during the original interview. Once transcribed, the interviews were examined using an interpretive, inductive approach. Examination and coding began within each individual interview. The researcher utilized in-vivo coding when analyzing the data. In-vivo coding refers to using the participants’ language in order to form codes and themes (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher then conducted a cross-case analysis. The data then was evaluated using deductive analysis using social role theory. Social role theory provided insight into how gender role stereotypes have impacted the participants’ identities as student parents. A codebook was created using both forms of analysis and was used to develop warrants and assumptions about the phenomenon (Schwandt, 2015). The researcher also utilized source triangulation to analyze the data. This refers to finding themes amongst various data collection methods (Patton, 2002). For the purpose of this study, interviews, self-studies, and my reflective journaling were utilized to find themes in the data. The research also used an auditor to review the codebook and themes found throughout the data to ensure the data truly reflected the experiences of the participants and to also ensure that researcher bias was not included. The

researcher chosen for this study was one that had experience with qualitative research. This auditor was also chosen specifically because she was not a student parent. The researcher made this decision in order to prevent bias and to recognize when the researcher misinterpreted the experiences of the participants due to her own student parent experiences.

Trustworthy Data

At its origin, validity is defined as the degree to which a test measures what it proposes to measure (Shepard, 1993). However, because qualitative research is more exploratory and based on the experiences of individuals, validity should be considered more of a way to prevent researcher bias (Johnson, 1997). Researcher bias refers to the researcher consciously or unconsciously finding what they want in the data and reporting those results (Johnson, 1997). Validity in qualitative research is used to prevent researcher bias through a process of checking the authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data generated by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Johnson, 1997). Reflexivity is a strategy utilized in this study to help increase the validity. Reflexivity involves critical self-reflection of the researcher to bring awareness to potential biases and predispositions that may affect the research process and results (Johnson, 1997). Reflective thinking and journaling, forms of reflexivity, will help to increase trustworthiness and confidence in data generation and interpretation (Ortlipp, 2008). For the purpose of this research, source triangulation was utilized to add to the validity of the study. Source triangulation is a method to check the quality of the interpretation through the use of multiple data sources (Schwandt, 2015). By comparing the data collected, the researcher's personal experience during the process, and reviewing past literature on student parents, the validity of the study was strengthened and analysis of the data was supported.

Research lens. During this study the researcher identified as a student parent in a counseling graduate program. The researcher self-identified as a heterosexual, White female. With this identity, she carried privilege that was continually reflected on and acknowledged throughout the process. The researcher's connection as a student parent in a counseling graduate program helped to provide understanding and empathy during the data collection phase. However, due to the close relation to the study, it was imperative to be aware of potential bias and truth so that it did not cloud the reality or truths of the participants. The researcher addressed this through reflexivity, or critical self-reflection (Schwandt, 2015).

Source triangulation. For this study, the researcher utilized source triangulation to build the trustworthiness of the research. Source triangulation is using multiple data collection methods and finding themes amongst the data (Patton, 2002). For this study data was collected through semi-structured interviews and through my reflective journal writing during the research process.

Reflective journaling and bracketing. The researcher kept a reflective journal throughout the research process to help ensure trustworthiness of the data and analysis. Reflective journaling allowed me to examine my personal assumptions, biases, and subjectivities (Ortlipp, 2008). This thought process is also referred to as "bracketing". Bracketing is the process of the researcher setting aside everyday existential assumptions in order to focus on the phenomenon being studied (Schwandt, 2015). Bracketing was important during the interview phase because I did not want my personal experience and vested interests (Fischer, 2009) in being a student parent to impair my ability to actively listen to my participants and respond to their experiences in the moment. Bracketing was also essential during the analysis phase. When

coding the interviews using in-vivo coding, my experiences and opinions on being a student parent in a counseling program should not speak for the experiences of the participants. Fischer (2009) warns that not utilizing bracketing during this process can prevent us from having new understandings of the experiences at hand. I wanted to provide a transparent view of my journey throughout the research process and to provide a trail to the audience to depict my thought processes and reasons for methodology.

Ethical Considerations

When beginning a study it is important that the researcher inform participants of the purpose of the study as well as any potential benefits or indirect harm that the participants may encounter. In order to prevent these potential ethical issues from occurring, it is imperative to formulate and disseminate an informed consent to all participants before the start of the study that include the rights and responsibilities of both the participants and the researcher. While informing the participants of the study, it was also important to bring awareness to their autonomy in the study and their ability to stop at any point in time in the study without repercussions. Another area of consideration was maintaining confidentiality with the participants. This was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, which are temporary fake names used to conceal the identity of the participant of a study (Lahman et al., 2015).

The power and privilege held as a researcher could have an impact on the participants of the study. In order to prevent participants from feeling exploited or deceived, the researcher built trust with the participants by being transparent about the purpose of the study as well as my role as the researcher. The researcher addressed her privilege with the participants at the beginning of

the study which allowed for an open dialogue to discuss my purpose and intentions, as well as gave the participants an opportunity to express any concerns about the researcher's role.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study that require notification. This study was not representative of all diverse cultures in the world due to the inability to reach all students in every counseling graduate program. Although it is criterion-based, the sampling is considered convenient because it only reflected the population within the researcher's reach. Therefore, the results are not to be generalizable to all living conditions and individuals. It also did not include all aspects of intersectionality that may impact the experiences of the student parents. The limited number of participants could also be considered a limitation. However, the purpose of phenomenological research is to uncover the presence of the phenomenon, therefore the number of participants is not to depict a representative sample as it would in a quantitative research study (Englander, 2012). Due to the nature of data collection, the information gathered could be considered filtered due to the presence of the researcher or the setting of the interview. Although a portion of the analysis may be helpful for some, the study only reflected students who are currently enrolled in a counseling graduate program and who are currently considered a student parent. This means that other graduate programs may require more or less from its students, impacting the experiences they may have differently than from those of the participants of this study. This phenomenological study reflects only the interpretation of the researcher and only represents one truth. Future research could benefit from looking at differing experiences of parents who have biological children versus parents who may have step-children or adopted children or the experiences of student parents with different family structures. This could also

include looking at specific ages of the children and how age may impact parental demands. The external demands required of parents of adopted or step-children may bring about a different phenomenon in their roles. Further research into outside factors, such as intimate relationships or family support, could provide a deeper understanding into how graduate student parents manage their roles.

Summary

This chapter discussed the method and research lens used to investigate the experiences of student parents in master's counseling graduate programs. Criteria for participants to be included in the research were reviewed as well as steps taken to ensure confidentiality. Data will be collected using a demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journaling. Considerations of validity, researcher bias, and limitations of the study were examined.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Demographics

This study included six master's level counseling students who identified as student parents. These students all attended CACREP-accredited programs within the southern region of the United States. Five of the six participants identified as female and one participant identified as male. All participants identified as heterosexual. Various races were represented by the participant population. The following is a brief description of each participant, giving general information including number of children, age(s) of children, program of study, current year in program, and marital status.

Zoey is a student parent in a clinical mental health master's program. She is a single mom to an 18-month-old little boy. She lives with her parents and brother while the child's father lives away but is able to come and help out on the weekends. She is finishing up her third year in her program and is currently engaging in the internship experience.

Jane is a student parent in a master's school counseling program. She began her academic career in criminal justice but found a passion for counseling students and changed career paths. Jane identifies as being married and has two children, a four-year-old and an 18-month-old.

Elizabeth is a student parent in a clinical mental health master's program. She identified as a single mom with 2 children, an eleven-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter. At the time of the interview, Elizabeth was considered a part-time student and was engaging in the internship portion of the program.

Catherine is a student parent in a master’s rehabilitation counseling program and at the time of the interview was due to graduate in May. She identified as being married and having a three-year-old daughter.

Beth is a student parent in a clinical mental health master’s counseling program. At the time of the interview she was in her final year and was engaging in the internship experience. Beth identified as a single mom of two sons who were 16 and 17 years old.

Harvey is a student parent in a master’s marriage and family therapy program. He was in his fourth year at the time of the interview and was about to begin his internship portion of the program. Harvey identified as being married and having a two-year-old son.

Table 1

Participants’ General Information

Pseudonym	Name of Program	Year in Program	Marital Status	Number of Kids	Age of Kids
Zoey	Clinical Mental Health	3rd	Single	1	18 months
Jane	School Counseling	3rd	Married	2	4, 18 months
Elizabeth	Clinical Mental Health	2nd	Single	2	11, 8
Catherine	Rehabilitation Counseling	3rd	Married	1	3
Beth	Clinical Mental Health	3rd	Single	2	16, 17
Harvey	Marriage and Family Therapy	4th	Married	1	2

Themes

During the data analysis phase, five overarching themes emerged. These themes were constructed using a deductive analysis approach utilizing the social role theory, in-vivo coding, and triangulation across semi-structured interviews, self-studies, and my reflective journaling. The researcher and external auditor collaborated to ensure the themes reflected the meaning of the experiences the participants shared. The five themes that emerged from the data are discussed and displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes Found in The Data

Themes	Subthemes
Resources in Managing Student Parent Roles	Family support, program support, institutional support, self-support
Thoughts and Feelings Associated with Managing Roles	Overwhelmed, resentment, feeling unprofessional, exhaustion
Sacrifices in Managing Roles	Limited self-care, lost time with their children, shifting priorities
Changes in Identity	Lowered expectations, changes in parenting identity
Overall Experience Being a Student Parent	Difficult, being a role model, parenting comes first

Resources in Managing Student Parent Roles

The first theme that emerged focused on the resources that helped student parents in managing their multiple roles. Participants discussed various support systems that have provided or have been a resource that has contributed to their success in managing the student parent roles, a point stressed by Burgess (2013). The resources that the participants highlighted were family support, program support, institutional support, and self-support.

For many participants having family support played a significant role in managing the student parent life. The resources that these family members provided were both physical and emotional support. Elizabeth shared how her parents living close by has helped her with childcare:

I do have help. So my parents are local, and for instance, if I have a night class or I'm in my internship right now to where I have to work until late, you know. I don't get home until eight or nine o'clock, then my parents live close, like, so they help babysit the kids until I get home.

Jane also discussed family support as way to complete course work away from a chaotic family environment:

I also live maybe about 10 minutes from family. So they're very helpful if I need to just have a quiet place to escape to take a test or to study. So I mean sometimes I go to my sister's house and I'm there for like an hour or two just trying to find a quiet place to go.

Beth echoed physical family support that her children provided to her when managing her roles as a student parent:

They do chores, you know, they feed the dog and get the trash and there's certain things that are just delegated and we've worked well as a team, but they've got their part pretty much covered, that helps. I'm leaning more on that and adding a little bit.

Jane discusses how her family provides emotional support and keeps her motivated in the program:

It's them that keeps me going to have a lot of home support and that's the only way I could get through school. That's the only way I could do it. So without the backbone of my family and the support that I have here, I don't, I don't know if I would be doing as well as I'm doing.

Catherine explains how her husband provides support:

My husband is my rock when it comes to that because we actually don't have a lot of family resources or resources...And so, and he works full time and so do I. So we, we really depend on one another and like when one of us really needs the other, we just do it. We kind of step in.

It was clear when talking to the participants how invaluable family support, whether physical or emotional, is to this population.

Program support was also something that many participants contributed to their success in managing their roles as student parents. Three participants mentioned the support and resources that their fellow cohort members provided to them. For Beth, support from the cohort did not necessarily have to come from fellow student parents but just other students who understood the demands of the program and life responsibilities: "I have friends I talk to in the program who, we're sharing, I mean not all of them are parents, but just sharing the time crunch

and the responsibility and everything”. Catherine mentions how even though they are sparse, she has learned to lean on fellow student parents in her program: “There aren’t actually many, you know that have children. So it’s kind of like the ones that you do know, we can kind of feed off each other and sympathize”. Harvey also relates to the support that other student parents in his program provide:

One thing that’s really helpful is talking to other students who are parents and checking in and seeing how they’re doing...how are they managing or what are they doing, what tips and tricks...So that, that’s probably one of the biggest things is having connections with other people in the same type of season or dealing with the same issues that I’m dealing with.

Along with the support from cohort members, participants also discussed support that they received from the faculty in their programs. Zoey discussed the emotional support that she felt faculty provided:

My advisor and a couple of the other professors were very supportive and they were always...just like...check. They checked in on me a lot and asked if I was...how I was doing and things like that so

Catherine discusses the important role her advisor played in caring for her mental health:

I didn’t realize like, that was sort of the beginning of when my postpartum was getting really bad. And so um, I think...I mean...and especially if it’s your first kid like you don’t know, like you don’t know that’s not really normal to be feeling like you’re gonna lose your mind every 20 minutes so um I think like having the support, and I mean my advisor would talk to me a lot. She was very, I guess, like in tune with what was going on with

me. I would say like having somebody look out for you a little bit and pay attention to the signs.

For Elizabeth and Jane, the structure of the programs provided a substantial amount of support when managing their roles as student parents. Elizabeth appreciated the various class options by saying, “For a parent with children in the program or in any program for that matter, to have options for class time and options for flexibility....it’s definitely helpful when there’s multiple class options.” Jane’s experience as a distance education student also elicited a sense of appreciation for the program’s structure.

My whole program is online and the fact that I can work at my own pace. I mean there’s due dates, I do have to submit my assignments in on time by the due date but the fact that I can work on them at midnight or one or two o’clock in the morning, like that is really a saving grace because there’s no way that I could actually go and sit in a lecture class...So allowing me to do my class time on my own time, that is the biggest resource and biggest benefit.

Institutional resources were also discussed among participants as a form of support when managing the student parent roles. Beth mentioned that her school offered free counseling to any student if individuals had the availability to attend. Elizabeth and Zoey discussed how their schools’ sitter service has been a great resource to them. Zoey reflected on this experience by discussing the relief of knowing her son is taken care of and is close by while fulfilling academic responsibilities:

I don't worry about him because he goes to the daycare on campus and they're just like 10 other kids that are his age. So I know he's getting to play with a lot of people, and he's getting full attention like all day long.

Elizabeth too discussed the sitter service her school provided but also reflects on the challenges that she still faced even with this resource available:

The program, the babysitter service...what a beautiful resource...but I didn't get in the first time because they were getting their feet wet and there was a lot of applicants. I applied again and I got in; however there were parameters on the sitters, which I completely understand, the sitters could not drive. What I really needed was someone to pick up my kids from after-school, take them home, and feed them dinner.

The last system of resources that participants mentioned were self-resources. These are resources in which the student parents were able to provide to themselves through experience in order to manage the roles of being a student and a parent. Scheduling was a common resource among four participants. Elizabeth describes how scheduling has helped her:

I'm a scheduler like I'm very color coded, type A. It really does help to have everything scheduled...I wouldn't be able to otherwise, it would be even more chaotic if I didn't have some sort of system or a plan in place.

Jane reiterates this point by stating that, "keeping a schedule is definitely helpful". Harvey goes into detail about what scheduling looks like when managing the student parent roles saying, "Practically the way that I tend to balance is I try to be a parent as much as I can. While my son's awake and then I just stay up till midnight at least like every night." Beth discusses how scheduling and self-care have been important resources to her:

I do carve out smaller increments of time where I'm by myself. I'm doing something peaceful and relaxing and that helps me. Sleep is important and that's the part of self-care that I safeguard. That's my most important vital necessary part of my world.

Beth also has learned to lean on her sense of humor as a resource. "I can find the humor and everything, I can laugh at myself. Laugh myself out of a lot of my small stresses."

It is also important to note other resources that have been a source of support for a couple of participants that are not necessarily shared across participants. Catherine describes how her community has aided her:

But we do have a church family, um, you know they're not biological but we do depend on them some. Our next door neighbor, you know, I'll have to get off work early and then go over to get our child from daycare, and then, you know, ask her. She's like 70 something years old.

During Beth's interview, she mentions faith as a form of support in responding, "Prayer. I look to God for help."

The resources discussed by the student parents indicated the need of both physical and emotional supports from various systems in their lives. Several participants reiterated that without these supports, life as a student parent would be challenging or even impossible.

Thoughts and Feelings Associated with Managing Roles

The second theme that emerged from the data were thoughts and feelings associated with managing roles as students and parents. For some participants, being a student parent brought about negative feelings such as feeling overwhelmed, resentment, feeling unprofessional, and overall exhaustion at times. When reflecting on balancing course work, internship, and parenting,

Beth says, “I feel overwhelmed.” Catherine also connects to feeling overwhelmed when discussing childcare and navigating schedules with her husband, “You have to kind of be okay with that chaos and that change. So, you know, it’ll become overwhelming, but we’ve both adapted and learned to just be okay with things not necessarily falling in a perfect order.”

For Zoey, managing the student parent roles can be overwhelming and also can lead toward resentment of other students who are not sharing in the same experiences:

I think I’m like, sometimes less patient with people like as far as when they’re complaining about stuff. I’m just like, okay, my four-month-old was up every single hour last night and you’re complaining that you only got four hours of sleep because you were watching TV. Like you have a choice to do that. And like, I don’t know, yeah, there were times when I wouldn’t say anything, but it would just like irritate me because sometimes when people will say like ‘I’m a dog mom’ or something, I’m like ‘no you’re not! You can’t use the word mom like that.’

Keeping in mind social role theory, societal pressures of women to be submissive and sympathetic (Burgess, 2013) may have prevented Zoey and other mothers from openly expressing their frustrations about the stressors they are feeling about balancing both the student and the parent role.

Three of the student parents brought up situations where they felt that they could be portrayed as unprofessional or even worried about being unprofessional due to the varying demands of being a parent while also being a student. When Catherine was reflecting on a situation where she had to go pick her daughter up, she explained the battle between parental responsibilities and trying to uphold a professional image in academia:

For me, that's something to like, whenever you hold yourself in that regard that we're doing what we have to do, it's impossible for everybody to have a sudden understanding, right. It makes you feel like you're a little bit unprofessional.

Beth could also relate to this battle of parental responsibilities versus upholding a professional image, "It's just, it's hard for me to think about going to someone and saying, 'my kid needs this and so I need time off from school or work'." Elizabeth goes even further to mention how the battle could portray a negative image as a student:

I know I probably annoyed some people just because of my lifestyle, like having to go leave class early to go pick up the kids or is rude and disrespectful. Like, I don't want to be rude or disrespectful or have to be late for class...I don't like imposing that kind of stuff on my professors and so that's been like an internal challenge.

Utilizing the social role lens, the connection between the sense of feeling unprofessional when caring for their children and the gender roles set by society to be primary caretakers (Turner & Norwood, 2013) was evident. This phenomenon of gender roles being challenged due to academic demands adds pressure to uphold a certain identity even while balancing parental responsibilities (Burgess, 2013; Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Managing both roles has brought about a sense of exhaustion for a couple of participants. After discussing the situation of childcare and leaving class, Catherine reflects, "I'm exhausted when I get in that position. Both roles are demanding, especially if you're doing it at the same time." Beth also discusses her experience with exhaustion in being a student parent saying, "Well the energy thing, I have to spend all this time, energy, at school, but I also have to be a devoted parent...I feel worn down. I feel exhausted and needs are pulling me from different directions."

Although there were negative thoughts and feelings associated with managing the roles as a student parent, participants also mentioned positive thoughts and feelings that have emerged because of their identities. Elizabeth, Zoey, and Harvey discussed learning to give themselves grace during this season in their life. Elizabeth goes into detail:

Grace for myself...just recognizing that I'm human and I'm doing the best I can...just in this season is allowing myself grace. I think, to be perfect and to not be able to do everything that I want to do.

Similarly, Zoey acknowledges the need for grace when trying not to criticize her parenting after learning academic content:

And then just another challenging thing I would say is that trying to separate hearing and learning things in school and then not applying it immediately to myself like just thinking about it and like I said earlier, like 'oh no I'm damaging him in some way'. So like, trying to separate that stuff and like be graceful with myself and like still...like take things as they come and try to learn from it instead of like looking down on myself for something.

Harvey openly discusses his experience with grace in saying, "I'm so grateful that I go to a faith-based school to help me embrace the idea of grace and that I don't have to be perfect, but yeah, it's still hard to sit with/"

Sacrifices in Managing Roles

As the student parents voiced their experiences, sacrifices due to managing the multiple roles became apparent among all participants. These sacrifices included limited self-care, lost time with their children, and shifting priorities. Zoey, Jane, Harvey, and Beth all mentioned ways

in which their self-care has been limited due to managing their roles as students and parents. Beth said, “I dropped some certain self-care things for myself. I just don’t have time.” Zoey reiterates this point, “I think, like self-care, especially when you have an infant baby, is non-existent.” Jane also discussed how her form of self-care, sleep, has been impacted in her life:

The challenges I would say, um just late nights and the lack of sleep. I think that is really the most challenging. I was never really that much a coffee drinker, but now I’m an avid coffee drinker. And I’ll drink it at, you know, six o’clock at night. Like, it’s not a big deal because I know I have to stay up and do those homework assignments and with my one-and-a-half-year old, sometimes she doesn’t sleep through the night. And that’s what’s really...that’s one of the biggest challenges, the lack of sleep and having to take care of them.

Sharing in the same experience, Harvey too reflected on discussing his lack of sleep while attending a conference:

I remember I went to the CAPS conference, which is Christian Association of Psychological Studies, a couple of weeks ago and this guy was talking about how sleep is really good for you and you need it and how much you are getting...I raised my hand and said, ‘yeah it’s not good’...he asked ‘how are you dealing, you know with what I just shared?’ I said ‘Oh, I’m just in denial. That’s how I manage it!’

Managing the student parent roles impacts the self-care routines of these participants, but it also has impacted the time that they spend with their children. Jane reflects on this by saying, “Being a student impacts me as being a parent in that I don’t get to spend as much time with them as I would like.” Catherine reiterates this point, “You know, I’ve lost time with my child

that I really have, you know, I'm not gonna be able to get back." Elizabeth goes into detail about the time that she may miss out with her children:

A negative aspect would be a time sacrifice of being away from them. And you know, I might not be able to go to this function at school because I've got to go to class or I have to study or something like that.

Being a student parent also required participants to be flexible in shifting their priorities at a given moment. Harvey talks about this shift when discussing his family role versus his academic responsibilities:

...this is advice I got from another guy a couple of years ago, was like giving my wife the 'trump card' and so hey at any time she can just lay it down and say 'listen, as your wife or as your co-parent, I need you right now', whether that's 'I need you, like, hey, this minute so stop', you know, 'step away from the class that you're in', or if it's 'hey today, I need you.'

Elizabeth too noted how shifting identities can be a challenge, "I also work so juggling everything has been a challenge because priorities shift. Obviously, my kids are number one, but they have to take a backseat to evenings sometimes or work-related activities on the weekends sometimes."

Elizabeth also discussed other areas of sacrifice due to being a student parent such as the financial sacrifice and a lack of freedom. She stated, "I've had to take out a lot of financial aid that I was debt free from before I made the decision to go back to school...we're definitely strapped a lot of times." Later she goes on to discuss the lack of freedom associated with being a

student parent, “The biggest challenge of going back to school is that there’s no freedom...there’s no downtime. There’s no breaks. There’s, weekends are not for resting, they’re for working.”

Changes in Identity

Along with making sacrifices, the student parents also discussed ways in which their identities had changed due to being a student and parent simultaneously. Two sub-themes emerged from this theme: lowered expectations of themselves and changes in parenting identities. Catherine describes her change in academic expectations of herself:

You know, used to, I couldn't settle for anything less than an A. I had to kind of like let that, you know, that slack and go a little bit because it just wasn't manageable to kind of be, you know, as on top of everything.

Elizabeth shares the same sentiments when managing her student parent roles:

Sometimes it can be very frustrating because you try so hard. You try so hard to give 100% and sometimes, you know, it's more important that I kind of slack off and be with my son while he has a broken collarbone.

Harvey also explained these lowered expectations with his wife in saying, “I was telling my wife the other day, like this is, I’m considering this my ‘B’ ‘mester. Hey, it’s totally fine if I just get all B’s.” The lowered self-standards of the student parents don’t align with societal standards (Eagly & Wood, 2012), causing discord within their identities.

Another shift in the student parents’ identities appeared in their parenting. Beth initially discusses this by saying, “I’m kind of having to be a little tougher of a parent.” She then goes on to talk about how her academic courses have impacted her parenting style, “Well, part of my course of study is making me a better parent because I’m learning different listening skills and

I'm learning different ways to communicate." Jane too said "There's a lot of things that I'm learning about that I see in my own kids and it's really amazing to see some of the therapeutic approaches come to life in real life, like with my own children." Harvey also reflected on how the program has impacted his view of parenting:

A professor uploaded videos of her playing with her children practicing this [parent child interactive therapy] and it really inspired me and so I'll do this with my son. And so it's really hard to spend 10 minutes with your kid playing and not like suggesting they play differently. And it really stood out to me like wow yeah like because I wanted to be like, 'Why don't you __? Why don't you __? Why don't you __?' I'm so controlling! Why can't I just let my kid play?' And it really stuck out to me and that would not have happened if I wasn't a parent while I was taking that class, but I was able to immediately like apply that idea, that thought. And that's happened multitudes of times and where I can ask questions to counselors about 'what about a two-year-old who is blah, blah, blah.'

Harvey also reflected on his changed perception of being the perfect dad by saying, "And I don't have to be the best dad, I just have to be a present dad. I think that is my desire. I just have to be whatever dad I can be."

Overall Experience Being a Student Parent

The final theme encompasses the overall experience of being student parents according to the participants. Some described the experience as being difficult, some an opportunity to be a role model, and many describing what takes priority at the end of the day. Zoey, Harvey, and Jane share the difficulty that they experience being student parents in a master's counseling

program. Although Jane describes her program as being a bit more accommodating, she shared, “I’m in a program catered towards people who do work, but having a family on top of that, it’s hard to get a lot of things done.” When asked what is one thing that he wished that others knew about being a student parent, Harvey replied:

How difficult...maybe how weighing...what I’m going to school for is teaching me the impact of what I am also doing to my kid at the same time and that part of me wishes I was more ignorant of it.

Harvey’s reflection contradicts the limited role conflict that men are expected to face when managing the student parent roles according to social role theory (Park & Banchevsky, 2019).

Elizabeth also replied to this question addressing faculty in her program:

If I could say anything to any of them, just know that we are trying our absolute best and that there’s not, it’s not for a lack of slacking off by any stretch, it’s actually very stressful to want to be able to give 100%

Zoey shares in the struggle of getting others to understand the difficulty associated with being a student parent:

I think a lot of times it’s like they expect you to be like, just like this happy, joyful person all the time and you’re like, I’m freaking tired and I’ve got this kid hanging on me all the time. And like, it’s freaking hard...it’s really hard.

Zoey leans into the social role identity prescribed by society that women, the caregivers, should be warm and nurturing at all times (Burgess, 2013). She also shared a specific situation where the difficulty in being a student parent was very apparent when caring for her infant child:

I would feed him and rock him and put him down and then by the time I would be able to calm myself back down and go to sleep he would wake up again and it was just like...that was...it was so hard. Like there were times when I would just like email my professors and say, 'I can't...I don't...I can't do anything right now, so...like I can barely even pick myself up off the floor to take care of the screaming child because all he does is scream.

For a couple of participants, being a student parent has provided them an opportunity to be a role model for their kids. Beth said, "I love that I'm modeling continuing education for my high schoolers." Elizabeth shares in her joy of being a role model, "I'm glad that my kids get to see me go back to school and achieve and accomplish something that I wouldn't have done otherwise."

Although many of the participants had different experiences as student parents, most of them shared the idea that parenting comes first. Zoey states, "I think it sort of feels like parent always comes first...I really do feel like it's mom comes first." Harvey too agreed that "being a parent takes priority over being a student in my belief." Beth describes an experience that reiterates her belief that parenting comes first:

Obviously, the kids are my first priority...After my son's surgery was successful in the fall, I planned a trip to France for their spring break. So, we are leaving in a month and my practicum teacher isn't pleased that I'll be missing a class. And I'm like, I've got nonrefundable air tickets. I didn't tell it in the context, but it's like right this minute, I don't care about my schooling. I'm celebrating the fact that he's healthy and well.

The overall experiences of these student parents are multifaceted and often complicated. Add in the content of a master's counseling program, things get a bit more complicated. Harvey discusses this point:

I'm having to grapple or to rumble with what I'm learning about myself, what I'm learning about my marriage, and what I'm learning about being a parent, while working on myself, working on my marriage, and working on being a parent.

Summary

This chapter shared descriptive accounts of the experiences of six student parents in CACREP accredited master's counseling programs located in the southern region of the United States. The primary focus and central question driving this study was: What are the experiences of student parents in master's counseling graduate programs? The data from individual semi-structured interviews provided rich descriptions of the participants' experiences and from the data, five recurring themes emerged. The first theme were resources that the participants found useful in managing their roles as student parents. The second theme were thoughts and feelings associated with managing the roles. The third theme encompassed sacrifices participants have made due to managing their student parent roles. The fourth theme revealed changes in the participants' identities. The fifth and final theme was the participants' overall experience of being a student parent which included the opportunity to be a role model, what takes priority, and describing the difficulty in being a student parent. In the following chapter, results will be reviewed and condensed to summarize the experiences of the student parents in their study and discuss implications for counselor education programs, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study provide a rich understanding of the experiences of student parents who are enrolled in a CACREP accredited master's counseling program. Guided by social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), this study was designed to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of student parents in master's counseling graduate programs? This study also sought to understand how the experiences of fathers differ or relate to those of mothers enrolled in master's counseling graduate programs. In order to answer these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted. A discussion of the research findings from the study will be reviewed in this chapter as well as the researcher's connection to this study. Additionally, implications for counselor education programs based on the data collected will also be discussed within this chapter. Finally, limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research will be reviewed

Discussion of Research Findings

As many as 33% of master's level students in the United States are parents (Mason & Frash, 2007; Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009). The nature of clinical work within a graduate counselor education program can create added stress that could affect a student's academic and personal life (Fuenfahausen & Cashwell, 2013). Studies have found that although some counseling programs and faculty are supportive of their students, student parents still feel limited due to discrimination barriers and traditional gender roles set by society (Lynch, 2008; Trepal et al., 2014). The current study sought to understand the experiences of student parents in

master's counseling programs, helping to fill the gap of student parent research in the counselor education field. Results of this study indicated five overarching themes across participants' experiences: (1) Resources used to manage student parent roles, (2) Thoughts and feelings associated with managing these roles, (3) Sacrifices made in order to manage the roles, (4) Changes in their identities due to being a student parent, and (5) The overall experience of being a student parent in a master's counseling program. The experiences examined through a social role theory lens revealed personal battles within the participants to build or maintain professionalism in the academic setting while managing the demands of parental responsibilities (Turner & Norwood, 2013). When societal gender roles were challenged or violated (Burgess, 2013), student parents encountered stress, changes in their identity, and oftentimes made sacrifices to manage both roles. This study shows when traditional gender roles are challenged, stress and discourse can emerge for some individuals. However, with resources and support from faculty, family, and institutions, student parents can be successful and feel empowered in a counseling graduate program.

Resources in Managing Student Parent Roles

All of the participants in this study made a point to mention the resources that helped them manage their student parent roles. These resources included family support, program support, institutional support, and support that they provided to themselves. Contradictory to literature on the impact of society's gender role identities on individuals, participants found support from society in helping them challenge traditional gender roles. The literature discusses how society can pressure men and women into these roles that can lead to mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (Christ, 2019). However, some participants have leaned into the

society around them to provide support and guidance in navigating the violated gender ideals (Burgess, 2013).

The theme of using resources in managing the student parent roles is not a foreign concept to other student parent research (Prokhidko & Haynes, 2018; Sallee, 2015). Past research on this student population highlights the need for resources when managing parental responsibilities such as child care and academic requirements like completing internship hours (Brown & Watson, 2010; Haynes et al., 2012). Social role theory proposes that if individuals had more support, they would be perceived as not having divided identities and commitments (Burgess, 2013) and would be more likely to be supported because of the various responsibilities associated with their parental identities.

Thoughts and Feelings Associated with Managing Roles

Many thoughts and feelings associated with managing the student parent roles emerged when talking with the participants. For some of the women, societal pressures for women to be submissive and sympathetic (Burgess, 2013) created discourse when communicating their true thoughts and feelings to others about their challenges who were not experiencing the same life struggles. As highlighted by Khadjooi et al. (2012), this disconnect made it difficult for some participants to feel connected to their fellow cohort members. Fears of being seen as unprofessional due to managing parental responsibilities while in the student role emerged for many of the participants. The pressure of being primary caretakers to their children (Turner & Norwood, 2013) while trying to uphold a professional identity in the academic setting created negative thoughts and feelings for the participants when discussing their experiences (Burgess, 2013; Eagly & Wood, 2012). The expectation to still uphold the same emotional and physical

attention to their children (Guendouzi, 2006) while managing the student role created an overall overwhelming feeling as well as a feeling of exhaustion for many of the student parents. When tending to academic demands, participants expressed feelings of guilt, many of which reflected the phenomenon of “mom guilt” (Zimmerman et al., 2008). These experiences were consistent with the findings from Prikhidko and Haynes’ (2018) study where participants also discussed feelings of guilt and cognitive dissonance when acting on one role over the other. It is important to note that the student father in this study did not mention feelings of guilt due to balancing the student and parent roles. This could support the notion that Sari et al. (2015) makes that mothers are more concerned about maintaining their professional and academic identity as compared to their male counterparts.

Sacrifices in Managing Roles

Although there has not been a published study specifically addressing the sacrifices that student parents make in managing their roles, research does identify the difficulty in managing both the student and parent roles, even going as far to say that these roles are incompatible for women (Springer et al., 2009). The sacrifices that participants highlighted in this current study are self-care, lost time with their children, and shifting priorities. A couple of participants from Appling’s (2015) study also connected with the experience of sacrificing personal time due to parenting and academic responsibilities. This sacrifice in self-care impacted the functionality and the mental state of a couple of participants from the current study, including postpartum depression. Navigating priorities simultaneously was a consistent theme found in the research conducted by Sallee (2015). A couple of participants in the current study discussed how navigating the roles simultaneously can present challenges and stress in their lives. Another

sacrifice mentioned by Elizabeth was the financial sacrifice of taking on academics while parenting. This financial challenge was also supported in research conducted by Ruppanner (2018) and Springer et al. (2009).

Changes in Identity

The lowered expectations and managing perfectionistic tendencies found in this study were also reflected in the study of student parents conducted by Prikhidko and Haynes (2018). The drive to be the perfect academic and parent stems from self-standards (Eagly & Wood, 2012), societal pressures and the expectation of what a “good parent” should embody (Eve et al., 2014; Pedersen, 2011; Smith, 2010). The student mothers in this study discussed instances where they felt their identities and expectations to be the ideal parent had to change due to the demands of academic responsibilities. This pressure created added stress and challenging situations to the student parents’ lives. Contradictory to social role theory (Arendell, 2000; Fagan, 2016), the student father also battled with the identity to be the ideal parent while managing his student parent roles. This is consistent with the findings from the autoethnography by Dillon (2012) in that student fathers also battle with being the perfect parent and academic.

Overall Experience Being a Student Parent

The current study reflects the experiences discussed in past research conducted on student parents in counseling programs (Appling, 2015; Lynch, 2008; Sallee, 2015; Trepal et al., 2014). The difficult experience of being a student parent provided a means to set a positive tone for the students’ families as well as reminded them what is important in their lives. This form of resiliency through personal values and self-determination has been seen in past research to help participants overcome adversity and success in their programs (Appling, 2015; Holm et al.,

2015). Most of the participants in this current study stressed the importance that their roles as parents held above academic roles and responsibilities which aligns with the research on graduate student parents conducted by Appling (2015) and Sallee (2015).

Social Role Theory Application

Social role theory was used in this study to formulate interview questions and to provide an understanding to the data collected during the analysis phase. The purpose of choosing this theory was to explain the pressure that society placed on participants in the study to fulfill the gender roles traditionally constructed: women as primary caretakers and men engaging in occupational roles (Yavorsky et al., 2015). Because social role theory highlights the division of labor amongst genders (Eagly & Wood, 2012), the researcher felt that the theory could support the experiences found amongst the participants engaging in both the traditional gender roles and the roles that would be considered gender role violations. Some of the data collected in this study reflects the assumptions made by social role theory as shown in Table 3. For instance, the drive to be the ideal mother and have a primary role in child rearing was evident among a few participants in the study. This was also clear across interviews when looking at the amount of content spent discussing the parental role versus the student role compared to the father who was interviewed. Another point made by social role theory was that when gender role violations occur, individuals are more likely to have decreased self-esteem and experience discourse (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Burgess, 2013). The data collected in the current study supported this notion. This was apparent when the mothers of the study discussed situations in which they were engaging in the student role and simultaneously handling parental responsibilities. Many of the

participants questioned whether their professional identity was upheld according to faculty standards.

Although the social role theory explains some of the data found in the study, there are parts of the study that contradict the social role assumptions. For instance, social role theory claims that men will occupy the majority of leadership driven occupations instead of household and caretaking responsibilities (Yavorsky et al., 2015). However, this study found that the participant who identified as the father was just as involved in caretaking and parental roles and often was concerned about his parenting identity. It is also evident in this study that the women strived to be successful in their academic roles which contradicts the traditional gender roles escribed by society. Another point to mention is that social role theory proposes that society will only add pressure to individuals to uphold the traditional gender stereotypes (Christ, 2019). This was not true for the participants of this study who leaned into the society around them for support and guidance on navigating the student parent roles.

Table 3

Social Role Theory in the Data

Concept of SRT	Discussion of Research Findings	Evidence of Theory in the Research
Gender roles are socially constructed	Participants in this study felt pressured to uphold the gender roles constructed by society even while managing the other role. For instance, Beth felt pressured to be a devoted parent even when energy levels were low.	“Well the energy thing, I have to spend all this time, energy, at school, but I also have to be a devoted parent...I feel worn down.” -Beth
Women holding a domestic role; men holding a provider role	Participants discussed how holding traditional gender roles while engaging in nontraditional roles created discourse. For instance,	“It’s just, it’s hard for me to think about going to someone and saying, ‘my kid needs this and so I need time off from school or work’” -Beth

	mothers engaging in parental responsibilities found it difficult to justify sacrificing aspects of their student role.	
Men characterized by strength and power; women characterized by childbearing and sensitivity	Participants felt pressured to uphold traditional gender characteristics while engaging in their student parent roles. For instance, one participant resisted expressing resentment of other cohort members not experiencing the stress of motherhood.	“I think I’m like, sometimes less patient with people like as far as when they’re complaining about stuff. I’m just like, okay, my four-month-old was up every single hour last night and you’re complaining that you only got four hours of sleep because you were watching TV. Like you have a choice to do that. And like, I don’t know, yeah, there were times when I wouldn’t say anything, but it would just like irritate me because sometimes when people will say like ‘I’m a dog mom’ or something, I’m like ‘no you’re not! You can’t use the word mom like that.’” -Zoey
Gender roles resulting from socialization and experiences affect behavior and attitudes	Due to the various demands of fulfilling both roles, participants altered their own expectations of themselves in order to manage the roles. For instance, the father from the study explained how he lowered his academic standards for himself in order to survive the student parent season of life.	“Sometimes it can be very frustrating because you try so hard. You try so hard to give 100% and sometimes, you know, it’s more important that I kind of slack off and be with my son while he has a broken collarbone.” -Elizabeth “I was telling my wife the other day, like this is, I’m considering this my ‘B’ ‘mester. Hey, it’s totally fine if I just get all B’s.” -Harvey

A theory that may have lent a better perspective of the participants’ experiences could be the social identity theory. This theory proposes that the groups in which individuals belong provided a source of self-esteem, belonging, and pride (Tajfel et al., 1979). This theory provides three mental categories involved in evaluating ourselves and others: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel et al., 1979). This theory could have highlighted and supported the experiences felt by participants while engaging in their student parent roles around

cohort members who may or may not have shared in the same experiences or among family members who were not engaging in academic roles.

Researcher Connection to the Study

My experiences as a student parent in a counseling graduate program provided the motivation for this study. During my graduate program, I recognized the need for awareness and advocacy for the student parent population not only at my institution but also within the counseling program itself. My research highlights these needs by bringing to light the raw experiences of other student parents and the challenges they have faced while managing these roles in a master's counseling graduate program. My hope was to show the importance of support and understanding from faculty, programs, and institutions in order to enhance the experiences of student parents in counseling graduate programs as well as to increase their ability to succeed in their academic journeys.

Implications for Counselor Education Programs

The findings from this study provided valuable implications for counselor education programs. Specifically, the findings of this study indicate that the demands of parenthood and completing coursework of the counseling programs have taken a toll on many participants. The participants in this study highlighted the lack of understanding of managing both the student and parent roles from institutions and fellow students as well as the sacrifices they have made in order to be successful in their respective programs. Similarly to the study conducted by Trepal and Stinchfield (2013), participants in this study stress the importance of a supportive climate in their programs. Therefore, an implication is that counseling graduate programs provide more

support to their student parents. For Jane who was enrolled in an online counseling program, she explained:

What is helpful that I wish all professors would do is to just open up the whole class on day one, because, like some of them will lock assignments and you can't actually see the assignment until maybe a week or two before it's due. I wish on day one they would open the whole class so if I finished one assignment and I am awake and have enough energy, I can move forward and go the second one.

This flexibility in scheduling could provide support to many student parents. Another form of support would be to provide flexibility in attendance policies when considering child related excuses. Several participants mentioned the stress of either having to communicate with professors about needing to miss class or asking to bring their child to class due to the fear of being absent and seeming unprofessional. Having a more understanding attendance policy that takes into consideration things like child related illnesses and appointments could relieve a burden that many student parents feel.

A need that many participants highlighted in their interviews was the need for community support. Some participants mentioned support and mentorship from faculty while others alluded to support from other student parents. It is clear that for a couple of participants, faculty that took time to check-in with them or provided resources to them had a positive effect on how they viewed their programs and experiences. Providing mentorship opportunities from faculty could give these students a positive foundation in their programs that would help support them through more challenging phases of the program such as practicum and internship. Another form of support that participants alluded to was the support from fellow student parents in their

programs. Participants would use other student parents as a gauge to how they were doing both in their academic programs and with parental responsibilities. Providing support networks such as program support groups to this population can provide a safe space for connection and resource sharing that could improve the overall experiences of student parents in master's counseling programs.

Limitations

The limitations of this study involve the participants included as well as the data collected. The limited number of participants of this study was possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the chaos of finishing coursework fully online. Many individuals who completed the demographic questionnaires were difficult to contact to set up interview times and days. The limited number of participants only provided a limited amount of experiences to explore. However, the purpose of phenomenological research is to uncover the presence of the phenomenon, therefore the number of participants is not to depict a representative sample as it would in a quantitative research study (Englander, 2012). Although the participants ranged in age, marital status, number and age of children, and programs of study, this study did not include various ethnicities or sexual orientations. This limits the cultural scope of experiences explored. It is also important to note that only one participant was male. This means that data collected about his experiences should not be generalized to the male population, instead be considered as another perspective of the student parent experience. The qualitative nature of the study only reflects an in-depth understanding of a small number of student parents; therefore, results should not be generalizable to other populations and programs.

Although the participants in this study were given the opportunity to do so, participants did not complete the reflective letter exercise originally proposed in this study. The inclusion of the letters could have provided a more in-depth and vulnerable aspect of the student parents' experiences. For example, participants may have been hesitant to share an experience with the primary researcher face-to-face; however, many may have shared through the writing activity, providing further understanding of their personal experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study helped to fill the gap of research on student parents in counseling graduate programs. Appling (2015), Holm et al. (2015), and Trepal and Stinchfield (2013) provided research on doctoral student mothers in counselor education; however, their research did not include master's level student parents nor did they include student fathers. This study provided insight into the experiences of student mothers and fathers in CACREP accredited master's counseling programs. However, future research studies could build upon the findings of this study and help to fill the gap in student parent research.

First, this study only examined the experiences of student parents in master's counseling programs in the southern region of the United States. Further studies could explore the experiences in other areas of the United States or around the world that may provide more or less support to their student parents. Second, this study was unable to explore the experiences of student parents who did not identify as heterosexual. Further research could examine the experiences of student parents who do not identify as heterosexual and the potential impact of other intersections of their identity. Third, since only one participant in this study was a male, additional studies could specifically look at the experiences of student fathers in counseling

graduate programs. This could provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of student fathers in counseling graduate programs. This research could also benefit from utilizing another theoretical perspective such as social identity theory in order to better understand the phenomenon and the experiences student parents may encounter. Lastly, future research could include a look into the differences of experiences between on-campus student parents versus distance education student parents. Through this study, distance education students appeared to have less support than on campus students. This research could provide resources to universities seeking distance education transitions on how to best support their students.

CHAPTER 5

MANUSCRIPT

Introduction and Background

Student parents in graduate programs are a population that are often overlooked by research and underserved by institutions. These students in counselor education programs offer a unique perspective on what life is like as a parent and as an aspiring educator and counselor. Along with the daily struggles of being a graduate student such as strict timelines and financial insecurity (Springer et al., 2009), these students also feel pressured to demonstrate their commitments and competencies to their professors and advisors (Brus, 2006). Student parents must integrate these student challenges with the emotional, financial, and physical concerns that parental responsibilities elicit (Ruppanner, 2018). In many cases, these students are not provided support in the home or by the institution thus creating extra stress on the student.

According to the American Counseling Association's (2014) code of ethics, code F.11.b states that counselor educators are to recognize and value diverse cultures and abilities of their students as well as provide accommodations and support to these students in their programs. This demonstrates the importance and the responsibility that counseling programs have to be aware of this student population and provide support in helping them succeed in the graduate programs.

Parenting

The ideals of being a good parent and practicing authoritative parenting can bombard the minds of many parents. Even though women are now encouraged to join the workforce, they are still often seen as the main caretaker of children and are expected to uphold the same emotional

and physical attention to them (Guendouzi, 2006). This leads to “intensive mothering” where the mother is expected to put her child’s needs above her own (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Elliot, Powell, and Brenton (2013) conducted a study by interviewing 16 low-income, Black single mothers that focused on intensive mothering, gender, class, and race and how these aspects impacted their parenting. Many of the participants sacrificed their education and careers to provide for their children and uphold societal pressures of being a mother (Elliott et al., 2013). Another study conducted by Locke and Yarwood (2017) sought to understand how societal discourses impacted the discourses in parenting and careers for fathers. The researchers found that fathers who were the primary caretakers took on this role for various reasons despite societal gendered expectations of parenting. Fathers in the study discuss societal pressures of being the “breadwinner” and having a masculine identity sometimes prevented them from being the caretakers they wished to be for their families (Locke & Yarwood (2017).

Societal ideologies of parenthood can add stress to both mother and father and can hinder them from deciding to pursue a career or educational degree. For example, mothers may experience a phenomenon known as “mom guilt”. Mom guilt is defined as feelings of inadequacy due to spending more time at or doing work than with one’s children (Zimmerman et al., 2008). These experiences have been documented in studies featuring moms in academic roles (Gilbert, 2008 ; Zimmerman et al., 2008). However, despite the societal ideologies and demands of parenthood, some parents choose to pursue graduate degrees.

Graduate Student Parents

During the 2015–2016 academic year, it is estimated that nearly 3.8 million parents were pursuing a college degree (Cruse et al., 2019). Although an under-researched population, student

parents account for a considerable amount of student populations across institutions. It is estimated that 33% of master's level students and 25% of doctoral students in the United States are parents (Mason & Frash, 2007; Springer et al., 2009). Even with the various demands of parenthood, 19.6% of graduate students with children were enrolled as full time students in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Unfortunately, past research suggests that having children is a factor associated with attrition and success rates, specifically for female graduate students (Green, 2015; Mason et al., 2009). Springer et al. (2009) suggest that the archetype of being an ideal academic and parent is incompatible and, for women, can often lead to struggles and failure. Even still, the drive for student parents to seek out graduate degrees fuels them to achieve their career goals while allowing them some flexibility in scheduling time with family (Trepal et al., 2014). Prikhidko and Haynes (2018) conducted a study to explore the challenges that graduate student mothers faced while balancing school and parenting responsibilities. The results of the study showed that these student parents experienced cognitive dissonance, feelings of guilt, the use of compartmentalization, and coping with perfectionism. Through these themes, the researchers felt that choosing between the attitudes and behaviors of one role over the other created enhanced discomfort.

Counseling Graduate Programs

The rigor and requirements of a counseling graduate program can be overwhelming for many students (Clarke, 2018). In fact, research shows that students who are enrolled in graduate programs containing a clinical human service component report more stress than those who are in purely academic fields (Dziegliewski et al., 2004; Polson & Nida, 1998). Institutions accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs ([CACREP],

2016) require a minimum of 60 semester credit hours for all entry-level counseling programs. The master's level programs focus on eight core areas in their curriculum: professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, counseling and helping relationships, group counseling and group work, assessment and testing, and research and program evaluation. However, academic rigor is not the only factor that can contribute to the stress of a counseling graduate student. Students enrolled in a counseling graduate program engage in clinical practice at some point during their degree programs. Although this practice is meant to help aide in education and experience for the counselor in training, some experiences can be traumatic and life changing for students.

Student Parents in Counseling Graduate Programs

Various research studies on student parents in counseling graduate programs exist within the literature (Appling, 2015; Brown & Watson, 2010; Haynes et al., 2012; Holm et al., 2015; Lynch, 2008; Trepal et al., 2014). Several researchers have found that women completing their doctoral degrees felt that completing a graduate degree would bring a better life for their family, however, it also brought about guilt for doing so because it took time away from their role as a parent (Brown & Watson, 2010; Haynes et al., 2012; Lynch, 2008; Trepal et al., 2014). Some identities of student parents in counseling graduate programs can become stressful and conflicted. For example, research conducted by Lynch (2008) supports the assumption that students who are also mothers are concerned about not being taken seriously in their role as an academic, also known as “mommy-tracking”. The mommy track concept was originally defined as women who are taken less seriously than their male counterparts due to choosing to contribute

more hours with their families instead of their work (Cummins, 2005). Mothers in academia may hold the same concerns about their academic and professional identity when compared to their male counterparts. These concerns extend to professional opportunities, funding, and other resources. Studies have found that although some counseling programs and faculty are supportive of their students, participants still feel limited due to discrimination barriers and traditional gender roles (Trepal et al., 2014; Lynch, 2008).

Importance of the Study

There is very limited research on graduate student parents in master's programs (Sallee, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education (2018) reports that the number of completed master's degrees rose by 66 percent between the academic years of 2000-2001 to 2015-2016. This statistic indicates the need to know more about master's level students, as many of these students will fill the classrooms of various institutions. In addition, master's degree students have a higher percentage of students who are married and have dependents than doctoral students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). While many studies focus on doctoral students (Haynes et al., 2012; Holm et al., 2015; Trepal et al., 2014), it is important that we understand the experiences of master's level student parents in counseling graduate programs as well in order to provide counselor educators the tools and resources they need to help their students be successful.

Several studies stress the lack of research and importance of looking into the experiences of fathers in counseling graduate programs (Holm et al., 2015; Springer et al., 2009; Trepal et al., 2014). While they may share similar experiences with mothers who are also students, fathers may have some differing points of view or concerns related to the balance of roles. A study conducted by Theisen et al. (2018) revealed that graduate student mothers placed more value on

outside resources than graduate student fathers. The researchers suggest that this could be due to gender schemas, or socially constructed expectations of the individual roles based on gender (Theisen et al., 2018). These gender schemas could place more pressure on mothers to find and utilize resources which can create stress.

There are many gaps in the literature concerning the student parent population and these include exploring the experiences of student parents in master's counseling programs as well as exploring the experiences of student fathers. The purpose of the current phenomenological study is to address the gaps in understanding the experiences of student parents in counseling graduate programs. The gaps will be addressed by answering the following research question: "What are the experiences of student parents in master's counseling graduate programs?"

Methodology

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited based on criterion-based sampling. Institutions in the southern region of the United States who offered CACREP accredited master's counseling programs were sent a recruitment email that detailed the criteria of the study and how to participate. In order to participate in this study, participants had to currently be enrolled in a CACREP accredited master's counseling program as well as currently be responsible for a dependent child while completing their program. The students who wished to participate in the study filled out an electronic demographic questionnaire and contacted the researcher to set up an interview time.

Procedures

Student parents who completed the demographic questionnaire and wished to complete an interview, provided their email addresses in order to set up an interview time and date. Before completing the interview, participants received an information letter describing the purpose of the study as well as their rights as participants. Individual interviews were completed using Zoom, a video streaming service, and were recorded for transcription purposes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with in-vivo coding to find themes amongst the data. Deductive analysis using social role theory was then used to find themes associated with gender roles understood by individuals and the expectations of societal assumptions of those roles. Bracketing was utilized to monitor researcher's assumptions (Schwandt, 2015). The themes and codes found in the data were reviewed by an auditor to ensure the data was reflected appropriately and the researchers' biases had not interfered with the analysis. The researcher chosen for this study was one that had experience with qualitative research. This auditor was also chosen specifically because she was not a student parent. The researcher made this decision in order to prevent bias and to recognize when the researcher misinterpreted the experiences of the participants due to her own student parent experiences.

Results

The current study sought to understand the experiences of student parents in a master's counseling program. Social role theory was used to understand the data collected from the semi-structured interviews of six participants. Themes were found in the data that described similar experiences among the student parents.

Demographics

As reported in Table 1, a total of six student parents were interviewed for the study. Five of the six participants identified as female and one identified as male. Three participants were enrolled in a CACREP accredited clinical mental health counseling program. CACREP accredited school counseling, rehabilitation counseling, and marriage and family therapy programs were also represented. Half of the participants identified as being married while the other half identified as single. Half of the participants reported only having one child while the other participants reported having two. Age ranges of children varied from 18 months old to 17 years of age.

Table 1

Participants' General Information

Pseudonym	Name of Program	Year in Program	Marital Status	Number of Kids	Age of Kids
Zoey	Clinical Mental Health	3rd	Single	1	18 months
Jane	School Counseling	3rd	Married	2	4, 18 months
Elizabeth	Clinical Mental Health	2nd	Single	2	11, 8
Catherine	Rehabilitation Counseling	3rd	Married	1	3
Beth	Clinical Mental Health	3rd	Single	2	16, 17
Harvey	Marriage and Family Therapy	4th	Married	1	2

Resources in Managing Student Parent Roles

All of the participants in this study made a point to mention the resources that helped them manage their student parent roles. These resources included family support, program support, institutional support, and support that they provided to themselves. Past literature discusses how society can pressure men and women into traditional gender roles that can lead to mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (Christ, 2019). However, some participants have leaned into the society around them to provide support and guidance in navigating the violated gender ideals (Burgess, 2013). One participant discussed the emotional support provided by her advisor in her program:

I didn't realize like, that was sort of the beginning of when my postpartum was getting really bad. And so um, I think...I mean...and especially if it's your first kid like you don't know, like you don't know that's not really normal to be feeling like you're gonna lose your mind every 20 minutes so um I think like having the support, and I mean my advisor would talk to me a lot. She was very, I guess, like in tune with what was going on with me. I would say like having somebody look out for you a little bit and pay attention to the signs.

The theme of using resources in managing the student parent roles is not a foreign concept to other student parent research (Prokhidko & Haynes, 2018; Sallee, 2015). Past research on this student population highlights the need for resources when managing parental responsibilities such as child care and academic requirements like completing internship hours (Brown & Watson, 2010; Haynes et al., 2012). Social role theory proposes that if individuals had more support, they would be perceived as not having divided identities and commitments (Burgess, 2013) and would be more likely to be supported because of the various responsibilities associated with their parental identities.

Thoughts and Feelings Associated with Managing Roles

Many thoughts and feelings associated with managing the student parent roles emerged when talking with all of the participants. For some of the women, societal pressures of women to be submissive and sympathetic (Burgess, 2013) created discourse when communicating their true thoughts and feelings to others about their challenges who were not experiencing the same life struggles. One participant shared her experience with this challenge:

I think I'm like, sometimes less patient with people like as far as when they're complaining about stuff. I'm just like, okay, my four month old was up every single hour last night and you're complaining that you only got four hours of sleep because you were watching TV. Like you have a choice to do that. And like, I don't know, yeah, there were times when I wouldn't say anything, but it would just like irritate me because sometimes when people will say like 'I'm a dog mom' or something, I'm like 'no you're not! You can't use the word mom like that'.

As highlighted by Khadjooi et al. (2012), this disconnect made it difficult for some participants to feel connected to their fellow cohort members. Fears of being seen as unprofessional due to managing parental responsibilities while in the student role emerged for many of the participants. The expectation to still uphold the same emotional and physical attention to their children (Guendouzi, 2006) while managing the student role created an overall overwhelming feeling as well as a feeling of exhaustion for many of the student parents. When tending to academic demands, participants expressed feelings of guilt, many of which reflected the phenomenon of "mom guilt" (Zimmerman et al., 2008). These experiences were consistent with the findings from Prikhidko and Haynes' (2018) study where participants also discussed feelings of guilt and cognitive dissonance when acting on one role over the other.

Sacrifices in Managing Roles

Although there has not been a published study specifically addressing the sacrifices that student parents make in managing their roles, research does identify the difficulty in managing both the student and parent roles, even going as far to say that these roles are incompatible for women (Springer et al., 2009). The sacrifices that participants highlighted in this current study

are self-care, lost time with their children, and shifting priorities. A couple of participants from Appling's (2015) study also connected with the experience of sacrificing personal time due to parenting and academic responsibilities. This sacrifice in self-care impacted the functionality and the mental state of a couple of participants from the current study. Navigating priorities simultaneously was a consistent theme found in the research conducted by Sallee (2015). A couple of participants in the current study discussed how navigating the roles simultaneously can present challenges and stress in their lives. One student mother shared: The biggest challenge of going back to school is that there's no freedom...there's no downtime. There's no breaks. There's, weekends are not for resting, they're for working". Another sacrifice mentioned by a participant was the financial sacrifice of taking on academics while parenting. This challenge was also discussed in research conducted by Ruppanner (2018) and Springer et al. (2009).

Changes in Identity

Along with making sacrifices, the student parents also discussed ways in which their identities had changed due to being a student and parent simultaneously. The lowered expectations and managing perfectionistic tendencies found in this study were also reflected in the study of student parents conducted by Prikhidko and Haynes (2018). The drive to be the perfect academic and parent stems from self-standards (Eagly & Wood, 2012), societal pressures and the expectation of what a "good parent" should embody (Eve et al., 2014; Pedersen, 2011; Smith, 2010). The student mothers in this study discussed instances where they felt their identities and expectations to be the ideal parent had to change due to the demands of academic responsibilities. Contradictory to social role theory (Arendell, 2000; Fagan, 2016), the student father also battled with the identity to be the ideal parent while managing his student parent

roles. He stated: “And I don’t have to be the best dad, I just have to be a present dad. I think that is my desire. I just have to be whatever dad I can be”. This is consistent with the findings from the autoethnography by Dillon (2012) in that student fathers also battle with being the perfect parent and academic.

Overall Experience Being a Student Parent

The final theme found encompasses the overall experience of being student parents according to the participants. Some described the experience as being difficult, some an opportunity to be a role model, and many describing what takes priority at the end of the day. Most of the participants in this current study stressed the importance that their roles as parents came first above academic roles and responsibilities which aligns with the research on graduate student parents conducted by Appling (2015) and Sallee (2015). One student mother described an experience where she emphasized the importance of her family value in the academic setting:

Obviously, the kids are my first priority...After my son’s surgery was successful in the fall, I planned a trip to France for their spring break. So, we are leaving in a month and my practicum teacher isn’t pleased that I’ll be missing a class. And I’m like, I’ve got nonrefundable air tickets. I didn’t tell it in the context, but it’s like right this minute, I don’t care about my schooling. I’m celebrating the fact that he’s healthy and well.

Discussion

Implications for Counselor Education Programs

The implications of this study include support and awareness of the student parent population in counselor education programs. Specifically, support in the form of a family-friendly academic environment. This can include flexibility in class schedules and

attendance policies to accommodate child care needs and appointments. Another form of support could include the implementation of faculty-student mentor support as well as a student parent support group within the counseling programs. Awareness of this student population could include conversations on the needs of the student parents in the program as well as placing value on the perspectives they bring in the classroom.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations of this study involve the participants included as well as the data collected. The limited number of participants only provided a limited amount of experiences to explore. Although the participants ranged in age, marital status, number and age of children, and programs of study, this study did not include various ethnicities or sexual orientations. The qualitative nature of the study only reflects an in-depth understanding of a small number of student parents; therefore, results should not be generalizable to other populations. Participants did not complete the reflective letter exercise originally proposed in this study. The absence of the letters could have provided a more in-depth and vulnerable aspect of the student parents' experiences.

This study helped to fill the gap of research on student parents in counseling graduate programs by providing insight into the experiences of student mothers and fathers in CACREP accredited master's counseling programs. However, future research studies could build upon the findings of this study and help to fill the gap in student parent research. Future research could examine the experiences of student parents in other areas of the United States or around the world. Further research could explore the experiences of student fathers in counseling graduate programs as well as exploring student parents of different intersectionalities to include various

sexualities or disabilities. This research could also benefit from utilizing another theoretical perspective such as social identity theory in order to better understand the phenomenon and the experiences student parents may encounter. Finally, future research could include a look into the differences of experiences between on-campus student parents versus distance education student parents.

Summary

This research study explored the experiences of student parents in master's counseling graduate programs. After interviewing six student parents in the southern region from CACREP accredited master's counseling programs, five overarching themes emerged: (1) Resources used to manage student parent roles, (2) Thoughts and feelings associated with managing these roles, (3) Sacrifices made in order to manage the roles, (4) Changes in their identities due to being a student parent, and (5) The overall experience of being a student parent in a master's counseling program. The results of this study can help guide and inform counselor education programs and faculty on how to best support the student parents in their programs.

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APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. I am _____ years of age.
2. I identify as
 - a. _____ male
 - b. _____ female
 - c. _____ Self Identify: _____
3. What race do you identify with? Check all that apply.
 - a. _____ White
 - b. _____ Black/African American
 - c. _____ American Indian/Alaska Native
 - d. _____ Asian
 - e. _____ Hawaiian Native/Other Pacific Islander
 - f. _____ Other
4. Do you identify with any of the following? Check all that apply.
 - a. _____ Straight
 - b. _____ Gay
 - c. _____ Lesbian
 - d. _____ Bisexual
 - e. _____ Self Identify: _____
5. I am
 - a. _____ currently enrolled in a counseling graduate program
 - b. _____ graduated from a counseling graduate program within the last 5 years
 - c. _____ completed some of a counseling graduate program within the last 5 years

- d. _____ graduated/completed some of a counseling graduate program more than 5 years ago
6. The counseling graduate program I am/was enrolled in is called _____.
7. Are/were you a parent while enrolled in a counseling graduate program?
- a. _____ yes
- b. _____ no
8. Are/were your children considered
- a. _____ biological
- b. _____ adopted
- c. _____ fostered
- d. _____ court assigned
- e. _____ other
9. The number of children I was/am responsible for while enrolled in a counseling graduate program
- a. _____ 1
- b. _____ 2
- c. _____ 3
- d. _____ 4
- e. _____ other: _____
10. Age range of children I was/am responsible for. Check all that apply.
- a. _____ 0-5
- b. _____ 6-10
- c. _____ 11-15
- d. _____ 16-19

APPENDIX B

INFORMED LETTER/INFORMED CONSENT



DEPARTMENT OF
SPECIAL EDUCATION,
REHABILITATION, AND COUNSELING

INFORMATION LETTER
for a Research Study entitled
“Understanding the experiences of student parents in master’s counseling graduate programs”

You are invited to participate in a research study to tell your story about being a student parent in a CACREP accredited master’s counseling program. The purpose of this study is to understand how you are navigating both roles of being a parent and a student in your program. The study is being conducted by Hillary Ellerman, doctoral student, under the direction of Dr. Derzis, Advisor in the Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling Department at Auburn University. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a student currently enrolled in a counseling graduate program, you are a parent while completing your program, and are age 19 or older.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will first be asked to complete a demographic survey. This survey will be used to determine if you meet the requirements of the study. Should you meet the requirements, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview and self-reflective writing activity. The self-reflective writing activity is an option for participants to further express what you wish others would understand about being a student parent in a master’s counseling program. Your total time commitment will be approximately 45-90 minutes.

Are there any risks or discomforts? The risks and discomfort associated with participating in this study are not beyond what you would experience in daily life. Should you need them, I will offer counseling services resources. You are responsible for any costs associated with these services.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? If you participate in this study, you can expect to explore the experiences you have had while being a parent and a student and how you have managed these roles. You will also be able to hear the experiences of others once the research has been published.

Will you receive compensation for participating? There will be no compensation offered for participating in this study.

Are there any costs? If you decide to participate, there will not be any costs.

2084 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5222; Telephone: 334-844-7676; Fax: 334-844-7677
www.auburn.edu/serc

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If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University, the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation and Counseling nor the researcher.

Your privacy will be protected. Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. You will be asked to provide a pseudonym to protect your identity. Information obtained through your participation may be used to fill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal or presented at a conference in the profession.

If you have questions about this study contact Hillary Ellerman at hpe0002@auburn.edu. A copy of this document will be given to you prior to participating in the interview process.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. SELECTING "AGREE" INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Interviewer

Interviewer Signature

Date

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APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviewee: _____

Interviewer: Hillary Ellerman, Doctoral Student

Focus: What are the experiences of student parents in CACREP accredited master's counseling graduate programs?

Brief: Hi, my name is Hillary Ellerman and I am a doctoral student at Auburn University. I am conducting research on student parents in counseling graduate programs. The purpose of my study is to understand the various experiences of student parents and explore their approaches to managing both roles as a student and as a parent. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. You may choose to stop the interview at any time. There are no costs or explicit benefits to completing this interview. There are little to no risks associated with completing the interview. Do you have any questions regarding my research study?

Interview Questions

Question 1: Tell me about your academic identity and family life?

Sub questions: How many children do you have?, What year are you currently in the program? When did you graduate or complete some of the program?, What counseling program are/were you enrolled in?

Question 2: How do/did you manage your roles both as a student and as a parent?

Question 3: What have/did you find to be most helpful in managing your roles as a student and parent?

Question 4: How have each of these roles impacted the other?

Question 5: What challenges have/did you experience/d as a student parent in your counseling graduate program?

Question 6: What resources are/were available, if any, to you as a student parent in the program?

Question 7: What is one thing you wish that others (faculty, family members) knew about being a student parent?

Question 8: Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your experience as a student parent in a counseling graduate program?

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Debriefing: Thank you for being willing to participate in my research study and interview process. Your experiences will provide perspective to into the experiences of student parents in a counseling graduate program. You will remain anonymous when incorporating your experiences into my research paper. Do you have any questions or concerns about the research study? Thank you.

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