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**NEGOTIATING CONTRADICTIONS: RURAL STUDENT-MOTHERS AND  
ONLINE LEARNING**

A Dissertation in

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by

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## **Abstract**

This phenomenological study is about the lived experiences of rural mothers who are pursuing their educational goals via online learning. How and why they negotiate the often conflicting roles of mother and of student in the ways that they do is the primary focus of this research. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is used to further analyze the data and in order to unpack the effects of the participants' rich cultural and historical backgrounds on their current daily lives. Five student-mothers each participated in three interviews and completed a daily journal for up to two weeks.

The student-mothers shared details of their lives from birth to the present. In their first interviews, they recalled their life histories. Particular attention was paid to where they lived, whom they lived with, gender roles in their childhood homes, and their educational backgrounds. They shared details from their current lived experiences as student-mothers in their second interviews. A portrait of their experiences was created by focusing on the most pertinent aspects of their lives: their families, online programs, paid employment, division of domestic labor, extended families, and social lives. The student-mothers reflected on the meaning that was made and on themes that arose in their first and second interviews, during their third interview. They used their journals to note any reflections they had on balancing school, work, and family.

The student-mothers who participated in this study prioritized their families and children above all else in their lives. They sacrificed sleep, friendships, and free time, along with many other things, to achieve their goals of earning a degree and to fulfill what they believed to be their purpose: to raise healthy, happy, well-adjusted children who feel loved. This study shows how and why.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Chapter one outlines the background of this study. I begin by explaining how my own upbringing in rural Pennsylvania and journey as a student-mother—at times pursuing higher education online—inspired my interest in the topic of this dissertation. I then present the problem statement and end the chapter by summarizing the organization of the study.

### **Coming to the Topic**

I was raised in rural Western Pennsylvania by a single mother who espoused feminist ideals but who lived her entire adult life beholden to men. While my mother worked or was at school, I was in the charge of my grandmothers: one who left an abusive husband with a tenth grade education and four children to enter into a life of long hours waitressing and then factory shifts and another who traded domestic and waitressing work to enter into the life of a well-to-do housewife who, never having learned to drive, existed almost entirely within walking distance of her front door.

As a child, I was intimately acquainted with what happens to women with little formal education and children to raise; they are at the mercy of the men they choose. I learned that if you choose wisely, you can expect a comfortable, if not covertly subservient life. Choose poorly and you might end up alone with mouths to feed and searching the couch cushions for gas money to get to a job that leaves you feeling physically and emotionally broken.

All three women enjoyed varying degrees of happiness and fulfillment, but all often seemed frustrated. I think they lived life always feeling like something was missing

or like the floor was about to fall out from under them. Because of this, I believe all three women, in their own ways, attempted to mold me into a stronger, wiser, more capable woman than they felt they were themselves. What they didn't realize was that I learned much more from what they did than from what they said.

My mother preached self-sufficiency and did not hide her contempt for the traditional housewife, though I always suspected her position was partially out of longing for the comfortable life she had lost when she divorced my father. She was extreme in her demands that I be independent, brutally condemning marriage and what she viewed as the motives of most men – to tie me down in a dead-end town, wasting my potential...my life, really. At the same time, she never seemed to like school – she was a part-time college student for many years during my childhood – or work – she never had what you could call long-term or stable employment. I remember feeling that she was not doing all that she could to alleviate our financial struggles; she seemed more content to blame it all on my father, grandfather, or the other men in our lives. While she built a façade of liberation around us, we felt and behaved like victims.

My maternal grandmother was very different from my mother in words, but nearly identical in deeds. She seemed to just give up and give herself over to what I think she felt was her God-given lot in life. She did not believe in questioning the way things were or in getting upset over things one could not change. She thought it was a sin to want, whether it was nice clothes or a good education, which then led to the sin of pride. She couldn't understand why we just couldn't be satisfied. We had food in our bellies, a roof over our heads, and a church to go to on Sundays. No matter that the food was poor quality, the roof leaked, and the church taught that women, as well as children, are to be

seen and not heard. She believed in showing love by taking care of our basic needs and was a gentle, calming influence in my life. But, her passive and reliant exemplar also left me fearful. Could or would she *really* take care of me?

My paternal grandmother was a spitfire in a housewife's clothing. Looking at her from the outside, she perfectly fit the mold of the 1950's wife and mother, down to the pearls. Dinner was on the table sharply at 6:00 by her own able hand with no help from anyone. Her home was immaculately decorated and always spic and span – as was her husband. Her garden was glorious. Her children were stars on every team they joined. And, she left herself plenty of time to golf, play cards, and lunch with the other perfect ladies. She embodied the American dream come true. But behind closed doors, she shared the insecurities she embodied growing up the daughter of poor Polish immigrants in the coal mining and steel mill suburbs of Pittsburgh just after the Depression. Her formative years were precarious, at best. She grew to become fiercely protective of the charmed life she had helped to build and, much like my mother, operated under the attitude that you had to look out for number one.

The nature of my reality, my truth if you will, was birthed by these women and my early experiences in their homes. I have come to realize that my drive comes from feeling deeply averse to ever facing the instability of being a minimally educated mother dependent on a husband, father, or boyfriend like my female role models.

As a child, I yearned for a sense of security. I understood that if I wanted to feel safe and provided for, I'd have to make it happen for myself. I had observed that the men in my life did not seem to suffer from the same insecurities that the women did. The one, major difference between them was that the men had careers, not just jobs. My father's

family owned a prosperous local business that had been started by my great-grandfather and his sons when they returned from WWII. The men in my father's family were driven and passionate about what they did. It was not unusual for them to work long days well into the evening or night, as well as weekends, and to do so without a complaint. Their work was their life; it defined who they were and seemed to make them happy – or at least content – and gave them a sense of purpose and a position of importance in the community. This observation rather early in life ingrained in me that having a career would be the key to my own liberation and the only way I'd be able to realize my full potential and ever really be satisfied with my life. Education would lead to a career that would give me a sense of control and power in my life, much like the men in my life, but very unlike the women.

For nearly my entire adult life, I have been in a happy and nurturing relationship with my husband, and as time has passed, my perspective about what I need to do in life in order to feel whole and safe has shifted. My husband and I are partners and work towards an egalitarian relationship. We try to share the second shift as equitably as possible; we have agreed that there should be no separate spheres in our home. We are a united front and share the burdens and joys of life equally. We are not perfect, and at times we will slide into traditional roles and expectations for one another—especially when I am home for extended periods of time—but we are always willing to hear the other's views on the state of our relationship and work harder towards fulfilling our commitment to each other and our values.

Even though I had always pulled my own weight in our relationship, I had become somewhat lackadaisical in my pursuit of a career that would allow me to be

entirely self-sufficient. While in graduate school pursuing my master's degree, I gave birth to my daughter, our only child. Her arrival caused me to re-examine my life and who I had become. My daughter renewed a sense of urgency in me to achieve. The little girl who delights in playing with my jewelry and clothes so that we can be 'twins', who tells stories about when she grows up and is a 'doctor student', and who relies on me to show her how to be a woman, ignited a drive that I haven't felt in many years. I want to be a pillar of strength for her, a mother who is competent in all areas of her life. I want to be an example of what to do, not what not to do. I want her to be fearless in her academic and career pursuits and never feel like her livelihood is in someone else's hands. I want her to feel powerful. My concern for her identity development has renewed my desire to achieve.

Pursuing a master's degree and then a doctorate while mothering a small child is fraught with challenges. Yes, my daughter will grow up with a mother who is highly educated, has a fulfilling career, and who is completely, financially self-sufficient, unlike the women who occupied the major roles in my life as a child. However, my concern is that I may be overlooking and sacrificing the good aspects of my childhood (large quantities of quality time) in order to ensure that she never endures anything like the bad aspects of my childhood (fear brought on by a reliance on others and financial instability stemming from inadequate education). Her immediate, as well as ultimate, well being is a driving force in all that I do, but am I really doing the right thing for her by putting my family through the ordeal that college can be for adult students and their families? Was pursuing parts of my education online really easier on my family than if I would have studied in traditional programs?

These questions wore on me. They ultimately led me to conduct a pilot study called “The Work/Life Balance of Student-Mothers in Online Graduate Programs” as a class project. The study affirmed my suspicion that other student-mothers faced very similar struggles and asked themselves very similar questions to mine. Every woman I interviewed stressed the importance of this topic and thanked me for bringing their stories to the forefront. It is valuable and necessary work.

As my daughter grew and I made progress in my program, guilt began to set in. I had an 80 mile commute to my campus and semesters that saw me there two or three times a week in the afternoon, evenings, and at night. When I was in class or researching my topic or talking with other students I felt invigorated, excited, fully alive and functioning at a level that I have never experienced. Then I would call home to say I was on my way and hear her tiny, sweet voice asking if I would be home in time to kiss her goodnight or read her a story... and I had to say no. My academically induced elation would fall like a cold rain around me leaving me soaked and chilled to the bone with feelings of inadequacy as a mother. I felt selfish, neglectful, and ashamed that I could love anything so much that I would let it take me away from her, disappointing her. I decided that I didn't want to feel this way anymore.

When I finished my last class my academic progress slowed down. I prepared for comprehensive exams at a leisurely pace while I took on more obligations at my daughter's school and added more extracurricular activities to her schedule. After my comprehensive exam in the fall, I told myself I would finish my revisions in a month, give or take. But there were lessons and meetings and play dates to attend and I would not let her miss one let alone not be there to supervise or cheer her on. I was home, after

all. I had the time and flexibility to be available to her when she needed me. Then I promised myself I would finish over the spring semester. I worked as a TA for the first time that semester and was surprised by how much satisfaction and pleasure working with students online gave me and how natural it felt. Still, I was enjoying mothering so much I allowed myself to be swept up in it like a new love affair, only vaguely noticing other aspects of my life outside of motherhood, specifically my dissertation. Then summer arrived. How could I possibly tell my little girl ‘no’ when she asked me to play or read or just be with her? I rationalized that this was my last chance to be at home with her for an entire, uninterrupted summer. Our last hurrah as the quasi stay-at-home mom and her adoring little girl, so thankful for the attention she lacked when Mama was taking classes on campus. I reveled in mothering her and wrapped myself up in its comfortableness like an old quilt. My dissertation was steadily fading away, an old friend I thought about fondly on occasion, but one I was beginning to forget and felt much less obligated too.

During my dissertation hiatus, situations would arise that would make me pause and think. For instance, it seemed that the longer I was away from my life as a student taking traditional classes, the less I appeared to be a student to my family. They were forgetting school, too, and gradually, their expectations for me changed. I was expected to take on more of the responsibilities of the full-time stay-at-home mom that I seemed to now be. My dissertation was relegated to the status of a hobby, and one that was now just barely tolerated. Their weariness with my long trek as a graduate student was expressed much more readily, often in conjunction with praise for taking such good care

of them...now. I began to see myself more and more as mostly a stay-at-home mom and less and less as a doctoral student. Out of sight, out of mind, they say.

Still, I would think about the other women like me. I would wonder about their stories. I realized that my blissful time with my daughter, away from my work, really made my research even more important. I had been indulging myself entirely in mothering or entirely with school and felt enormous regret and guilt in the midst of both, each for the other. I had become Dr. Dolittle's Pushmi-pullyu (pronounced push me - pull you)—an unfortunate creature that looks similar to a llama, but with a head on each end of its body. The student side of myself would lead for a time, pulling along my family in return causing them to pull harder on my family life side, leaving academia trailing behind. This constant tension in my life brought me back to my work. Other student-mothers might be feeling this turmoil. A true work/life balance has been elusive for me; I struggle to feel like a real student and a good mother harmoniously. Is it possible for others? I decided to re-visit my old friend and make our relationship a priority; there are stories that need to be told.

### **Problem Statement**

A significant number of students enrolled in distance education programs are mothers (Radford, 2011). In 2011-12, 61.5% of undergraduate students taking online classes were women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). According to Radford's report for the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), 55% of undergraduate students pursuing distance education in 2007-8 had at least one dependent and 40% were married. Additionally, Radford (2011, p. 13) found that "62% of all

undergraduates enrolled in a distance education degree program were employed full time”.

A conundrum exists. Moore and Kearsley (2012) relay that the majority of distance education students are between the ages of 25 and 50, which happen to be the prime child-bearing and child-rearing years for women (Fredrikson-Goldsen & Scharlach, 2001). In 2010, the average age to become a first-time mother in the United States among all women was 25.4 (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Osterman, Wilson, & Mathews, 2012) but thirty-six percent of college educated women wait until after age 30 to have their first child (Mason & Ekman, 2007). This trend could prove to be a regretful decision for some women as infertility is an issue for one-third of couples when the woman is over the age of 35 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

Women students, who want a family as well as a career, have difficult decisions to make regarding their personal and professional lives. They can decide to put off starting a family until degree completion in favor of trying at an older age and at a time when their careers are beginning, or they can juggle new motherhood and their studies (Devos, Viera, Diaz, & Dunn, 2007; Kuperberg, 2009; Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). It is also possible that they are beginning their degrees with children in tow, raising a family while dealing with the demands of life as a college student (Lynch, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Murphy & Cloutier-Fisher, 2002; Plageman, 2011; Prins, Campbell, & Kassab, 2014; Scott, 1993; Williams, 2007).

There is a plethora of data available about working mothers, as well as student-mothers pursuing higher education in traditional settings (Butler, Bass, & Grzywacz, 2009; Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009; Ingman, 2006; Mason & Eckman, 2007; Mason &

Goulden, 2002; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Pare, 2009; Scott, 1993; Vaccaro & Lovell), yet I have found gaps in the literature concerning the research question: what are the lived experiences of rural Pennsylvanian student-mothers pursuing higher education online? We do not have a full understanding of the interactions of the most significant aspect of their lives—paid work, home life, and school—and how these aspects are balanced. We also do not know why women balance the competing aspects of their lives in the ways that they do or if there is a trend in how they go about doing so.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the lived experiences of student-mothers from rural Pennsylvania pursuing higher education online. The student-mothers currently have multiple areas in their lives that demand a great deal of their time and attention, but when all of their mothering activities are condensed into one, mothering activity system, there are two primary aspects of their lives that demand most of their focus: mothering and online learning. It should be noted that, for this study, I chose to combine paid employment, which is also a major aspect of their lives, with mothering. I did so because a goal of mothering for the student-mothers is to raise happy, healthy, well-adjusted children who feel loved, and the participants in this study all said that their paid work is a tool they use to achieve that goal.

I looked closely at these two core foci of their lives, with their socio-historically influenced rural contexts always in mind, and have created a detailed portrait of their complex experiences with education and mothering, past and present. This holistic picture allows us to see the women in their entirety and to better understand how and why their experiences are what they are. This knowledge will allow higher education

institutions to understand student-mothers' needs, challenges, motives, and goals in a way that they never have. And, this understanding could lead to programs and services developed with student-mothers in mind, which in turn could mean higher levels of satisfaction and goal attainment by others like the women in this study.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study consists of eight chapters. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature regarding the most salient aspects of the lives of student-mothers, living in rural Pennsylvania while pursuing higher education online. The chapter consists of an overview of the extant adult and distance education, family theory, and feminist theory literature as well as a discussion of the research regarding work and mothering, mothering while in college, the student-mother identity, the role of the family, student-mothers' priorities, positive aspects of being a student-mother, online student-mothers, and the rural Pennsylvania context. Chapter 3 focuses on the theoretical framework, specifically Cultural Historical Activity Theory, or CHAT. Supporting theories are also discussed: feminist theory and feminist family theories. Chapter 4 describes the research design. The primary research approach, phenomenology, and specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology, are defined and explored in relation to the study topic. Next, my positionality as a researcher and ethics are examined. Lastly, the aspects of data collection and analysis are described. Chapters 5 and 6 loosely follow the qualitative interviewing technique described by Seidman (2006) in his book, *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Chapter 5 consists of the detailed life histories of each of the five student mothers—Amy, Charlotte, Hannah, Mary Ann, and Sarah—as well as their histories in their rural homes,

their decision to stay or become rural, the positive and negative aspects of rural life, and stories about their lives growing up, specifically focused on issues with their mothers, gender roles in their homes, and their families' educational and work backgrounds.

Chapter 6 is focused on their lives now, as student-mothers. The chapter is divided into sections on their home and family, paid employment, online degree program, and the sacrifices they make in order to do it all. Chapter 7 is the CHAT analysis. Two activity systems—the mothering activity system and the online learning activity system—and the activity system network are discussed. Finally, the contradictions that student-mothers face are explored. Chapter 8 is the final chapter and the discussion of findings.

References and Appendices are listed at the end of the paper.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Geographic context, socioeconomic status, gender roles, and educational delivery format influence student-mothers' experiences (Furst, Bowe, & Dittman, 2001; Jackson, 2003; Kramarae, 2002; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Noonan, 2001; Orr, 2005; Pare, 2009; Prins, Campbell, & Kassab, 2014; Pruitt, 2008; Stalker, 2001; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). In this chapter, I specifically focus on the effects that living in rural Pennsylvania, while pursuing higher education online, have on student-mothers' experiences as they try to balance the multiple roles they embody. In order to explore the impact of these factors, and any possible interaction between them, I have conducted an examination of the extant adult and distance education, feminist theory, and family theory research and, although I have readily found research about mothers' work/life balance, I have found research or data about the experiences of rural student-mothers, student-mothers in online programs, and of rural student-mothers in online programs, specifically, to be less abundant.

The deficiency on the topic is especially apparent in the preeminent tomes—those that are most notable and significant—in the fields of adult and distance education. For example, little attention is paid to the experience of student-mothers in the 2000 or the 2010 edition of the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* or in *The Oxford Handbook of Lifelong Learning*. There is a chapter that focuses on feminist theories in the most recent edition of the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* and chapters on rural community development, distance education and lifelong learning, and adult learners in higher education in the 2000 handbook, as well as acknowledgements that adult students are a varied group throughout both books (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-

Gordon, 2010; Wilson, & Hayes, 2000). But, there is no focus on students who are mothers and their experiences, let alone any mention of those who are from rural areas or who are in online programs. The offerings in *The Oxford Handbook of Lifelong Learning* are similar with only one chapter dealing with gender role stereotypes in general (London, 2011).

The most recent editions of the most widely utilized texts in the field of distance education have also ignored student-mothers, instead focusing on history and concepts, developing theories, course design and technology, teaching, and the administration of distance education. To a lesser extent and more broadly, the distance education student is discussed. In *Distance Education: A Systems View of Online Learning*, Moore and Kearsley (2012) devote just one paragraph to the rural student and parenting student, both of which were first-hand accounts from students and not in-depth, scholarly explorations of the experiences. In the third edition of the *Handbook of Distance Education* (Moore, 2013), learners are written about as just that, learners, nothing else. One chapter in the handbook looks at online student persistence, but does not consider issues outside of the virtual classroom that might lead to attrition. Another chapter considers online student satisfaction with their experiences in the online class, but not holistically as an online student.

Students are more than just students. They are often simultaneously parents, workers, volunteers, family members, and friends. Based on my own experience as an online student and mother as well as the extant distance education literature (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001; Kramarae, 2000; Moore & Kearsley 2012; Orr, 2005; Stavredes & Herder, 2013), I contend that their experiences as online students—including their

satisfaction, success, and persistence—are greatly effected by all of the other roles they embody. The online class typically takes place in the student’s home, or sometimes in their workplace, where life (complicated by context, such as being rural) is also taking place all around them, pulling them away, cognitively and even physically, from their school work.

Certain I would be successful in my task to find descriptions of the current experiences of student-mothers, and possibly rural student-mothers, I consulted a total of eight texts on feminist theory and research. I was moderately disappointed with my findings. I found two-thirds of one page devoted to the family in the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* and two short essays on mothering in *Modern Feminisms* (Code, 2000; Heilbrun & Miller, 1992). The book, *Feminist Thoughts*, dedicates about half of one chapter to debating reproduction and mothering (Putnam Tong, 1998). There are two essays—one about mothering and the other about working mothers—in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, the former being thirty years-old and the latter being one hundred years-old (Kolmar & Bartowski, 2013). In *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Tradition*, the term ‘mother’, or a permutation of it, is found throughout the book with particular attention to working mothers and mothers balancing conflicting roles in two different chapters, one about Marxist Feminism and one about Twentieth-Century Cultural Feminism, but again most references were at least thirty-years-old (Donovan, 2012). Another chapter on Marxist Feminism is also where I found a four page discussion about ‘women’s work’ in *Doing Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity*. Most of the cited sources in the chapter were from the late 1960s to the early 1990s (Mann, 2012). I found nothing about families or motherhood in *The Handbook of Feminist*

*Research or in Feminist Theories and Education* (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Villaverde, 2008).

In all, mothering and work/family issues are represented, if just briefly, in six of the eight texts, with most essays and references being between twenty and one hundred years old.

However, mothering and work/family issues are currently well-represented topics in texts specifically focused on these concepts, many of which are from a feminist perspective. For instance, I consulted approximately two dozen works about motherhood while writing this dissertation, and although some were more than twenty-years-old, most were contemporary (Arendell 2000; Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Baber, 2009; Baraister, 2009; Bianchi, 2009; Chae, 2015; Chodorow, 1978; Christopher, 2012; Devos, Viera, Diaz, and Dunn, 2007; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Duarte & Goncalves, 2007; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Kuperberg, 2009; Liss, Schiffron, & Rizzo, 2012; Mason & Eckman, 2007; McCormick, 2010; Miller, 2005; Murphy & Cloutier-Fisher, 2002; Orr, 2005; Pare, 2009; Rich, 1986; Scott, 1993; Smart, 1996; Ward & Wolf-Wendell, 2008).

It is also with family theories that I have found books and chapters about the work/life balance and mothering experiences. Each of the half dozen or so texts that I consulted have entire chapters dedicated to the topic, some from the feminist perspective. Still, I have yet to find a single mention of rural mothers or online student-mothers in any of the texts I have encountered.

I have found much more variety of topics in the journals I have consulted. Indeed, I have found that there is a plethora of details available about working and student-mothers in general. But still, there are a number of gaps in the literature concerning the work/life balance of student-mothers in online higher education programs and nothing about those who live in rural areas or in Pennsylvania, specifically. I have concluded

that we do not yet have a full understanding of how each aspect of the student-mothers' lives—paid work, home life, geographic context, extended family, social life, or the format of the higher education programs—interact and are balanced. We also do not know why women balance them in the ways that they do, how their history and culture figures in, or if there are trends in how they go about balancing their lives.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will conduct a critical review of the extant literature with the intent of developing a better understanding of the experiences of student-mothers from rural areas of Pennsylvania who are enrolled in online programs. As there is a paucity of literature on this very specific population, I will utilize research about each individual aspect of the population: work and mothering, mothering while pursuing higher education, online student-mothers, information about being rural and rural Pennsylvanians, and data about internet access in rural Pennsylvania. A preliminary understanding of each of these aspects is essential to developing a more holistic perspective about these women.

### **The Work/School/Life Balancing Act**

For the purposes of this study, when I use the terms 'mother', 'mothering' or 'motherhood', I mean women who are living the role of primary caregiver to at least one minor child and whose decisions in other areas of their lives are affected, and determined, by this role (caregiving may be shared with a partner, making them co-primary caregivers).

### **Work and Mothering**

Information about working mothers is readily available. We know—at least among the white-collar women that Mason and Ekman (2007) interviewed in their

book—that they are often not as professionally successful as their male counterparts and that they often (but not always) have work environments that are family friendly (Mason & Ekman, 2007), but that they are inclined to report rather negative feelings about their work/life balance (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009). Professional working mothers also do not tend to achieve the success that working fathers experience. Mason and Ekman (2007) found that while 84% of male CEOs are married with children, only 49% of women enjoy the equivalent lifestyle. To add, 70% of male, tenured faculty members are married with children but only 44% of female, tenured faculty members have children and a spouse. This may be because many women defer to their husband's careers or opt out of the workforce to raise young children, returning when they are older, which causes them to fall behind their same-age male peers in rank and position (Mason & Ekman, 2007). Unfortunately, working women still believe that they have to make choices between work and family and often feel guilty no matter what decision they make (Mason & Ekman, 2007; Mason & Goulden, 2002).

Nevertheless, there are women, who choose to work, who may find themselves working for companies with family friendly policies. In addition to the Federally required leave mandated by the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (United States Department of Labor, n.d.), many companies now offer employees extended leave after childbirth, part-time options, and telecommuting options (Mason & Ekman, 2007). Some even offer on-site daycare (Mason & Ekman, 2007). Companies that offer such family-friendly policies report much higher success at retaining talented and valuable female employees (Mason & Ekman, 2007). However, these companies are in the minority (Mason & Ekman, 2007).

Mason and Ekman's (2007) findings are quite intriguing, but the question remains: what about working or solidly middle-class women, those in blue-collar jobs, those whose employers are inhospitable to the needs of their workers' families, or those who have not reached the highest echelons of professional success? How do they fare with regards to success in their careers when compared to their male counterparts? Do they even have the same outlook on success as the women studied by Mason and Ekman, whose data also does not delineate between rural, urban, and suburban women? How does the 'average' mother balance work and family?

Even though many working mothers are able to achieve some amount of success in their careers and often work for organizations that are more likely than ever to support their choice to parent, in their phenomenological study of ten mothers of pre-teen children working in academic positions, Hirakata and Daniluk (2009) found a number of common themes among mothers in academic careers that are rather negative. Regarding their work/life balance, they all reported feeling—at one time or another—a sense of vulnerability, isolation, compromise, inadequacy, stress, and pressure. However, all women also reported that they felt they had made positive gains in their personal lives as well as in their careers.

I think it is important to note that as plentiful as the data is about working mothers in general, Butler, Bass, and Grzywacz (2009) state that detailed information about the ways they balance work with family (work/family balance defined as an absence of conflict between the two aspects) is lacking. At the time of their quantitative study that focused only on non-professional women, Butler et al. (2009, p.23), found “few empirical

studies on the subject and no longitudinal studies of which [they were] aware.” These findings could be different with populations of professional women.

### **Mothering While in College**

When asked to define ‘work’, many Americans would describe paid employment, when in fact there are “three worlds of work: market work, civic work, and family work”, all of which can be paid or unpaid (Moen & Kelly, 2009, p.47). Student-mothers are a group of—typically unpaid—working mothers who are not always offered the same job security as those in traditional, paid employment such as market (corporate) or civic (non-profit) work. Conversely, student-mothers are engaged in domestic, caring, and development (personal growth via continuing education) work (Code, 2000; Moen & Kelly, 2009). For example, the Family and Medical Leave Act does not protect them, unlike other working women in general, (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). They cannot be sure that their assistantships, or spot in their programs, will be waiting for them if they take time off to have a baby or care for a sick child. But, they have similar financial and family concerns as their traditionally employed counterparts.

Adult women with families attend college for many reasons. Some took time off from the workforce when their children were young and then go back to school to enhance their credentials in the hopes of a better job (Scott, 1993). Some had never been to college and go, again, for a chance at better paying employment (Scott, 1993). Many find that it is impossible to support a family on just their husbands’ income while others find themselves without a partner and the sole breadwinner for their family (Scott, 1993). All of these reasons tend to make student-mothers ideal students, committed to success.

They are not attending school just for themselves, but for the betterment of their families (Scott, 1993).

Scott (1993) conducted a quantitative study of 118 student-mothers. Initially upon reading that her participants ranged in age from 34 – 60, I postulated that women from such a large range across the lifespan would provide reports on an equally large range of experiences, and this was true. But Scott (1993) accounted for this when she conducted a multivariate analysis and found that women of roughly the same age range tended to have the same types of experiences. For instance, younger women with younger children reported role overload while the oldest women in the sample felt out of place in their courses because of their age and reasons for attending (Scott, 1993). This study could help me to understand my participants' motives for pursuing higher education as well as any possible differences in motives or experiences that might arise between different age groups of student-mothers.

The one flaw I can find with Scott's study is its age. Her results were published in 1993, making them over twenty-years-old. Much has changed in higher education and our culture in the last twenty years. This does not make her findings invalid, but it is a point to consider.

In a more recent commentary on the experiences of student-mothers, Ingman (2006) shares that, based on her own experiences as a student-mother and observations of other student-mothers navigating academia, women who have a family while in school commonly describe all that they do as fragmented and often as "simultaneous" (Ingman, 2006, p.54). The "schizophrenically divided spheres of public and private life" (Ingman, 2006, p. 54) are not just overwhelming, frustrating, and distracting, they can be

maddening (Ingman, 2006). This juggling act has even been called a mental burden on student-mothers (Moreau & Kerner, 2012).

But how do women from different SESs and women in different contexts fare regarding help with domestic chores? Deutsch and Schmertz (2011), in their qualitative study of 13 adult women, from differing walks of life, pursuing a Bachelor's degree from two different single-sex institutions, ten of whom were mothers, found that women see themselves as primarily responsible for the care of their families and homes. Lundberg, McIntire, and Creasman (2008) conducted a cross-sectional study of 196 entry-level and graduating adult, undergraduate students pursuing a Bachelor's degree while employed full-time. They found that adult women reported receiving some instrumental (housework) help from their spouses and children, but not enough (Lundberg, McIntire, & Creasman, 2008). According to Usdansky and Parker (2011)—who drew data from the 2003 and 2006 national American Time Use Survey to study the experiences of 4,246 adult women, who were employed at least 35 hours per week—married mothers without a college degree spend about 10% more time each week on housework than college educated, married mothers. Additionally, women who earn higher levels of income, regardless of their educational background, do less housework than lower paid women, on average (Usdansky & Parker, 2011). According to these studies women still tend to hold more traditional views about their role in their households, but as their incomes and/or educational attainment grows, their contributions to household tasks decrease slightly (Deutsch and Schmertz, 2011; Lundberg, McIntire, & Creasman, 2008; Usdansky & Parker, 2011).

Not only are they overwhelmed, but mothers are also pulled in multiple directions and often fear that some aspect of their lives will suffer neglect, according to Moreau and Kerner (2012) who conducted a policy analysis of ten universities throughout England utilizing case studies of both student-parents and student services professionals. Employers often demand flexibility, on-call status, or extended hours as needed. Families get sick and have appointments or school programs or meetings. Both work and families are unpredictable in what they will need next, and in how much. Both desire to be our primary focus. Add school to the mix and student-mothers have a third sphere vying for first place in their lives (Ingman, 2006; Pruitt, 2008). Mothers feel like “you can’t ever win” (Moreau & Kerner, 2012, p.39) and as if when one task is completed there is always something else they should do in order to be a good mom, student, or worker; the public and private spheres are bottomless pits that can seemingly never be filled (Moreau & Kerner, 2012). And, as roles collide and spill over onto each other, it can appear that nothing will ever be done well (Pare, 2009; Scott, 1993).

### **The Student-Mother Identity**

In the United States, women are now expected to work in many different types of situations while also “adher[ing] to the images and [all-consuming] activities of the stay-at-home mother” (Pare, 2009, p.74), if they want to be perceived as a ‘good’ mom (Pare, 2009, p.84), which has led to the superwoman myth, that declares that women can have it all and do it all...perfectly (Spar, 2013). Devos, Viera, Diaz, and Dunn (2007), in their two-part quantitative study of 55 traditionally aged undergraduate women without children and 73 undergraduate women aged 18 – 27 — one with children—found that women who identify with the concept of motherhood have difficulty linking their concept

of self to their role as student, that the roles of mother and student do not meld but exist independently and in opposition to each other. Women struggle to see themselves as both mother and student at the same time because motherhood is often seen as “an intense role that should override other identities...(Pare, 2009, p.85).”

Women report that they prioritize their role and identity as mother over school for many reasons. Predominantly though, because they think they can very easily and quickly “ruin” their children but that there are more chances to get school right, that “school will always be there” but children only grow up once (Pare, 2009, p.89). Student-mothers also report not feeling a connection to their campus or like they are not a part of the campus culture. Pare (2009) explains that they do not tend to participate in extracurricular activities, have feelings of being a fraud/not a real student, and as if they stand out; it is not easy to prioritize a role that does not feel natural or that one does not feel welcome in (Pare, 2009).

This idea of the role of motherhood is important. I think student-mothers’ perceptions of themselves as mothers, workers, and students will affect their satisfaction with, and success in, all the roles they embody, based on Pare’s (2009) findings. However, in her phenomenological study of 24 undergraduate and graduate student-mothers from multiple different fields, Pare (2009) only studied women between the ages of 18 and 30 with children under the age of five, criteria that I think are too strict. It is not unusual to find mothers well over thirty with young children or women under the age of thirty with children over the age of five. Moreover, I think that women with school age children and those over thirty also struggle with the multiple roles they juggle. When geographic context is added as an aspect to the mix of identities, student-mothers’

experiences become exceedingly complex. I want to understand all of these experiences and the meaning that is made from them, as well.

### **The Role of the Family**

Student-mothers report that they receive enough support from family and friends to allow them to be good mothers and good students, but Pare (2009), upon delving deeper, found these assertions to be less than accurate. Pare (2009) found that what often appeared to be their husbands' support was in reality, more like their husbands' permission to attend school, as there was very little proof of any actual emotional or other types of concrete support from the men. Additionally, the women seemed to be apologetic about their decisions to go to school, defending the choice as temporary, which led Pare (2009) to believe her conclusion is correct.

Many women considered their husbands' primary support to be financial and explained away the men's lack of other types of support as okay because his paid work is so crucial to the families' survival. Very few of the women Pare (2009) studied reported receiving concrete support from their husbands but those who did said that their husbands took on more housework, emotional work, childcare, and even changed their work schedules to support their wives.

Most women in Pare's (2009) study also receive support from their extended families, primarily in the form of childcare. Though this support can sometimes be problematic when their families expect something in return from the already stretched thin student-mothers, the women vehemently expressed their thankfulness for what they received. Women reported receiving free childcare – both through babysitting and

through cash gifts used towards childcare costs - from parents, stepparents, grandparents, and friends.

Pare's (2009) argument leads to further questions about the support that student-mothers need, receive, and do not receive. These inquiries could result in a deeper and richer understanding of the experiences of rural student-mothers pursuing higher education online, specifically in regards to their experiences balancing school and family. They include: Are extended family members more likely to support younger women or women with younger children? Does the age of the mother affect her feelings about support given by her family? Does context have a part to play in family and spousal support? Are rural families more or less likely to offer support and why. Also, what level and kind of support do rural husbands tend to offer and why? How much and what kind of support do rural student-mothers ask for and receive? What motivates them to ask for what they do? Do online student-mothers need the same amount of support as those in traditional programs?

### **Student-Mothers' Priorities**

There is always something going on in the lives of student-mothers, but they are often resilient and find a way to juggle it all, explain Vaccaro and Lovell (2010), whose qualitative study looked at the educational engagement of adult women pursuing higher education. They work at night, during lunch, on weekends, and when the kids are playing. They work during their commutes, listening to recorded notes in their cars and reading chapters on the train. They make school a priority, though a secondary priority to motherhood (Pare, 2009), and ask that others in their lives respect the hard work they are

doing and have patience while they balance the public and private spheres (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010).

Accordingly, even though family usually comes first with student-mothers, school is a very close second. Pare (2009) shares that student-mothers are not averse to rearranging their schedules to fit their school work or classes. They also must have tough decisions with their children about why the children's needs cannot always be immediately met when their mother is working under a deadline for school. Some women handle this by setting study times that they ask their families to respect with the understanding that when it is no longer study time, mother's attention can be fully theirs. Student-mothers must also hope that their extended families will understand when they must choose to focus on school rather than attend a family event, for instance. Prioritizing school higher than family is often difficult but occasionally necessary (Pare, 2009).

The ways that student-mothers prioritize their time will be especially important to my study. Acknowledging the impact of the rural context may also illuminate the motivating factors behind the decisions they make concerning how they prioritize their time. Pare (2009) found the mothers she studied to be rather altruistic, always putting others or school first. Women do not automatically become martyrs when they have children; do student-mothers put themselves first and how do they feel about those times? Will they discuss 'selfish' pursuits and why they view them in that light? Uncovering the answers to these questions will deepen our understanding of this population's experiences.

### **Positive Aspects of Being a Student-Mother**

Not all aspects of balancing school and family are negative. Pare (2009) found that many women in her study felt that being a mother helped them to be better students. Being a mother taught them transferable skills such as planning, being structured, being motivated, being organized, scheduling, and creating a routine.

Moreau and Kerner (2012) and Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) explain that their children are also a major motivator for student-mothers. Wanting a better life for their families is a strong motivator. Additionally, many student-mothers state that they want to be positive role models for their children and that by going to school while balancing home and, many times, work, their children will grow up seeing a strong work ethic. They also want their children to know that a college education is a possibility for them, that they can do anything if they work hard enough. Modeling educational excellence and motivation to succeed, drives many student-mothers to continue with their studies (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010).

### **Online Student-Mothers**

Women in online programs also face the challenges confronted by all other students: preparing for exams, writing papers, working with classmates. But, Kramarae (2000) in her study that utilized interview and survey data from over 500 women and men, found that they face a struggle that is often much more difficult than what men face when they embark into distance education; women tend to be the primary caregivers in their homes as well as equal or sole breadwinners. This means that mothers in online classes often have three shifts of work: one that is for paid work, a second for domestic work, and a third for their studies that often occurs late at night or very early in the

morning while the rest of their household is asleep (Kramarae, 2000). Not surprisingly, women often feel that they have difficulty juggling all three shifts and that they need their family's support, much like Cloutier-Fisher (2002) and Lynch (2008) found in their studies of traditional graduate students (Kramarae, 2000; Orr, 2005).

Families may be supportive in words but not always in actions, especially as the mother's workload begins to interfere with their lives. Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001), in their qualitative study of 40 women enrolled in distance education courses, found that mothers in online programs think the programs are much more difficult and time-consuming than traditional courses, causing frustration amongst the students and their families. Women will sometimes hide their work from their families to satiate family members who may feel abandoned by their scholastic endeavors and to alleviate their own guilt. Women report feeling the most guilt over lost time with their children and feeling much less guilt about neglecting their housework and/or husbands (Kramarae, 2000). Orr's (2005) finding—based on in-depth interviews and demographic surveys with three women—that student-mothers in online programs claim their number one priority is their children, supports this sentiment.

Difficulties notwithstanding, many women choose and thrive in online programs. They frequently choose online programs for their convenience: seventy-five percent doing so to further their careers or to get a better job (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001). And, women report that they like distance learning for many reasons. Among them: they do not have to travel and be away from their families to attend class, they do not have to pay for childcare, and classes tend to be asynchronous giving them flexibility to work during convenient times (Kramarae, 2000).

These works by Kramarae (2000), Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001), and Orr (2005) will all be ‘diamond articles’ for me as I begin my own study. First, Kramarae’s (2000) article is a very large study with data from just over 500 participants. It also uses interview data from 53 men. I have toyed with the idea of interviewing my participants’ husbands and am pleased to see a study that highlights the importance of their voices being heard, in addition to their wives’, in the pursuit of understanding the complexity of their shared lives. Overall, I think the data garnered from Kramarae’s (2000) study make sturdy, general building blocks on which to build a more finely detailed, smaller scale study. Furst-Bowe and Dittmann’s (2001) study is much smaller, but had a similar age range of participants to the range that I will propose, 19-51 years-old. An issue that I have found with this study, however, is that it is again a very general study, looking at students only as students and not really as whole individuals with many factors affecting each aspect of their lives. Another issue is that not all participants were mothers and those who were all had children over the age of 8, losing the experience of mothers of young children. Orr’s (2005) small study, on the other hand, focused only on mothers with small children, which I think may fill in some of the blanks left by Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001).

### **The pilot study.**

During the spring of 2013, I conducted a small, unpublished pilot study focused on the work/life balance of student-mothers in online graduate programs. I found that the difficulties brought on by balancing school, work, and family were often overwhelming. Themes revolving around their struggles arose and included: feelings of tiredness,

feeling overwhelmed, feelings of guilt, frustration from interruptions, and level and types of spousal support.

This pilot study began to answer some of the questions I have had about online student-mothers' experiences, specifically how what happens in their homes affect their school work: how they do school work at home and the obstacles they face in getting their work done, the role their spouses play in their success as students, and how they negotiate household work with school work. But, it also raised new questions, questions about their experiences as students in the online classroom. How do student-mothers pursuing higher education online find their place in their classes or programs? Do they feel isolated, and if so, how do the feelings of isolation affect them? Do they ever acquire a sense of community with others in their classes or programs? Uncovering this data will bring us closer to developing a more holistic understanding of their experiences.

### **Student-Mothers in Rural Pennsylvania**

Student-mothers in rural Pennsylvania are an insufficiently understood group. I describe them this way because there is extant literature about each descriptive term in their name, scant literature about a combination of the terms, and nothing currently in existence about the entire woman. In this section I will attempt to build a holistic understanding of this population.

#### **Who are Rural Pennsylvanians?**

According to Ritchey, who conducted a comprehensive literature review about rural Pennsylvania, 48 of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania are rural, which makes Pennsylvania one of the most rural states in the country (2006). And, by 2030, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that Pennsylvania will realize a 3% increase in rural population

bringing the rural population of Pennsylvania to about 3.57 million people (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014). But, what does the term ‘rural’ mean? The Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2003a) defines ‘rural’ simply as an area with fewer than 274 people per square mile. Ritchey (2006), on the other hand, asserts that ‘rural’ means more than just the number of people in a defined area. He says that for an area to be considered ‘rural’ there must be a low population density but also a feeling of “locally-based independence, intimacy with nature, and the importance of shared values and collective responsibility” (p. 3). Bracken (2008), in her literature review from her book chapter “Defining Rural Community (ies): Future Considerations for Informal and Non formal Adult Education in Rural Communities”, adds that rural residents usually have a shared history and stories, as well as a shared community life, while Galbraith (1992), in his book about education in rural communities, adds that rural communities also have limited access to resources - compared to their urban counterparts - and lack in diversity.

It should be noted that just because a place fits the numerical definition of rural, it might not be. For instance, college towns and rural resort communities may be sparsely populated and in isolated areas, but they do not have the other, necessary characteristics of rural communities explained earlier (Pruitt, 2008).

Rural Pennsylvanians are a homogenous group. The average adult in Pennsylvania tends to be white (92%), born in Pennsylvania, living in a family (73%) or married (52%) in a home they own (74%), and a high school graduate (87%)—only 19% of rural Pennsylvanians had a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2007-2011, while 30% of urban Pennsylvanians had completed some type of post-secondary degree; the average household income in 2007-2011 was \$57,826 (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014).

Notably, rural families are just as likely as non-rural families to be headed by a female but are slightly more likely to live in poverty, noted Pruitt (2008) in her overview called “Rural Families and Work-Family Issues. Struthers and Bokemeier (2000), in their examination of myths surrounding rural family life and interviews with rural parents, add that there is little demographic variation between rural and non-rural families. One difference is that rural women tend to marry and to have children at a slightly younger age.

There is also very little diversity in rural Pennsylvania, especially compared to the urban areas of the state where as much as 22% of the population is racially or ethnically diverse (Ritchey, 2006). In fact, Ritchey (2006), in his literature review, found that rural Pennsylvanians often report that they fear diversity. However, from 2000 to 2010 rural Pennsylvania became slightly more racially diverse, from 5% of the rural population reporting being non-white and/or Hispanic in 2000 to 8% in 2010 (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014).

Rural Pennsylvanians are also an aging group. There has been a steady and steep increase of the oldest elderly in rural PA. In 2000, the number of rural residents over the age of 85 grew by a striking 43%, which has put a major stressor on the rural healthcare system (Ritchey, 2006). In 2010, 17% of rural Pennsylvanians were over 65 and it is projected that 25% of rural Pennsylvanians will be over 65 by 2030 (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014).

Of the rural residents who were not born in PA, they usually report moving to the state for affordable housing and not for job opportunities. A majority of those new residents settle in the Northeastern section of the state and are often from New York state

or New Jersey (Richey, 2006). Ritchey (2006) explains that one reason new residents are not coming for jobs is because the market in the state has been changing over the last five decades causing a decline in the number of available, well-paying positions. Jobs in rural PA went from those in mining, steel, farming, and railroading – occupations that could sustain a family – to those mainly in service-oriented fields (Ritchey, 2006). These new types of jobs pay much less in rural areas compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, as well. According to Kusmin and Parker (2006), rural workers earn about 25% less than urban workers. Rural workers are also more likely to be in seasonal or part-time work, have more than one job, or be searching for a job than their non-rural counterparts (Pruitt, 2008).

Ritchey (2006) postulates that this change in the types of jobs available, from well-paying, family sustaining positions to service jobs, has become synonymous with the term ‘loss’ for many Pennsylvanians and that this feeling of loss has become ingrained in the being of many rural Pennsylvanians. Consequently, even though rural Pennsylvanians as a whole tend to value nature and their rural surroundings, they prioritize job creation and use of the land to make money or create jobs over its preservation (Ritchey, 2006).

### **Perceptions about Rural People: True, Untrue, and Shared**

Bracken (2008) explains that there is a disconnect between who rural people are, and how they are perceived, by non-rural people. Are these perceptions actually stereotypes and are they detrimental? Hilton and von Hippel (1996, p.238), in their review of the psychological literature about stereotypes state that, “stereotyping emerges in various contexts to serve particular functions necessitated by those contexts.” This is

in line with Struthers and Bokemeier's (2000, p.18) explanation that "Our understanding of rural areas is based on images presented to us in the media, our own experiences, and the stories that others tell us about their experiences and understandings." Hilton and von Hippel (1996, p.240) define stereotypes as "beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups...they are also theories about how and why certain attributes go together." They explain that there are two primary types of stereotypes, those that are based on real group differences and those that "are formed about various groups independent of real group differences" (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996, p.241). They note that stereotypes that are based on real group differences can have connotations that are as negative as those that are formed independent of real group differences but that are at the same time objectively positive when applied to members from outside the group. For instance, many non-rural people think that rural people embody agrarian ideals and that the rural economy is agriculturally based, when in fact only between seven and eleven percent of most rural jobs are agriculture based (Bracken, 2008). When one conjures an image of a rural person with agrarian ideals working in agriculture, it may be the stereotypical picture of an older farmer in dirty overalls and work boots on the same land owned by generations of his family doing his work the way it has always been done, averse to new ideas (Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000). But, when one conjures the image of an urban farmer who espouses agrarian ideals, we might think of the new, hip trend of rooftop agriculture or community based organic gardening, with a decidedly younger and possibly more educated or sophisticated 'farmer' working rented or newly acquired land.

According to Struthers and Bokemeier (2000, p.19), this rural ‘agrarian ideology’ is rather commonly known and consists of three parts: “strong value on the traditional two-parent family; second, an emphasis on individualism and independence; and third, a belief that rural people help each other in difficult circumstances.” The misconception that rural people are independent, shirking government aid, is quite false. Well-paying jobs are scarce in rural areas and even when two parents work, government assistance is sometimes needed. Unfortunately, the government social services net that many rural residents rely on has steadily decreased in size since the 1950s (Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000). Additionally, because others often think rural is synonymous with traditional and agrarian, they mistakenly believe that rural areas are safer than urban, that there is lower crime (Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000). Non-rural people also mistakenly believe that the majority of rural people have very conservative political views (Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000), when, according to Bracken (2008), it is not unusual to find that some hold progressive views, seeing issues as complex and multi-faceted, though most are politically conservative (Pruitt, 2008).

There are myths that abound and are believed by many people, both rural and non-rural, about rural life being safe and wholesome (Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000). On the contrary, domestic violence, child abuse, drug abuse, gangs, and alcohol abuse are just as, and sometimes more, prevalent in rural communities as in any other (Pruitt, 2008) as are firearms in the home (Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000).

At the same time, rural people sometimes identify with certain stereotypes; some even internalize the stereotypes leading to an “inferiority complex about their origins”, claim Herzog and Pittman (1995, p.5) who surveyed 100 rural college students in North

Carolina about their experiences with life in a rural area. Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977, p.656) in their quantitative study of 51 male and 51 female undergraduate students focused on the “self-fulfilling nature of social stereotypes”, found that, indeed, the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy seems to exist concerning cultural stereotypes. People might embrace stereotypes or perceptions about themselves and act accordingly.

There are, however, some perceptions, or stereotypes, that a majority of rural people will agree with about themselves, according to Bracken (2008) and Pruitt (2008). They self-identify as dealing with brain drain—more than half of the students surveyed by Herzog and Pittman (1995) said they will not return to their rural homes after graduation—, transportation issues, a lack of community monetary resources, community health care issues, educational access issues, widespread and often debilitating unemployment (Pickering, Harvey, Summers, & Mushinski, 2006) poverty, and - on a more positive note - having a strong connection to nature, family, their community and their faith (Bracken, 2008).

### **The Rural Family**

As important as it is to understand students’ demographic information when studying rural, working-class, adult women students, so, too, is an overview of the rural family, as most are living in a family (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014). Pruitt (2008, p. 1) points out that “Rural families experience considerable and distinct challenges in relationship to work-family issues. Human capital deficits, substandard child care, [entrenched gender based role expectations], transportation infrastructure, and limited economic diversity result in rural work contexts that are quite different from those experienced by urban families.” As trying as these issues can be, many families refuse to

leave because they believe the safety myths, do not want to break family and friend ties, or think that they need familial support. Many are also hesitant to leave places that they have generational ties to (Pruitt, 2008).

### **Family ties.**

Adults from rural areas are often hesitant to leave. Struthers and Bokemeier (2000) found that rural residents have strong connections, especially to their extended families, and to friends, co-workers, and even to the families of their ex-spouses. Herzog and Pittman (1995, p.18) conveyed that the college students in their study showed positive feelings related to rural life and that those feelings were directly connected to their “families, homes and small communities and with peace, safety, and caring.” In fact, many of their respondents reported choosing to pursue a career that would allow them to return home after college. Johnson, Elder, and Stern (2005, p.99)—in their quantitative study that utilized longitudinal data from the Iowa Youth and Families Project (n=391 households), investigating “the links between rural adolescents’ residential preferences and their plans for the future, perceptions of local opportunity, and ties to family and community” —discovered that living near relatives and family was moderately important to high school adolescents as well.

Adults in rural communities often depend on each other for financial and childcare help in addition to emotional support. However, contrary to a common myth about rural people, those from Struthers and Bokemeier’s (2000) and Johnson, Elder, and Stern’s (2005) studies did not report having connections to the community in general and stated that community ties were not motivating reasons to stay in their hometowns.

As useful as family ties can be to rural adults, they can be detrimental to student-mothers. Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) explain that family ties can cause behavior in student-mothers that looks as if they are not committed to their schoolwork, when in fact they are. For example, women might stop out or take on lighter workloads when there are issues in their families such as an illness, divorce, or when a family member is in a time of need. Some student-mothers experience mental absences, times when they are physically present in class but their minds are at home on their families (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). And, some student-mothers stop out just to get a break or in order to refocus on family (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Overall, though, student-mothers regularly return when they have fulfilled the needs of their families and typically are just as committed as ever (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010).

I think this idea that family is critical to the mother but also a hindrance is a key to understanding their experiences. In other areas of our lives we would discard aspects that are harmful to the ones most important or essential to our livelihood, fulfillment, or general happiness. But, when the most necessary and significant part of our lives, family, works to impede our progress (whether consciously or not) in another area of our lives, areas that require exhaustive amounts of deliberate and focused attention, a rather Earth shaking conflict can arise. We need to understand these conflicts so that we can help student-mothers achieve their goals.

### **Gender and the rural family.**

Rural women live overwhelmingly in traditional, conservative, and patriarchal contexts (Pruitt, 2008). Pruitt (2008) found that most value motherhood above paid employment, but must work at higher rates than urban women to help support their

families. And, even the more highly educated rural women tend to work in fields traditionally occupied by women, making less money than men, i.e. teaching. Those who do blue collar or working class work tend to also be employed in traditionally female, low-paid positions (Pruitt, 2008).

It can be postulated that living in a traditional environment while undertaking a non-traditional pursuit such as working or attending college could cause psychic distress in student-mothers (Pare, 2009). In fact, in their quantitative study on the “influence of motherhood on the implicit academic self-concept of female college students” (p.371) utilizing data from two experiments (n=55 and n=73), Devos, Viera, Diaz, and Dunn (2007, p. 382) found that “the conscious learning of gender equality [in college] leads female college students to reject traditional gender roles.” Interestingly though, Pare (2009), in her study of student-mothers, found that even after beginning school, student-mothers continued to feel responsible for most of the housework and childcare, even those with a partner who was able to take on more of the burden of household chores. Subsequently, even though they may reject the role, they still embody it. They personify the role so fully that student-mothers reported to Pare (2009) that while their skills at balancing multiple roles had improved, they continued to feel badly about the quality of their efforts, saying that they believed they could do more.

This housework – which includes emotional work, childcare, planning, shopping, cleaning, cooking, and other activities that keep a family running smoothly – is called the “second shift” and is often primarily the woman’s domain (Noonan, 2001, p.1134). “Women perform on average more than one and a half times the amount of housework as men perform, 33 hours versus 19 hours, respectively” (Noonan, 2001, p.1140). To add,

women's typical household tasks are the most inflexible and the most frequent, compared to men's (Noonan, 2001).

Women, who add school to their lives, have to make decisions about their household tasks that often include neglecting the tasks leading them to describe their homes as resembling "pigsty[s]" (Moreau & Kerner, 2012, p. 41). There is simply not enough time in the day to work, go to school, and take care of a home and family as if each task was the only task (Moreau & Kerner, 2012). Women who use this type of description about their homes – stemming from decisions they have made to shirk traditional gender roles – state a sense of guilt and an intense feeling of struggling even though, in most cases, their spouses have done little to pick up the slack (Moreau & Kerner, 2012). Fortunately, the women who make these comments also seem to understand that the pressure being placed on them is a cultural norm but that it does not have to define them (Moreau & Kerner, 2012).

These descriptions of the rural student-mother and her family paint a decidedly grim picture of her life. They also highlight important questions about student-mothers' experiences. The data collected in this study could uncover if the persona of the constantly struggling woman wracked with guilt over the state of her messy house really is the norm among rural student-mothers. The findings could also confirm if modern women, even modern rural women who have been described as being more traditional than their urban and suburban counterparts, really care so much about living up to cultural standards that they feel emotional suffering over situations such as dirty dishes and piles of laundry. If, in fact the women report that their home lives are in a shambles, the data could explicate what it is that drives them on. We could discover if it is simply

the promise of a larger paycheck and more certain job security...or if it is something else entirely.

### **Education and the rural family.**

Rural residents are more highly educated than ever, but still lag behind their non-rural peers in college degree attainment (Pruitt, 2008). In 2008, 22% of rural adults in Pennsylvania were college graduates compared to 34% of their urban peers (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2008b). A lack of easy access to educational opportunities is partially to blame (Prins, Campbell, & Kassab, 2014). Universities and even branch campuses or community colleges are often geographically dispersed so that it is not uncommon for a geographically isolated, rural student to be forced to drive long distances to attend classes (Prins et al., 2014). Additionally, Pruitt (2008) contends that when a student has no intention of leaving home for work, there is little incentive to make the sacrifices required to attain a college degree. Prins et al. (2014, p.130) explain that “...compared to their urban counterparts, rural students have less access to postsecondary institutions, higher transportation and/or relocation costs, and more limited email access, and are more likely to be first-generation students and to perceive college as ‘out of reach.’”

### **Characteristics of Rural Adult Students in Pennsylvania**

Prins et al. (2014), in their study of students pursuing postsecondary education in Pennsylvania utilizing data from the 2010/2011 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and interviews with financial aid administrators, found that 20% of FAFSA applicants from Pennsylvania were from rural counties. This is noteworthy because 31% of Pennsylvania’s residents over the age of twenty are from rural counties. Thirty-two

percent of these applicants were adults over age 24. Prins et al. (2014) found that, of these rural, adult students, 23% had never attended college before. Thirty-nine percent reported pursuing a bachelor's degree, 45% an associate's degree of some type, 12.5% a certificate or diploma, and approximately 4% reported pursuing a teaching credential or other program. According to Prins et al. (2014), the great majority of the students, 79%, said they would be pursuing higher education full-time, 33% at four-year institutions, 18% at a community college, and 49% at a technical or other type of school. Ninety-one percent reported that they would live off campus. Prins et al. (2014) also found that 66% of adult, rural, FAFSA applicants in Pennsylvania are women and the average age of all adult, rural applicants was 33.5 years. Fifty-six and a half percent of all adult, rural, FAFSA applicants in Pennsylvania are married while 58% had dependent children. Notably, an overwhelming majority, 93%, had been residents of Pennsylvania for at least five years prior to applying for financial aid (Prins et al., 2014).

What do these numbers tell us about rural student-mothers in Pennsylvania who are FAFSA applicants? First, a small number of FAFSA applicants are rural residents but about a third of those are adults, only a quarter of whom had never been to college before. Approximately three-quarters are women and the majority of them are married with children. Consequently, married rural mothers make up a significant proportion of rural FAFSA applicants in Pennsylvania.

### **Obstacles to education.**

Rural women face a number of obstacles when pursuing higher education. Financial issues, a resistance to education, and misogyny are the three issues focused on in this section.

### ***Financial need.***

Prins et al. (2014) explain that rural, adult learners from Pennsylvania have very different financial situations than traditional students. Many find themselves in precarious job situations where their employment is not guaranteed over the long term and “they are not dependents and do not rely on parents’ income; they are raising families; they may take classes sporadically as their financial situation, employment status, and personal responsibilities allow; and they do not necessarily intend to complete a 4-year or even 2-year degree, opting instead to seek certification (e.g., Police Academy), specialized training, or professional development (Prins et al., 2014, p.133).” To add, many rural, adult students in Pennsylvania are not financially secure. Prins et al. (2014) found that 43% of adult, rural, 2010/2011 FAFSA applicants in Pennsylvania live at or below the poverty level. Sixteen percent live above but within 150% of the poverty level and 41.5% live at least 150% above the poverty level. Those who live within 200% of the poverty line are considered working poor. According to The Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2008b), 19% of rural Pennsylvanian adults are classified in this category. Nearly a quarter, 23%, reported being or having a spouse that is a dislocated worker (Prins et al., 2014). Additionally, 26% of rural households have at least one unemployed adult (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2008).

Thus, approximately half of rural adult students are living in or near poverty and many report having a dislocated worker or unemployed adult in their households. In their longitudinal study utilizing “hierarchical linear modeling analysis conducted with 98 low-income families...at or below 150% of federal poverty line”, Santiago, Etter, Wadsworth, and Raviv (2011, p. 239 & 242) found that poor families in stressful situations often

negatively cope by avoiding or denying the stressful situation or using wishful thinking. Santiago et al. (2011, p.255) state “unhelpful patterns of responding to stress feed off of each other and become stable over time.” Meanwhile, the children living in the home observe these negative coping mechanisms and often emulate them or display other maladaptive behaviors that can lead to psychological problems and long term developmental issues including difficulties with emotion regulation, effective problem-solving, and positive thinking (Santiago et al., 2011). The financial stress that rural families face is real and disturbing to all members of the family, compounding and prolonging the suffering brought on by their financial insecurity (Santiago et al., 2011). This type of stress could negatively affect student-mothers’ success in their online programs, thus significantly impacting their experiences as student-mothers.

### ***Resistance to schooling.***

Family values and expectations, quality and relevance of education, and misunderstandings between teachers and students encompass the reasons working-class students cite for being resistant to higher education (Hendrickson, 2012). First, students may resist college, even when encouraged at school, if their families do not support or understand the logistics of higher education, most likely because they did not attend college themselves. In rural Pennsylvania, only 18% of the adult, rural students who completed a FAFSA in 2010/2011 reported that their father completed some type of higher education and only 23% said their mothers had (Prins et al., 2014). In the case of the students from a small, rural high school studied by Hendrickson (2012)—who conducted 67 classroom observations as well as interviews with seven male and female students who met her criteria for being resistant to schooling—many working-class

families do not want their children to leave home and/or want them to enter into the family business or trade. The students reported valuing close family ties and a desire to please their parents. Accordingly, most expressed wanting to stay in their hometown after graduation. And, they reason that if they do go to college, they will not be able to find a job in their hometown, so what is the point (Hendrickson, 2012)? Second, students in Hendrickson's (2012) study reported that hands-on work is usually the only school work that they learn from, the only schooling that is relevant or practical in their minds, unlike bookwork which seems to them to have very little value in their world. And, as much as students value a diploma as a ticket to a job in the real world, they overwhelmingly reported wishing to get school over with and stated that they show up, do the minimum, but do not engage (Hendrickson, 2012). Hendrickson (2012) found that school and what the rural students learn there is not relevant to their lives or does not align with their values, alienating many. Finally, students think that teachers do not understand their intentions in class when they are viewed as being disruptive, cannot see their side when they do something that is against school rules (are unfair), are not empathetic to their lives outside of school (this is true of those who work or who are teen parents, in particular) and that teachers generally do not like or respect them (Hendrickson, 2012). The teacher, in essence, is the antithesis of their culture, a culture they say they want to hold onto and emulate. Consequently, they rebel (Hendrickson, 2012). It is interesting to note that students with higher grades or educational ambition are much less likely to want to stay in their communities after high school or to emulate their parents' path (Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005).

Hendrickson's (2012) study provided an in-depth view of the opinions of rural

students regarding their resistance to schooling. However, I think the study could be strengthened by data from interviews with the students' parents and teachers. The information Hendrickson (2012) provides is only part of the picture. Her participants often discuss how others' views have affected their beliefs and decisions. Learning what the parents' and teachers' views actually are and if they align with what the students think, would be useful to our understanding of the rural students' resistance to learning.

### *Misogyny.*

Obstacles to educational attainment are not only of the students' making. Stalker (2001), in her qualitative study focused on the experiences of 18 adult, women, undergraduate students and their experiences with misogyny in relation to their pursuit of higher education, writes that misogynistic attitudes have a part to play in the obstacles rural women face when considering or participating in lifelong learning endeavors. The women she studied reported hiding their learning in order to maintain the home as a 'sanctuary' and so not to let on that anything would take them away from their primary duty as a housewife. This even included pretending to watch television while actually studying so to appear as if she was fully present in an activity with her husband, even one as mundane as television watching. Stalker's (2001) study participants also reported working extremely hard to ensure that they completed all household tasks without needing to ask their husbands for help – to maintain stability in the home. They also refrained from appearing changed in front of their partners who warned them not to think they are in any way better or stronger because of their education; the women wanted their husbands to feel needed, especially as a protector (Stalker, 2001). The women feared their spouses feeling as though they are no longer good enough for their wives. When the

wives were unable to satisfy their husbands' egos, many were the victims of verbal, emotional, and even physical abuse as their husbands retaliated against the change they were seeing in their newly educated wives (Stalker, 2001).

Stalker (2001) says that she thinks her findings show that adult women students need more than structural help (i.e. childcare) and understanding (i.e. extensions on papers when kids are sick). Educators must understand rural student-mothers' emotional needs as well, especially those who live in hostile, and even misogynistic environments.

The obstacles described in this section all work together to create what Jackson (2003, p.367), in her critique of lifelong learning practices and policies, tells us is called the "class ceiling" for working-class women. The rural, working-class tendency to encourage adolescents to stay close to home and to not value higher education and the insistence that women shoulder the burden of the second shift while also working or attending school are limiting factors. Add rural institutions' focus on offering literacy training that many rural women do not necessarily need or that will not really move them farther than they are in their jobs, training for jobs that don't exist, and policies that ignore the complex issue of gender and a problem that makes it very difficult, if not impossible for working-class, rural women to pursue lifelong learning opportunities emerges (Jackson, 2003).

### **Internet Access in Rural Pennsylvania**

Glasmeier, Benner, Ohdedar, and Carpenter (2007, p.6), in their report for The Center for Rural Pennsylvania called "Beyond the Digital Divide: Broadband Internet Use and Rural Development in Pennsylvania", state that " While access to technology is still far from universal in rural Pennsylvania, it has become widespread enough for

academic researchers and policymakers to move beyond simply arguing that lack of access to the technology is obstructing social and economic development in rural areas. We must now begin asking a new set of questions aimed at understanding the broader implications of the Internet for rural Pennsylvania.” These questions include inquiries into the demographics of those with access and those without in the United States as a whole and in Pennsylvania, as well as questions concerning why some do not have access. I would also add questions concerning how Internet access affects adult learning in the rural areas of the state.

Eighty-four percent of American Adults have access to and use the Internet according to Perrin and Duggan’s 2015 report for The Pew Research Center. However, there are still Internet usage differences among groups. For instance, only 58% of senior citizens use the Internet, 78% of blacks, and 81% of Hispanics. Additionally, people from lower SES homes are less likely to have access to and use the Internet than their wealthier counterparts (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). There are no differences in the usage rate between men and women. There are differences among community types, though. According to Perrin and Duggan’s (2015) data, 85% of urban and suburban individuals use the Internet as compared to 78% of rural individuals. The number of rural people using the Internet has increased from 42% in 2000, but they still lag behind those from other types of communities.

When asked why they do not use the Internet, American adults who participated in Zickuhr’s (2013) survey of 2,252 adults for the Pew Research Center, gave a variety of answers. Price came in as number one at 42%, then relevance with 17%, and then usability (9%) and lack of access (8%). Zickuhr (2013) did not break the reasons down

by community type, though it would be interesting to see if rural residents site lack of access at higher rates than urban.

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2008a), in their study utilizing three data sets, found that in 2007, 63% of rural households in Pennsylvania had Internet access. The households are typically younger and have a higher SES (more educated and affluent). These households are also more likely to have children, be employed, have more than one individual living in the home, and to own their home (90%).

A question that is not answered by the data I have found concerning Internet access in rural Pennsylvania is what those without Internet access do if they want to pursue higher education online. Do they complete their schoolwork at their day job? Do they use a friend or relative's Internet? Do they utilize public Wi-Fi at a library or other public place? And, if they do leave their homes to do online schoolwork, what are their experiences like?

### **Conclusion**

Being a mother, having a job, and being a student in an online program are individually complex roles to embrace. Add to them the deeply culturally and historically influenced dimension of rurality, and the job of balancing the roles all at once becomes very complicated indeed. Rural student-mothers must overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles in order to reach their goals of achieving higher education via online programs. They must cope with feelings of guilt and inadequacy as mothers and wives, which may only be amplified by traditional rural views on gender. They must find the time and energy to be a student, another culturally defined role that many struggle to

fit. They often also must wear the hat of an employee, ready to fulfill their assigned tasks without complaint or need for special treatment.

These descriptions came from the extant literature, but each description only tells us of one role or aspect of the student-mothers' lives in rural Pennsylvania. If we are to truly understand their lives, it is imperative that they are studied holistically, not as parts of a person. Only then will we gain an accurate depiction of how all of the roles they juggle interact to produce the experience of being a rural student-mother in an online higher education program.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I discuss the two theories that will frame, guide, and inform my study. The first is Cultural Historical Activity Theory, or CHAT, which will be my framework. I cover the history and aspects of CHAT, define contradictions in CHAT, discuss CHAT contradictions and my dissertation, explain the limitations of CHAT, and conclude with why CHAT made an appropriate primary theory for my study. I then discuss why and how I used feminist family theories as a lens for my work, while defining feminism and touching on feminist theories.

#### CHAT

“... [The] conscious division of labor in human society is the most obvious indicator of the individual human’s *societal* nature. The individual is truly human *only* in society.” (Tolman, 1999, p. 73).

I have known, almost from the very beginning of my time as a doctoral student, that I would write a dissertation about student-mothers. I have studied families, mothers in particular, since my days as an undergraduate. I was not sure exactly how, or precisely who, my student-mothers would be, but I have always been intrigued by women like me, who juggle school, work, family, and social obligations and have wanted to know more about them. It was when I learned about Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) that I knew I had found a theory that will guide and frame my research.

In this section, I explore CHAT in relation to my dissertation topic: the experiences of rural student-mothers in Pennsylvania who are pursuing higher education online. I begin by giving an overview of CHAT including its history. I then explore the

concept of contradictions in more depth. Next, I discuss how CHAT, and contradictions in CHAT in particular, will be relevant to my study. Finally, I discuss the limitations of CHAT and ways that I overcame those limitations in my study.

CHAT is a descriptive, not predictive, cross-disciplinary approach that is built on the notion that learning and doing are never separate and that activity is connected to a cultural and historical background (Van der Riet, 2011). “We are who we are because of the activity we engage in” (Van der Riet, 2011). Consequently, CHAT is concerned with object-oriented activity from the subject’s point of view as the primary unit of analysis (Van der Riet, 2011). CHAT disavows prior theories that held to the centrality of the individual. According to CHAT, assumptions that reality is the same for everyone across gender, class, race, and other individual differences, are incorrect. CHAT declares that learning is not universalized, that it is affected by our society and defined by where and how we live (F. Schied, personal communication, April 2014).

According to Madyarov and Taef (2012), there are five principles of CHAT. First, collective activity systems should be viewed in context within the network of activity systems. Second, activity systems have multiple voices originating from participants’ “traditions, interests, opinions, instruments, rules, and histories” (Madyarov & Taef, 2012, p. 80). Third, activity systems have a history and they are ever changing. Fourth, we learn from contradictions, which can also be thought of as tensions (Joo, 2013; Madyarov & Taef, 2012). We become aware of these contradictions—or tensions—as disturbances or innovation happens at the action level of the activity system (Joo, 2013; Madyarov & Taef, 2012). Contradictions are the “potential causes of desirable changes in all activity systems...characterized by ambiguity, surprise,

interpretation, sense-making, and potential for change” (Madyarov & Taef, 2012, p.81).  
The last principle occurs when contradictions are resolved and growth happens.

### **History and Aspects of CHAT**

CHAT’s roots began with Immanuel Kant (Madyarov & Taef, 2012). According to Rolf (2010), Kant is the most influential person in modern philosophy. Kant explained how our knowledge and thoughts are due to our experiences as well as to the ways in which we are capable of knowing as humans (Derry, 2013). Kant’s ideas about how our thoughts come to be and the conditions under which they occur is called transcendental idealism, “...transcendental in the sense that knowledge transcends experience, ideal in the sense that objects are only knowable to the extent that they conform to the conditions of our knowing” (Derry, 2013, p.108). Rolf (2010, para. 32) explains that, with transcendental idealism, Kant argued that “...human beings experience only appearances, not things in themselves; and that space and time are only subjective forms of human intuition that would not subsist in themselves if one were to abstract from all subjective conditions of human intuition.”

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel followed Kant. His work had the most impact on Lev S. Vygotsky, psychologist and developer of the first generation of CHAT; Hegel is said to have resurrected the dialectical mode of thought that began with the ancient Greek philosophers (Derry, 2013; Madyarov and Taef, 2012; Sewell, 2002). “The dialectical method of analysis enables us to study natural phenomena, the evolution of society and thought itself, as processes of development based upon motion and contradiction. Everything is in a constant state of flux and change. (Clapp, n.d., para. 31-32)” According to Hegel, nothing is final. Nothing is absolute.

Kant and Hegel were both idealists. They held the philosophical view that our ideas are what make the world around us real; the material world, to an idealist, does not exist on its own (Sewell, 2002). However, Hegel differed from Kant in a number of areas concerning human knowledge and understanding. Kant worked to develop a set of universal, constant criteria for human knowledge while Hegel understood that the criteria would change throughout history. Hegel "...linked knowledge to the movement of historical conditions" (Derry, 2013, p.106). A second contrast is that Kant thought that there are realms of reality that are unknowable (Derry, 2013). Hegel disagreed (Derry, 2013). Hegel also disagreed with Kant's stance that the mind exists a priori, or independent of experience (Derry, 2013). Instead, he said that the mind develops through activity in the social context (Derry, 2013). A final contrast between Kant and Hegel concerns "Kant's emphasis on representations as providing a correspondence to the world that we have knowledge of, as opposed to Hegel's emphasis on meaning arising inferentially within a system" (Derry, 2013, p. 106).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who worked together to develop historical materialism, were influenced by Hegel's work, and in turn, influenced Vygotsky (Sewell, 2002; Van der Riet, 2011). Marx and Engels realized contradictions existed between some of Hegel's most notable assertions and the dialectical thought that he championed (Sewell, 2002). On one hand, Hegel viewed history as evolutionary while at the same time claiming that his system is the absolute truth. Marx and Engels found that, "for Hegel, all that was real was rational" in contradiction to dialectical materialism which maintains that "...all that is real will become irrational" (Sewell, 2002, para. 84). It was

from these contradictions that Marx and Engels developed a ‘new materialism’, and dialectical materialism was born (Sewell, 2002).

Dialectical Materialism is the philosophical component, the bedrock, if you will, of Marxism (Sewell, 2002). To understand dialectical materialism, one must first understand the meaning of philosophical materialism. Philosophical materialism states that there is no heaven or hell, only one material world and that the universe is in a constant state of change or flux (Sewell, 2002). Over time, humans evolved and developed thought and consciousness; the matter that they observed and experienced in the world around them existed before they had awareness of it (Sewell, 2002). Our ideas come from those experiences and our mind, from which those ideas are formed, does not exist separately from the body (Sewell, 2002). This philosophy is in opposition to philosophical idealism (Sewell, 2002). Dialectical materialism provides us with a philosophy or method of understanding that human history is a process of evolution that we must study in order to understand any human phenomenon (The Socialist Party of Great Britain, 1977).

Historical materialism is another component of Marxism that influenced Vygotsky—the social history component—and is the “application of Marxist science to historical development” (Brooks, 2002, para. 13; Cole & Scribner, 1978; Sewell, 2002). Historical materialism explains that human consciousness is determined by our being and that thought is limited by our range of experiences (Brooks, 2002). According to Marx (1859, para. 6), “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.”

Van der Riet (2011) explains that Marx and Engels argued that through labor, we master the world. In other words, the organism and the environment, or context, is an integral system, they are not separate. There is no such thing as existing without culture and in turn, we help create culture (F. Schied, personal communication, April 2014). We cannot separate a person from their culture just like we cannot separate the body from the mind (Van der Riet, 2011).

Vygotsky—utilizing the dialectical method materialistically— applied these ideas to explain how humans, through their experiences, culturally produced sign systems, and tool use, learn and change within the specific contexts of their societies (Blunden, 1997; Cole & Scribner, 1978). “Thus for Vygotsky, in the tradition of Marx and Engels, the mechanism of individual developmental change is rooted in society and culture (Cole & Scribner, 1978, p. 7)”.

Van der Riet (2011) stressed that, according to CHAT, the relationship between internal and external is dialectical—continually in flux and facing contradictions. She explained that doing, and being active in the world, makes us creators of culture and the formation of human consciousness. “We are the products of our own activity” in “particular by participation in social and historical practices”(Van der Riet, 2011). “We are who we are because of the activity we engage in” (Van der Riet, 2011). Engestrom and Miettinen (1999, p.10) explain the concept of the dialectical relationship further by stating:

Activity theory recognizes two basic processes operating continuously at every level of human activities: internalization and externalization. Internalization is related to reproduction of culture; externalization as creation of new artifacts

makes possible its transformation. These two processes are inseparably intertwined.

So, in order to understand human behavior, we must study human activity. The student-mothers in my study will be continually acting within their rural context and culture, engaging in culturally derived behaviors, and all the while making meaning from all they experience.

Vygotsky and his idea of mediation was really the beginning of CHAT, as it is known today. He wondered how to study a phenomenon and not just focus on the context or the individual: a link between the external world and consciousness is necessary (Van der Riet, 2011). He taught, “Human beings perform all conscious actions towards achieving their goal by means of mediating instruments...” (Madyarov & Taef, 2012, p. 79).

CHAT’s premise is that the world is always understood through the process of mediation—through tools that are physical entities or symbolic—, it is never a direct process. For instance, our language impacts us, which is a mediating tool. The Inuit people, for example, have many different words for snow, which affects how they interact with each other and understand their environment (F. Schied, personal communication, April 2014). Van der Riet (2011) says that writing systems or language, as in the Inuit example, alters the way our cognition works and that there are social and historical origins to this sign system. These socially, culturally, and historically constructed sign systems mediate the way we interact in the world and cause us to think differently.

Vygotsky's contributions to CHAT were substantial, but he did not differentiate between individual and collective activity. Leont'ev, a pupil of Vygotsky, took CHAT from action to activity and ushered in the second generation of the theory after Vygotsky's death in 1934 (Nunez, 2013; Van der Riet, 2011). Leont'ev continued with the work that his teacher began in Kharkov Russia (now the Ukraine), forming the Kharkovian group with other students of Vygotsky (Nunez, 2013). This was the Stalinist period in Russia and a time when Vygotsky's writings were blacklisted because they too closely aligned with ideologies from the West and not closely enough with Marx, Engels, or Lenin (Nunez, 2013). Leont'ev, a professor of Psychology and later the Dean of Moscow University's Psychological Institute, had to use caution in Stalinist Russia (Nunez, 2013). It was not safe to oppose the prevailing ideology. Accordingly, he gave in to the "...pressure to produce a psychology that was derived closely from Marx, Engels, and Lenin." (Nunez, 2013, p.144) and saw his theory of activity become the "...official doctrine for Soviet psychology..." (Nunez, 2013, p. 144).

It was at this time that the idea of the activity system along with the 'triangle' that Leont'ev co-created with Luria—consisting of subject, mediating instruments or tools, object, division of labor, community, and rules—, and that is used as a representation of the activity system, came to be (Foot, 2014; Van der Riet, 2011). Van der Riet (2011) uses the example of the hunt to illustrate levels of activity in the activity system and the collective motive of the activity; some separate activities may seem counter to the motive but are not. She explains that the collective activity is driven by the motive and that the "object-related motives drive collective activity" while "goals drive individual or group action". That is, each person in the hunt has a specific role and each role may not make

sense outside of the context. The object is to kill animals (but may also concurrently be a personal desire to earn a better role in the hunt, attract a mate, etc.) and the subject is the whole tribe (or also the individual with a concurrent desire). Van der Riet (2011) states that our individual actions are always situated in a context and understood that way. She shares that, in CHAT, we do not focus on individual acts, we focus on a collective activity and the individual within that activity (the primary unit of analysis and “now the smallest unit of analysis that contains all elements of human collective activity” (Madyarov & Taef, 2012, p. 80)). Activities organize our lives and through them we become ourselves, always mediated by culture and society (Van der Riet, 2011).

Leont’ev also differed with Vygotsky in that he thought Vygotsky put too much emphasis on consciousness and word meaning, which are psychological tools or signs (Miller, 2011). Conversely, Leont’ev stressed the need for a theory that focused more on “material forms of activity”, i.e. physical tools (Miller, 2011, p.20). Miller (2011) explains that mediation is an internal process when using signs and an external process when using physical tools.

Engestrom is credited with leading the third generation in CHAT. He agreed with Lave and Wenger (1991, p.53) who said, “Activities...do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities which are in part systems of relations among people.”

Engestrom contributed a number of new ideas to CHAT. According to Van der Riet (2011), Engestrom reframed the concept of context. She explains, “Contexts are neither containers ...nor situationally created experiential spaces. Contexts are activity

systems and activity systems integrate the subject, the object, and instruments...into a unified whole.” (Van der Riet, 2011). Engestrom also added interactivity among different systems to CHAT. It is now possible for two systems to come together to form a new object that they both have in common (Madyarov & Taef, 2012). He also expanded on the triangle by adding rules, division of labor, and community. In addition, Engestrom “Expands [the] unit of analysis... to a collective activity system... and incorporates psychological, cultural, and institutional perspectives in analysis.” (Van der Riet, 2011). Engestrom emphasized what was missing from Leont’ev’s theory, that culture and history are embedded in the activity system (Nunez, 2013; F. Schied, personal communication, November 2015).

Engestrom’s expansions on CHAT led to a better-defined activity system triangle. The activity system triangle is important to my study because it will offer a visual representation of the student-mothers’ experiences; it is a tool that can make the data more accessible and easier to understand. Van der Riet (2011) explains that the subject has agency towards a goal in the activity system and it is seen through the subject’s perspective, the subject has the point of view. The object is turned into an outcome by the subject, whether the subject is an individual or a group, and is the motive of the activity. The object, the goal or motive, can be physical or it can be an ideal. It is what is worked towards, what all activity is directed towards (it is also the unit of analysis). It is important to note “individual action is driven by a goal while collective activity is driven by an object related motive” (Van der Riet, 2011).

When there is collective activity, shared by a community with a common motivation, it can be viewed as a community of practice. Participants share

understandings about what they are doing, why, and the effects on their joint community motive/object. Additionally, in a collective activity triangle, rules are the norms and conventions that are shared by the community while the division of labor has a vertical *and* historical level. Van der Riet (2011) describes the historical level as the division of roles or tasks in the activity that have historical roots while the vertical level is where power and status—often determined by context— come into play.

### **Contradictions**

One of Engestrom's greatest contributions to CHAT is his concept of the role of contradictions—different ways of understanding an event or the meaning of something—in activity systems that may or may not be resolved. Lord (2009) says that they create a disturbance. According to Lord and Schied (2007), new learning occurs through the resolution of contradictions. Without contradictions, new learning simply wouldn't occur (Lord & Schied, 2007).

There are four different types of contradictions: primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary (Foot, 2014; Lord, 2009; Madyarov & Taef, 2012; Roth & Lee, 2007). Primary contradictions occur within the individual elements of the activity system (Foot, 2014; Lord, 2009; Madyarov & Taef, 2012; Roth & Lee, 2007). Secondary contradictions occur between two elements (Foot, 2014; Lord, 2009; Madyarov & Taef, 2012; Roth & Lee, 2007). Tertiary contradictions happen when a new activity introduces a new object (Joo, 2014). And, quaternary contradictions are those that exist “between the central activity system and the outside activity systems” (Madyarov & Taef, 2012, p.82). Quaternary contradictions occur between systems, not people (Madyarov & Taef, 2012). Understanding the contradictions that student-mothers encounter, and what they learn

from them, could lead to a deeper understanding of their experiences and answer questions concerning why and how they balance their lives in the manner that they do.

As a final note, it is important to understand the concept of multivoicedness when considering contradictions. Multivoicedness occurs when people involved with an activity system, such as between the subjects and those in the community or individuals within the collective subject, have different perceptions or interpretations of rules, division of labor, mediating instruments, or the object. Each individual's perceptions or interpretations—their point of view— developed from their cultural and historical backgrounds and experiences (Lord, 2009, p.58-59). For example, multivoicedness appears when the student-mothers think differently about their goals than others who have a role in their activity system, i.e. mother-in-laws who are needed for emotional support but who think the student-mothers should not work or go to school or husbands who refuse to help with certain aspects of caring work or domestic chores. In these examples, each actor has a socio-historically rooted opinion that differs from the student-mothers' opinions regarding specific actions or operations in the activity system.

### **Why CHAT?**

Engestrom (1987) states that “the basic internal contradiction of human activity is its *dual existence*...[and] within the structure of any specific productive activity, the contradiction is renewed as the clash between *individual actions and the total activity system*.” Studying the clash that rural, student-mothers face between their desires to be good mothers and their goals to be successful students in their online programs have helped me to gain an even deeper understanding of the actions they take on the way to achieving their objects/goals.

Engestrom (1987) explains further, stating that the “fundamental contradiction arises out of the division of labor”. I think this phenomena was obvious in my study and is one place where the cultural-historical aspect of CHAT came into play. In the United States, even through all of our strides in gender equality over the last 100 years or so, women still tend to be the primary caregivers of children and other dependent family members and are often in charge of overseeing and completing nearly all household chores (Kramarae, 2000; Mason & Ekman, 2007; Murphy & Cloutier-Fisher, 2002). This is also true of working women and student-mothers, causing role-strain and issues with work/life balance (Kramarae, 2000; Mason & Ekman, 2007; Murphy & Cloutier-Fisher, 2002). Because of the emphasis CHAT placed on the contradictions in student-mothers’ lives, CHAT put a laser focus on the role-strain that student-mothers face when pursuing a degree online while illuminating how their rural culture, and society in general, hinders or aids the process of learning how to negotiate their contradicting roles/goals.

It was also beneficial, and quite interesting, to explore the implications that contradictions, and the process of resolving them, had on the student-mothers’ lived experiences. Tolman argues that we do not *learn* the information needed for existence in human society; we *appropriate* the information during our interactions in society. According to Levrini, Fantini, Tasquier, Pecori, and Levin (2015, p.93), “Appropriation implies deep conceptual understanding, but it also involves a reflexive process of transforming ...discourse in a way that is authentic and personal”. Individuals change during involvement or participation in day-to-day situations and become prepared for the next time they are in similar situations; this is appropriation (Levrini et al., 2015). We appropriate and reproduce “historically formed human capacities ... it is a developmental

process in which the individual is drawn into societal practice at the same time, it is a societal process by which new “psychological formations” are developed.” (Tolman, 1999, p.74).

I relate this to how women become mothers. Most women do not take a class on how to mother, most appropriate the behaviors of mothering by watching mothers in action and by being mothered themselves. We appropriate how to be mothers from societally constructed and approved images of motherhood that have been formed over time. An intriguing dilemma—and identity crisis of sorts—then occurs when women who undertake the socially constructed practice of being a mother in a rural context then take on the conflicting role of student, which is also a historically formed societal practice. We also appropriate how to be students by watching how other students and our teachers behave. But how do adult women become effective online students, a totally new experience for most of them and one that is intrinsically isolating, without a frame of reference? And, how do they figure out how to juggle the role of mother while pursuing higher education online, an achievement that is yet uncommon, if they have never seen it done? These are questions that CHAT has helped me to answer.

So, why CHAT? As I have just explained, CHAT was necessary to this dissertation for a number of reasons. First, CHAT allowed me to examine the clashes between the student-mothers’ desires to be good mothers while also attending school online. I analyzed the tensions between the two activities by focusing on their contradictions, a CHAT technique. Secondly, CHAT’s concern with the historical and cultural context of activity illuminated details and nuance about the role strain that the student-mothers’ experienced, which was rooted in their rural culture and history. Third,

CHAT helped me to understand how the student-mothers learned to negotiate their goals and roles. Finally, using CHAT helped me to understand how the student-mothers learned to mother in their rural context and why they mother the way that they do.

### **The Limitations of CHAT**

I think it is imperative to fully understand the limitations of CHAT, including pitfalls other researchers have faced when attempting to use CHAT. My primary reason for doing so is to illuminate the issues that researchers may encounter as they use CHAT.

The first issue is with the Activity System Triangles. Some have argued that the activity system triangles are overused and often are not properly explained by the researchers who utilize them (Lord, 2009). The triangles have sometimes been misused as the only explanation of the actions they represent. Without adequate explanation, much understanding is lost or only vaguely understood. Sawchuck has identified another issue: the triangles do not aid in the understanding of the cultural-historical aspect of CHAT. For that reason, he is moving away from the use of triangles in his work (F. Schied, personal communication, April, 10, 2014). The subject and object nodes do not speak to the cultural-historical aspect of the activity at all. However, the cultural-historical aspect of the activity could be shown in the rules, division of labor, and mediating factor/tools nodes, but it is the case that they are not always well-developed or explicated.

A second issue is that some studies that purport to use CHAT do not delve deeply enough into the socio-cultural historical aspects or do not pay enough attention to context (Lord, 2009). Researchers can ameliorate this issue by working diligently to use CHAT correctly, by conducting a thorough literature review about the study's context, by being

cognizant of the role that context plays in day-to-day life, and by asking questions that take context into consideration. It is not possible to fully understand the experiences of a population without understanding the social and historical context within which those experiences occur.

A third common issue is that some studies that attempt to utilize CHAT do not investigate enough into the “subject’s motives and goals” (Lord, 2009, p.72). Yamagata-Lynch (2010a) explains that CHAT can often just show snapshots of activity and activity settings that are “not as rich and complex as real experiences” (p.33). This makes it difficult to know what contextual information to include.

A final issue is that CHAT’s focus may be too much on the micro-level—with the subject and the activity—rather than on the macro-level— the cultural, social, and political. The Activity System triangle contributes to this lack of attention to the cultural and historical; there are no nodes that address these aspects adequately (Joo, 2013).

I am quite confident that CHAT was the ideal framework for my dissertation focused on the experiences of student-mothers, from rural Pennsylvania, pursuing higher education in online programs. As I explain in more detail in the following chapter, the study employed a phenomenological approach, which means I focused on gathering data that gave a deep and rich description of how historically formed culture affects the lived experiences, identities, and actions of my population. I used the activity system triangle to illuminate how the aspects of their activities interact and to display their process, and the influence of their histories and society, as they work towards accomplishing their object/goals, as well as the resulting outcomes. The triangles also helped to explain the contradictions the student-mothers face as they navigate through the process of

combining their identity as mother with that of student and, again, how their historically formed culture influences this progression. The other theories that I utilized—feminist theory and feminist family theories— helped me to recognize contradictions between prevailing ideologies and the student-mothers’ actions and/or goals. I also saw contradictions arise when there was conflict between competing voices in the system or between elements. CHAT allowed me to draw together data on student-mothers’ activity, identity, actions, motives, and historically influenced culture to provide a multifaceted understanding of who they are, why they behave the way that they do, and what they need in order to be successful in their chosen roles.

### **Feminist Theories**

In simplest terms, a feminist is anyone who supports equality and wants the subordination of women to end (Mann, 2012). *The Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* states that feminism can be understood as a theory that respects women’s perspectives and authority and that attempts to describe and explain their experiences while also championing ways to improve their situations (Code, 2000). Villaverde (2008, p.17) explains that “Feminism is informed by the intersections of history, theory, ideology, social movements, and individual acts of courage and agency. Its foundations are in diverse struggles over labor, livelihood, health care, suffrage, access, and recognition.” Accordingly, there have been, and are, many different feminisms, or ways of being a feminist: liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, womanist feminism, cultural feminism, postmodern feminism, ecofeminism, multicultural and global feminism, and existentialist feminism are some of the most well known (Donovan, 2012; Putnam Tong, 1998; Villaverde, 2008). When critically analyzed, these feminisms can

seem quite disparate, but White and Klein (2008) explain that a central tenet of feminist theory, a unifying concept in all types of feminism, is the idea that women's experiences and ways of knowing are real, diverse, and legitimate and that they will sometimes differ from those of men.

There are a number of common concepts the many different feminist theories share. The difference between gender and sex is one (Mann, 2012). Our sex is determined by our biology while our gender is socially constructed (Mann, 2012; White & Klein, 2008). Gender is constructed in three ways: personally, structurally, and symbolically (White & Klein, 2008). Personal gender refers to where one falls—how one identifies—on the masculinity to femininity continuum (White & Klein, 2008). Some people display more masculine or feminine tendencies than society deems typical for their sex, while others identify in a more typical or even androgynous manner. Our society determines structural and symbolic ideals of gender (White & Klein, 2008). For instance, 1950s America determined that women were to stay home (structural) and that the images in the media, such as cleaning product ads showing a woman in heels and pearls while she dusted or vacuumed, were to serve as guides for women on how to behave (symbolic) (White & Klein, 2008).

Family and Household is a second concept. Feminist theory says that family is not defined by membership but by ideology, an ideology that determines how the genders are to function within the family system (White & Klein, 2008).

A third concept is the idea of the private and public spheres, particularly the very separate societal rules governing them. Until the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, women were mostly resigned to the private sphere while their husbands worked outside

of the home in the public sphere. There have always been rules of conduct in the public sphere meant to maintain order and harmony in society. However, those rules have not always applied to the private sphere. For instance, while a man would never think of striking a colleague at work during a disagreement, because it would be against social norms for acceptable behavior, there have been times in our history when it would have been acceptable to strike his wife within the private sphere of their home. The different spheres have created a sort of “gender based class system” (White & Klein, 2008, p.222).

A final concept in feminist theory is that of sexism. Sexism is the belief that our abilities—i.e. intelligence and athletic ability—and characteristics—such as personality, drive, and emotionality—are genetically determined by our sex. Sexist ideas and statements are used to subordinate women to men, to keep them in a state of inequality and oppression (White & Klein, 2008).

These definitions and concepts explain why I utilized feminist theories: they are meant to be emancipatory, to share the voices of women who have long been oppressed by patriarchal societies, including in the United States, and move them closer to equality with men (White & Klein, 2008). Feminist research is also cognizant of the researcher’s role in the process (Pillow & Mayo, 2012). These principles are all important to me, personally, as a researcher. Moreover, I think they give this study greater purpose.

Although I have long been in agreement with the tenets of feminist theories, I have struggled somewhat with how to locate myself among the types of feminism. As I read about each one, I could find bits and pieces that rang true for me, but other aspects differed so drastically from my personal philosophies that I had to dismiss them entirely from consideration. For instance, I wholeheartedly reject the view that has been

expounded by prominent existential feminist, Simone De Bouvier, that motherhood robs women of their personhood and that pregnancy or the pregnant body is negative and unpleasant for all women (Donovan, 2012; Putnam Tong, 1998). Additionally, though I agree with the postmodern feminists that there “is no single formula for a good feminist” and that our ‘otherness’ as women does not mean that we are inferior to men, just different and in a position to critique the dominant patriarchal culture, I disagree with their focus on the roots of our fragmentation as primarily literary, psychological, and sexual (Donovan, 2012; Putnam Tong, 1998, p.193). I also do not see a place for myself among the liberal feminists whose voices are so often white, upper middle class, well-educated, and Christian and who have often ignored the voices of women lower on the social hierarchy than themselves and focused only on challenges that they face (hooks, 2000; Putnam Tong, 1998). These are women that they need to silence or ignore in order to keep their privileged positions in society including women of color and poor and working class women (hooks, 2000). I may now look like them [liberal feminists], but I do not come from the same place and they are not who I am at my core.

Third-wave feminism aligns most closely with my personal beliefs. According to Snyder (2008), third-wave feminists share three general characteristics: they embrace the importance of recognizing intersectionality, they value multiple points of view over one way of doing or thinking, and they “emphasize an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political.” (p.175). Third-wave feminists are different from their predecessors in that they understand and want to examine the ways that aspects such as culture, sexuality, class, and gender intersect and influence our experiences (Snyder, 2008). They also acknowledge that all women should

be heard; we all have different outlooks on issues, needs, challenges, and ways of living that come from our unique social contexts and histories (Snyder, 2008). No one should be dismissed or overlooked; one, common experience just does not exist. Finally, they promote inclusivity (Snyder, 2008). They understand that the housewife who reads Vogue and always has perfect make-up and nails can be just as concerned with feminist issues as a woman in a power suit with a full-time job and no interest in children.

Multicultural feminism is a feminist theory that I think melds well with my third-wave feminist beliefs. Multicultural feminists agree with the postmodern feminists that the 'self' is fragmented and broken down by arbitrary boundaries such as mind versus body, conscious versus unconscious, and reason versus emotion (Putnam Tong, 1998). However, multicultural feminists say that this senseless and harmful dualistic thinking is rooted primarily in our culture and influenced by race and ethnicity (Putnam Tong, 1998). Multicultural feminists also realize that women are more than our sex or gender and that we can be different from men and from other women but still be equal. We are influenced daily, and our unique experiences are impacted by, our different religions, ages, marital statuses, sexual orientation, socio-economic statuses, health conditions and limitations, location, occupation, and the list goes on (Putnam Tong, 1998). All of these components contribute to our level of inequality in American society. No two women will experience inequality or oppression to exactly the same degree or in the same manner (Putnam Tong, 1998).

Putnam Tong (1998) explains that multicultural feminism can speak to the many women who do not feel represented by other forms of feminism. "Multicultural feminists applaud multicultural thinkers' celebration of difference, lamenting that traditional

feminist theorists often failed to distinguish between the condition of white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian women in advanced and affluent Western industrialized countries and the very different conditions of other women with varying backgrounds (Putnam Tong, 1998, p.215). Multicultural feminism tells the ‘other’ women that their beliefs and experiences in regards to sex and gender are not wrong. The lens of multicultural feminism has allowed me to see the rural women I studied holistically, in their culturally and historically influenced context.

I have also found a place for myself in bell hook’s (2000) writings. hooks, along with other black feminists, have written extensively about the phenomenon of intersectionality (E. Gnanadass, personal communication, May 26, 2016).

Intersectionality takes the impact of race, sexuality, and class into consideration when addressing gender (Hesse-Biber, 2012). In this study, it was imperative that I was attentive to the intersection of class, location, and gender, specifically. Accordingly, I viewed how being a rural woman intersects with the gendered identity role of student-mother through a feminist lens, which I think has given the study more dimension and weight (Pillow & Mayo, 2012). It is my hope that this research will contribute to the feminist literature by illuminating the gendered experiences of this specific group of women.

I appreciate that, unlike some feminist authors, hooks is willing to speak the hard, contextualized (small t) truths about both men and women. Many of these truths show themselves, loud and clear, throughout the data in this study. One truth is that we women are not always victims; sometimes we are victimizers (hooks, 2000). In my own experience, some of the most vicious humans I have known have been women. This is

also true for most of the women who participated in this study. Another truth: women are not innately superior parents. Fathers can do just as good a job, maybe even better than some mothers (hooks, 2000). My own husband is an excellent example. There have been many times when I just did not know what to do and he showed me, taught me. I have grown in my motherhood through his example as a good father. Most of the student-mothers have echoed this sentiment, saying how critical their partners' roles are in their family life. A third truth is that patriarchy is not only perpetuated by men; it is oftentimes upheld and taught by women (hooks, 2000). No man ever explicitly told me, growing up, that I could or could not do or be something because I was a girl. That narrative came solely from the women in my life and on quite a regular basis. Again, many of the student-mothers experienced the same thing from their mothers and grandmothers. Another truth in hook's (2000) writings is that women—typically white, upper middle class, well-educated women—who call themselves feminists can be self-serving and dismissive of, or even abusive towards, women lower on the social hierarchy than themselves. I felt this when I did not think feminism was for me or wanted me and I think this is true for other women from working class or lower middle class backgrounds, based on my experiences in rural, working class communities. This truth leads to the final truth that speaks to me, personally. Working class and poor women often do not view work as liberating and would prefer the luxury of staying home (hooks, 2000). For many, especially women of color and poor or working class women, work was never something they had to fight for the right to do, it was a given (hooks, 2000). For the women in this study, the question of whether or not they have to work was almost laughable. Of course they have to work. It was never a question for them or their

partners.

Feminism, through writers such as bell hooks as well as the third-wave feminists, has given us (men, women, families) the freedom to choose what is best for us. All of these truths spoken by hooks (2000) and others are refreshing to me and make me feel secure in my choice to call myself a feminist.

“Feminism...provides a methodological and epistemological lens for *the doing* of research methods” (Pillow & Mayo, 2012, p.189). Accordingly, the truths about people, as understood through a feminist lens, became my perspective as a researcher and a sort of guide for the way I conducted this phenomenological study and for how I analyzed the findings using CHAT. I refer to feminist ideas throughout my work because they help to inform our understanding of the lived experiences of the women in this study.

I say that feminist theories were a guide, because there is no distinct feminist method, per se, but there are feminist instructions of sorts that determine how research is conducted, what concepts and ideas are emphasized, and for what purpose when using a feminist lens (Pillow & Mayo, 2012). To reiterate, I used feminist theories as a guide for conducting my Phenomenology because understanding how gender is constituted differently, and differently understood and experienced according to context, offers insights into social, political, familial, and religious structures and discourses and into how power is embedded in our daily lived experiences (Pillow & Mayo, 2012, p.188).

The women in my study are bombarded with structural and symbolic ideals of gender almost constantly (Baber, 2009; Brisolara & Seigart, 2012; Donovan, 2012; Putnam Tong, 1998; White & Klein, 2008). They have learned from the media how mothers, or women in general, in the private sphere and how students in the public sphere

are to behave, ways of being, that will often lead to contradictions. They also learn from their spouses, families, children, and communities what is expected of them as a mother and woman, and from their classmates, instructors, and institutions what is expected from them as students, which are often conflicting messages (Donovan, 2012). Juggling these roles—that may frequently seem incompatible— cause the student-mothers to make decisions about how they will embrace their differing roles and these decisions lead to internal and family conflicts concerning the gendered roles they fill in their families. Feminist theories helped me to better understand these experiences.

### **Feminist Family Theories**

Feminist family theorists recognize that male power and dominance [are] the result of socialization and challenge the concept that male power [is] natural and inevitable...Feminist scholars examine how the family [is] influenced by social institutions and politics and how it [is] affected by the wider system of social norms. (Smith, Hamon, Ingoldsby, & Miller, 2009, p.232)

To reiterate, I used feminist theories, specifically feminist family theory, not as my guiding theory or framework, but a lens through which to view my work.

I agree with feminist family theory's concepts as well as with the theory's propositions about the family. First, I subscribe to the idea that young people entering into relationships (at this time my focus is on heterosexual unions) are driven by societal pressures to follow the status quo and attempt to recreate a new family that is similar to their original family (White & Klein, 2008). I think this is particularly true of some of the rural student-mothers' relationships because of the importance of family ties to the typical rural person (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000). I also

subscribe to the idea that, because families tend to reconstruct, and hence, reinforce gender roles, families are partly responsible for women's oppression (White & Klein, 2008). On the other hand, because families play such an integral role in their members' development of gender identities and beliefs, I think they could be a powerful force in overcoming structural and symbolic gender oppression by rejecting negative and harmful gender stereotypes (White & Klein, 2008). Egalitarian families open the door to opportunities in the public sphere for women while families that ascribe to traditional gender roles perpetuate inequality within both spheres (White & Klein, 2008). I have discovered that the types of homes the women that I studied came from, egalitarian or traditional, their early upbringing, and how they have made sense of what they saw and learned as children has impacted the decisions they have made concerning their participation in online programs and in how they mother.

According to Smith et al. (2009), there are six basic assumptions that feminist family theorists follow. First, feminist family theorists are interested in the perspective of women in families and how gender affects power relations in everyday life. They examine how women's issues and feelings have been left out of the social and historical dialogue. Smith et al. (2009) explains that, for example, feminist family theorists have changed what the word 'work' means when discussing what women do, to include unpaid labor in the home and community. I have expanded on the definition even more in my study to include online schoolwork. Second, feminist family theorists hold that gender and gender roles are constructed and defined by society. There are three ways in which this occurs: through language, categorization, and stratification. Many common words have connotations that are often unnoticed, but covertly serve to exclude and even

degrade women. Categorization works insidiously as well. For example, when parents label behaviors or activities as either male or female, they teach children what they and society believe to be appropriate behavior and that to deviate is deviant (Smith et al., 2009). Categorization leads to stratification, which is when value is attributed to behaviors or activities, with higher value usually given to traditionally male pursuits (i.e. doctors are typically valued more than nurses, father's work takes priority over mother's work) (Smith et al., 2009). And, higher value equates to higher power, which brings privilege (Smith et al., 2009). Again, language perpetuates stratification and hierarchies (Smith et al., 2009). When we say that a father is baby-sitting his own children, for instance, we are implying that tending to children (historically a low status occupation) is the job of the women, not men. Third, context, both historical and social, is critical to understanding women and families. Politics, the economy, religion, families of origin, and society in general all affect how families function and define what behaviors and roles are socially acceptable (Smith et al., 2009). Fourth, families come in many different forms. Some families are traditional—man, woman, children—while others consist of combinations of nuclear and extended family members, stepfamilies, same sex couples, and friends (Smith et al., 2009). The fifth assumption is that a goal and emphasis of feminist family theory is social change (Smith et al., 2009). The theory challenges the status quo in order to empower women (Smith et al., 2009). The final assumption is that “there is no objective, unbiased observation of humans.” (Smith et al., 2009). Feminist family theory maintains that everyday life is colored by gendered assumptions that affect our perception, which is inherently subjective. The task of the feminist family scholar, much like the hermeneutic phenomenologist and ethnographer, is to understand women's

subjective perspectives and experiences.

### **Conclusion**

I have utilized CHAT along with feminist theories in tandem as my framework and lens. The theories have many similarities and where they are dissimilar, complement each other. Each has bolstered my purpose: to understand the experiences of rural student-mothers pursuing higher education online. Each has served a purpose towards understanding the student-mother holistically by investigating at least one critical aspect of her life: her activity and her gender and roles. And, each is built to consider her culture and history, a necessary task when exploring the part specific geographical contexts—such as being rural—play in participants’ understandings, experiences and meaning making overall. Together they have assisted me in creating a picture of the essence of the experience of being a rural student-mother pursuing higher education in an online program.

The theories integrated seamlessly in this study. For example, CHAT helped me to investigate each element of the mothering activity system independently as well as the elements’ interactions between themselves and with other activity systems in the women’s activity network. History and culture are embedded in CHAT, but not always obvious. Feminist theories and feminist family theory worked as a lens through which to view the women’s histories and rural culture and illuminated details and nuance in their experiences that could have been overlooked otherwise. So, CHAT identified each aspect of the ‘big picture’ of the activity systems and how those aspects interact, and feminist theory and feminist family theory helped to explain why the systems were built

the way they were and why they operate the way that they do. CHAT explains what is happening and the feminist theories explain why.

## Chapter 4

### Research Design

In this chapter I describe how I utilized my research method in my research: phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology of the family, in particular. I discuss the fundamental features of the method as well as details about the specific type of the method that I used. I also clarify how and why phenomenology was appropriate for my study. I then describe details of my data collection and analysis. I end the chapter with a discussion of the limitations of the study.

#### **Primary Research Approach: Phenomenology**

The term ‘phenomenology’ can be traced back to the writings of Kant and Hegel (Moustakas, 1994). Hegel explained phenomenology as “...the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26)” Phenomenology is a theory of intentionality (Hintikka, 2006). This means our “consciousness is always directed towards an object. Reality of an object then, is inextricably related to one’s consciousness of it (Creswell, 2013, p.77). Edmund Husserl, considered to be the father of phenomenology said, “In the physical sphere there is...no distinction between appearances and being...”(1965, p.106).

Phenomenology is primarily concerned with uncovering the ‘life world’ of individual participants in order to find a common meaning of a lived experience of a phenomenon in order to build a composite description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Schram, 2006). The life world is the everyday life of the participant, including aspects such as common knowledge that are taken for granted. “The underlying assumption [in phenomenology] is that dialogue and reflection can reveal the [universal]

essence—the essential, invariant structure or central underlying meaning—of some aspect of shared experience...” (Schram, 2006, p.98). To summarize, the aim of phenomenology is to understand, interpret, and describe people’s perceptions of their own lived experiences and of the world, or the essence of a phenomenon. Oftentimes, the details of the phenomenon might seem trivial to the participant but to the researcher, the often-overlooked details create meaning and understanding (Kafle, 2011).

According to Schram (2006), there are five basic assumptions in phenomenology. First, we can only understand human behavior in context. Second, understanding individual perceptions of an experience is key to understanding the life world. Third, we cannot understand a phenomenon unless we understand participants’ lived experiences with it; it is through experience that we ascribe meaning. Creswell (2013, p.77) explains that the “[r]eality of an object...is inextricably related to one’s consciousness of it.” which is referred to as intentionality of consciousness, intentionality being one of the foundational themes in Phenomenology. Fourth, we build and express meaning through language, creating dialogue and reflection, which are key components in phenomenology. And fifth, a “central underlying meaning” of phenomena do exist and can be understood and described (Schram, 2006, p. 99). Lavery (2003, p.13) further clarifies the defining features of phenomenology by explaining “the interpretivist framework of inquiry supports the ontological perspective of the belief in the existence of not just one reality, but of multiple realities that are constructed and can be altered by the knower. Reality is not something ‘out there’, but rather something that is local and specifically constructed.”

There are several types of phenomenology. Husserl developed the initial philosophy, transcendental phenomenology. A central concept of transcendental

phenomenology is that of the epoche, or bracketing. Phenomenologists attempt to bracket out, or set aside, their own, personal experiences in order to perceive the experiences they are researching with a fresh perspective (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing has been critiqued as being difficult to do, or even rarely being possible (Creswell, 2013; Kafle, 2011; Porter & Robinson, 2011).

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Martin Heidegger, a disciple of Husserl who has been called “the hidden master of modern thought (Clark, 2002, p.1)” and “the most famous, influential, and controversial philosopher of the twentieth century (Davis, 2010, p.1)”, developed the school of thought known as hermeneutic phenomenology (Kafle, 2011). Heidegger was primarily interested in ontology, the study of being or our beliefs regarding reality. Davis (2010, p. 5) says that Heidegger’s “chief concern is not with how this particular thing *X* relates to that particular thing *Y*, but rather how it is that the meaning of *X*s and *Y*s and their possible relations gets determined in the first place.” Heidegger thought globally about issues such as class, the environment, and imperialism—well before talk of the issues surrounding globalization became de rigueur—and questioned deeply held, long-standing assumptions about the Western value system (Clark, 2002).

Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, and Sixsmith (2013) explain that the intention of hermeneutic phenomenology is to describe, understand, and interpret lived experiences—just like ethnography and phenomenology in general— but not to make generalizations or predictions (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Everyday life, context, and culture are visible and meaningful to the hermeneutic phenomenologist; the mind and body are not separate (Benner, 2008). Kafle (2011) asserts that hermeneutic phenomenology is, in

fact, a lived experience for the researcher as well; the researcher attempts to understand a phenomenon that is experienced by another through the researcher's own lens of understanding grown from the researcher's own experiences. And, regarding the concept and act of interpretation, Moustakas (1994, p. 10) states that "[i]nterpretation unmasks what is hidden behind the objective phenomena ...interpretation is not an isolated activity but the basic structure of experience." Lavery (2003, p.15-17) summarizes this overview of hermeneutic phenomenology by stating that,

[h]ermeneutic research is interpretive and concentrated on historical meanings of experience and their developmental and cumulative effects on individual and social levels...a hermeneutical approach asks the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection to quite a different end than that of phenomenology. Specifically, the biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set-aside, but rather are embedded and essential to interpretive process. The researcher is called, on an ongoing basis, to give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched.

Overall, at the end of any hermeneutic study, the goal is for participants to say that the researcher has been able to put into words what they could not (Benner, 2008).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the approach that I utilized, quite simply because hermeneutic phenomenologists assert that we cannot remove, or bracket, ourselves from the influence of the world around us or from our past experiences, a concept with which I concur. According to Porter and Robinson (2011, p.60) hermeneutic phenomenology is "a radically interpretive enterprise in which understanding is never without

presuppositions or preformed prejudices, for there is no neutral or unbiased starting place from which one may begin to understand.” Researchers are always ‘in the world’ and influenced by it (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Bracketing simply is not possible.

Therefore, instead of bracketing their own beliefs and past experiences, researchers embrace them by discussing how they affect their interpretations and by reflecting on them during the research process (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Porter & Robinson, 2011).

Researchers who utilize this methodology realize that we are all influenced by the world around us and that there is no experience without the influence of the outside world (Crist & Tanner, 2003).

It is indisputable that I am not capable of bracketing my preformed ideas and the meanings I have made from my own past experiences as a student-mother. It would no doubt be a losing battle. Instead, I embraced and reflected upon my own presuppositions throughout the research process. I did this by noting elements of my perspective as they arose: as notes during interviews, by journaling as I worked through the research process, and by discussing my reflections with my committee. They added a depth of understanding that allowed me to access insights that outsiders may not.

There are several integral concepts in hermeneutic phenomenology. One concept is that of ‘dasein’, which means “to be there”, “to be immersed in everydayness” (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p.62) or “being-in-the-world” (Davis, 2010, p. 44). Another concept is ‘fore-structure’, which is our prior knowledge built on past experiences (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixmith, 2013). A third concept concerns the life-world existential themes such as lived space (where we are located), lived time (subjective time, how fast or slow time seems goes by), lived body (body language, we are always in our

bodies during experiences), and lived human relation (the experiences we have with others and how we influence each other) (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixmith, 2013). Student-mothers' interpretations of their daily experiences, happening while they are immersed in the day-to-day and built on their interpretations of past experiences, helped me to interpret and describe their life-worlds.

Kafle (2011, p. 191) writes about the hermeneutic process when he states that “[h]ermeneutics avoids method for method's sake and does not have a step by step method or analytic requirements. The only guidelines are the recommendation for a dynamic interplay among six research activities: commitment to an abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question, investigating the experience as it is lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and consideration of parts and whole.” In order to meet these guidelines, researchers use the hermeneutic circle, or cycle, which consists of the process of reading, reflective writing, and interpreting (Kafle, 2011). According to Moustakas (1994), the process of using the hermeneutic circle includes describing the experience, its meaning to the participants, and where the underlying meanings may have come from. The hermeneutic circle may go on for some time. Crist and Tanner (2003) explain that as many as three interviews may be necessary: the first to fully develop the participants' accounts, the second to allow participants to elaborate on ideas from the initial interview or to introduce new topics that have grown from the original interview, and the third to reflect with the participant on my interpretations. This is very much like the in-depth, three-interview series detailed by Seidman (2006), which I used. He explains that “The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience

within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences holds for them” (Seidman, 2006, p. 17). The hermeneutic circle allows for growth from general questions and answers to more focused and detailed communications. The hermeneutic circle has a distinct emphasis on co-construction of meaning through reflection on the researcher’s interpretations.

### **Phenomenology of the Family**

Phenomenologists, as well as society in general, tend to acknowledge that families operate together as well as individually in the public sphere, but that they also tend to develop their own understandings and beliefs about experiences that occur inside of their family units that typically occur nowhere else (White & Klein, 2008). Families share a life world and ways of making and interpreting meaning based on their shared history and ideals for the future; they share a biography. Consequently, they are commonly seen as a private sphere with their own understandings about how they will operate (White & Klein, 2008). Although families tend to share similar life worlds and biographies as well as ways of making meaning from experiences, they will still have some differences in in their interpretations of events and meaning making.

Phenomenology of the family can help researchers to see these similarities and differences (White & Klein, 2008). White and Klein explain that:

The focus in phenomenology of the family is to find out how, at any point in history, the “public” typifies families and how, for any family, family members typify and understand their family activities...The way actors explain or typify their experience, both in the lifeworld and in the more restricted frames of reference, is the subject matter of the social analysis of meaning. These

typifications allow us to understand (verstehen) the way meanings are constructed and explained to others in the shared lifeworld. (2008, p. 214-215).

Phenomenology of the family allowed me to understand student-mothers' families' shared, intersubjective meanings and the ways that they are similar to or differ from their local and the larger context.

### **Positionality and Ethics**

I was inspired to study rural student-mothers because I am one. My positionality was as a student-mother who has taken online graduate classes and whose master's degree was completed 100% online. I have taken nearly two-dozen classes online. I am also a doctoral student studying adult and distance education. I am also a mother and have been one the entire time I have been a graduate student. Additionally, I have lived my entire life in rural Pennsylvania. I know first-hand what their lives are like.

The participants in this study were fully aware of my background and I interacted with them as colleagues and equals. Even so, I was an outsider within, and I had to come to terms with the fact that I was an outsider, which was difficult. These were women I could imagine talking with on the playground or doing charity work with or even being friends with. They are so like me in so many ways. But still, I was in a powerful position: their stories were in my hands; they trusted me to do them justice. I was fully aware that this fact could have been very unnerving for my participants, even with the knowledge that I have walked in their shoes. I worked hard to ameliorate the issue by taking a feminist stance to my work and by keeping our power differential always in mind.

In any research study, power should be considered (Glesne, 2011). But in this study, the usual power differential was mitigated, at least to some degree, by the fact that we—the participants and I—were similar women helping each other and learning from one another (Glesne, 2011, p. 148-149). Additionally, it was my desire that the women I worked with felt as if they gained a better understanding of their experiences as student-mothers, making the process valuable to them as well (Glesne, 2011). I think this goal was accomplished. Many of the women told me before and after their interviews how much they were realizing about themselves that they did not know before. Many thanked me and expressed how glad they were that they decided to participate. Some even said that they did not want our conversations to end! Even so, I was cognizant of the fact that the interviews were not a conversation but a rigorously constructed interaction with one person steering the dialogue and the other placed at the center of attention (Glesne, 2011). Because of my feminist theory lens, I worked to promote interviews that allowed more open-ended questions as well as the possibility for the participants to lead the interview where they thought their story needed to go; I attempted to reign in any impulse I had to be overly directive or to be overly focused on my own pre-determined goals for the interview (Glesne, 2011). I will explain further in the next section.

I also followed the advice of Preissle and Han (2012) by making my participants a part of the research process—outside of data collection—by asking them to provide feedback on my findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2013). I emailed each woman asking them if they would be interested in member checking. I briefly explained what member checking entails and told them I would send selections from the dissertation that concerned them for their feedback. I then told them we could discuss the selections via

email or by phone or Skype. Three of the five women were interested in participating in member checking: Hannah, Sarah, and Mary Ann. I sent them each ten selections that were focused on their experiences from throughout the dissertation, amounting to roughly ten pages of text each. I did not want to overwhelm or burden the already busy student-mothers, so I kept the amount of text to a minimum while still making sure it was representative of my interpretations of their data. We then exchanged emails trying to find the most convenient way to communicate.

The women are all very busy and not all were able to find time for a phone call. I communicated with Hannah via telephone and with Mary Ann and Sarah via email. Hannah and I had a telephone conversation that lasted roughly thirty minutes. Hannah told me that she was happy with my interpretations and thought that I accurately captured what she told me. She said that she actually laughed out loud a few times while reading, she was so happy with the passages and with recalling what we had discussed. There was nothing that she wanted me to change. Mary Ann's email also expressed her enthusiasm for the study. She also said she was happy with what I had written. She especially liked that I shared the negative issues she has encountered in her program. Her hope is that her story will be seen and changes will be made. She did find one, minor typographical error that I fixed. There was nothing else that she asked me to alter. Sarah said that her selections were "eye opening" and that she had not realized how "crazy" her life looks to other people. She was also enthusiastic about what she had read and did not request any changes.

## **Data Collection**

I endeavored to develop a deep and rich understanding of the experiences of student-mothers living in rural Pennsylvania who are pursuing higher education online, particularly their school/work/life balance. The study focused on the ways each participant balanced the major aspects of their lives: their online programs, their paid employment, their home and family life, their extended family, and their social lives. The participants parlayed information to me by describing their everyday lives as student-mothers in the rural context via our three approximately hour-long interviews and through their journals.

### **Sampling Method**

I employed criterion sampling strategies to recruit participants. In order to reach as many potential participants as possible, I recruited participants from one university in the Mid Atlantic region of the United States with a well-established distance education division. I made the distance education division aware that I would be reaching out to their faculty to ask permission to recruit their students and shared my recruitment message with them. I then secured permission from individual instructors and program heads to distribute my recruitment message via email. I chose instructors from programs with large online enrollments as well as those from programs that I thought might be receptive to and interested in this research, i.e., programs with large populations of adult women, programs interested in the study of higher education or families, and programs that have rich histories with the use of qualitative methods. The recruitment message explained the study and offered a \$15.00 gift card for each interview that the participants completed, up to three interviews (see Appendix A). The recruitment process, from

asking permission to recruit students to the last student that contacted me, lasted approximately two months. I stopped recruiting when I enrolled five participants. I was confident that I had acquired an adequate number of participants to develop a rich understanding of their experiences. I was not looking for breadth, but depth. Additionally, five was a manageable number considering my time frame.

The study participants lived in multiple rural counties throughout Pennsylvania. As a consequence of my need to keep costs low, to make the process as easy and stress free as possible for the participants, and in light of my relatively brief timeline, it was necessary for the interviews to take place via telephone from my home office. Each interview was audio recorded.

Prospective participants contacted me via email. If they divulged information in their email that did not fit the search criteria, I would eliminate them immediately. I sent them an email thanking them for their interest and explaining why they did not fit the search criteria. If they did not give information that automatically disqualified them, I emailed back to set up a time to screen them, also via telephone (see Appendix B). In total, fourteen women emailed with an interest in the study. Seven did not fit the search criteria and two contacted me after I had finished recruiting.

### **Population**

Five women fit the search criteria and were chosen to participate in this study. I chose to study this population for the reasons outlined in the literature review—they are not well represented in the extant literature. Additionally, I have a personal interest in this population. I am one of them and have thought for some time that my experience

could not have happened in isolation. There had to be others who have had similar experiences that were not being heard. I wanted to tell their stories.

The participants were all student-mothers living in rural areas of Pennsylvania who were enrolled in online higher education programs. They also all exhibited the following characteristics: they had at least one biological or adopted child under the age of 18 and were legal guardians with primary physical custody of the child or children. They were all also enrolled and taking classes in a 100% online higher education degree program at a non-profit institution in the United States. I was open to participants from all disciplines and all educational levels. The women represented four different majors, from associates degree programs to a masters program. All of the women worked outside of the home full-time. I did not specify a specific marital status—married, single or otherwise—and the women ranged from dating, to married, to engaged, and widowed. The women ranged in age from 26 to 40. Interview participants included women only from one of the 48 rural counties in Pennsylvania, as defined by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2014) (see Appendix C). They were each from a different county and represented the following regions of Pennsylvania: North Central, South Central, Western, and Eastern.

### **Interviews**

Because I conducted a phenomenology, I employed the phenomenological cycle. Accordingly, I conducted three, in-depth interviews with each participant using the interview guide found in Appendix D. I approximated Seidman's (2013) three interview structure. I approached the interviews mindful of the fact that there was no right or correct way of interpreting or understanding our own experiences and that my role as

researcher was to interpret the meaning of my participants' experiences while taking my topic into consideration, as well as how my own positionality would affect my interpretation along with the types of questions I asked and the parts of stories I focused on. Each person, their experiences, their interpretation of their experiences, and how they react or behave based on them is completely unique and 'correct' for that individual.

In the first interview, I began by asking the participants to reconstruct their detailed life histories, focusing on demographic information, their hometowns, their experiences with gender roles, and their and their families' educational backgrounds. I started the conversation, off the record, by telling them about myself and my reasons for doing the study. I wanted them to fully understand my plans for their stories. Many of the women expressed relief when they discovered my purpose, it was what they had hoped it was, and told me they felt more comfortable with proceeding. It was at this time that we gave them each a code name in order to protect their anonymity in all textual documentation. I then began the recorded interview by asking demographic information as a way to break the ice. After the demographic questions, the interviews all flowed smoothly. We were strangers speaking on the telephone without the ability to read body language or see facial expressions, which made getting to know each other more complicated. And, because of my feminist lens, it was important to me that they were comfortable with me and felt at ease. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2012, p. 181) explain that "...personal disclosure on the part of the researcher...[is a way to] deconstruct power imbalances and allow for greater trust and rapport." Accordingly, at the end of the interviews, I turned off the recording and talked casually with them, again building a feeling of fellowship, and made plans for our second interviews.

I asked questions about their lives now, as student-mothers, in the second interview. I again started our conversations off the record with small talk and with a recap of the first interviews. After I began recording, the interviews consisted of questions about their online program, their paid employment, their family, their home, their extended family, and their social lives. And, as in the first interviews, we talked after the recording device was turned off. Some of the conversations lasted for up to thirty minutes and consisted generally of a recap of the interviews or with me answering questions about my own life and positionality as a researcher in this study. One conversation was about a vacuum that the participant has and that I have been thinking of purchasing. Another conversation continued a discussion of an emotionally charged topic that arose during the recorded interview. We said things to each other that we were not comfortable sharing with the world but felt moved to disclose to one another, all the time mindful of not disclosing so much as to burden them or make them feel uncomfortable. We were communicating as women with similar lived experiences and similar goals, both for our lives and for this research. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2012) explain that empathetic interpersonal relationships are critical towards co-constructing an understanding of participants' everyday lives and insight into the meaning they make from their experiences. They said, "Through reflective inquiry and reflexive knowledge building, researchers can deconstruct hierarchical relationships and produce research that is useful and meaningful to participants and the larger society." (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 180). Doing so also made the experience much more pleasurable for me, as the researcher, as well as for the student-mothers.

The third interviews also all began and ended with general conversation about the study and life in general. By this time, I think, each woman and I enjoyed each other's company and were also enjoying, and excited about, the process. We had built genuine connections. The official interviews began with questions about demographics that came to mind during the other two interviews followed by a discussion about their journals. I then asked questions that arose over the course of all of the other interviews as I reflected on our conversations. I also asked questions that arose directly from the women. I left time for the women to reflect on anything they had thought of during the process that they would like to discuss. We ended the third interviews in agreement that the process had been valuable for all of us and in some instances, even cathartic. I also agreed to keep them up to date about the research process and to share the work with them while in progress and after it is finished.

I made a concerted effort to make the women feel that their perspectives and opinions mattered to me. For that reason, I would recite brief summaries of my interpretation of what they were telling me throughout all of the interviews. I did this as a sort of member checking and to demonstrate my commitment to getting their stories right, to telling them primarily in their voices, not mine. Also, after every interview, I asked the women if there was anything they wanted to discuss or add. I was interviewing from a feminist standpoint and wanted to be sure to honor their stories and tell their stories the way the women wanted them to be told.

Throughout all of the interviews, I also asked a few specific questions based on elements that have been significant to my own experience or questions I have personally pondered during my time in graduate school and that were all relevant to my lens as a

researcher. They consisted of questions about interruptions at home while studying, what being a mother and a student means to them, specifics about their goals, how their childhood experiences have affected their mothering, and the level of support (emotional, financial, with domestic labor, etc.) given by their partners and how it affects them. I think these questions helped us to delve deeper into their lives and to make meaning from the everyday experiences they described throughout the interviews.

The interviews and my feminist approach to them had a place in the hermeneutic circle. The interviews allowed the women to describe their experiences and the meaning they have made from them and allowed us to work together to figure out where the meanings originated. We were also able to consider the intersubjective meaning their families have made from their shared experiences and discover how their personal meaning is different from the prevailing socio-historically created ideology in their communities and in society as a whole.

### **Journals**

I also asked each participant to keep a journal for up to two weeks after we had our initial interview; the length of time was up to them. The fewest number of days was five days and the longest any of the women wrote in their journal was twelve days. I told the women they could write as much or as little as they liked. I suggested that, at a minimum, they write down their daily schedule and add thoughts and feelings about their day focused on their experiences with school/work/life balance. I provided a few journaling prompts, but tried to avoid being overly directive, which could have led to participants focusing too closely on what they think I want from them and not closely enough on what was actually happening in their lives. Examples of the journaling

prompts included asking them to note details about any interruptions that occurred as they worked on school assignments or details about their partners' levels of support regarding their higher education goals throughout the week. I also asked the women to reflect on their interviews and to write about anything that struck them or that they would like to revisit. We discussed their journals during their third interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

I utilized phenomenological data analysis following descriptions given by Creswell (2013), Moustakas (1994), Glesne (2011), and Merriam (2009). I created codes to reveal themes or clusters of meaning. My codes emphasized themes about how the phenomenon of being a student-mother is experienced. I did not use an existing coding scheme. The codes arose from the data. I created a series of codes and sub-codes, initially. I then combined, added, and eliminated codes as appropriate. Themes arose from the codes. I used the themes to write textural (what was experienced) and structural (the 'how' of the experience) descriptions of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) is a proponent of researchers reflecting on their own experiences and how they may affect their interpretations. Accordingly, reflection was a critical aspect of my work. Finally, I wrote multiple drafts until all themes and ideas were in place.

Data collection lasted for a very brief time, from February 11<sup>th</sup> to February 24<sup>th</sup>, making any in-depth early data analysis difficult. During those fourteen days, I conducted five, short screening calls and fifteen interviews of approximately one hour each. My early data analysis, which is a technique explicitly suggested by Glesne (2011) Merriam (2009), consisted simply of jotting down memos during our conversations and

writing notes to myself afterward on any interesting reflections I had. I did not memo much during the interviews, either, because I was intently focused on reflective listening. I listened closely and then reflected back what I thought the women were saying, which functioned as a sort of member checking. I kept my notes in a three-ring binder divided into one section for each participant.

My next step dealt with how I chose to handle the audio and transcription. I did not use data analysis software to code the transcripts. I printed the transcripts and used pens and highlighters to code by hand (see Appendix E). I began by reading through all of the transcripts once to check the transcription. Anytime I found something that seemed unusual in the transcription—a word that did not seem correct or a spot that was unintelligible, for example—I would return to the audio. This happened only a few times.

I then began coding. My process is unlike any I have read about, but it worked well for me because it allowed me to chunk the large amounts of data, roughly 300 pages, into manageable pieces in an order that made sense to me. I conducted three sets of interviews, following Seidman's (2006) interviewing strategy, so I divided the transcripts accordingly. Each participant had three separate interviews and one journal that made a set of four documents for each woman. I used my interview guide to divide each transcript into sections based on topic. For example, I began with the interview one transcripts. I put the women in alphabetical order by their code name; I always began with Amy and ended with Sarah. I found the title of the first and second topic on my interview guide and then scanned Amy's first transcript through the first topic until the second topic began. I then drew a line where one topic ended and the next began. I did

this for all the topics found in Amy's first interview until the entire transcript was divided by interview topic. I then repeated the process for the four other first interviews.

My next step in my preliminary coding process was to begin writing codes and looking for themes. I worked on one topic at a time for all of the first interviews. For example, the first interview topic was demographic information, so I began by coding Amy's demographic information and then each of the other women. As I coded, I also highlighted passages that I might want to use as quotes or that could be indicative of a particular theme. Because the codes were already grouped, what I did would be called analytical coding (Merriam, 2012). I then spread the interviews out and began comparing the codes, solidifying themes. When I finished that topic, I moved on to the next topic and repeated the process. Sometimes codes and themes would cross into multiple topics, sometimes they would not.

When I had coded all of the first interviews, I looked again for overarching themes and began to decide what data was necessary and what I did not need to note. Merriam (2012) warned that it is too easy to wander on tangents at this stage. This was a difficult stage for me because of my desire to honor everything that the women had shared with me. Yet, I knew that it was important to narrow the data to what was most salient. I kept my themes in mind as well as my research question, to help me decide what to write about. It is also at this time when my positionality as a researcher once again became overtly apparent. I was aware of the fact that there were a number of reasons why I made the decisions I did about the data and that one was my own biases and personal experiences as a rural student-mother. I reflected on the decisions I made at

this stage accordingly, going back to the literature, my purpose, and the research questions to check my choices.

This is when I began writing up the data for the first interviews. I decided that the first set of interviews would become Chapter 5: Detailed Life Histories. I uncovered two sub-themes in this chapter: remaining rural and the effects of childhood experiences on mothering and as a student.

When Chapter 5 was finished, I began the process all over again for the second set of interviews. This second set of interviews became Chapter 6: Life as a Student-Mother. It is in this chapter where the two overarching themes for the study, which translated into the two main activity systems in the CHAT analysis, emerged. The two themes are mothering and online learning. Chapter 5 also yielded six sub-themes.

The final interviews and journals were also coded in the same way. Many of the themes found in the final interviews and journals already existed, but there were a few that were new. Note that interview three was primarily a reflection interview where we made meaning, discussed our reflections on the previous interviews and journals, and elaborated on the two, previous interviews. The information from these two sources was integrated into Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 to bolster and enrich the findings.

My final stage was to receive feedback from my advisor and continue writing until the themes and sub-themes were better articulated and organized. I continued reading and re-reading Chapters 5 and 6 as well as the transcripts and journals looking for anything that I had missed or any new ways that experiences were connected. When I was satisfied I had identified all relevant themes, I finished writing.

## Validity and Trustworthiness

Creswell (2013) describes a number of validation strategies that can be used to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. First, I worked diligently throughout our three interviews towards “building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation...” through prolonged engagement with my participants and by checking my interpretations with them periodically, especially when I was in need of clarification (Creswell, 2013, p. 250). Second, I employed triangulation strategies by making “use of multiple methods of data collection” (Merriam, 2009, p. 216)—interviews and participant journals—as well as by using “interview data collected from ...follow-up interviews with the same people.” (Merriam, 2009, p. 216). I also triangulated the data by “mak[ing] use of ...theories to provide corroborating evidence...” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Third, I regularly debriefed with my advisor in order to get feedback on my work, as well as support, as I worked through the process (Creswell, 2013). Fourth, I remained aware of my own biases by noting them as they arose during interviews and making note of my own past experiences that could alter the form of my interpretations of the participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Fifth, as I detailed earlier, I engaged in member checking; I asked participants to comment on the accuracy of my data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Sixth, I utilized the expertise of an external consultant, who is not affiliated in any way with the study and who holds a PhD from a related education field, to audit a selection from the dissertation using the corresponding interview transcripts. She audited the section under the heading “troubled mothers”. Creswell said that the “...findings, interpretations, and conclusions [must be] supported by the data.” (2013, p. 252). The external consultant confirmed that I had

accomplished the task in the selection she read. Finally, I wrote detailed, thick, rich descriptions when describing the data from each interview (Creswell, 2013). I described the subjective stories told to me by the mothers, paying attention to moments of epiphany, the context, and significant statements in order to never abstract what was said to me. I did my best to understand, interpret, and present the meaning of the stories (Creswell, 2007).

I think the quality of this study depended on its trustworthiness. Golfashani (2003) explains that rigor, and thus trustworthiness, in a study means that the researcher went to lengths to explore and understand the participants' subjective experiences and stories. Through the methods described previously, I labored to develop and carry out a study that was credible, ethical, upheld transparency, and that established confidence in its findings.

### **Conclusion**

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) share that behavior and ways of meaning making are variable and contextually specific. I think this is especially true of the population I have studied. Rural student-mothers' experiences and the meaning they make from their experiences—which are informed by the cultures, contexts, and histories that they embrace or feel obliged to embrace—are very complex. To add, their experiences, and the meanings they develop from them, are intricately interwoven with those of their family members. By utilizing phenomenological methods, I developed a comprehensive understanding of the social constructions under which student-mothers labor as well as the intricate facets of their personal and shared experiences.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Detailed Life Histories**

In this chapter, using a feminist lens and phenomenological methods, I focus in detail on the student-mothers' individual life histories. Understanding where they came from—their histories, rural context, and place in time—and the meaning they made from their earliest experiences in life, illuminates who they are today as student-mothers, which is discussed in Chapter 6. I combine the findings from Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 in Chapter 7, where the CHAT analysis of the two overarching activity systems—mothering and online learning—takes place. The background information in this chapter includes demographic information, anecdotes about the rural communities many of the women grew up in, why they chose to live in their rural communities and what they like and dislike about rural life. I also examine specific aspects of their childhood experiences, particularly concerning their relationships with their mothers and the mother figures in their lives, gender roles in their childhood homes, their parents' work and educational background, and the student-mothers' own educational experiences. These stories begin to form the cultural and historical aspect of the CHAT analysis.

I chose to focus on these particular data points for a number of reasons. First, the framework for this study is CHAT. Consequently, the women's history and context play an important role in understanding their current experiences. Second, the study is focused on the women's lives as mothers and as students. I thought it was necessary to examine these aspects of their lives closely, thus the detailed questions about their experiences with mothering as children and as mothers, and the questions about their educational backgrounds.

I endeavored to develop a snapshot of the student-mothers themselves, and the most important people and aspects in the women's lives, with my questions about their demographics. Accordingly, I asked for information such as their ages, number and ages of children, marital status, job description, educational background, etc. and the same snapshot information about their partners. It was an attempt to take a complex whole and boil it down into its basic elements, the fewest descriptors needed to give a fundamental description of each person. This information also acted as a starting place for the deeper analysis of their lives that follows. I asked the bulk of the demographic questions during the first few minutes of the first interviews: age, marital status, children, where they live, work, and school. I realized as I conducted the first and second interviews that I was missing two pieces of demographic data that would help give a more detailed picture of who the women are: economic class and race. I asked these questions at the beginning of the third and final interview. In both interviews, we moved through the demographic questions quickly. I asked the questions in a matter-of-fact fashion, and they answered similarly. I did this, especially in the first interview, to begin to get the conversation flowing, to warm us up, if you will. I thought it would be more appropriate to ask basic demographic questions before delving into more personal or emotionally charged questions.

### **Amy**

Amy is twenty-six-years-old, the mother of a six-year-old son, and was widowed at twenty-two. She is in a committed relationship, but does not cohabit with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend lives about twenty minutes away and works at home as an IT helpdesk representative for a bank. He has a bachelor's degree from a nearby state

school. She lives with her sister, who is a bank teller by day and helps care for Amy's son when he gets home from school and in the evenings. Amy is a full-time registered nurse at an inpatient behavioral health facility forty minutes from her home where she works second shift. Amy has an associate's degree in nursing that she earned from a technical school in a neighboring state. She's currently enrolled in the online RN to BSN program at her university and is taking seven classes. Amy is a veteran and served in Afghanistan. She is currently in the reserves and serves one weekend per month and two weeks per year. Amy lives in the same rural county that she grew up in. She identifies as Caucasian and working class.

### **Charlotte**

Charlotte is twenty-seven. She's the mother of an eighteen-month-old daughter. Charlotte is engaged to, and living with, her child's father. He has a bachelor's degree from a nearby, private, liberal arts university and works for a staffing company. He is also a college basketball coach. Charlotte's fiancé is from the area where they now live. Charlotte works full-time in administration at a branch campus of the university that she attends, which is only a few miles from her home. She is enrolled in an online master's program and is studying Higher Education. This is her first semester and she is taking one class. Charlotte grew up in a suburban neighborhood in an urban county but now lives in a rural county in the same state. Charlotte identifies as Caucasian and lower-middle class.

### **Hannah**

Hannah is forty-years-old. She has been married for twenty years. Her husband works as a mechanic for the railroad, only about five minutes from their home. He has a technical diploma in heating and air conditioning and has taken online classes towards a degree in labor and employee relations because he had an interest in the topic, but does not plan to finish a degree program. Hannah has two children: a sixteen-year-old daughter who lives in her home and a twenty-four-year-old son who is married and living on his own in the same town. She is a full-time staff member at the main campus of the university that she attends. Her job is a forty-five-minute drive from her home. She is completing an associate's degree in Letters, Arts, and Sciences this semester and is planning to enroll in a bachelor's program in Organizational Leadership – both are 100% online. She is taking two classes this semester. Hannah lives in the same town that she did as a child. She identifies as Caucasian and middle class.

### **Mary Ann**

Mary Ann is thirty-five and has been married for six years but has been in a relationship with her husband for twelve years. Her husband did not attend college but has earned professional certifications needed for his work. He has worked in construction, roadwork, and drilling. He is now a pipeline x-ray technician's helper for a drilling company. Mary Ann's husband works away and is home only about one weekend a month. Because of his work demands, she jokingly refers to herself as a single mom. She has two children. Her son is fourteen and her daughter is nine. Mary Ann holds down two jobs. She works full-time in middle management at a bank that is about two miles from her home. She also works part-time, about twenty hours per week,

as an Avon representative. She is set to earn an associate's degree in Letters, Arts, and Sciences this semester and is taking one class this semester. Mary Ann was born in the rural county that she lives in now but grew up in a less populated area of an urban county in the same state. Mary Ann identifies as Caucasian and middle class.

### **Sarah**

Sarah is thirty-three and married. Sarah's husband was a journeyman electrician, but he is no longer able to work outside the home. He fell from a twenty-three foot scaffolding at work and seriously injured his back. Sarah's husband left high school at seventeen to help support his parents, but earned his GED and attended college to become an electrician. Sarah is the mother of four biological children and two stepchildren. She has a sixteen-year-old stepson, a fourteen-year-old stepdaughter, and thirteen, twelve, seven, and five-year-old biological daughters. She works full-time in customer service at a car dealership that is about five minutes from her home. Sarah is enrolled in the Law and Society bachelor's program at her university and is taking five classes this semester. She grew up in an adjoining rural county approximately forty-five minutes from where she lives now. Sarah identifies as Caucasian and working class.

It is interesting to note the ways that each woman self-identifies their socio-economic status. When I asked them what economic class they identify most with, I listed the following as examples: below poverty level, working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper-middle class, wealthy, or other. They did not ask me to explain and I did not offer. They simply answered. Most interesting to me is that they did not answer the way I expected, based on their educational background, pay, and their and their partners' type of employment, i.e. white collar or blue collar.

Charlotte is an excellent example. She answered that she is lower-middle-class when she has a bachelor's degree, works full-time for a university and lives with her college educated fiancé who also works a white collar job. Based on data from the Pew Research Center (2016), which describes middle class incomes as falling between \$42,000 and \$125,000 per year in 2014, I would have listed her as middle class. It is possible that she chose the economic class that she identifies with because of her upbringing and current context. Charlotte's parents struggled to make ends meet when she was a child but her maternal grandparents, aunts, and uncles were upper-middle class and successful in their educational endeavors and careers, as a whole. Compared to her mother's family, she may still feel poor, even though she is located firmly in the middle class. Or, according to Bottero's (2004) findings in her study of class identity, Charlotte may simply see herself as average or just below average in the larger society, which Bottero (2004) says is common when describing class self-image.

Table 1. Student-Mothers' Demographic Information

Name	Age	Marital Status	Children	Program	Classes	Work
Amy	26	Widowed	Son: 6	Bachelor's	7	Full-time nurse
Charlotte	27	Engaged and cohabitating	Daughter: 1 ½	Master's	1	Full-time university staff
Hannah	40	Married	Adult Son: 24 Daughter: 16	Associate's	2	Full-time university staff
Mary Ann	35	Married	Son: 14 Daughter: 9	Associate's	1	Full-time banking Part-time Avon
Sarah	33	Married	Stepson: 16 Stepdaughter: 14 Daughter: 13 Daughter: 12 Daughter: 7 Daughter: 5	Bachelor's	5	Full-time customer service

### **We've Been Here Forever: The Rural Community**

One sub-theme regarding the women's cultural and historical backgrounds, which arose from the data, is that most of the women are living in the rural areas where they grew up. Most also reported long family lineages in the rural areas where they now live, some going back over one hundred years. For many of the women, they have been in their rural homes forever, both personally and historically. Charlotte is the only participant who was born in an urban county and moved to a rural county as an adult and the only participant who has a long family history in an urban county rather than in a rural county. Notably, all of the women could trace at least as far as their grandparents,

and some much farther, to the county where they were born. The stories in this section, about their rural family histories, support the sub-theme of choosing to stay rural.

It is not unusual for rural Pennsylvanians to live their entire lives not just in their home state, but also in their hometowns. More than three quarters of the residents of the state were born there, which is much higher than the national average of fifty-seven percent (Pew Research Center, 2008). Also, according to the Pew Research Center (2008), thirty-eight percent of adults living in the Eastern United States have lived in the same town their entire lives, while forty-eight percent of rural people have always lived in the same community. In fact, rural Americans are more likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to stay in their hometowns, as are people without a college degree (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Amy described the community where she grew up and now lives as “very rural”. She explained what it was like when she was a child:

...the closest grocery store or anything would be at least fifteen to twenty minutes away. So, if we needed to go grab anything...we had a little, wee tiny one or two, three, small mom and pop shops where you can get a little food or something or a gallon of milk if you needed it, but nothing major.

The community provided only the basics. Anything else meant a car ride to a larger community.

Amy could trace her family back to her third great grandparents. They came to the area from Wales and opened a bar. She has been told that one branch of her family could trace their roots to the Revolutionary War. She also reported having a great, great grandmother who is well known through the area as an early and very successful

entrepreneur. She owned a coal company, a water company, and a brickyard all while mothering five children. Amy's family pride is evident when she talks about how she and her work ethic are often compared to her strong and industrious ancestor.

Like Amy, Hannah and Mary Ann are also deeply rooted in their rural communities. Hannah can trace her family back at least as far as her great grandparents. She shared that her parents grew up only a mile away from each other and that her husband's family owns land that touches her family's property. Like her family, Hannah's husband's family goes back many generations in the same community, on the same land. Hannah explained what their rural community was like when she and her husband were children:

It is very rural. Everybody that lived close to me was family. So, I had uncles on either side of me, and then on the one side of the other uncle was my grandma. So, it was a whole row of family land that we all were related. And then, we had one lady that was across the main street that was just, you know, she wasn't related..."

Hannah was related to every neighbor that she could see except for one. Not only is she tied to the place because of having grown up there, she is tied to the people through relation in the place where she grew up. When most children grow up with family consisting of those people who live in their home, Hannah grew up with family and home that stretched outside her door and as far as she could see across the rural countryside.

Mary Ann's husband also has a long family history in the area where they live and has lived there his entire life, unlike Mary Ann who was born in their rural area but grew up in an urban county. She described the rural community where her husband grew

up, which is only five minutes from where they live now, as “You drive through and blink, you miss it.”

Sarah lives about forty-five minutes away from the rural community where she was born and raised. It is where her mother’s family lives. She moved away to another rural community in the area when her oldest daughter was five, hoping to enroll her in a better school district. Sarah explained her reason for moving, “...it’s not a good town...I’m not putting her through what I went through in this town.”

Living on family land, having generations of relatives within minutes of their homes, and being around people who know them, their families, and even their ancestors created a bond for many of the women with where they are from and where they still live. This bond to rural people and the rural place is deeply meaningful and important to many of them and is seen throughout the data. And as the data shows, this is not unusual for rural Pennsylvanians (Pew Research Center, 2008).

### **The Decision to Stay (or Become) Rural**

The women who took part in this study all have three key things in common: they are mothers and they are pursuing higher education online and from the same university. Another aspect that Amy, Hannah, Mary Ann, and Sarah all share is their decision to live in the rural areas where they grew up and where they, and sometimes their spouses, have long family histories. The stories in this section address the sub-theme of their shared experience of deciding to remain rural. They help to explain, in more detail, why they chose to stay.

Staying in a community because of feelings of attachment, deep bonds, or family ties to it is very common (Pew Research Center, 2008). Seventy-four percent of people

who stay in their hometowns cite family connections as their reason for staying while sixty-nine percent cited a sort of nostalgia as their reason for staying (Pew Research Center, 2008). They want to stay where they grew up. And according to the Pew Research Center (2008), these bonds or family roots can cause a deep sense of belonging. It is no wonder then that the third most common reason people cite for staying in their hometowns is that they think they are ideal places to raise their own families (Pew Research Center, 2008). To add, people with moderate incomes, much like the student-mothers, overwhelmingly cite family ties, or ties to home in general, as the major reasons they are more likely to stay where they grew up (Pew Research Center, 2008). In fact, people who still live in their hometowns have a median of eight family members living within one hour's drive from them. However, not all of the student-mothers fit this mold.

Amy's first move away from the rural area where she grew up was just a few counties away to an urban county in the same state. She moved to live with her husband. She remembered that time in her life:

I liked it down there. [name of town] was nice, you know? It was a little town. It was all clean and there were streetlamps and stuff. So, I thought that was the neatest thing 'cause I had only lived here where there was practically nothing. And then I moved out. After I got home from Afghanistan, my husband and I had kind of ran into some issues with his family. My, my husband actually committed, committed suicide. His family was very non-welcoming to my son and I due to the situation. And, I basically kind of ran away from the area to get away from his family.

This time was happy for her in the beginning, but ended tragically with her husband's death and subsequent difficulties with his family.

Amy told me that her own family was not supportive during this difficult time in her life, either. Her father had warned her that he thought her husband was "acting funny" and that he was concerned for Amy's safety. He told her he thought her husband might kill her. Amy said that her family considers suicide to be a cowardly act and that they said she was wrong to be upset when her husband died. They even advised her not to attend the funeral.

After her husband's death, Amy 'ran away' to a large city in the same state, about three hours from where she was living with her husband. She stayed in that city until just a few months ago, when she moved back to the rural community where she grew up. She was there for only a few years. It was during that time that she earned her first nursing degree.

Amy broke down in tears when she talked to me about her decision to move back to her hometown. She told me that living through her childhood without having her grandma in her life was very difficult. She moved home because she wants her family to be a part of her son's life and because she needs their help with childcare so that she can work full-time and attend school. Her sister now lives with her for this reason. Amy shared why it is good for her and her son to live in her hometown:

Her [sister] boyfriend comes over and stays and it's kind of nice. Because, I always say, I have my brother, who lives with my dad; my dad is five minutes away. And, my grandparents are five minutes away. So, my grandfather is there and then her [sister] boyfriend and my boyfriend, they both live twenty minutes

away. So, it's like I have five men within like twenty minutes. If I ever have an absolute emergency, somebody's got to answer the phone, you know?

It is not unusual for families, especially grandparents, to provide help for their family members, particularly with childcare (Pew Research Center, 2015). One third of Americans say that grandparents should help with childcare and 48% do (Pew Research Center, 2015). Amy expressed how thankful and relieved she is to have the help she gets from her family.

Family ties were among the reasons why Hannah and her husband chose to stay in their rural home, as well. Hannah began dating her husband in high school and said neither one of them ever wanted to leave their community, they both like the area and she added, "...neither one of us liked traffic or city people...we just loved being here". She said they knew they wanted to have a family and hoped their future kids would like the rural life as well. Hannah shared that she thinks her husband stayed because of his mother, who was divorced and alone. She said, "I think he felt it was his obligation to stay here and keep an eye on his mom." Hannah is not close with her parents, but feels a connection to extended family members that keeps her in her hometown.

Mary Ann did not spend her entire childhood in her rural hometown like Amy and Hannah, but it made a strong impression on her, nevertheless. Mary Ann's path back to her rural roots began in high school when she was living with her father in a nearby urban county. She shared that she was friends with a "rough crowd" as a teenager and that she ended up dropping out of school in her senior year. In response, her father kicked her out and she became homeless, living in her car for about six months. She eventually found an efficiency apartment and a full-time job at a fast food restaurant and returned to high

school. She said she then quickly “got burned out” and moved in with her sister who was living in a neighboring state on a Marine base. She only stayed there for a few weeks, per the military’s rules. Mary Ann then went to live with her mother in the rural community where she was born. She enrolled in school there and graduated.

Mary Ann had been spending vacations and summer with her mother since childhood and had made many friends, one of whom was her current husband who is a few years older. However, she met someone else after high school graduation, her first husband. They married, moved to an urban county in the central area of the state, and soon divorced. After her divorce, she reconnected with her now husband. They decided to move back to their rural hometown after his grandmother passed away. Mary Ann said that his grandmother’s passing “really put things into perspective” and made them want to be close to family for the sake of their children. Sadly for Mary Ann and her family, their plan to connect with their extended family has not been successful. She shared that they do not see their relatives very often, even though they live in the same area.

Sarah is not living in her rural hometown like most of the other women, but she is in the same rural area. Sarah felt that she could not move very far away because she is a “creature of habit” and has severe anxiety. However, she has moved a few times since her first child was born but has always stayed within about forty-five minutes of her hometown in the same, rural area of the state. Her first move was to a better school district for her children. Her next move was due to tragic circumstances. Her three-year-old daughter was sexually assaulted in their home by an acquaintance. Sixteen days later, the family left. They moved to a rural community about thirty miles away from where the crime occurred. This was a terribly difficult time for Sarah’s family, especially for

her husband who was home when their daughter was assaulted. She said, “He buried the burden and turned to alcoholism.” She recalled the events from that time when her husband was descending into alcoholism:

...he drank profusely no matter what the cost, he drank. We had Children and Youth involved in our life constantly. He broke windows. He broke doors. He broke walls. He fell down the steps even though he already has an injured back ...because of the town and our disturbances, we decided it was best we tried to leave the past behind us and move.

Because of the painful repercussions in the aftermath of their child’s abuse, the family wanted to start over again, but still wanted to stay close to the place that had been home.

The family moved to a neighboring rural community, about 15 minutes away, for another attempt at a fresh start. Her husband went to rehab, relapsed, and went back to rehab. They lost their house. The courts got involved again, but they won their case. She said things are finally beginning to get better, but that the stress from these events has negatively impacted her schoolwork. She is on academic probation. Her inability to concentrate on anything but the difficulties they were facing in previous semesters left her with a grade point average below 2.0.

Charlotte is the only student-mother who did not grow up in a rural town but chose to move to one as an adult. Charlotte grew up in the suburbs in an urban county. She moved to a rural county in the same state for work. She chose the town where she lives now from the other job offers she had because she likes the location in the state—it is half-way between her hometown and where she attended college—, she likes the size and history of the campus where she works, the rural beauty, the small-town atmosphere

(everyone knows everyone else), and yet she is centralized to major cities. She said the community is “the best of both worlds”. It is also near where her brother is living. And although she is currently estranged from both of her parents, she has stayed close to her brother and still feels somewhat responsible for his well being—she is four years older and had taken on a motherly role for him early in their lives.

Charlotte’s primary reason now to stay in her community is her fiancé who is from the area and would like to stay. Accordingly, I consider rural newcomer, Charlotte’s, decision to live in her rural community a decision to remain rural. She is a part of a family unit and because more than half of her family unit, her fiancé and their child, have a long family history in the rural area, I have chosen to view this as a decision to stay where their family roots are. Even though they are biologically not hers, his roots will soon be hers through marriage and they are her child’s.

The student-mothers’ reasons for choosing to live in their rural communities all revolve around wanting what they view is best for their families and follows the findings found in the literature (Pew Research Center, 2008). These reasons add depth to our understanding of what exactly it is about their rural homes that has created their desires to stay. Amy lives in her hometown so that her family can help with childcare while she works to provide a good life for her son. Hannah lives in her rural community to be close to family and to provide the rural life that she and her husband love for their children. Mary Ann also lives in her rural community for her children, so they too can be close to their extended family. Sarah chose her town to give her family a fresh start, yet in a familiar area. And Charlotte chose to stay in her community primarily because it is near

her brother, it provides the kind of life she wants for her daughter, and it is where her fiancé is from and wants to stay.

### **The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Side of Rural Life**

Staying in their rural hometowns or moving to new rural communities for their children or family does not necessarily mean the student-mothers like everything about rural life, and in the case of one of the women, that they like rural life at all. There are aspects that many of them love and things they decidedly dislike or hope to soon escape. These stories can also help us to better understand the overarching sub-theme of their decisions to stay in their rural homes.

Many of the women cited the natural beauty, peace, and solitude of rural places as something they really like about their homes. Hannah, Charlotte, Amy and Mary Ann each described their enjoyment of different aspects of natural, rural areas such as greenery, trees, parks, wildlife, hiking, and sunsets over rural lakes. Mary Ann shared, “you see the sunset on the lake and it just, it makes everything right living here.” Amy and Charlotte like that there are fewer people and that rural places are often quiet. Charlotte, in particular, said she becomes overwhelmed in cities with so many people around her, a feeling she does not experience in her rural town. But, Hannah said the lack of other children nearby to play with can be difficult for her kids. To add, Mary Ann finds the long distances she must drive to get to other rural communities or to access services that her family needs to be a negative aspect of living in a rural area. She spends a lot of time in her car every day, driving her children up to an hour away for activities and appointments. Hannah hates dealing with city traffic and Charlotte dislikes long city commutes, things missing in quiet rural towns. Hannah likes that nature is right outside

her door and Charlotte agrees, saying that her idea of a dream home is one with “wide open spaces” for kids to run and play or to have a garden, much like Hannah’s grandparents’ ninety-nine acre property, one of her favorite peaceful places. Charlotte thinks her desire for lots of space of her own comes from having grown up in rather claustrophobic circumstances in a number of apartments or small town homes, always sharing a wall with other people.

The women also have varied opinions about their rural neighbors, some positive, some negative, and some that leave them with mixed feelings. Amy and Mary Ann cited safety as a reason they prefer their rural communities, with Mary Ann specifying the low crime rate. She said, “I leave my doors unlocked every day...I leave my keys in my car all night long.” She trusts her neighbors. Along these lines, it is very comforting to Hannah and Mary Ann that their neighbors and friends are there to watch out for each other and help each other when needed. Hannah shared an example of how her rural community cares for each other:

We have one lady who is by herself. Her kids live away and when it snows, we plow her out and we feed her cats when she needs us to feed her cats. And, I guess I like, we like that. We all know each other and we all take care of each other.

Hannah appreciates the feeling of caring for others in her community and, in turn, being cared for.

Mary Ann also receives peace of mind knowing that she has many people who can help her with her kids, if an emergency should arise; there is always someone to call,

someone available and willing to help out. She explained how hard life with active kids can be and why having help available is important to her:

...that matters to me with my kids. I mean, in all reality, on a day, say, I'm supposed to pick my kids up from tutoring at 4:30 and if I get stuck at work until 5:00 or 5:30, I can, I have a whole slew of people I can call, any one of my friend's or classmate's...I can call their parents and say, "Hey, I'm in a jam. Could you pick my son up for me and drop him off at my house?" And you know they would do it because we're a small town and that's what we do. We help each other out.

Knowing she has people that she knows and trusts that are there for her makes Mary Ann's difficult job of mothering somewhat easier.

Knowing and helping each other builds a sense of community for many of the women. But, while Amy often likes that many in her community know not just her but her parents and even grandparents, she said that everyone knowing your family history is not always a good thing. Hannah agrees. Hannah shared that sometimes rural people will unfairly judge one another based on the sins of their family members, even going back generations. She talked about her thoughts on being judged based on one's ancestors:

In a small town it's hard because everybody knows your maiden name and your married name and they know everybody you're related to...I guess I'm not one of those people that like to talk about the generations before me and all the mistakes they made. I would just like to just stay in the current and not always have to go back and talk about whether we liked grandfathers or something.

Hannah thinks this phenomenon of not judging people on who they are, but on whom they came from, is unfair and annoying.

Amy has firsthand experience with dealing with the judgment passed on family members in her rural community. She explained that some of her family members have public jobs that affect the day-to-day life in her rural community. She said that their decisions are not always popular, causing her rural neighbors to be angry with her family and even with her, a sort of punishment by association. Amy told me what the “drama” is like for her:

It’s kind of like, when they [her family members] make public decisions that are voted on...it creates a little animosity and stuff. And, now that there’s Facebook... people post a bunch of stuff on Facebook...I have a hard time sitting back and watching if they [her family members] make a decision that...everybody is resisting...sometimes it’s hard to sit back and see your family name bashed or hear rumors.

So, not only does Amy have to consider and deal with how she is appraised in her community, she has to bear the burden of how her family is judged and talked about.

No matter how annoying or exhausting being known for generations can be, Amy, Charlotte, Hannah, and Mary Ann all like certain aspects of the lack of anonymity in rural towns. Some of the women explained that they are not strangers where they live, when they are “lifers”. Mary Ann likes feeling like she is “somebody” and not a “nobody”. Newcomers, on the other hand, are not always welcomed with open arms by community members who seem uninterested in making new relationships, according to Charlotte and Sarah who are new to their rural towns.

Amy, Hannah, and Mary Ann did make clear that the lack of anonymity could lead to unpleasant behavior among their neighbors and friends such as gossiping, drama, and nosiness. Hannah shared an anecdote about the downside of the lack of anonymity in rural communities, she said that sometimes she would like to "...just run to the store and nobody really know you 'cause you ran down in your sweatpants and you're in the middle of cleaning and then that's when you run into everybody!"

Amy, Hannah, and Mary Ann all shared aspects of rural life that are not ideal, but Sarah and Charlotte also shared some decidedly disconcerting aspects of their rural lives. Charlotte said the lack of diversity in some rural areas, particularly the community she lived in while an undergraduate, is uncomfortable for her. She told me about particularly unsettling experiences she has had concerning overt racism that those around her seemed entirely ignorant of, troubling her. One experience happened while she was an undergraduate in the rural, western part of her state. She shared the disturbing details of a trip home with a college friend:

...pulling into their driveway on Halloween and seeing a skeleton hanging from their tree with a sign that said, "I used to be a 'N word'." And so, for me, I think one of the biggest shocks was that where I grew up, and how I grew up, [an urban county in the same state] I was surrounded by diversity all the time and I never really, I never really, I want to say, noticed that kind of stuff before I came to [rural college town].

This incident shocked Charlotte and left her questioning, in her own mind, the rural people around her with whom she had begun to form relationships. Charlotte also shared that, while in college, she had a friend from a country in Arica who would wear an "I

love Africa” shirt around campus. She said people on the rural campus would shout things at her friend whenever she wore the shirt such as “go back to Africa!” This was very unnerving and shocking for Charlotte who had not experienced this type of blatant racism in her urban hometown.

The issues with rural life are a bit different for Sarah. The lack of opportunity combined with the lack of cultural offerings in her rural area leaves her excited to move away. She also thinks the residents of her rural community, as a whole, are rather close-minded. She said that she and her family feel as if the community demands that everyone conforms or risk not fitting in. She explained, “It’s just that, the one time we lived in [name of town], everybody hid behind walls. If you weren’t cookie cutter individuals, you didn’t fit in and you weren’t welcomed, kind of thing.” She said she and her family would like to move south, closer to where her husband is from in a neighboring state. She said his home state has more to offer her entire family, a place where she said they would all feel more comfortable.

The positive reasons the women cite for staying in their rural homes are compelling while the negative issues create tensions that are difficult to resolve. Being known, often for many generations, can be annoying when wanting to blend in or when wanting to be judged on one’s own merits, but being known can also bring enormous comfort and a sense of community that feels like family. And, the beauty and serenity of rural areas can be both aesthetically and spiritually uplifting. But, the dark side of rural life, for those who have not been anesthetized to it by time in the rural place, can be overwhelming and even psychologically painful.

The student-mothers all have complex reasons for living in their rural communities along with things they do and do not like about their homes. These stories about their (and their partners') family histories, their reasons for staying, and the things they like and dislike about rural life, highlight their often complicated ties to their rural homes and bring us closer to understanding their lived experiences as rural women bonded to the places where they live.

### **Growing Up**

The second sub-theme of this study is the effect that the women's early experiences with being mothered, with gender roles, and with education has had on them as mothers and as students. In the following pages, I reveal the stories they shared from their childhoods that explain how they were mothered, what they learned about gender roles in the family, and how their families viewed, did, and discussed education and work. In the next chapter, these stories will help us to understand how they became the mothers and students that they are today.

### **Troubled Mothers**

O'Reilly, in her book on feminism and motherhood, "...situates the mother-daughter relationship as a cultural construction." (2006, p. 90), a patriarchal cultural construction, in particular, that seeks to define the correct way to be a mother and daughter by dichotomizing the relationship. According to this cultural narrative, mothers and daughters are either estranged from their relationship or empowered by it (O'Reilly, 2006). There is really no gray area. There are good mothers and there are bad. And, according to Douglas and Michaels (2004) in their book about how modern motherhood has been idealized to the detriment of mothers and their children, the media that we are

constantly bombarded with on a daily basis has perpetuated the myth that mothers are to always demonstrate perfect love for their children: meaning they are devoted, ever joyful in their motherhood, self-sacrificing, and oozing with boundless patience and adoration for their progeny. But what of the mothers and mother figures who do not fit the mold? What does that mean for their daughters who grow up without mother love?

For most of the student-mothers in my study, their mothers, stepmothers, and other mother figures do not fit the socially constructed narrative of what a good mother is supposed to be. Rich (1986, p.12) described the enormity of the mother/child relationship when she said, “For most of us a woman provided the continuity and stability—but also the rejections and refusals—of our early lives, and it is with a woman’s hands, eyes, body, voice, that we associate our primal sensations, our earliest social experience.” Many of the student-mothers in this study had decidedly negative early experiences at the hands of their mother figures. They have been neglected, abused, and abandoned by the women who our cultural ideology tells us were supposed to love, guide and protect them throughout their lives, the women who were supposed to teach them what it is to be a woman and a mother (O’Reilly, 2006). As a result, they have all been deeply affected.

Amy, Charlotte, Mary Ann, and Sarah all have had especially difficult relationships with their mothers. Amy’s biological mother moved across the country when Amy was around three or four. She had very little contact with her growing up. They are currently estranged. Charlotte’s mother left when she was fourteen. According to Charlotte, “...she just decided to leave...I haven’t really heard from her since.” It’s been thirteen years since she has seen her. Mary Ann’s parents left their rural county and

then divorced when she was a young child. Her mother moved back to the rural county where she grew up. Mary Ann lived with her father in an urban county and did not see her mom very often. She shared that her mother “had some troubled issues that she was dealing with” and that her mother was not very involved in her childhood. However, she moved in with her mother during her senior year of high school but then moved out immediately upon graduating from high school. And, although she now lives in the same area as her mother again, according to Mary Ann, “Our plan to move back home to be close to family backfired...they don’t really have much to do with us.” Sarah also has a strained relationship with her mother. She explained what her life with, and without, her mother was like:

I grew up in my grandfather’s house. My mom had me when she was sixteen, so she still lived at home. And then when she moved out on her own and she had my brother when she was eighteen, married his father, lived with him for about six months, they divorced and then we moved to [name of town], which is when my mom moved from house to house, from boyfriend to boyfriend, never really settling down until she met my stepdad and she was only with him for about seven years. And at that time, I was old enough to live with my grandmother, which is what I did to keep a stable environment for myself. I didn’t want to go back to the lifestyle she had before she was with my stepdad. So, I moved in with my grandmother.

Sarah’s early life was marred by upheaval and tenuous examples of motherhood.

Throughout her childhood, Sarah moved between her mother’s home and her maternal grandparent’s home, which was very difficult for her. Sarah stressed that her

mother was not a good role model for her. She explained how her mother's actions affected her:

...my brother, my sister, and I all have different dads. That's why I say she's not a very good role model as a mother at all, and I don't let my kids be around her for various reasons including, um...my sister's father...and everybody tried to tell her at the time he was a child molester. And, she didn't listen. She was with him until my sister was a year and a half. The day my sister was born is the day I became a mom. I was eight-years-old.

These painful memories are of a sort of abandonment. Sarah's mother was there in body, but she was not there as Sarah's mother in our culturally understood sense. She did not protect Sarah, put her needs first, or nurture her or her siblings.

Miller (2005, p. 15) explains this distressing conundrum from a feminist perspective, "...women are expected instinctively to know how to mother." But, motherhood is not one size fits all; "...it is not a universally standard experience." (Miller, 2005, p. 15). Sarah's mother, for reasons we do not know, did not follow the socio-historically created motherhood script and did not embody the motherhood instinct—whether we believe it to be a myth or real—, causing her children enormous distress.

Sarah's struggles with her mother continued throughout her childhood. She explained, "I witnessed things I shouldn't have witnessed. The men my mother chose were not good role models until she met my stepdad." She shared that things were so bad with her mother that her grandfather has apologized for the times when he gave her back to her mother. But, even though they provided a more stable home, Sarah's relationship

with her grandmother was not a replacement for the close mother-daughter bond that she was missing. Sarah told me about her place in her family, which originated with her mother's actions:

...my mom's family referred to her [her mother] as the black sheep, and we're her children, so my younger sister and I were the black sheep as well...So, when I moved in with my gram, I only lived with her until I graduated from high school and then I moved out 'cause we weren't close at all.

As a result, Sarah is estranged from her mother and is not close to most of her extended family members.

Amy and Mary Ann not only had painful relationships with their mothers, they also had troubled relationships with their stepmothers. Both Amy's and Mary Ann's fathers were their custodial parent as kids, making their stepmothers full-time co-parents with their fathers.

Amy's father remarried shortly after Amy's mother left, when she was around three or four. She lived with her father until she was sixteen, she then moved in with her grandparents for a short while. Amy joined the military at seventeen as a way to pay for college when her father and stepmother refused to sign her FAFSA or help with the cost of college in any way, and spent the summer between her junior and senior year in basic training before returning to finish her senior year of high school. She had left her grandparents' home and moved back in with her father and stepmother, but she moved out of her father's home for good the day she turned 18, during her senior year of high school. She then lived with her grandparents again for a short time before moving in with her husband.

This instability in her living situation was due, in part, to her difficult relationship with her stepmother, who Amy said, “ruled with an iron fist”. She remembered what her stepmother was like:

She didn’t like to clean but she liked her house clean. So, my sister and I were responsible for...we weren’t allowed to stay anywhere Friday nights. Saturday mornings we had to be up at 5:00 am and clean the house and do everybody’s laundry. It was just a routine that we had to do every week...that was all on my sister and I shoulders. We had daily chores. Every day the vacuum needed ran or something. And, we cleaned the kitchen every night.

She went on to explain the lasting effects of her stepmother’s treatment of her as a child:

...my stepmom was just so emotionally abusive and just so bad that I always felt like I was going to get in trouble. And, it’s still to this day...once you get so ingrained with something, the way you were raised, it’s still to this day, there’s times where I can’t sit down and watch television unless I do something else [chores] because I feel like I’m going to get in trouble. And I’m twenty-six-years-old.

Amy’s stepmother’s emotionally abusive treatment of her and her sister was so extreme and so controlling, it still affects her and her behavior to this day.

Amy’s stepmother’s behavior not only affected Amy, but it affected Amy’s relationships with other family members. She told me that her stepmother’s abusive behavior extended to treating her biological children so differently from Amy and her sister—regarding chore expectations—that her stepmother created animosity between Amy and her stepsiblings. She also said that her stepmother’s abusive behavior extended

to alienating Amy and the rest of her immediate family from their extended family. She explained the alienation that her stepmother caused:

My stepmother had alienated us all from that side of the family [her father's family]. So, for the majority of my life, it was just my stepmom and my dad... We didn't talk to them [her father's family]. We didn't see my grandma growing up for seven years or so... they live five minutes away.

Amy's stepmother succeeded in not only controlling and emotionally abusing Amy and her sister but she also worked to destroy their relationships with people close to them.

Mary Ann's father remarried when she was nine, about four years after he was divorced from her mother. She described her stepmother as a domineering woman who "ruled the roost". Much like Amy's stepmother, Mary Ann's stepmother treated her and her sister much differently than she did her own children, expecting Mary Ann and her sister to do the majority of the housework while her own children had no chore expectations. Mary Ann described their unhappy relationship:

She ended up not liking us and we ended up not liking her. And it really wasn't a good relationship and it didn't become a better relationship until we were in our twenties and had children of our own... It really felt like we were competing for our dad between... her and us.

Not only was Mary Ann left by her biological mother, she was locked in a continual battle for her father's attention with her stepmother, who treated her like an indentured servant.

Hannah is the only participant whose parents remained married. But, her relationship with them is not her idea of ideal. She said that she and her family see her

parents a few times a month, but said, “I’m one of those weird people that don’t have an extremely close relationships with their parents.”

Rich said that biological “Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct.” (1986, p. 12). Feminist scholars and biology tells us this is true, but the prevailing socio-historically created narrative does not. It says that mothers are to love their children unconditionally. When they do not, what are their children to think? How should they feel? They are left by this destructive narrative, wondering why the women who society tells us should be instinctively driven to lay down their lives for their children, do not feel that way for them. These feelings of abandonment, estrangement, and general disinterest from their mothers haunts them. It follows the student-mothers into their own mothering and affects every move they make as they mother their own children.

### **Gender Roles in the Childhood Home**

According to Smith, Hamon, Ingoldsby, and Miller (2009, p.233), “Gender roles are defined by society, not by biology.” Who does what in the home is a cultural, learned creation and different from place to place, circumstance to circumstance (Smith et al., 2009; White & Klein, 2008). For the student-mothers in this study, the gender roles, specifically domestic chore allocation in their childhood homes varied, often times depending on the presence of an adult woman living in the home and her relation to the student-mother. There also appeared to be an overarching traditional outlook in most of the homes. How far the traditional roles were taken depended, for the most part, on who was available to do the work and who was directing the work, so gender was not

always the primary factor regarding who did what. There did seem to be a trend in the hierarchy of domestic chore allocation, however. Stepdaughters as well as girls living only with their father were most likely to be saddled with the majority of the domestic work—although for different reasons— followed by married biological mothers/grandmothers, daughters of married biological parents, stepmothers and fathers, and finally biological children of stepparents did the least or even no domestic chores.

This hierarchy differs from the prevailing discourse on the gender division of labor in the home. For instance, when searching the extant literature about this topic, one is most likely to discover research and writings about the division of labor between the adults in the home, not between the adults and children or stepchildren. Feminist family theorists, in particular, discuss the historical reasons why domestic labor has been divided the way it has in the home; the work that has become the woman's domain is the least valued work (Donovan, 2012; Smith et al., 2009; White & Klein, 2008). They have also discussed issues surrounding fairness and marital satisfaction (White & Klein, 2008). But, daughters, stepdaughters specifically, have been largely left out of the conversation of the division of domestic labor, fairness and satisfaction in the home. The women in this study who were stepdaughters were allocated domestic labor not only based on the status their gender afforded them in their homes but also on their lesser status as a stepchild. They were the people with the lowest status and power and had the most precarious relationships in the home, and thus, were given an unfair portion of the least valued work, although arguably the work most critical to daily survival (Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009; Donovan, 2012; White & Klein, 2008).

Amy described her childhood home and family as “extremely traditional” and said gender roles were discussed and understood in her home. She explained, “...my grandmother draws my grandfather’s bathwater. He doesn’t even draw his own bathwater!” She added that her stepmother would get up early every morning just to make her father’s lunch.

Amy shared that the gender messages she received as a child could be a bit confusing, though.

...my dad was big on, you know, someday you might not have a man to do this for you. So, my dad was big on making sure I knew how to change the oil in the vehicle, making sure I could change a tire, making sure I knew, you know, I had to help with the wood cause we had a wood burner and stuff. And, I was the oldest, so...but at the same time, it was always ingrained in me that the traditional things around the house had to be done by the woman.”

Amy was expected to take on the traditionally feminine gender roles in the home as well as know how to complete all of the traditionally masculine roles.

She now considers herself to be “semi-traditional” because, “...my husband never even dished out his own meal. I would dish out his meal for him.” But, that at the same time, she says she is “extremely independent”.

Charlotte thinks issues with gender roles played a part in her parent’s divorce. She described what she thinks happened:

My grandmother on my mom’s side was a stay at home mom, and I think my mom always wanted to be that, but, and I think she resented the fact that she had

to work and that my dad couldn't provide enough for everybody in our family.

And, I think that's kind of where things started to deteriorate.

She thinks her mother was disappointed in not having the life she thought she should have.

Charlotte doesn't remember her father ever cleaning when her parents were married, but does remember him grilling occasionally. Charlotte said that after her mother left, gender was not an issue. If a job needed to be done, whoever was available to do it, did it. Charlotte recalled how the domestic work was allocated in her childhood home:

My brother and I cleaned a lot. My dad would clean the kitchen. My dad was a, a good cook and so he would cook every once in a while. But, there was a lot of times that, you know, my brother and I, we would come home and my dad wouldn't be home. So, you know, we would just make whatever we wanted to make in the fridge...I needed clean, clean clothes? All right, well, I need to do my laundry.

It was a truly egalitarian home, mostly out of necessity. Her father worked a lot, but the demands of daily life were still there. Charlotte and, to a lesser extent, her brother had to pick up the slack left by their mother in order to meet their own needs.

Hannah also described her childhood home as "typical" in the traditional sense. She said, "...I think about the things my husband does; my dad would have never done any of those things." She and her two sisters would help her mother with cooking and cleaning, but her younger brother did not do chores. She thinks the reason her brother did not help with housework was due to three things: he was the baby in the family, he had a

few minor health issues, and he was a boy. Hannah does not remember gender roles being discussed at home, except possibly in a joking manner. She described her parents' roles in the following way, "So he was at work and that was his work and the house was her work." Interestingly, she shared that when her father retired, he and her mother began sharing the domestic chores equally.

Mary Ann's childhood experiences with gender roles were similar to Hannah's. She grew up with four children in her home, which included herself, her sister, a younger stepbrother, and a younger half-brother. She told me about the division of domestic labor in her childhood home:

...we did the majority of the housework [she and her sister]. Well, I shouldn't make it sound like my parents didn't do anything, but we had more responsibility in chores whereas my two younger brothers literally had to do nothing. We were raised very differently even though there were four kids under one roof.

When I asked Mary Ann if she thought the girls in her home were treated differently than the boys because of their gender, she answered that she thought the reason was a combination of the age differences among the kids—she is four and twelve years older than her brothers— with the fact that she and her sister are not her stepmother's biological children and the boys are. She said, "...well I don't want to say me, I mean me and my sister, you know, were my dad's kids and those were my stepmom's boys...she's a very dominating woman and I will say she definitely rules the roost."

Sarah, who moved between her grandparents' and mother and stepfather's homes as a child, said gender roles were not talked about, but understood. She described her grandparents as traditional and "old school individuals". Her responsibilities in her

mother's home were similar to some of the other women. She was expected to take on many adult chores, not necessarily because of her gender, but because the adults in the home were either unavailable or not interested in completing them. Sarah explained what this expectation was like for her:

...my mom passed all of the responsibilities on to me. She delegated her work and I did it all including the cooking, the cleaning, taking care of my little sister and, when she met my stepdad, he had a little boy and he was two months younger than my sister. I took care of him as well.

She added that her stepfather did the "manly stuff" around the house such as yard work, working on the cars, and taking out the garbage, much like her grandfather.

All of the student-mothers grew up being responsible for a large share of the domestic work in their childhood homes. For some of the student-mothers, gender roles were ever present, if only as an understanding, and guided who did what in their homes. For others, who did what was more of a matter of survival. They did the domestic work that needed to be done or there was no dinner or clean clothes. It was as simple as that.

The women took what they learned as children into their adult lives. I will explain in Chapter 6 how these early experiences formed how they think about gender today and how it affects their experiences as students and mothers.

### **Parents' Work and Educational Backgrounds**

All of the student-mothers described being influenced, to some degree, by the work ethic and value placed on education in their homes as children. Whether they witnessed positive examples in their parents or they saw a string of failures, they all

became determined to do well or be better than their own parents, as providers for their families.

Amy described her childhood family as working class. Her biological mother did not graduate high school, though she later earned her GED, and never held down a steady job. Her stepmother was a stay at home mom. Amy shared that her stepmother attempted a career in medical billing when Amy was a teenager, but that she quit after a few months. Amy's describes her father as a "big back breaker" and a "very, very, very hard worker" who made a good living. He was a laborer who traveled for work, only coming home on weekends, when she was growing up. Amy is the first person in her family to graduate from college.

Charlotte described her childhood socio economic status as "lower class" or working class. Her father was a plumber and her mother, while she was still married to Charlotte's father, was a teacher's aid and a nursing aid. Neither of Charlotte's parents have a college degree. She said that no one had ever gone to college on her father's side. But, on her mother's side, college was expected. Most of her mother's relatives have pursued higher education and have gone on to achieve prestigious positions as engineers, business owners, and vice presidents of companies. Her mother began, but did not finish nursing school. Much like the way that Sarah described her mother, Charlotte said her mother was the black sheep of her family in regards to her educational and work success.

Hannah's family was working class when she was a child. Her mother was a stay at home mom. When she was very young, her father was a truck driver who worked long days but was home every night. For most of her childhood and until his retirement,

though, he was a corrections officer. Hannah will be the first person in her family to graduate from college.

Mary Ann described her childhood socio economic status as middle class. She said her father was a “self-proclaimed workaholic” with a very strong work ethic. He worked on a farm when she was very young and then in a factory. She described her mother as a “gypsy soul” who did not hold down a regular job. When Mary Ann was nine, her father remarried. Her stepmother worked as a janitor. When Mary Ann was a teenager, her father completed a degree program at a local community college, making him the first in the family to earn a college degree. Neither her mother nor stepmother went to college.

Sarah grew up in a working class home. Sarah said her mother “moved jobs constantly” and when Sarah was in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, her mother hurt her shoulder, “fought for disability”, and never went back to work. Sarah said she gets her work ethic from her former stepfather whom she said was a very hard worker. He had a job in a potato chip factory and “never took off, even his vacation”. She explained, “to watch him work that hard and then my mom just not work at all...it was an eye opener, I think.” Sarah said her stepfather showed her “what a real dad is and what a parent is”. Sarah’s mother did not graduate from high school, but returned to get her GED after her last daughter was born. Sarah’s parents did not attend college.

Because Sarah lived with her grandparents off and on throughout her childhood, I think it is important to include them as her exemplars for work and education. Sarah’s grandfather was a security guard and her step-grandmother was the secretary to the

president of the company where her grandfather worked. It is where they met. Her grandparents did not attend college.

Many times during our conversations, the student-mothers would refer to what kind of work ethic they saw growing up and what kind they want to emulate for their own children. Most praised the father figures in their lives and have expressed a desire to emulate their example. On the other hand, the most vocal women were those who thought their mothers provided a bad example and did not provide for them adequately. It was apparent to me that these women are driven by their desires to make sure own their children know they are doing everything they can to help provide a secure, comfortable home, and even some extras. I think it is a way that they demonstrate love for their families. My understanding, based on the hurt in their voices and bitter tone when they told me their stories, is that they did not feel loved or cared for when their own mothers did not provide for them.

### **Education: Expectations and Experiences**

All of the student-mothers wanted to go to college after high school. For some, the desire was evident while for others it was just a dream they kept to themselves. One of the women was a traditional student who followed the typical timeline and finished college in four years. A few began college but dropped out soon after. A couple just recently began their college experience as adults. But, for all of the women, pursuing higher education is something that they have to do, for themselves as well as for their families. Mary Ann said, “I have a vision for my life and college is it.”

Amy’s family expected straight As from her and her sister, she explained that it was not because they were unreasonable, but because her parents knew they could do it.

The girls had “set a precedent” with their good grades. She remembers a strict schedule that she had to follow each evening of chores followed by homework, with no debating.

However much doing well in high school was valued in her home, Amy said there was not an emphasis on college. She noted that her parents did not deter her from going; they just did not think it was necessary. In fact, her parents refused to sign her FAFSA or help her with any college expenses. She was told she was on her own.

Amy said she had always wanted to attend the university where she now attends. But, because her parents would not sign her FAFSA forms, she decided the only way she could afford college was to join the military. She wanted to be an architectural engineer, applied to her dream school, and was accepted. She went to basic training, completed job training with the military, and met her husband. She said that, because her childhood was not ideal, she moved in with her husband quickly and was soon pregnant. She was in her first semester of engineering school. She described what this difficult time in her life was like:

I worked 40 hours a week plus I did a full load at [university] full time. And I, I ended up just . . . my pregnancy was not ideal. It was, I was pretty sick . . . I was really sick actually. They tried to put me on bed rest. But I’m like, of course I didn’t have time for bed rest because I was working full time and I was going to school full time. So, eventually I had him and then my husband went to Iraq. And then that’s when my schooling stopped. And then after my husband came home from Iraq, I went to Afghanistan six months later. And then after I got home from Afghanistan, three weeks after I got home, my husband had passed away. So at that point I was going to take a job with the military. I’m going to

take a DOD job when I got home from Afghanistan. But when my husband passed away, at that point, I thought I could collect unemployment, I could collect my school benefits and stuff and I could go to college and I wouldn't have to work. And I wouldn't have to miss time with my son because of . . . I was going to a full time school but it was a tech school. So I only had to go three days a week.

When Amy's life became complicated and difficult, she had to make even more difficult decisions.

Amy decided not to return to her engineering program but to instead enroll in a nursing program. It was something she could do quickly and that would almost guarantee she would find a job that would pay enough to support her and her son. She completed the program in 27 months and earned an associate's degree in nursing at a technical college.

Amy expressed feeling uncomfortable with her decision to attend a technical college for her nursing degree. She shared, "...a lot of people just looked at me like I was not a, a qualified nurse, per se, because I went to a tech school...I literally had a Major that I worked for in the military laugh at me and said, "I would never let my daughter go to [name of technical college]."" She added, "I wanted to work with PTSD veterans and the VA wouldn't hire me either, because the school I went to is accredited, obviously, because I had my license, but it's not accredited by a specific organization that the VA likes." Amy shared that she worked very hard to earn her nursing degree—she was the valedictorian of her class—and she wants the level of respect that nurses who attended more prestigious institutions have. This is one driving reason why she is now

pursing a nursing degree from the university that she has always wanted to attend but had to leave as a new mom.

Charlotte also did well in school and wanted to go to college. Charlotte recalls her parents talking about her going to college and wanting her to do so. Her maternal grandparents were also confident she would go to college. Although they had no doubts she would go, she explained, “whether or not we had the support moving forward in terms of going to college was another thing”. It was difficult for Charlotte, knowing that her mother’s family wanted her to go to college, expected it really, and was well-off enough to help her do so, but refused and left her on her own. College was never a topic of conversation in her dad’s family.

Charlotte said she was good at school, above average. She shared that she was “interested in college for one reason, and for one reason only”: to get out of where she was. She was a swimmer and played water polo in high school and was offered a scholarship from a state school across the state from her home. She explained, “it was probably the furthest state school I could go to without getting out the state from where I lived. And, I kind of made a decision and, you know, I was determined that that’ where I wanted to go.” Charlotte entered college right out of high school and graduated four years later with a bachelor’s degree.

Hannah loved school as a kid. She reported never having issues or struggling. She even loved to ride the school bus for an hour in the morning and an hour after school each day, saying it was fun. When asked about her parents’ views on education, Hannah explained their perceived outlook. She said:

No one ever told me I should go to college...I'm not saying that my parents didn't think education was important, because obviously we did well in school and that was important for us to do. But, I don't feel that anyone at that time was recommending that any of us kids go to college...So, I'm not saying they didn't think it was important, but I guess, in my mind, I guess my parents thought it was more important to have life skills and to be able to get a job after high school.

In Hannah's home, college was simply a non-issue. The kids in her home were expected to work after high school.

Hannah followed in her two older sisters' footsteps in high school, taking business track courses with the idea that she would go to work in an office after graduation. The decision also seemed to work for her at the time because she became a mother late in high school and needed to seek employment after graduation in order to support her son. But, she had hesitations about forgoing higher education. She explained how she felt when she found the school she wanted to attend after high school but could not afford to go:

I remember we went on a field trip one day during school to [for-profit business college in the area]. And, I was like, "oh, my gosh! This is so awesome!" ...I just remember being so excited when I left that day...But, I always felt like "well, where am I going to get the money for that?" I, we don't have money for that.

She also shared insight into her views on her potential for college:

...when I think about it, it's kind of crazy because I remember being in algebra class and I was so good at algebra, and then, of course, when you went to

accounting [class] you stopped that because in your mind, you weren't in the college track. There was no need to keep taking algebra, you know?

And, she explained what it was like for her when her brother was ready for higher education: "...when my brother, who is only 18 months younger than me, when he wanted to go to [area technical college in the area] and get a degree, my parents made it work." She said, " We were girls and we didn't need a degree. I guess that was what was in my brain." Her disappointment with her parents' decision not to encourage college or help fund higher education for her, while they did so for her younger brother, is evident.

Even though she lit up when she described her love of school and her ability in certain college track classes, and was very clear about her disappointment with being unable to pursue higher education after high school, she did not think college was really for her. She said that few of her friends were on the college track and only some were on the business school track. Many were planning to find jobs, like her. What was most puzzling to me, considering her ambition, intelligence, and ability, was the self-deprecating way that she categorized herself. She said:

I can't think of any of my friends that was really, like, "I'm going to be a doctor and I'm going to be..." If I think of the things my daughter is saying and I do think, "Oh, my gosh!" I was never thinking that when I was 16, you know? ...to me, I guess I'm thinking, "Oh, they're really smart ones.", you know? I guess you kind of put yourself in a different class...I wasn't putting myself with those kids that I knew were going to college. I didn't think I was on the same level as them.

This description is confusing because she also told me that she loved school and did very well. I think her dismissal, when she was a teenager, of her ability to go to college could have stemmed from never being encouraged to go to college or told she could do it.

Hannah also believed that not asking for help with her dreams of achieving a college education was the “right thing to do”. She had a child to help support. She said she had to make “more conservative choices” whether it was to forgo asking for a leather jacket she really wanted for her birthday or money for school. She said they were not “...a big lavish family that spent money” and that she “...was one of those kids that even if [she] really needed something or wanted something, [she] wouldn’t have asked for it.”

Like Hannah’s parents, Mary Ann’s father also wanted her to find a job after high school, and one that she loved, but did not talk with her about college. She thinks her older sister’s decision to drop out of business college hurt her chances of getting her father to send her to college, too. She said, “It actually took a month or two until it caught up and my dad was notified [of her sister dropping out] and he was out a lot of money...when it came time for me to go to college, my family couldn’t afford to send me to college. So, I couldn’t go after high school.”

Mary Ann also did not have a social group that was college bound. She said that she was “very much wrapped up with a bad crowd”. She said that she “wasn’t hanging out with people that were very focused on their future”.

Like Charlotte’s family, Sarah’s stepfather and grandparents were very supportive of her education when she was growing up. She said her stepfather would tell her, “Always do your best!” “Always put your best foot forward!” Her stepfather encouraged her to do her homework and to even do extra to get ahead. She said her grandfather

would similarly encourage her, always asking her about school and her homework. He also encouraged her to go to college. Sarah said that her grandfather made it clear to her that he did not want her to be like her mom. He would tell her, “Do better than your mom.”; She told me that she worked hard not to disappoint him. Sarah did not mention her mother’s behavior or opinions when we discussed her family’s attitude regarding education.

Sarah’s grandfather was so adamant that she attend college, he encouraged her to move across the state to go to college in an urban area. He thought she could live with a great-aunt who lived in the city. Sarah remembers her thoughts on moving away for school, “...I can’t go that far. Like, I, I just can’t. I don’t know anybody. I’m, I’m a creature of habit and I know I am. And, to be out of my element is just...it’s, it’s not good for me. I have severe anxiety issues.” Sarah thinks her decision not to go away upset her grandfather, but she assured him she would go to college, just not so far away.

Sarah applied to a state university nearer to her home and got in. She recalled her experience:

I got in to the summer program. And, I started and three quarter of the way, I, I was living with my boyfriend and he’s, like, gave me the whole guilt trip of “I can’t do it on my own. You need to help out. You need to get a job.” I’m like...and I was young. I really didn’t know ways of the world. So I was like, well, I don’t know how to handle all of it. So, it’s one or the other. And, in order to support myself, I decided I had to quit school. And then, a month later, I found out I was pregnant anyhow.

Sarah's experience is very similar to Amy's. She got into a program that she was excited about, but life, and then a baby, complicated her plan. Because of major life changes and without family support, she had to make hard decisions. College had to wait.

All of the women in this study thought about college as teenagers. Some were told they could go, some were told they would go to work, some did not hear about college at home at all. A few of the women made an attempt at college right out of high school, but only one finished on a traditional time line. The others had to put off their desire for higher education until they were older and better situated to take on the responsibility of school, work, and family.

All of the women were greatly affected by their educational experiences, so much so that they impact the way they mother their children. They all want to be, what they believe to be, good examples for their children. They want them to know how much they value education. They also want their children to know that college is an option and that, unlike their own parents in most cases, they will support their children's educational dreams and efforts.

### **Conclusion**

There is an old saying that states, "You don't know where you're going until you know where you've been." I think this relates beautifully to why it is so beneficial for adult educators to understand that each student-mother arrives with a complex and rich life history. We simply cannot help them achieve their goals without understanding that their goals did not originate out of thin air. They are sometimes long held dreams that have ben interrupted, maybe repeatedly, often out of the woman's control. Their goals may have been beaten down and pushed aside for years by societally imposed gender

norms or misguided motherhood ideologies or family histories that have made the women question the possibility of their goals. But yet, they are held firmly. They are cried over, fretted over, and fought over, often with different people in different places at different times in the women's lives. And still they hold on. We need to understand the sacrifice and resolve that their educational goals have demanded and continue to demand. We need to see student-mothers for what they are: tenacious, brave, and finally in control of their life course.

This chapter chronicling the women's detailed life histories is critical to understanding their lived experiences as student-mothers. Porter and Robinson (2011, p.61) explain why:

Our history is not something that may be viewed or examined by a detached or unbiased attitude. What matters is not so much our history in terms of the facts and details of our past, but our historicity, our being historical. We are thrown into a world in which language, culture, and institutions of life are already given, so no matter where or when we find ourselves we will always be conditioned by our own historical situatedness.

In understanding how the women are situated based on their unique life histories and the meaning they've made from those experiences, we will better understand who they are today, why they do what they do, and where they are headed. Understanding the two, culturally and historically situated sub-themes outlined in this chapter will get us close to that understanding: their decision to remain in their rural homes and the effects of their childhood experiences on their mothering and behavior as students.

## Chapter 6

### Life As a Student-Mother

*“We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood.” (Rich, 1986, p.11).*

In this chapter, I continue to utilize phenomenological methods, in combination with feminist theories, to come to a deeper understanding of how the student-mothers’ current, overarching goals for their lives—to be good mothers and to earn a post secondary degree—interact and are affected, each by the other. I also explore how their rural context and family histories, as described in the previous chapter, influence their everyday lives and decisions as they mother while pursuing higher education online.

In order to develop a rich and detailed holistic picture of the student-mothers’ current lived experiences, I looked at multiple aspects of the student-mothers’ everyday lives in order to uncover who they believe themselves to be, the impact of their context on their experiences, and how they make meaning from their experiences as they move towards accomplishing two of their central goals, which are to be good mothers and to pursue higher education online towards the completion of a college degree. I divided my questions into four categories. The first two categories—home and family and work—support the primary, overarching theme of this study, which is mothering. A number of sub-themes emerged under the theme of mothering including intensive mothering, mothers as household managers, the importance of a supportive partner, and their lack of relationships with others in their rural communities. The third category, online programs, supports the second theme of the same title. One sub-theme emerged under this category: interruptions. The final category, which is also a sub-theme, looks at the sacrifices

mothers make, especially when compelled by guilt. Throughout the interviews, I also invited the women to add anything they thought was relevant to understanding their experience.

I chose these aspect of their lives as my focus for a few reasons. First, these are areas that played an integral role in the lives of the student-mothers in my unpublished pilot study. Second, through reflection on my own life, I realized that these are all areas that have been most pertinent to my experience as a student-mother. And finally, most are aspects that are explored in the work/life balance literature (Bianchi, 2009; Butler, Bass, & Grzywacz, 2009; Crouter & Goodman, 2009; Furst-Bowe & Dittman, 2001; Kramarae, 2000; Moen & Kelly, 2009).

Throughout the chapter, I discuss how these aspects are connected, how they affect each other, and how they impact the student-mothers' ultimate goals. I also discuss the part that the findings from the previous chapter play, how their pasts have shaped their present.

In the following chapter, I use CHAT to further explore the interaction of the two, primary themes of this study, mothering and online learning. The two, overarching themes became the two activity systems in the activity system network that I detail and explore in Chapter 7.

### **Home and Family**

In this and the following section on their paid employment, I impart the stories that the student-mothers told me about their lives as mothers. They told me about their children, their partners and how they impact their role as mother, how they divide the domestic work of chores and caring for the children, and also about the important people

in their lives who are outside of their immediate family and the impact they have on their mothering. These stories all inform our understanding of what the lived experience of mothering is like for them. Throughout, I also highlight a number of sub-themes that emerged and how they impact the women as they live their most cherished role and identity, that of mother.

The most important, time-consuming, and steadfast aspect of all of the student-mothers' lives is their role as mother. Mothering is defined as "the social practices of nurturing and caring for dependent children" and has traditionally and universally been performed by women (Arendell, 2000, p.1192). What it means to be a good mother is socially constructed and has evolved along side our understanding of what children need in order to grow and develop optimally (Arendell, 2000). The definition of 'good mother' is not static or universal but changes with time and place (Arendell, 2000). In the United State today, an idealized form of mothering called 'intensive mothering' has become the popularly accepted, and in many instances expected, way to mother children, especially among white, married, middle-class mothers like those in this study (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Intensive mothering is an all-consuming act (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). It is labor and time intensive, emotionally and financially straining, and entirely centered on fulfilling the needs of the child (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). The precepts of intensive mothering say that good mothers are devoted mothers who always put their children's needs before their own and who will make whatever sacrifices are necessary to do so (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). The standards set by the intensive mothering canon

are incredibly difficult to achieve often leading to feelings of failure, shame, and guilt by mothers (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2012).

The student-mothers all face an uphill battle when mothering under such an intensely difficult standard. The addition of their online programs complicates matters even more. In the following pages, I show how they have fared as they negotiate modern motherhood with the demands of their busy lives, as the ideology of intensive mothering—the third sub-theme in this study—looms over them.

### **Children: Making Sure They Know They are Loved**

All of the student-mothers in this study are consumed with their desire to be good mothers. I think it is a fair appraisal to say they all practice intensive mothering in some form and that the ideology affects all aspects of their lives. They all worry about how their decisions will affect their kids and they all push themselves to make up for any slights, real or feared, that their decisions may have caused their children. Their children are their first priority: above school, work, other relationships, and themselves. They all, more than anything, want their children to know they are loved.

Amy was terrified when she found out she was pregnant at nineteen. She had lived through a difficult childhood at the hands of her stepmother, who she called “so bad” and dealt with grief over being abandoned by her biological mother at a young age. She said she grew up being told by her stepmother that there was something wrong with her and that she was going to end up just like her mother who left Amy when she was very young. Amy saw a therapist as a child who told her that some women are “not wired” to be mothers, listing her stepmother and biological mother as examples. She held

onto this notion and when she became pregnant, her terror came from the fear that she really would be just like her mothers. She said she asked herself, “Oh, my God, what if *I’m* not hard wired to be a mother? What if I don’t love my child?” Her fears left her when he was born. In her words, she “loved him dearly”.

Amy said that to her, being a good mother means, “...making sure he’s loved.” That is the most important thing to her. Loving a child, she said, means he is respected and learns to respect others, he is disciplined, he has fun, and that he experiences everything else that comes with being a kid in a loving home—being nurtured.

She not only learned what kind of mother she wanted to be, and grew in her motherhood, because of her experiences in her childhood home, but also from her rural home and during her time in the military. Of her rural upbringing, Amy said, “I think it’s the reason I’m able to accomplish so much, because without the hard work and ethics, values [learned in her rural community and home], I wouldn’t be successful in anything I do.” She learned even more about hard work and a strong work ethic in the military. She explained that her time in the Army taught her not only about hard work, but how to be independent, that she could survive in difficult circumstances, something she did not believe about herself as a child and young woman.

She said her stepmother told her as a child that she would never survive. Some of the abusive things she told Amy included, “You’ll never make it. You need your ass kicked. You need whipped into shape. You’re terrible.” But, she did make it. Amy has excelled.

Amy also learned how precious every moment with her son is while she was serving full-time in the military. She was stationed in Afghanistan from just before her

son turned two until just before he turned three. She missed so many milestones during this time that it is painful for her to recall. She cried as she told me about her experiences. She said, “I guess some people may or may not take for granted or may not even notice, little things that people may not even notice are changing, I missed. And, I noticed that I missed it.”

The lessons Amy learned in her rural community and in the military have, as she put it, “trickled down into being a mother and being a student.” Her rural and military culture and history affect her current actions as she mothers and pursues her education. They both taught her that if there was something she really wanted to do, she was capable of doing it and doing it well.

I think the sub-theme of intensive mothering (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006) can also be seen in her stories in this section. It is possible that her fear of being like her own mother, who abandoned Amy when she was small, had caused her to embrace intensive mothering. She wants to make sure her child feels that he is everything to her, so that he never feels like she did as a child because of her own mother. I also think the pain she experienced at the hands of her stepmother has caused her to intensively mother. She is exceedingly careful of her son’s thoughts and feelings, gentle with him, and patient, unlike her stepmother who was emotionally and verbally abusive. Amy has been so negatively affected by the mother figures in her life that she is consumed with not repeating their mistakes with her own child. Everything she does is to make him feel loved and cared for.

Amy is not the only woman in this study whose painful early relationships with the mother figures in her life caused her to embrace the intensive mothering philosophy.

Charlotte and Amy had very similar experiences as children and have very similar outlooks on motherhood, as a result. Charlotte said being a mother "...means a chance to raise somebody to be better than who you are and to have the opportunity to make another person's life better than the one that you had." Charlotte told me that she is always thinking about parenting and how her words and actions affect her daughter. She thinks she does this because of her own childhood. Her parents were not present nor were they particularly reflective about how they raised her. She wants to do things differently with her own child.

Charlotte's sentiments about her motherhood philosophy are nearly identical to Amy's: do better than her mother; give her child a better life. She does this by intensively mothering (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). She constantly thinks of her daughter and her welfare. Every word and deed is deliberate and with her child in mind.

Charlotte's and Amy's shared mantra: to make sure their children know they are loved, is also shared by Hannah, who repeated this idea nearly word for word in her interview. Hannah said, "Being a mother is, I think, the most rewarding thing that you can do." And, almost exactly like Amy, she said she has worked hard while raising her children to "...make sure they knew I loved them." She remembers being a little girl and playing with dolls, imagining the day when she would be a real mother with a real baby to care for. And, like Amy who was also a young mother, she said it all seemed magical until the baby arrived, and then she was "scared to death"!

For Hannah, mothering is much harder than she ever imagined. She said mothers do so much work and put so much effort into parenting, all the while worrying about

whether they are doing a good job or not, a characteristic indicative of intensive mothering (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). She said she feels rewarded when she learns something “fabulous” about her children from a teacher or friend that lets her know she is, in fact, doing a good job with her kids. She gave the example of her son going out of his way to do something kind for a classmate with a disability. She explained how it felt:

That’s the best thing about being a mom, putting good values and good morals and teaching them...giving them a background and values that will turn them into a person that you almost wonder, “Really? Really? Did I have something to do with that?”

Hannah, too, thinks her childhood experiences, which were influenced by her rural culture and place in history, have played an important role in her mothering and, like the other student-mothers, she wants to do things differently. She described her childhood as “strange”. Her parents, she shared, never told her that they loved her and were not affectionate. She said she knew they loved her, but it was never outwardly expressed in her home. She resolved to display her love for her own children as much as possible. She proudly told me that her children never hang up the phone without saying “I love you, mom”. She was also affected by her parents’ style of discipline, spanking, which she said she does not think is necessarily wrong, she just thinks there are better ways. She does not want them to have the same kinds of negative memories about discipline that she has.

Like all the other student-mothers, “Being a mom means everything...” to Mary Ann. Mary Ann said that she was a “very messed up person” before her children were

born and that she came from a “very bad world” where she “made a lot of horrible choices”. She shared that there were times when she did not think she could go on. She said everything changed when she became a mother. She explained, “I had my son and then my daughter, and they’re my purpose in life. They’re my everything. Everything that they need and want comes before my desires. That’s the type of mom that I am. I don’t think twice about it.” Mary Ann’s mothering philosophy is in line with intensive mothering, too (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006).

Mary Ann, just like the other women in this study, was profoundly affected by the way she was raised and reflects on her own experiences as she mothers her children. Much like Hannah’s parents, Mary Ann’s father, mother, and stepmother were not affectionate with her as a child. They were authoritarian parents who made rules or gave punishments with no explanation or discussion. She said there were never “open conversations” in her childhood home. Their parenting style did not work for Mary Ann who has decided to raise her children differently. She prizes communication about everything from school to lying to sex and drugs. She wants to help her children make good decisions and avoid the difficult times she experienced as a result of bad decisions as a teen and young adult. She explained:

I want them to be better than me and I tell them that all the time. “Be better than me. Be better than the person that I was.” I just hope that they’re listening. I think that they are ‘cause we have a very open relationship. I talk to my kids a lot.

Sarah also tries to mother differently than her own mother. She said that, as a rule, she does the opposite of what her mother did, and “it seems to be working better.” Her mother’s example negatively affected her “a great deal”.

Finally, Sarah echoed most of what the other women expressed concerning their mothering philosophies and motivation for the philosophies they have chosen. She, too, practices intensive mothering (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006), possibly because of the neglect she felt at the hands of her own mother as a child.

Sarah said that being a good mother is about “being a good role model, setting a good example, providing for them, showing them the way...showing them to have an open mind and lead by example. Don’t follow. Just lead.” Sarah shared that she feels comfortable with her mothering but that she is not always confident. She said, “I think every mom has doubts, serious doubts.” She said she thinks good mothers, including her, “wake up every day and try and try and try.” Sarah is very deliberate in her mothering, but because of her fear of being like her own mother, who she has described previously as a poor role model, she sometimes doubts herself and worries.

Every student-mother in this study emphatically stated that motherhood is the most important and meaningful part of her life. And, they all had difficult, if not abusive relationships, with their mother figures as children. Because of their childhood experiences with being mothered, they have chosen to follow the intensive mothering ideology, which is currently and overtly the prevailing and expected way to mother in the United States at this point in time. I say overtly because none of the women covertly referred to the philosophy or alluded to feeling pressure specifically because of it, but

they all described a way of mothering that follows its precepts (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). This closely held, common ideology helps us to better understand the lived experiences of the student-mothers in this study. It helps us to see why they act in the ways that they do and where their goals for their mothering have come from.

For some of the women in this study, motherhood was unexpected and came during their teen years. For a few, it was initially frightening. For many, it has been fraught with worry. For all, their motherhood experience has been filled with hope and a determination that they will be better mothers than their own mothers were to them.

I did not expect to find that the majority of the women in the study would have childhood stories of abuse, neglect, and pain perpetrated by their mothers and/or stepmothers. I was surprised and deeply saddened to find that all of the women had this unfortunate experience in common, to some extent. Except for hook's (2000) assertion that women are often, if not more often than men, the perpetrators of child abuse, I did not come across anything like this in the literature, but I have seen it in my own experience. It is something that I had always thought was rare, but I see now that we are not alone. The grief and pain that accompanies children who did not receive the mother love that they needed or who were mistreated by their stepmothers follows us, doggedly, through life. It touches every aspect of our own mothering and fills us with fear that we will somehow hurt our own children, psychologically, the way we were hurt. But it also makes us stronger and more determined to be the mothers we always wanted and needed. Intensive mothering, even considering its faults, is an ideology we have adopted because

it is the opposite of how we were mothered (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006).

### **Childcare.**

In this section, I will discuss the issue of childcare. It is a supporting topic, helping to illuminate more detail about the lived experiences of the student-mothers, which informs my research question as well as the theme of mothering and sub-theme of intensive mothering.

Three student-mothers have children who are too young to be left home alone. Amy and Sarah rely on family to care for their children when they are at work. Charlotte utilizes a local childcare facility. According to Johnston and Swanson, based on their qualitative study of ninety-five married mothers who had adopted intensive mothering standards, mothers who work full-time and utilize childcare are primarily focused on their "...mothering in terms of psychological and emotional accessibility" and not on being able to "...always be physically accessible to their children." (2006, p.514). This is how they rationalize working full-time—which makes it impossible to personally always put all of their children's needs first— while also practicing intensive mothering.

Amy works very hard to always be there for her son, she harbors inner pain from being left by her own mother as a small child, but when she cannot, she has close family members who will step in. Amy's dad gets her six-year-old son off of the school bus and gives him dinner. Amy's sister lives with her; she cares for Amy's son after she gets home from work and does his homework with him. When Amy is away with the reserves, her sister, father, grandparents, and aunt share babysitting duty until she gets

home. She said her son is the only child in the family, so they do not consider caring for him to be an extra burden.

Amy's childcare arrangement is not uncommon in rural areas. As I noted previously in this study, grandparents will often, happily, provide childcare for their grandchildren (Pew Research Center, 2015). I also previously described how common it is for rural people to say that they have stayed in their rural hometowns in order to be closer to family members and because they want to raise their children in they themselves grew up (Pew Research Center, 2008). This is also true, and is working, for Amy. Her childcare arrangement also follows her intensive mothering beliefs (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). She told me that if anything were to ever happen to her, she would want her sister to raise her son. She said they are very much alike and that her sister loves her son more than anyone, excluding Amy. I think that by utilizing her loving sister and father for childcare, Amy has found people who are a sort of extension of herself. There is no one she trusts more or who loves her child more. They are also personally dedicated to her child's wellbeing in a way that closely mimics her own devotion to him.

Charlotte lives in the rural area where her soon-to-be in-laws live, but not close enough to rely on them for daily childcare. She relies on a nearby daycare center for childcare while she is at work and will sometimes receive childcare from her fiancé's parents, who live nearby, when she is overwhelmed with schoolwork and her fiancé is away. She said her daughter loves daycare and that they call it her "school". Charlotte said her daughter is very social and enjoys being with the other children. Daycare is a place where her eighteen-month-old can "climb and play and jump and yell and sing and

be with others that are her age...” She said she thinks it plays an important part in her daughter’s life.

Even though Charlotte is not with her daughter throughout the day, I think, to Charlotte, her choice in daycare is a way to intensively mother her child. She stressed the high quality of the facility and how happy her daughter is when she is there, even telling me that her daughter misses her “school” when they have snow days or other extended time away. Charlotte is fulfilling her own need for childcare but also her child’s need for an educational environment, social interaction and physical activity by placing her daughter in the facility they use. She can feel at ease when she is at work knowing that her daughter’s every need, and then some, is being met.

Sarah also has small children who need care while she is at work. She has gone the same route as Amy and utilizes someone who loves her children for their care. Sarah’s husband cares for their children when she is at work. Because of his serious back injury many years ago, he is unable to work in his profession, construction. Having him as a stay-at-home dad gives Sarah a sense of piece that I could detect in her voice when we spoke. She said he is something of a “superman”. He has taken up to ten kids fishing at a time, children who might not have had the opportunity otherwise. He has also been a Boy Scout leader.

Her husband may not be able to intensively mother, but it was clear to me that together, they intensively parent. From all of the extra-curricular activities he is involved with to his fiercely protective stance after the terrible abuse their child suffered, Sarah’s husband is just as devoted to meeting every need their children may have, at the expense of everything else, as she is. They have even moved, multiple times, to make a better life

for their kids. And now, he has taken over the bulk of the childcare responsibilities so that she can go to work and finish school, which will lead to even better work...all for their family.

I would like to note how their situation runs counter to a stereotype that I have encountered throughout my life as a rural person and that many of the women have talked about: the myth of the traditional, rural household. Yes, Sarah said that she was raised in a somewhat traditional environment, but she has chosen not to embody that way of life. She and her husband value and live an egalitarian lifestyle.

Throughout these stories, I think I have shown that it is important to the student-mothers that their children are cared for in a place where they feel safe, where there is little disruption in their schedules, and where they can grow and develop much like they would under their mothers' care. For Amy and Sarah, this place is home. For Charlotte, her daughter's "school" is a place that she can rely on to nurture her child.

A longitudinal study, the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development from 1991 to 2007, found that, "Children who were cared for exclusively by their mothers did not develop differently than those who were also cared for by others" (2006, p.1). The study found that the most important predictor of healthy child development is a happy and nurturing home and not the characteristics of the child care (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2006). In effect, then, each student-mother truly is doing what is best for her individual child or children, no matter which childcare route they have chosen.

This is an important point to make about women who are practicing intensive mothering, which says that mothers must be everything to their children at all times (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Even though they cannot physically be with their children at all times, they have all found comparable situations for their children where they are doted upon or attended to in a way that is similar to how they treat their children and that allows them to meet their goals for their mothering.

### **Kids' thoughts about mom going to school.**

The student-mothers are all very contemplative about how their decision to pursue an online degree affects their children. After all, the feedback from their children is an excellent way for them to discover if they are meeting their goals for mothering and if their intensive mothering is working the way they hope it will—to leave their children feeling loved.

Four of the women have children who are old enough to discuss and express an opinion about their mother's decision. The student-mothers all said they think it is important that they talk with their kids about their programs and that they try to help their kids see the future positive outcome while also honoring their children's concerns. The stories they tell about their children in this section support the primary theme of mothering and give us a fuller view of their experiences.

When Amy was a full-time nursing student pursuing an associate's degree for two years, she said her schedule negatively affected her son. Now, as a full-time nurse and bachelor's level nursing student, she works very hard to make sure she does her schoolwork when he is in school. She does not want him to feel neglected by her choice

to attend school. Of course, there are times when she has to do schoolwork when he is home and awake, but he is used to her being in school and understands. She shared a sweet story about a conversation they had regarding her school obligations:

...when I went to my associate degree program, my first program...I went to clinical that was an hour and a half away. We had to get up at 3:00 am to get him to daycare, to get me to clinical. And, he's not a morning person! God love this child! He would sleep for forever...he would sometimes say, "why do we have to get up so early?" and I would explain, so mommy could get clothes and food and so on and so forth...He would say, "mommy goes to school so she can make the pennies."

Amy, as I have noted in other sections of the study, is keenly aware of the pain of being abandoned. She works diligently to ensure that her son will never feel that pain. She gauges how well she is doing by talking with him and by paying close attention to how he is doing, overall.

Hannah's children are older and able to have deeper conversations with her about how they are being affected by her program. She said her sixteen-year-old daughter is proud of her for pursuing a college education. She shared that her daughter will ask her about how a quiz went or what grade she got on an assignment. And she always wants to celebrate Hannah's accomplishment. Hannah said her daughter is a very understanding girl who is enthusiastic about Hannah's online program and choice to go to college. In fact, her daughter is supportive even though Hannah cannot always put her own schoolwork aside to assist her daughter with hers. She explained, "She understands because she knows that I would never not do something for her if I absolutely couldn't.

Like, for instance, I would never not go to her swim meet because I have homework due...it's on me to work ahead or to get it done so that I don't miss her swim meet.”

Hannah said that when the demands of her own schoolwork gets in the way of her being able to help her daughter, her daughter can “...go with number two: Daddy.”

This is a very interesting quote from Hannah. Throughout the study, the women told me about their desires to share the home and child work equally with their partners. They said their partners, generally, concur. However, they would occasionally make comments like the one Hannah made regarding her husband being number two to her with their children. No matter how much they want an egalitarian home, the women in this study are still primarily responsible for managing all of the domestic work. This is the fourth sub-theme that runs through this study: the student-mothers voice their support for and their desire to have egalitarian homes, but continue to fill the role of household manager.

Mary Ann also has children who are old enough that she can discuss her online program and its effects on their well being with them. Overall, she said they are supportive, much like Hannah's kids. Mary Ann told a touching story that she said she will “cherish forever” about how her son views her status as an adult college student:

...I have a fourteen-year-old son. He's a teenager, more opinionated on things than what the younger one is. I check his phone. I check his text messages and stuff. I try to monitor that stuff and about a year or so ago, I actually saw a text message that he had written to a classmate where he was complementing me and he specifically said, “I don't know how she does it. I don't know how she works

and does everything for us, and keeps the house clean and she does college...she's a superwoman!

Mary Ann said finding this message made her realize that, "...they're watching, they're listening even when they don't say anything. Her children are keenly aware of what she is doing for herself and for their entire family, and what she is going through to accomplish her goal.

Mary Ann shared that recently, her son had a talk with her about how he feels about her pursuit of higher education and its effect on their family. She said:

...he did tell me... "one thing we need to improve on is our family time. We are very busy with our own things and running to this and running to that. We don't sit down and play a board game. We don't even sit down to eat dinner together most of the time." So, we were talking about those things and he did say to me, he's like, "I know it's hard for you because you have to do it...but it feels like as soon as you come home from work you do what you need to do to get us dinner and get us situated, but then you're out in your office because you have to study." And it's very true. As soon as I can get out there and I can get started, I try to chisel away at a little bit of my work because I know I still have to do laundry or dishes or vacuum or whatever it is. And then I go and I work a little bit more...you have to squeeze your schooling in whenever you can. But, he made a very good point. Schooling does take away from family time...

Mary Ann said her daughter feels similarly. She expresses her desire to have more time with her mom, but understands that, when her father is away at work, Mary Ann is alone with a lot to do to take care of the family. She said, "They also understand that it's hard

for me to find a balance ‘cause...it’s just me. I don’t have anyone else to just take my kids and give me an hour to completely commit without interruptions. That’s the way it’s always been.”

Mary Ann talks with her children frequently about her program and her schoolwork. She said that she shares things she is learning with them, if she thinks certain topics will “spark their interest”. For example, her son has read and talked with her about a few of her biology lessons while her daughter showed interest in a project she completed concerning maple syrup production. Mary Ann said that sharing her coursework with her children has been a “bonding experience” for them.

Talking with them about her college experience is also a way to warn them. Mary Ann does not want her children to make the same mistakes as she has made. She thinks that, because they see how much she struggles, they are learning a life lesson. She has also made it clear to them that she and their father are dedicated to making college happen for them after high school. She shared how deeply she feels about wanting a better life for her kids:

I literally can’t tell you how many times over the years that I have preached to my children. I don’t want them to go backwards in life like I did...not to make my life sound bad by any means, but I was married young. I had my son young. I had a family young. I originally intended to go to college right after high school but my family couldn’t afford it at the time, so I couldn’t go. That always bothered me. That’s why I put myself back in...I try to tell my kids, “Be better than me. Try to make better choices ‘cause I don’t want you to struggle like I am.” I mean, my kids have literally seen me break down and have temper

tantrums because I'm so stressed out. I'm just at my wits end with a deadline or I intended to take this exam and I intended to do it on Wednesday but something came up on Wednesday. We already had plans on Thursday. So, I have to push that exam to the very last minute. They seen me crying and have these breakdowns and stuff.

Like the other student-mothers, it is important to Sarah that all of her kids are involved in her decision to go to college online. She said she does not believe in hiding things from her kids. She explained, "I believe in being as open and honest as possible because the more lines of communication I have open with them, the more apt they're going to be to come and talk to me about things that are troubling them."

Much like Mary Ann's kids, Sarah's older children have shown an interest in her coursework. They have read through her psychology, biology, and algebra texts. Her thirteen-year-old even worked on her algebra lessons with her. When she took a cinema class, she would occasionally watch and discuss her homework movies with her family. Sarah said she does not "shove it down their throats", but if they are interested in what she is working on, she is happy to share with them. She said knowing what she is doing in school helps her older kids to understand the pressure she is under. She said they know she "aspire[s] to do something better."

Her younger children do not quite understand her schoolwork. She said, to them, school is a building you go to and where you sit all day in a classroom. She explained how she talks to the younger children:

I don't expect them to understand everything...My husband explains, we both explain to them, it's school just like you go to school; mommy just doesn't have

to go anywhere. Her teachers give her, her work and she still has work to do just like you have homework to do and they're understanding. I mean, sometimes they're like any kid, impatient and "I want to do this! Can we go here?" kind of thing, but we work through it.

She said her little ones are "happy go lucky" and are used to her doing schoolwork; she started when they were around two and three-years-old. They are sometimes impatient with her, but for the most part, do not seem to mind the time she spends on school.

Sarah said that compromise is very important to finding balance. She explained that sometimes her children will continue to urge her to stop her schoolwork to do something they want to do. That is when she tries to compromise with them, when she sees that they are upset or are genuinely in need of some attention. She said the longer she is in school, the more they all understand that they need to work together to make online education work for their family. Sarah's desire to intensively mother her children—to always put their needs before her own—is evident here.

One thing is clear. All of the children want to be involved in what their mother is doing and all want to be put first, their needs and desires spur on their mothers' resolve to intensively mother. Hannah, Mary Ann, and Sarah all have children who are old enough to engage with their mothers in her schoolwork and show a genuine interest in learning with her. This also supports intensive mothering; the women can include their children in their very time-consuming activity, making it a family affair. Additionally, the women told stories that demonstrate that their children are proud of them. The dialogue they have and positive feedback they receive helps the women to gauge how well they are

doing as mothers, i.e. how close they are to their goals for mothering. They all seem to be satisfied with their ability to handle school and mothering.

The experiences of the student-mothers' children as their mothers negotiate school and mothering, told by the children, is an intriguing area for future research. All we now know is second hand information told by the student-mothers, but is it accurate? Would the children tell the same stories or see the situation in the same light? It could be that they do not always share their true thoughts and feelings with their mothers. Understanding how their children are affected, what they are experiencing, would enrich our understanding of the student-mothers' experiences.

### **“He’s My Biggest Fan”: Husbands, Fiancés, and Boyfriends**

The student-mothers' husbands, fiancés, and boyfriends all play an integral part in their success as students and as mothers. They all rely on their significant others' emotional support. They all count on their partners' help with domestic work to some extent. Some also need their financial support. Most said it would be very difficult, or even impossible, to complete their degree programs without them. And some jokingly said they would do their programs even without their husband's support, just to prove them wrong! In this section, I pass on the stories the women told me about what their partners mean to them and how they support their mothering goals, the overarching theme of this study.

Amy is a widow, but she is in a committed relationship. Her boyfriend lives about twenty minutes away from her. They met in the military and have been dating for a year. He is about seven years older than Amy and has one child of his own from a previous marriage. He currently works from home. They see each other at least once a

week—they attend church together as a family every Sunday—and sometimes see each other more often, up to two to three times a week. She said they do not usually talk on the phone but text throughout the day. She said things work well between them because they understand each other, in part, because of their shared military history. Amy said other men she has known are usually (1) intimidated by her, (2) do not take her seriously, or (3) her being in the military is a “huge blow to their ego and they just can’t handle it”. She referred to her boyfriend as her “sounding board” and as “the soft place to land for all three of us, me and the two kids.” She said she considers herself a patient person, “...but for every little bit of patience I have, he has more.” He is her go-to person when she needs advice or emotional support. He is also “extremely supportive” of her pursuit of a bachelor’s degree online. She said, “...there’re certain things I guess, sometimes, that he sees in me that I don’t see in myself, and he always reminds me of that.” She said that they might not always agree, but that they respect each other and the decisions they each make. Although he does not contribute to her household financially—she does not want or need him to do so, he has his own household to support, although he does provide help with her household chores. And, if she has a bad day, he will bring dinner.

Amy’s boyfriend provides much needed emotional and functional support for single-mother, Amy. He gets her. He understands her goals for her life and for mothering. He ‘fathers’ in a similar manner. He also provides low maintenance love, meaning he is there for her when she needs him without being demanding or her time or energy. His actions support Amy’s desire to be a good mother and to intensively mother her child.

Charlotte also has a very supportive partner. She was thinking about leaving her new rural home when she met her fiancé. She was having a hard time making new friends, and dating was even harder. She decided to join an online dating site and that is where she met him. She said, “After several attempt to find boys on my own, it just wasn’t working out well. Rural areas, there’s not much to pick from.” He messaged her for a date and said he was from the rural area where she was living. Charlotte checked into her fiancé’s background with a friend of hers, who was also from the area. Her friend said he was a wonderful person, so she decided to go out with him. She said, “I decided to give it a shot and three years later, here we are.” Charlotte’s fiancé is five years older than she is, but has never been married before and his only child is with Charlotte.

Charlotte’s fiancé is also supportive of her decision to pursue a degree online. She said he’s, “completely for it.” She explained that she has talked to him about her educational goals since they began dating, so he has known for a long time that this is something she wants. She said she believes he will support her for as long as it is financially feasible for their family and as long as pursuing the degree does not put undue stress on her or their family. She, too, considers herself to be in a good relationship and said that she knows she is “extremely lucky” to be involved with a man who is as supportive and involved with housework and family caregiving as her fiancé. When I asked her if she thought she could continue on in her online program without his support, she said, “No, I don’t think I could.”

Charlotte's fiancé supports her goals and desires for her mothering similarly to Amy's boyfriend. His emotional, financial, and functional support makes it easier for her to be the mother she wants to be.

Hannah's husband is also five years older. They met when she was a senior in high school. After three years of dating, they married when Hannah was twenty.

When she began taking more classes in her online program each semester, Hannah's husband told her, "Well, you got me. I'll support you. I'll help out, whatever I can do, so you can do this." And, she said he does. Like Charlotte, she also considers herself to be lucky to have a partner that is so supportive. She said he is also "intrigued" by some of her schoolwork because it is in a field he has studied in college courses that he has taken. They will discuss her work and he will even help her on occasion.

I asked Hannah if she could do her online program without her husband's support. She was not sure. She guessed that she would try to continue. She said, "I would hope that I'm driven enough that I would still be able to do that." She had already put so much time and effort in; she would not want to give up. But, she said it would be much harder. Laughing, she said that maybe she would do it just to prove him wrong!

Mary Ann said that before she and her husband were romantically involved, "he was one of my closest friends. We were inseparable." She met him while they were both in high school. He is four years older than Mary Ann. When he graduated from high school, he left the area for work doing construction and they did not see much of each other. But, she was always happy to see him when their paths would cross. When Mary Ann graduated, she moved a few counties away with her first husband and child, but the marriage did not last long. She began going back to the county where her mother

lived, where her now husband was from, to visit friends. He would come home from his construction job on the weekends, too. They hung out with the same group of friends and, according to Mary Ann, “One night, just one thing led to another and we ended up becoming a couple, and the rest is history!” They have now been together for ten years and married for five.

Mary Ann said her husband is not “for or against” her pursuing her degree online. She said it is her “thing”. She told me that the “sad truth of it” is that she probably will not see a pay increase after she finishes her degree program. She explained:

Nothing is going to change in my world except for that I can say I did it. I have to say, for me, that’s a very deceiving feeling. I’ve been very conflicted with that also over the years. Because, I’m basically putting myself in more financial debt for a piece of paper that’s not going to make a difference in my life. I know that’s a crappy thing to say but that’s the reality of my world.

She said her husband is always there to listen, but that he has not tried to influence her decision to go to school, to stop out, or to quit. She said, overall, his level of support is “pretty good”. Sometimes when he is home, he does not like it when she spends time “cooped up” in her office instead of with him and their kids, but that it is “nothing major or bad”. She said, “We just have different expectations of each other. I expect a break and he expects attention. So, we both have reasonable expectations...”

Like with Hannah and Charlotte, I asked Mary Ann if she could do her online program without her husband’s support. She replied by telling me:

I’m a very, very independent woman and even if he didn’t approve, I would have done it anyways because it’s what I want to do. As much as I respect and adore

my husband...no one has any right to designate what I can and cannot do in my life.

She also told me nearly the same thing that Hannah said, "...if you tell me I can't do it, I have to do it to prove you wrong!" She said he understands that this is something she has to do. She said, "I had a vision of what I wanted for myself for life and college was it."

Hannah, Mary Ann, Charlotte, and Amy all have men in their lives who understand what they want in life and for their children. They all share the same goal: to have healthy, happy, well-adjusted children who feel loved. And, they all work together to put their children first so that they can achieve their shared goal.

A college degree has also been a dream for Sarah, whose husband shares her dream for her. They are the fifth and final couple in this study to show the importance of a supportive partner towards achieving both mothering and educational goals. Sarah has been married to her husband for three and a half years. Both she and her husband were married before and have children from their first marriages. He is six years older. They met when she was working at a daycare center in the same building where his daughter was enrolled in Head Start. She described her husband as an extremely supportive person.

Sarah told me that, if it were not for her husband's support, she would not be able to go to school. She said her first husband was not at all supportive. She wanted to go to college then and when she would talk to him about it, he would find reasons why she could not. He would tell her college was too expensive or that it would get in the way of her job or that she simply was not capable of doing it. She said she felt like she was "campaigning" to talk him into supporting her, but he never would. Her current husband,

on the other hand, has always supported her dream. She said they talked about their plans for the future when they were dating and she told him about her ex-husband's views about her pursuing a college degree. Jokingly, she said "his jaw hit the floor and put a crack in it." She said that in his family, husbands are taught to "always support your wife: support, support, support!" She added that her husband sees her goal to get a degree as "conducive" to their family. He understands that it will benefit everyone in the long run and is doing his part to make it happen.

Having a supportive partner is important to the student-mothers and is the fifth sub-theme in this study. Some receive more support than others, but they all value what support they do receive. Their support is so important to some of the women, they said they could not complete their programs without it. For the others, they said they would continue on, but they said so in a joking manner that makes me question if they really would or even could. I do not think that they know, either, nor do they really want to think about the possibility. It was clear to me that their partners all play an integral role in the student-mothers' goal achievement.

This is also an area of future study. The focus of this work is on the student-mothers' perspective and in this section of the paper, I've looked at what they need from their spouses in order to be successful. But it would enlighten our understanding of the student-mothers' full experiences even further if we could also develop an understanding of their spouses' motivations, thoughts, and behaviors from their own points-of-view.

### **“If It Needs To Be Done, Do It”: The Delegation of Domestic Work**

Domestic work—the care of the home and the people who live there—is an integral aspect of mothering and it is a tool that is used in the act of fulfilling their goal of being good mothers. The passages in this section show how the division of domestic labor in the student-mothers’ homes interacts with the sub-themes of the importance of supportive spouses and the women as household managers to influence their mothering.

For the student-mothers who live with their partners, the level of support that they receive in the form of emotional, housework, and financial support and their likelihood of continuing on in their programs without their partners’ support is variable. Mary Ann, who jokingly calls herself a single mom because her husband works away for weeks at a time, said that her husband does minimal housework and offers little feedback about her program and also said that she would continue in her program even if he no longer supported her. On the other hand, Charlotte and Sarah, who say their partners are very supportive and who live in egalitarian homes, do not think they could continue their program without their partners’ support. Hannah is the only student-mother whose level of emotional, housework, and financial support from her partner is not directly proportional to her ability to stick with her program without his support, saying he is very supportive and helpful and that she would likely continue on even if he would revoke his support.

All of the student-mothers receive some kind of help with domestic and caring work. I use the word ‘help’ purposely and will discuss why I point this distinction out at the end of this section. The women with small children share the work primarily with their spouses while the women with older children share the work with everyone in the

household. None of the mothers are solely responsible for all of the domestic and caring work, but their attitudes about the work and whom should do what vary.

Amy's sister lives with her in order to help care for Amy's son. During the approximately five to ten minutes we spent talking about her sister, Amy defended her sister's character, telling me that she does not want her to sound like a "bad person" or saying that she is a good or "wonderful" person five times. She explained that her sister was affected very negatively by the way they were treated by their stepmother as children and has chosen to deal with her pain differently than Amy. For instance, her sister is very messy while Amy cannot relax unless all of her chores are done. Amy said,

...I turned out responsible because of the way we grew up, my sister turned out a little irresponsible...instead of being thankful and being like, this is where I am now, my sister resents a lot...she doesn't clean because she looks at it like we were expected to clean our entire lives as children and now she doesn't have anybody to tell her to do it, so she is not going to do it."

Amy's sister may do the "bare, bare minimum" as far as housework, but she is very good with Amy's son. She said her sister is a "fun aunt". He might not get his bath or finish his homework when she is caring for him, but he is happy. Amy thinks that her sister, as a childless person, just does not comprehend all of her son's needs and she forgives her for it. She said that without her sister, she could not go to school and work full-time at the job she has now, and for that, Amy is grateful to her. Amy's sister also does not contribute to the household finances. She rarely does emotional work, either. Amy said:

I think she leans on me more than I lean on her emotionally...my sister sometimes has good advice, so sometimes I'll go to her...but normally, it's not to the point

where I'm like crying and I just need somebody to hug me and she probably won't say anything because I cry...she is resentful so her theory is cut everybody off and we don't look at the repercussions of that...I don't see it as personal. She would do it to anybody.

I replied that her sister sounds angry and Amy agreed. But again, she does not blame her or judge her for it. She said her behavior and attitude are the result of childhood issues that she has not overcome. Amy has empathy for her because they experienced it together. Amy provides the financial and emotional support and takes on all household chores in her home and in return, her sister is supportive of her online program and takes care of her son when Amy is at work. To Amy, it is a fair deal.

Amy and her boyfriend also share chores. Amy said that when they began dating, she and her boyfriend made a list, just for fun, of the chores they never wanted to do again, but that the list has become a reality in their lives. She said that if he sees that something needs to be done at her house, he will do it, including the chores she dislikes like cutting wood or hauling buckets of coal for her furnace. She asserted that she is capable of these jobs and will do them when they need to be done, but she does not have to because he does them for her. He "tries to make it [life] easier" for her. She said he knows how to "do it all" because "he was raised by a single mother." And, he will do it all without complaining, unlike her deceased husband who refused to do any housework or family care, including traditionally male jobs such as yard work. She said her marriage "was not good". But her relationship now is good. Amy reciprocates when she visits her boyfriend by doing chores he does not like such as the dishes or his laundry.

Amy's views on housework and family care originated in her traditional childhood home in her rural hometown and in her Christian faith. She told me that there is a Proverb that states what a godly woman is supposed to do and be. She tries to live by these guidelines. She also shared that her grandmother is an important role model for her. She said, "The cooking, the cleaning, and the caring, that's who my grandma is and that's who I want to be." She went on to say, "...sometimes I get frustrated because I want to be everything. I want to be a career woman. I want to be the traditional housewife. I want to be the military. I want to be everything. I somehow want to do it all."

Amy said that because of her upbringing—to be independent while at the same time traditional—she initially did not realize her marriage was bad for her. She explained:

I didn't see anything wrong with it at first because I was raised by my dad mostly, and I was very independent, 'cause my dad always said, "You know, you should be able to do this stuff because somebody might not be able to do it for you someday." So at first I was like, "Oh, I can do this! Yeah, I can shovel snow...great!" But, eventually you're going to get tired of doing everything, especially when you're in a relationship. You shouldn't have to do everything. In her relationship now, she said who does what is not about being traditional. She said, "...he will gladly pick up dinner...I will gladly go down and bring my won coal in." Their division of labor is about helping each other and alleviating each other of household chores that the other dislikes. She said she "thoroughly hates" cutting wood

but her boyfriend likes it. So, it works for them for him to do it. And, as much as she dislikes cleaning the bathroom, he dislikes it more, so she does it for him.

Amy devotes time every day to housework. Some days she devotes more time than others. For instance, she “deep cleans” (i.e. labor intensive work such as scrubbing floors, wiping walls, baseboards, and cabinetry, washing bedding, etc.) on Sundays for a few hours and “reds up” (a colloquial phrase from Western Pennsylvania that means to tidy) on all other days. Redding up can include running the dishwasher, vacuuming, and putting things away. She said she cannot relax if the house is messy. She does all of the cleaning herself, but her son helps by picking up his toys every day. Sticking to her cleaning schedule puts her at ease. She said, “...in the morning I wake up and I don’t feel stressed or overwhelmed because my house is a wreck.” She also goes to the grocery store once a week and does all of the laundry herself.

The division of labor is somewhat different in Charlotte’s home. Charlotte and her fiancé split the housework and care of their child almost equally. They grocery shop every Sunday as a family, he takes their daughter to daycare every morning, and he helps her with their daughter’s laundry, cleaning the house, taking out the trash, and doing dishes. She said there is no set list of who does what. They each do what needs to be done when they have free time. She said they both think this is a fair arrangement and neither of them complain about it, because “...if he didn’t like it, he would just not do it.” She said that the only time most of the domestic work falls to her is when he is traveling as a basketball coach and, at those times, balancing all aspects of their life is “harder than normal”.

The division of labor and attitudes regarding how to divide the labor in Hannah's home is very similar to Charlotte's. Hannah's husband has always contributed to taking care of housework and care of their children, but he has done more since she started taking more online classes. He has always met their daughter at home after school—his work shift begins early in the morning and ends when her school day does—, and he has always driven her to activities, but now he also plans weekly menus together with Hannah on Sundays and works with her to prep dinners during the week. Sometime he will make dinner (even though Hannah said he is not a good cook) and if Hannah needs to do schoolwork, he will do the dishes. The one thing she will not let him do is the laundry; he has ruined clothes in the past. I asked her what she thinks he thinks of the changes in their allocation of domestic work and she said:

I think he's happy to do it [housework] and he's just proud of me for wanting to do it [her online degree program]...I always tell him he's my biggest fan...he always says, "Well, that can wait. You go do that [her schoolwork]...He's super supportive and I think, even if he is feeling a little burnt out because he's having to do too much, he never says a word.

Hannah's daughter also helps with chores. She laughingly said her daughter, "has a little compulsive disorder when it comes to cleaning. When she cleans, she cleans better than me, I think sometimes!" She said her daughter does not have regular chores, she just pitches in when things need to be done, like her mother and father. Hannah explained, "It's not like mom has to do everything around here. ..We do it together. Good teamwork." She said that occasionally her daughter will grumble a bit about

chores, she is a teenager, but overall, no one in the household complains about pulling their weight when it comes to domestic work.

Things are different in Mary Ann's home. Mary Ann's husband works away for up to five weeks at a time: when he comes home, he wants to relax, and she wants that, too. She said, "...it is still pretty much all on me, even when he is home...I don't really try to honey-do with him either because I know he's home and he doesn't get to be home much." She did say that since he has been laid off, he has taken on a lot of the housework. He is a good cook, better than she is, she shared. He also does the laundry and dishes. However, the one thing he does not help with is driving the kids to their after school activities; that is always Mary Ann's responsibility.

Mary Ann can usually count on her children to do chores. She said that her children have had chores from the time they were capable of doing them. Her son and daughter take care of their pets, loading and unloading the dishwasher, and folding clothes and putting them away. She said that her kids will whine and fight with her about doing their chores, saying, "they're kids", but that she tells them "There's three people living here [when Dad is away] every single day. We all have to pitch in. We all got to help." She said she will tolerate a certain amount of whining but that she does not "really buy into the whole let's have a whole dispute over it...just go on and by the time you argue with me, you could have had it done." She also tries to help them understand what being responsible for chores as kids will do for them as adults. She explained:

I also try to tell my kids, "You're going to appreciate this someday. You hate it now, but you're going to appreciate it because you're going to find people in the world when you're twenty-years-old and you're able to tend to your own

apartment or home and family, but there are people who don't even know how to run the dishwasher or the washing machine or operate a mop and bucket.”

She added that she will take on the chores that are supposed to be the kids' domain if the kids have neglected them, but that she expects them to handle their chores most of the time. She said you can only let a litter box go for so long before someone has to clean it!

Even with the help of her husband—when he is home—and her son and daughter, Mary Ann still devotes a large amount of time to housework each week. She estimates that she spends fifteen to twenty hours each week on childcare, cooking, and cleaning. Even so, she said she thinks the division of domestic labor in her home is fair and she thinks her family would agree, saying her husband agrees “very much”. She told me the work is not delegated along gender lines, but is based on whoever is available to do it. She explained that it is an “unspoken” rule. She said, “...we're all equal here now. We're a family unit...I don't care if you're the guy or the girl. If you're capable, you're going to do it.

Sarah said her family has had to “revamp their entire dynamic” when it comes to domestic work after she started her online program. Prior to her program, she said that she did most of the household chores and caring work. She said that she would “literally sometimes walk behind them [her children] and pick up after them.” But, after she had her last child and then started her program, while working full time, she realized, “Oh, my God. I'm exhausted all the time.” It was then when she and her husband told their children that they would have to help out around the house. They created a chore chart to help keep everyone on schedule, trying to put a positive spin on the change. She said their understanding of who does what in the house has moved away from the chart and is

now, “You see it needs done, just do it. Don’t wait to be told. Don’t wait to be asked. Don’t wait for it to be put on the refrigerator on a to-do list. Just do it.” She said this mindset applies to everyone, including her and her husband. Sarah said her kids, like most kids in her estimation, complained at first. She said the change was a “shocker” for them because they were used to their parents doing everything for them, but that they are getting used to it. Her husband is 100% supportive of the change. She said he thinks, “...they’re old enough, they should know just to do it and take care of business.”

Sarah said that her husband does not have to do more domestic work since she enrolled in her online program, but that, “he just opts to do more ‘cause he knows I need to do as much studying as I can.” She explained:

I work all day and I go home and he knows I have schoolwork to do and there’s still dinner to be made. He’ll be like, “You go sit down. Chill out for like five, ten minutes and start your homework. I’ve got dinner.” He takes on more responsibility on his own. He doesn’t feel as though he has to. He just feels as though it’s, that’s the right thing to do...I can’t say I make him do everything because I obviously, I don’t. He does it on his own. He likes to know that I have ample time and space and time and concentration for my schoolwork...when I know things are done, he knows it makes me feel better.

A number of studies have shown that working mothers today spend as much time with their children as stay-at-home mothers did forty or more years ago, and sometimes more, in part because of the pervasive intensive mothering ideology (Arendell, 2000; Bianchi, 2009; Damaske, 2013). Working mothers do not forgo time with their children. Instead, they forgo or delegate housework (Arendell, 2000; Bianchi, 2009; Damaske,

2013). The women in this study are no exception. Most rely on their partners and other family members to help with the forgone domestic work in favor of spending what free time they do have with their children and partners. As they themselves shared, they feel lucky to have this support towards their goals of being good mothers.

The student-mothers all share the domestic and caring work, to some degree, with their partners, children, and sometimes other family members. This assists them in their ultimate, overarching goal of being good mothers with children who feel loved. They all also said that the work is not divided along gender lines. However, when you look closely at the language they use to describe the work and their homes, it becomes clear that they consider all of the work to be theirs and that the others are *helping* with what is truly *their* work. And, when domestic and caring work is looming, the student-mothers are the default person that the work falls to if no one else is able or willing to do it. The home is primarily their domain. They are the household managers and their spouses, no matter how supportive, are number two in charge, not truly an equal partner. So, although the women said they are happy, overall, with the division of labor in their homes and feel it is fair, they do not have the truly egalitarian divisions of labor that some of them reported.

This unequal responsibility differential, no matter how slight in some of the homes, does exist for the women. I think we may look to their upbringings in their overwhelming traditional, rural homes to discover why. Yes, they and their partners have chosen to turn away from the ideologies that wrote the script for their parents' and grandparents' relationships with their families, but they have not fully turned. They still have one foot in a time that said mother is everything to everyone and the home is solely

her domain. It could be that, because they and their partners are the first-generation in their families to adopt an egalitarian way of running their household, they are figuring it out as they go. They have no role models to emulate. Add to this the modern intensive mothering narrative that they all embrace and, no doubt, they will be compelled to keep that foot firmly rooted in a place and time that told her that, at the end of the day, it is mother who is ultimately in charge of and responsible for everything and everyone under her roof.

### **The People on the Periphery**

There was one reoccurring sub-theme in this study that I did not expect and that is contrary to the literature about rural families that tells us that family ties are often very strong (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005; Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000). Most of the rural student-mothers in this study are not close to their extended family members, especially their mothers, and even when they live in the same community. Amy is estranged from her mother. Charlotte is estranged from everyone in her family except her brother. Hannah and Mary Ann do not feel close to their extended families. And Sarah is estranged from her mother and never even mentioned her biological father during the course of our interviews. Only one of the student-mothers receives childcare from her extended family and none of the women receive financial support or any substantial emotional support. According to Arendell (2000), the student-mothers are in the majority; it is not uncommon for extended family members to offer little in the way of support to mothers. Even though they are distant from one or more of their parents, each woman has at least one supportive person outside of their nuclear families whom they are close to.

### **Extended family members.**

Amy said that her extended family—her dad, sister, and grandma—are “supportive the best way they can be.” She explained that she is the first to attend college, so when she tells them something about school, they will listen, but they do not engage in a discussion. However, she said her sister has become interested in possibly enrolling in an online program, so she has been more interested than usual. Amanda also said that her family does not offer any financial support for school and very little emotional support. She described her family as rather stoic people, not at all emotional, though she said she knows they love her. They just do not demonstrate it. She also said that she does not go to them for emotional support because, “it’s hard to vent to somebody that doesn’t understand.” She said she is different, more patient, than her family members who have a “my way or the highway” attitude. She appreciates any advice they might give her, but typically, her life is different enough from anything they have experienced that she does not ask for it.

Charlotte’s brother is the only extended family member who knows she is pursuing a master’s degree. Her parents do not know; they are estranged. She said her brother is supportive of her decision. He lives a few hours away in the same state, so they only see each other occasionally, but they text. Charlotte receives no financial, childcare, or emotional support from her family to help with school. She said she never has.

Hannah’s extended family is mostly indifferent towards her decision to pursue a college degree. She said of her parents:

If I were to be honest about my parents, they've never come out and said this to me, but it's just my thought is, well, "Why would you get a degree when you already have a good job?" Not that they're dissing me or telling me I shouldn't waste my time or my energy on it. It's just always kind of like, "Well, what are you going to do with that?"

Her in-laws are also rather uninterested. They live in Florida and she said that when they are talking on the phone, it is not about her online program. Hannah mentioned one relative that is "thrilled out of her mind" for her, her aunt. She talks with her about her progress and received positive emotional support from her. The emotional support she receives from her aunt is the only kind of support she receives from her extended family.

Hannah said that she has had to miss out on family functions because of her online program. She told me that it really has not been a problem, though. Her family has been understanding.

Mary Ann told me that she does not really talk with her extended family about school, even though their attitudes about it are generally positive. She said they are aware, it is just not a topic of conversation. Occasionally, her mother-in-law will ask her how it is going, but her conversations with her own mother are often explosive. She said that her mother is an alcoholic. Sometimes she expresses feeling proud of Mary Ann and other times she reacts negatively. She explained, "...she'll tell me, "Who do you think you are? You think you're better than everyone else you know because you think 'cause you're going to college, that you're better."...sometimes I just think it depends on her emotions for the day." Mary Ann said she does have a sister-in-law who has inquired about her experiences because she is also interested in going to school online and has

asked for advice. Mary Ann said she likes to think she has had a positive and helpful influence.

Mary Ann's online program has prevented her from participating in some family. She said that she has never been very close with her own family and that they do not spend much time together outside of holiday time that she described as an "obligation". Her husband's family, on the other hand, spends time together because they enjoy each other's company. She said this has always been hard for her to understand because of her family history. She shared that her mother-in-law has been disappointed with her when she chooses school over an outing, but that she does understand why Mary Ann prioritizes school the way that she does. Mary Ann, however, said she does not mind missing family get-togethers. She said there are usually other things she would rather do, even if she does not have schoolwork, such as spending time with her kids. She was clear, however, that she is willing to be "selfish" and take time off when she "needs a break".

When I asked Mary Ann if she receives any kind of emotional, financial, or child care help from her extended family, her answer was "no". She said, "It sounds kind of sad, but I really don't have good, solid relationships outside of my husband and kids."

Like the other women, Sarah also has a distant relationship with her extended family members. Sarah is only in contact with her aunt who lives in another part of the country and her grandfather. She said her aunt is "ecstatic" that Sarah will be the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree. Her grandfather checks in on her regularly to ask how school is going, what she is working on, and how she is doing. She said she and her family are also in contact with her husband's mother, but that she is "crazy" and

“shouldn’t count”. She said her mother-in-law is not supportive. She thinks Sarah should be focused on her family and home, not school. Sarah said she thinks Sarah is neglecting her family because she is not at home; her mother-in-law ascribes to very traditional gender roles.

Sarah does not receive substantial support from the family she is in contact with. She receives no financial or child care help and only minimal emotional support. Regarding her family, she said, “I really don’t talk to anybody about anything but my husband.”

The student-mothers, their children, and their partners are overwhelmingly on their own. Most have family members who live nearby but do not receive any kind of support from them towards their mothering goals. I think this fact of life for the student-mothers and their families runs askance of a commonly believed stereotype about rural people that is sometimes supported by research (Pew Research Center, 2008; Struthers and Bokemeier, 2000). The idea that rural people usually have tightly knit families that they are very close to and can go to for support is just not true for most of the women in this study. They do not have the proverbial village to help them raise their children. In most cases, they only have each other.

### **Social life.**

The student-mothers are largely on their own, socially, as well. All of the women reported having close and even long-term friendships, but most do not have friends nearby. I think this aspect of their lives, along with the lack of support from extended family members, shows how very important having a supportive spouse is for them. Without their partners, they would, in most cases, be entirely alone in their mothering.

Amy has no close friends nearby. Her best friend recently moved to another state many hours south. She is in touch with two friends that she made in nursing school but one lives in a neighboring state and the other lives a few hours east of her in the same state, not close enough to visit regularly. Two of her friends are very supportive and think her choice to pursue her degree online is “great”. However, one of her friends, a friend that she said is older and “does not have the drive to go on” in her education, is not very supportive. Amy said, “...she tells me I’m nuts ” all the time. She shared that she does not talk to her friends about school very much.

Amy said she has not had time to establish any new friendships since she moved back to her hometown. She said she is a “very goal driven” person and because her time with her son is already limited by the time she spend at work and on school, she just does not have room for much of a social life. Amy said that she would like to develop a social group, but one that is focused on volunteer work or based in her church. She does not have an interest in activities that involve drinking or partying, though she would like someone to go shopping with or to a movie. She said that sometimes she feels frustrated and stretched thin. She would like to go to Monday night Bible study, for example, but because of her schoolwork, she cannot. Amy said she does her own Bible study, but she “long[s] for that relationship with other people.”

Charlotte has had trouble making good friends in her rural home, as well. But, she has a number of very supportive friends who are all excited that she is fulfilling her goal to earn a master’s degree. They are mostly women she met while in college, but she still talks to friend from high school occasionally. One of her close friends is a woman she met in her new town. Even though she lives nearby, they only get to see each other

“every few weeks” because of their schedules. She sees her college friends infrequently, as well. But, she texts or talks on the phone with her closest friends regularly. She is very excited because two of her friends are hoping to find jobs in the area where Charlotte is living. She said that having her friends nearby would help her a lot.

Charlotte also participates in her community. She teaches swimming lessons and she is a club advisor at the campus where she works. She has had to cut back a bit on her volunteer work as a swimming instructor, but not because of her school obligations getting in the way. She had to cut back because of her fiancé’s coaching schedule. With him away, she does not have the childcare she would need to volunteer as much as she would like.

When I asked Hannah about her social life, she laughed and said, “Oh, when do you have that, ‘cause I don’t think I have one!” She said she has one close friend that she does not see very often because her friend has small children and she has so much to do with school, work, and her own family. Hannah thinks her friend is very understanding, though, and their inability to see each other as much as they would like has not harmed their relationship. She said she also spends time socially with her son and daughter-in-law and her daughter-in-laws family. They mostly spend holidays together. Hannah’s other social activities consist of regularly attending church “...and sporting stuff. Whatever she [their daughter] is in, we are involved in...”

Mary Ann said that she has three close friends that, “when it comes down to the wire, I could talk to them about anything.” Two of the women have been friends with Mary Ann since high school and one since her early twenties. However, they do not live in the same community, but they do live in the same state, so all are within relatively easy

driving distance. Her main stumbling block with one of her friends, much like Hannah, is that her friend has small children that occupy most of her time. Her relationships with her friends are so meaningful to her that she said she values them and prioritizes them above her relationships with her extended family members.

Mary Ann said that her online program, “definitely hinders my relationship with them [her friends] in a lot of ways. She said that she has not seen one of her friends in over a year and a half because she just cannot find time to visit her. She said her family obligations also play a part in their separation, but that, because she does most of her schoolwork on the weekends and Sundays are her deadline days, there just is not time to travel to visit friends. Even though they do not see each other as often as they would like, Mary Ann said her friends are very supportive of her goals. But, she said she thinks, “...all three are thinking, “Oh, thank God this is her last semester!”.

Mary Ann’s decision to enroll in her online program has effected other aspects of her social life as well. She used to be the president of her children’s PTO (Parent / Teacher Organization) and she was a Girl Scout leader. She gave up both positions when she started school. She said that now, she is “a spectator for my kids sports, the theater, and the choir, and whatnot. But, I’m not very involved. I’m in a bubble of my kids, my home, and my husband...and school.” She said she had to prioritize what was most important and what had to go. She explained:

I have a hard enough time juggling everything that I’ve got going on. I’ve really isolated myself, but I probably shouldn’t as much as what I have, but I very much isolated myself because I just feel, I know how to handle stress. And sometimes

I'm not the greatest [at handling stress]. So if I cancel all these different things out, it just keeps my more focused.

Laughing, she said that having to give up her volunteer work “sucks”.

Two things influenced her decision to prioritize her social commitments in the way she has. First, she deals with mental illness. She knows she has limits as far as how much stress she can handle before she becomes overwhelmed and her health is affected. And second, she said she has to think about how much money she is spending on school. She wants to see a return on her investment. She said she is a “...very financial person...It could be the banker in me”. If she is distracted, she might not do as well in school, which means she might not get her money's worth.

Sarah also has a long-term friendship that is very important to her. She has had the same best friend since seventh grade. Outside of her husband, she said her friend is, “the only person I can really trust.” Her friend is “100% supportive” of her choice to go to college. She even helps Sarah with her math homework. Her friend lives about forty-five minutes away from Sarah, which she said is “not that bad”. They are able to see each other a few times a month. Sarah said her school obligations have not negatively affected their friendship. Her friend is very understanding and, because she helps her with her work, is fairly actively involved in the school aspect of Sarah's life.

Sarah and her husband also have a newer friend that they share. She said, at first, it was difficult for them to trust their new friend because of the abuse their young daughter had suffered at the hands of another friend of theirs, but that he has earned their trust.

Sarah said that, outside of their two friends, their social life revolves entirely around their family. They spend their free time on activities like family movie night, skating, or thrift store shopping, which is a favorite of their older daughters. Sarah said she used to scrapbook and was interested in photography, but since their move, she has not had time to spend on herself. She said the focus of her free time is on supporting her husband's sobriety.

All of the student-mothers have enduring friendships with people who are understanding and supportive of their commitments. And, for all of the women, their friendships and social activities are the first aspects of their lives to be pushed aside when life becomes overwhelming, even though they miss and even "long" for the attachments to others that they must sometimes let go of, if just temporarily.

Their decisions to prioritize their friendships the way they have could be the result of a number of factors. First, mothering, especially intensive mothering, is very time consuming. So is full-time work. These two aspects of their lives are non-negotiable. Online learning also demands a large amount of their attention, time that might have been spent with friends and on other social pursuits in the past. Considering the companionship needs of their partners and what little time they have for extended family, and it is clear why most of the women struggle to find time for friendship, no matter how much they wish for it. It is a concern that the women do not have more time for their friends as studies have shown how important women's friendships are to their wellbeing as well as their marital satisfaction (Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004; Walker, 1995).

It is also not surprising, according to the literature, that the women are not more involved in their communities, even though most reported a bond or ties to them.

According to the Pew Research Center's report, *American mobility: Who moves? Who stays put? Where's home?*, "Feeling that a community is your home doesn't appear to lead to more civic engagement. Among those who say their current community is their home, just 12% say they are "very involved" in civic life—virtually identical to the 11 percent of those who say their home is elsewhere." (2008, p.29).

### **Paid Employment**

Assertions about what a happy family looks like surround us in American culture (Arendell, 2000; Chae, 2015; McCormick, 2010). Turn on the television and multiple programs showcasing the perfect family can easily be found: impeccably dressed, precisely coiffed, their smiling faces beaming back at us. Wait for a commercial and you will see examples of how happy families are supposed to spend their free time, ideally at an exorbitantly expensive destination where they are assured they will make memories that last forever. Check social media and you will be inundated with picture after picture of more smiling faces in surroundings captured in just the right moment and meant to impress those who are looking.

The cultural narrative tells us that, if we want a happy family, we need to be able to give them the things that lead to happiness in our culture: not just any clothing, but clothing that is in style; not just any home, but one in the right neighborhood and good school district; not just any family time spent together, but trips that change lives; not just any childhood, but one that is special (Arendell, 2000; Chae, 2015). This is the American dream and the American dream is not cheap. Given that the median household income in rural areas of the U.S. in 2014 was just \$45,482, it becomes apparent how difficult it can

be for families to achieve the culturally constructed ideal family life (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015).

As I asked each student-mother about her need to work, I became more hesitant and even somewhat embarrassed to ask the next. The typical response to this question was a soft chuckle or incredulousness. Of course they need to work. In the United States, 58.6% of adult women are considered a part of the workforce, meaning they are working or looking for work, and 73% of those work full-time (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Additionally, according to The Council of Economic Advisors (2014), “More than 40 percent of mothers are now the sole or primary source of income for the household.” To add, in 60% of American homes today, both parents work (The Council of Economic Advisors, 2014). This statistic is congruent with the current popular perception among all people that women, including mothers, should work to help support their households, at least part-time (National Data Program for the Sciences, 2012).

The women in this study represent these statistics. They work for both economic and personal reasons and are going to school to improve both their financial contributions to their households and their work satisfaction.

Amy has no choice but to work to support her son. Her hectic schedule leaves her feeling tired, but not necessarily overwhelmed. She said that she realizes, “...this is what I have to do and this is how I have to get it done and that’s what I do.” She shared that her boyfriend sometimes has to step in to remind her to take a break, and she was quick to point out that it is not because she neglects any of her many responsibilities but because she simply needs to down time to recharge. Down time usually comes when she

has been able to work ahead in school and has a day off from work. And, her work can be grueling. She works second shift and sometimes doubles if the hours fall when her son is in bed. She said it is hard to pass up the extra shifts because, “I would make time and a half for like six or seven hours.” She explained how working doubles works:

It’s easier for me to stay if somebody calls off on night shift, I work the evening shift, I work 3:00 – 11:30. But, if somebody calls off on night shift it’s easier for me to stay because my son’s already here and already in bed. And then I’ll get home at 7:00 am and I can just get him straight on the bus...Instead of going to sleep, I’ll get him up, get him on the bus, and then I’ll sleep after he goes to school.

Hannah works to relieve her husband of the financial burden of supporting their family on his own. She said she took off two years when her daughter was born and that they “were not starving or anything”, but that it was difficult to make ends meet. She said she likes to work and did not mind going back after her time off with her daughter. Hannah works because she wants to help her family.

Charlotte works for a number of reasons. First of all, she has student loans and other bills that she is responsible for. Second, her fiancé makes a good living, but not enough to support them all. Third, they have goals that they are working towards including home ownership and a wedding. And finally, she continues to work to build seniority at her job and to move up at her university.

Mary Ann has to work, as well, especially now that her husband is laid off from his job. She said her full-time job is to pay bills and her part-time Avon business is to pay for extras like entertainment and meals out. She explained their need for her work:

...for the bills that we have and all the things that my kids are involved with, my son especially, with the choir and the theater productions that he does, that's a lot of money out of pocket...just the sports, just gas wise, to be able to do those things and provide the opportunities for our kids.

Mary Ann works to provide her children with things beyond the basics, to give them the lifestyle, experiences, and opportunities she and her husband want them to have.

Sarah said, "I think in today's society, it's understood that it's a necessity [for mothers to work]." Her husband was seriously injured in a work accident and can no longer work outside of the home, so Sarah does not have a choice but to work to help support her family. She said she has always worked and only took off the minimum amount of time when her daughters were born before returning to work. She shared that the environment at her current job is conducive to family life, something that she seemed to appreciate very much. Her work is only four blocks from where she lives, but if she needs to, she is able to work from home. She said, "I work with the sales manager and he's, if I need to go, I need to go and he's very understanding. He's a family man himself, so it's great to work with people who understand."

I included these descriptions of the student-mothers' paid employment after the discussions of their home and family life because work plays an integral role in their mothering. Their work leads to a paycheck and that paycheck is a tool that they use to accomplish their mothering goals. Many of these women grew up feeling abandoned by their own mothers. They use their ability to financially provide for their families as a way to show their love and devotion to their families' well being. Understanding their work lives helps us to understand their lived experience as student-mothers.

## **The Online Degree Program**

I think Hannah explained it best when she said that in “online learning...you’re not learning just in courses. You are also learning how to balance your life to the fullest.” Being enrolled in an online degree program adds yet another shift to their already busy lives and another dimension of difficulty to the delicate balance of paid work and family.

In this section, I delve into details about the women’s experiences in their online programs. This topic is so critical, online learning is the second theme of this study and is one of the activity systems in the following chapter. I discuss the meaning they find in being a student, their educational goals, why they chose their university and their programs, costs, their schedules, their online classrooms, their experiences with interruptions, and other issues they have had with distance education. All of these topics bring us closer to a holistic understanding of the women’s experiences with balancing mothering with online education.

### **Meaning in Being a Student**

During our third interviews, I asked the student-mothers what being a student means to them. They each gave a sincere answer. I think it is important to relay what they told me in their words. Amy said:

I feel like when I reach the point, as a nurse, ...when I’m unwilling to learn or when I stop seeking education, that’s probably when I either need to change fields like change from mental health to something else, or I need to stop being a nurse. Because, that’s such an important part of nursing...being a student is, it’s

important to me because it directly correlates with my profession. And, it helps me build upon my profession so that I'm constantly striving to be a better nurse.

Charlotte shared:

Working in the field that I work in, in higher education, I mean, I think that it is something that I need to do for myself and something I need to do for the student in which I work with on a daily basis. I mean, I'd be doing an injustice if I were not continually trying to better myself, not only for myself, but also for the students that I advise on a regular basis. So, for me, it's just all about gaining knowledge and really just moving on and being able to think intelligently on a different level, being able to think out of the box, so to speak, in certain situations, and just constantly being able to critically think and critically read and critically write is definitely something that usually is, over time, is something that has to be practiced and kept up with. So, that's the other thing, too, is just being able to stay sharp and that's what the education is doing for me.

Hannah explained:

I think being a student is just never stop learning...I think when you have that ability to continue to learn and to move on in life and to just keep making yourself better, I think that's what a student is about. You can be a student at work learning a new task, too. You don't have to necessarily be in a class, but I think anything that you're learning, something new and adding something to you, I think that's what's important is to never stop learning and always, always do something that keeps you going...my grandma who was, she passed away when she was 93, so every day she would sit down and do crosswords and word

searches. And she had the clearest mind when she died. You know, she didn't have dementia. She didn't have Alzheimer's and I always say it's because she always did something every day that kept her mind working.

Mary Ann said:

I think it's a sense of accomplishment and it fills a void for me, because I think I've said before, I kind of got stripped of the opportunity of being able to go to college right after high school. It's something that I had to wait until when I thought was the right time, which there's no right time [laughs]. Life happens. But I was filling a void. Besides that, I want to be a better employee. I want to exceed in my career. I wanted, I'm the type of person that when I go to work every single day I put in 110%. I genuinely care about my responsibilities [to] my coworkers and my customers. Every single day I, even though my job is stressful, I really love going to work. I love what I do. So, why wouldn't I want to get better so I can stay doing what I love even longer? And, so I don't get overlooked when the time comes for me to apply for the management position. So if you want things in life you got to work for it and that's what college means to me.

Sarah shared that, for her, being a student means:

To absorb the things that I'm given and the opportunity to respond to the information. It's a big responsibility, being a student, 'cause there's a lot of responsibilities, there's a lot of goals you have to set for yourself, I think, in order to succeed. You can't wing it. Some people think it's easy, just wing it. If you wing it, you might not come out on top... It's just a big responsibility, but it's rewarding as well because the end result is gratification and it's rewarding.

## **Motivation and Goals**

All of the women have definite goals that motivate them to make the sacrifices that they do in order to earn their degrees. Their goals all differ somewhat, but they all have two things in common. All of them mentioned their families as a major motivation and providing a better living or being a role model as a goal. Many of them are also doing it for themselves: to be the first in their families to earn a college degree or to prove that they are capable or to be better at their work or to achieve a lifelong goal of becoming an educated person. No matter their reasons, they are all passionate.

Amy has three goals. First, she wants to be able to provide a better life for her son and any future children she may have. Her current position can be very stressful, and she said that it is not unusual for the stress to spill over into nurse's home lives. She does not want her job to take a toll on her family. Additionally, with an advanced degree, she will make more money, which benefits her family. Her second goal is to qualify for a management or better clinical position. She does not want to have to do "grunt work" for the rest of her career. She has plans to pursue a master's degree after she finishes her bachelor's program and maybe even a doctorate. She said, "My goal in the end is to be somewhere where my hours are comfortable. As quickly as possible." She wants more stability in her life. She does not want to be "miserable" in her work. Her third reason is to finally get the respect that she thinks she has earned and deserves. She shared that some colleagues look down on her because she only has an associate's degree from a technical school. She wants to prove that she is smart and capable, that she is a "competent nurse." She explained:

I want to be at a point in my life where I can say, “Okay, yeah, I did go to this tech school and this is here I started off, but look at where I am now.” When I reach that masters’ nurse practitioner level or the doctorate nurse practitioner level, I can look back and I can say to yonder nurses, “just because I started here at this lowly or humble beginning, or whatever, this is where I’m at now.”

Amy’s shared that her third reason is truly about the value of her personal achievement.

Charlotte also has three goals. Her number one reason is to achieve her goal of being the first in her immediate family and on her father’s side to achieve a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. She wants a degree that reflects what she does on a daily basis. Her family motivates her second goal. She wants to improve her earning potential in order to help provide a “higher quality of life” for them. Charlotte wants to be able to provide for her daughter’s education in a way that her own parents could not. She also wants to be a role model for her child. She said she wants to “...show her that education is important and if you’re determined enough, you can do it.”

Her final reason, “moving forward at work and gaining more seniority and giving people more of a reason to trust me and my knowledge in this area.” Charlotte takes her schoolwork very seriously, noting how upset she became once when she missed one point on a paper. She said:

I know it sounds stupid, just getting upset about losing that one point, but it was kind of like it made me go back and think, well, maybe if I would have spend like ten more minutes on it, maybe that would have gotten that extra point...

Hannah wants to be a good role model for her daughter. She said, “ I want to show my daughter that I’m working as hard at my studies as she is at her ‘cause she’s

coming home and doing homework every night, too.” But, she is also doing this for herself. She wants to be a good student and earn a degree. Hannah hopes to be a supervisor someday so that she can use what she has learned on the job, in combination with what she learns in college, to be a better supervisor. She thinks that if she is going to do something that takes her away from her family, she wants to do well and make the most of it and she wants them to see that, too. She wants to make them proud and to be proud of herself.

Mary Ann told me that she simply likes to learn. She said, “I like to be an educated woman.” She also said that knowledge is power; it is something she tells her children. She explained why she wants a college education:

I strive to be a better person in my career. I mean, a better person period...I want to do better at my job. I want to do better with my relationships, just my communicating and whatnot. And, having that education gives me the power to do that. And, mainly, I've had two kids. They're watching me. They see everything that I do and what I don't do and the ups and downs of it...what kind of example would I be if I quit and just said, “Oh, it's too hard. I can't do it?”

What example does that set for them? ... So, I not only have my own drive, but I have to remember I've got eyes watching me and ears listening.

Mary Ann is also motivated by both negative and positive feedback she has received from her parents. She shared that she has an encouraging email from her father that she printed out so “when I just get really down in the dumps and I think I can't go on with it, I pull that email out and I just read it.” Her mother has not been encouraging, though. Mary Ann said that her mother literally told her, “...it's just going to be a waste

of money. You know you won't finish it. Don't set yourself up for failure." She said that by taking her father's advice and kind words to heart, she is proving her mother and others who doubt her wrong. She is proud that she will be the first of her siblings to finish college.

Sarah wants to make her family proud and help provide a better life for them. She said the most important reason she attends college is her kids, being a good role model for them is critical to her. She also wants to make her grandfather proud. Like some of the other student-mothers, she will be the first in her family to earn a bachelor's degree.

The student-mothers all report educational goals and motivating factors that are also represented in the literature on adult distance education students. Their reasons range from the desire to continue interrupted educations, to wanting to further their careers or earn higher incomes, while some pursue higher education online for a variety of personal reasons (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). One thing is certain, though, their goals have made them highly motivated. This information opens yet another window on their world.

### **Why Their University and Why Online?**

There is one reason that the student-mothers' share concerning their decisions to pursue higher education online and at their current university. It is a convenient and flexible way to earn a degree from a respected institution that they trust and, in many cases, admire. For some of the women, attending the university where they are currently enrolled has been a life-long goal. For others, they had been waiting for their program to be available online and jumped at the opportunity when it finally arose. For all of the

women, access to a high-quality education means positive outlooks for them and for their families.

Amy had always wanted to attend her current university. She worked hard in high school and even joined the military to make her dream come true. She began college at her dream school, but found she could not continue on after she became pregnant and the demands of motherhood, marriage, and the military put too much pressure on her. She later attended and graduated from a technical school, but regretted that decision. She wanted a prestigious degree from the university where she was first enrolled. Amy knew she was smart and capable, she had earned a spot in a program that was notoriously difficult to get into at her university as a freshman and she was valedictorian of her nursing class at her technical college. But, she felt that she did not get the respect she deserved, the respect nurses, from what she considers, better programs receive. Amy said that she does not want her son to suffer because she chose to return to school. That is why she chose to return online. She prefers online learning because she can work, go to school, and still have the time for her son that she thinks he needs. She said she can take her work anywhere and do it anytime, which means she does not have to take time off from work and she can do school when she is away with the reserves, accomplishing two time-consuming tasks at once.

Charlotte is employed by her university and receives a large percentage of her tuition as an employee benefit, making the pursuit of her master's degree more manageable. She wanted to enroll in her program when she began working for her university but could not because her branch campus is too far from the main campus where the program was offered. She had heard that the program might be going online,

and when it did, she enrolled. She prefers taking classes online as a graduate student because of the flexibility it offers her. She is able to mother, spend time with her fiancé, and work full-time while enrolled in her online program. She could not balance everything the way she wants to in a traditional program. She also enjoys her online program simply because the subject area interests her and is relevant to her current work.

Hannah was encouraged to pursue a degree by a supportive former boss, who she described as a mentor to her. When she first began taking classes, she did so online and on campus but was really just dabbling. She said she really was not sure what area she wanted to pursue. Along the way, she discovered her major, one that will allow her to move up within her current university and which is only offered online, and became serious about finishing a bachelor's degree. She said, in consultation with her advisor, she decided it would be best for her career if she completed an associate's degree first and then move on to a bachelor's degree, so that she would be able to put a degree on her resume sooner. Her mentor/boss has since retired, but she said her new boss is also supportive, allowing her to leave early to take proctored exams, when necessary.

Mary Ann started school for the first time in 2009 when she wanted to become a social worker focused on helping adolescents with drug and alcohol addiction. Her major at the time was psychology and her program was online through the university she now attends. She said she soon realized that jobs in that field are scarce where she lives, and relocating was not an option. She changed her major to business administration and then the organizational leadership, her current major. During this time, she also changed jobs a number frequently. Mary Ann said she chose an online program because it "is

supposed to work around my schedule, but as we both know, that doesn't always work that way.”

Like Mary Ann, Sarah did not start her college education knowing exactly what she would major in. At first, she thought about a degree in business, but soon realized it was not for her. She then began working for a behavioral health company and became so inspired by her work that she thought about switching to human development or family sciences. The more she thought about it, though, she knew that it would be a stressful career and that she would probably bring that stress home with her every day, something she did not want to do. Sarah said, “I think that in order to maintain a level of sanity, I needed to find something that was a good medium.” She chose her current major because it is an area she is interested in—she said she “immediately fell in love”—and a career in the field will not create stress that will follow her home. She also thinks it has the greatest potential for her family because of the job opportunities the degree will open up. Making sure her career direction is right for her family is very important to her, she said, because of her mother's lifestyle and her lack of a career, or even regular employment, that could support Sarah as a child.

Sarah, like Amy, knew that she wanted a degree from a prestigious university. She said she chose her school because she is a “big fan” and because the university has a good graduation rate and curriculum. She also chose it for what it is not, a for-profit institution, which, according to Sarah, are not as credible. She also said it is very important to her that potential employers do not look at her differently because her degree was earned through an online program. She does not think that will be a problem with the university she is attending; she is confident she is getting the same education as a

student in a traditional program. Completing her program online allows her to continue to work, a must for Sarah. She summarized her reasoning by saying:

I needed to go somewhere I could still hold a job but still earn a credible degree that didn't get tossed...when you put in on your resume, your resume didn't get tossed in the trashcan like one from [names of for-profit online institutions] or any of those.

Sarah said her online program takes “dedication and hard work”, that it is a “very good program”: “structured well” and “enlightening”.

Moore and Kearsley (2012) explain, “One special feature of distance education and perhaps what most people think of when they first think about distance education is the capability for an institution or organization to provide access to education to some learners who could otherwise not have it. “ (p.156). All of the women in this study have benefited from access to a quality education that otherwise might not have been available to them. Because of family and work reasons and their ties to their rural homes, many were not willing or able to move to pursue higher education. But, thanks to their university, they can fulfill their educational goals and earn the degrees they want at an institution that demands the respect that many desire.

I think the fact that many of the women expressed a desire to earn a rigorous degree from a prestigious and well-regarded institution is interesting. Often when we hear of students longing for an Ivy League or similar education, the students mentioned are traditionally aged undergraduates, not mothers. The women's desires for their educations go beyond simply wanting a degree. We should not assume that adults do not care where they study so long as they earn a credential. Some, like many of the women

in this study, are not only driven by utilitarian reasons, they also want the best education they are capable of achieving.

### **Cost**

It is not news to anyone that college is expensive. For some, it is becoming prohibitively so. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), the cost for four years of tuition, room, and board at a public, four-year institution was just over \$17,000 per year during the 2012-2013 school year. For mothers, the cost of a college education makes them face a dilemma: how do they pay for it without putting too much of a burden on their families? Each of the women in the study have found a way to fund their educations that they are content with.

The student-mothers are financing their educations through various means. Amy's tuition is paid for by the military benefits she receives. Charlotte and Hannah both receive large discounts from the institutions where they work, but pay the rest of the costs out of pocket. Hannah uses money she puts aside from their tax refund each year. Neither woman uses loans or receives scholarships. Mary Ann uses a combination of Federal loans, scholarships, and out-of-pocket money to pay for her tuition. She said that the loans only pay for spring and fall semester, so she pays out-of-pocket in the summer. This year she was excited to receive a \$1500 scholarship that was split between fall and spring. Sarah also gets Federal loans. In addition, she receives some grant money.

### **Daily Schedule**

The student-mothers all have full schedules and long days in common. Some of their schedules are highly structured and regimented while others are more fluid, but all are packed with work, school, and family commitments to the point of overflowing.

Understanding exactly what their daily lives entail and how they balance all of their competing demands will go a long way towards improving our understanding of their experiences as student-mothers.

Amy's daily schedule is highly structured and completely full. She must be organized; she is taking seven classes this semester. She works very hard to finish all of her school work during the week so that any free time she may have on weekends, when she does not have to work at her nursing job or be away with the reserves, can be spent with her son and boyfriend. She works every other weekend at hospital and one weekend a month for reserves. Amy works the second shift. She leaves for work at 2:15 pm and is home by midnight. She then sleeps until 7:00 am when she wakes up and gets her son ready for school. Over breakfast, they try to make time to work on whatever homework he did not complete with his aunt the night before. She takes him to school at 8:15 am and begins her own homework at 8:30 am. She said school comes rather easily for her, so it has not been too difficult for her to carry such a heavy course load. She said she takes six or seven classes at a time. She completes about two hours of schoolwork and then exercises, showers, and gets ready for work. She then makes a meal for herself and puts away some for her son for after school. The whole process then starts over again.

Amy stays organized by keeping a detailed list that she creates each week and prints out. The list consists of due dates for her classes and helps her to remember when assignments are due. She relies on her list to help her stay on schedule, and staying on schedule is critical to her having time to get her schoolwork done. She said people often assume that she has time to do her schoolwork while she is at work, but she said that is

not the case with nurses. When they are at work, all they have time to do is work, nothing else. She said, “I can’t double dip.”

Like Amy, Charlotte has a structured schedule. Her intentions are to finish her schoolwork for the class she is taking during the week so that weekends can be focused on her daughter and fiancé. Charlotte usually has a traditional, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm work schedule. However, she must travel occasionally for her job in the fall and spring. Typically she arrives at work between 7:15 and 7:30 am in order to complete some schoolwork before her workday begins. She likes working in the morning. She said her mind is clearer than in the evening when she is exhausted. She also does schoolwork during her lunch break sometimes. If she needs to, she will do work at night after her toddler goes to bed. She does not like to do schoolwork during times when her family is awake or home, but sometimes she has to. Charlotte said it can be difficult, or impossible, to do her work at those times, so if her fiancé is not home, his parents will sometimes help with childcare so she can have uninterrupted time to work. She said it can be difficult for her to accept help because she is so independent, but she knows it is best for all of them to do so.

Hannah also has very early mornings and sometimes late nights. She leaves her house at 5:00 am to go to the gym, saying as a busy mom, it is the only time she has for herself. She then gets to work at 7:30 am. She does work for the two classes she is taking or reads for pleasure on her lunch break. She tries not to do anything time sensitive, like take a quiz, on her lunch break because she could be interrupted. Hannah leaves work at 4:30 pm and drives her forty-five minute commute home, arriving at home around 5:15 pm if she does not have to pick up her daughter from a practice. She said her

husband has to go to bed early, so usually she works on her schoolwork in the evening after he's gone to bed. Occasionally she will do her schoolwork right after dinner. She works in the front room of her house, which functions as her office, when everyone else in the house is settled in for the evening and no longer needs her. She shared that she sits in an uncomfortable straight-backed chair so she can stay awake. She said she usually does schoolwork from 7:00 pm until 10:00 or 11:00 pm on weeknights. Hannah also does schoolwork on the weekend, because even though she has every intention of putting in a solid three hours or so each weeknight, interruptions make it an almost impossibility. She gets up before everyone else in her home on Saturday and Sunday for peaceful, uninterrupted time. She said she thinks best before lunch when her mind is clear. By the end of the day, she said, "...you're just in a complete different mindset." However, she still often interrupts herself. Weekend mornings are also when she does a lot of her housework and when housework is looming; sometimes she has to stop schoolwork to get it done. She frequently will then also have to do schoolwork on Sunday evening in order to finish for her Sunday deadline in most classes. Hannah said she usually works on school for about four hours on Saturday and from none at all to six hours on Sunday, depending on how much work she has due and how far behind she is.

She stressed the importance of being disciplined as an online student and having a schedule. Hannah likes that she does not have to be at class at a certain time on a certain day, asserts that that does not mean students can put their work off and do it all at once. Getting the work done takes time and a plan, especially as she balances her schedule with her busy teenage daughter's. Hannah said some times of the year are "crazier" than

others, depending on what sport her daughter is playing at the time. She recalled one example of an especially busy time and how it affected her schoolwork:

...during volleyball season its crazy. I remember at a tournament when she wasn't playing—this is an all day Saturday things and she wasn't [playing]—, if they weren't playing, I was sitting over in a corner doing homework because that's what I had to do because I had already had two meets during the week and then this all day thing on Saturday, so I was finding corners to go hide in to do homework.

Hannah evaluates her schedule at the beginning of each week in order to stay organized. She looks at what is coming up at school, work, and with her kids. She said, “Otherwise, it would be Friday and I would be like, “Oh, really? There was something due on Wednesday?”” Hannah said it is not personally healthy for her to put things off until the last minute. She would much rather do a few hours each night than frantically try to complete everything the night her work is due. She added that there have been nights when she has been up until midnight working to meet a deadline, but as a rule, she tries not to procrastinate.

Mary Ann said that a regular schedule just does not work for her. She said, “In my world it just never seems to work, so whenever I can sign on and take a shot at something, I work at it as long as I can.” Mary Ann told me that Wednesday and Sundays are her best days to do schoolwork, primarily because those have consistently been her deadline days throughout her time in her program. However, she said she tries to work for an hour or two every day and will squeeze studying in whenever she can:

before work, on lunch breaks, when she gets home, and when the kids are in bed and her housework is done. She said:

...I'm a night owl. I can stay up 'till 2:00, 3:00 in the morning to get up at 7:00 for work and start the day all over again. I've really tried, especially these last two semesters, to try and be in bed by 10:00, 11:00. It's a work in progress, but if I am going to still study at night and be to bed early, that means I have to start studying earlier [taking away from family time].

Mary Ann said that 99% of the time, she works in her home office, but that she might read in bed occasionally. She is only taking one class in her last semester but usually takes three. She shared that she had to drop out during the spring of 2015 because she was too overwhelmed with trying to keep up with all of her kids' athletic and extracurricular activities, her Avon business and school. She explained that she has long commutes many days because they are so rural. She can drive up to an hour to take her kids to a game or meet at another school district.

Sarah, like the other student-mothers, tries to work her schedule around the needs of her family. She works five days a week at her job but on a rotating schedule, which sometimes includes Saturday. Unlike the other women, Sarah works among her family members, often in the living room where they are so that they do not feel neglected and so she is available if they need her. She studies wearing headphones to help her concentrate. She said, "I don't know why, but that seems to help drown everybody out sometimes if I need to." This is her way of multitasking or "doing double duty", as she called it. She is able to get work done and attend to her family's needs. Sarah works during the week at home and at work on her lunch breaks and on weekends. She said she

puts in up to five hours on Saturday, starting in the morning, but that that time is often interrupted by five or ten minute breaks when her children need her or housework needs to be done. She also works all throughout the day on Sunday, up to twelve hours including short breaks, in order to complete her assignments in time for her Sunday night deadlines. Sarah is taking five classes, her usual number. She keeps track of it all by writing down everything that she needs to remember.

The student-mothers have all found ways to stay on their strict schedules. Charlotte uses an online calendar that she can access from work, home, and on her phone to stay organized as well as a detailed filing system. She keeps all aspects on her life, as well as her fiancé's schedule, on her calendar. And, she organizes her class in individual folders for easy retrieval of the documents she needs. Mary Ann also uses a calendar. She said staying organized is critical to success in online programs. She fills out her calendar at the beginning of each semester and, much like Charlotte, fills in every aspect of her life so that nothing is forgotten and so she knows exactly what needs to happen each week. Sarah also writes everything down for fear of forgetting. Mary Ann said, though, that she has learned not to be too tough on herself if something comes up in her life and she cannot devote the time she intended to her schoolwork. Her advice is to, "...try to do the best that you can and if something doesn't go according to plan, don't beat yourself up...communicate with your instructors. That's so important."

The women all have learned the dire importance of structure and organization to making schoolwork while mothering. None of the women are willing to put anything before their children, even school. Accordingly, they have had to figure out how to make it all fit.

## **The Online Classroom**

The online classroom takes some getting used to for students new to distance education. The style of, and rules for, communication are quite different from a traditional classroom and can be off-putting for some (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). And while online learning can offer access to rural students who might otherwise not have access to higher education, distance education is not always ideal or a good fit for every student. It can be lonely. It can be isolating. It can be frustrating. Many of the student-mothers in this study have experienced these emotions regarding online learning and more. However, it can also be exciting and even fun. In the end, it is a valuable and necessary tool for them to achieve their goals.

### **Classmates.**

The student-mothers all had different outlooks on their classmates that spanned a large range from Amy who has no interest in making friends or getting to know her classmates to Mary Ann who would like the opportunity to develop the kinds of lasting friendships that she thinks students in traditional environments can make. All of the women said their relationships with their classmates, however, were at least professional and in many cases were enriching.

Amy is not entirely certain what the online environment is like for her classmates. She has not tried to form a relationship with any of them and is just not interested in knowing them. She said, “To be honest, I don’t even know anybody’s name...” Amy is too busy to worry about other people in her classes. In fact, she strongly dislikes that she is required to interact for a grade. She said she often feels “forced to talk about

something I don't want to talk about", but that she likes that she can "avoid having to deal with classmate's opinions."

Hannah said that her instructors provide opportunities for students to collaborate with each other —such as in chat rooms or question centered discussion boards— but that it rarely happens because people are too busy to meet online. She also shared that it would be difficult to build relationships outside of working on a team project, because students simply do not get to know each other on a personal level, it is strictly professional. Hannah feels like it is a downfall to not have a "study buddy" who she could ask questions about things like homework, like she might in a traditional class, but that she really does not miss making friends in her online classes. She said that is what her husband is for, that he is her "sounding board."

Charlotte also has a professional only relationship with her classmates and is okay with it. She said she gets many opportunities to engage with her classmates via weekly small group meetings and the social media forum that they use for discussion posts. A lot of her work in her class is done collaboratively allowing her ample opportunities to interact with classmates. She said she will never make a best friend, they do not try to know each other personally, but she has begun to build a professional network that she feels is valuable now and will be in the future. She said, "...I'm getting married in September and my maid of honor is somebody I met in college. We've been best friends ever since. And, I don't think I'm going to have that same connection with the people I'm meeting in class now at the graduate level online...I'm okay with that."

Sarah's views on building relationships in online classes are similar to Charlotte's and she is happy with the level of relationships she has formed, most of which are professional. She said:

...building relationships is obviously a great benefit when you're attending online schooling 'cause you don't, I don't think anyone goes and signs up for online schooling and is going into it thinking, "well, I'm going to meet my future best friend or I'm going to meet my maid of honor or my best man or my husband, maybe." I think they just, they go into it with the understanding they're going to interact with other people and if they get to build relationships, that's just a great benefit that they take away from online learning.

She said online students know that their classmates are probably as busy as they are with families, work, and even military service. They do not expect more than a professional relationship from each other.

Counter to what the other women think about their online classmates, Mary Ann is "a little envious" of the friendships that traditional students are able to cultivate. She just does not think the opportunity is there for online students to build lifelong friendships. She said of the online environment, "...it's very much all business..." Mary Ann said she has tried to connect with her classmates when a similarity will arise, such as being from the same part of her state, but that her classmates' responses are usually "very minimal", if they respond at all. She said she believes it is because people are more guarded online and hesitant to open up. However difficult it can be, she has been successful in making a few relationships with her classmates, though they always only

last for as long as they are in class together and then “fizzle out” because, she said, she has never been in the same class twice with anyone.

The difficulty connecting online has been hard on Mary Ann who describes herself as a “people person”. She explained:

I like to be present and I like to help other people and talk to other people. I personally would give anything to have my college experience in a classroom. I would thrive in a classroom versus online. I know that for a fact.”

The student-mothers all seemed to understand the nature of relationships with online classmates, whether they personally wanted deeper relationships or not. They shared that their classmates are mostly all adults who were there to get a degree and nothing else. Many noted that they are not there to meet their new best friend, but that networking is a perk and that it does help to get to know people well enough to share ideas and even to commiserate with.

I think the take away from this data is that every adult has different needs and desires for what they would like to get out of their online courses. As a graduate student studying adult, distance, and higher education, I learned that most adult students are already in established social relationships and are too busy to be concerned with making new friendships in the same way that undergraduate students typically are (Kramarae, 2001). And although most of the women in this study fit this description, Mary Ann proves that this is not always the case.

This was also not the case for me when I was studying online. I made an effort to develop friendships with my classmates that extended beyond simply being acquaintances who could help with a project or for networking. I made an effort to really

get to know people and have maintained those friendships over time. My friendships with my online classmates alleviated the loneliness and isolation that I felt in the online environment by making me feel connected in a meaningful way to others in the same situation, which is not entirely unusual (Kramarae, 2001). For me and for Mary Ann, making friends was a part of the college experience that we were not willing to sacrifice simply because we are adults, already had friends, or were studying in an environment that was inhospitable to developing lasting relationships.

### **Discussion boards and group work.**

The student-mothers' outlook on discussion boards and group work, like their outlook on friendships with classmates, also vary widely. Some women enjoy communicating or working with their classmates while others loathe it. Brindley, Walti, and Blascke (2009) state that it is not unusual for online students to dislike group work. They explain that those who have had negative group experiences in the past, with group members not doing their fair share of work or with having to cope with difficult group members, may be hesitant to want to go through a similar experience again, especially if their grade was negatively affected. To add, each class is a new experience leaving students not knowing what to expect. As Brindley, Walti, and Blaschke (2009, p. 1) noted, "...the quality and quantity of interactivity can vary dramatically from course to course."

However, Moore and Kearsley (2012) found that most students benefit from learner-learner interaction in groups, or individually within their class, and that most students enjoy working with their classmates. In fact, Brindley, Walti, and Blascke (2009, p.2) found that "Quality learning environments include opportunities for students

to engage in interactive and collaborative activities with their peers; such environments have been shown to contribute to better learning outcomes, including development of higher order thinking skills.” So in situations where emerging issues in groups can be mediated, learners have a good chance of gaining more from group work than if they worked entirely on their own. In high-quality online learning environments, “...learner-learner interaction among members of a class or other group is sometimes an extremely valuable resource for learning and is sometimes even essential.” (Moore, 1989, p.88).

Amy shared that she finds the online discussion boards very frustrating. She said of her classmates, “...I think their response is just (1) stupid; (2) uneducated; and (3) it’s like it’s hard to ...really relate to this person.” She added that meaning can get lost in translation, so classmates might not really understand what others are trying to say. Amy gave an example of a classmate who responded to a post that Amy made regarding Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—the condition that contributed to Amy’s husband’s suicide, that Amy herself identifies with, and that she sees regularly in her work as a psychiatric nurse. Amy was upset with her classmate for arguing with her when she has both personal and professional experience in the area while the classmate does not. She thinks situations like this arise because, “...the posting requirements kind of force people to say anything even if they don’t have anything worthwhile to say.” She said she avoids responding to her classmates’ posts to her:

I’m not encouraged to write back. I actually get angry and I get frustrated and I get...I get angry. So, I can’t write back...the reason I can’t is because if they respond and they give me another stupid answer, I’m just going to escalate. And I, and I don’t want to; it’s supposed to be a professional setting.

Amy is also averse to reaching out to her instructors, whom she said she has never had any issues with, but are largely absent from her online classrooms. When asked about engaging her instructors to help with issues regarding her classmates she said, ...it's like they might be looking over this [disagreements in the discussion boards], but they're not responding and it's almost as if they are not there at all...it would be like if you were in the actual classroom, it would be like the instructor had stepped out of the classroom and this exchange had happened. She added that she has "no desire" to ask them for help with issues because "in this format, it sort of drags on", and adding, "I have enough stuff to do. For me, it's easier to move on and keep going...what's the point?"

Charlotte's experience has been different from Amy's. She has an overall positive outlook on her online interactions with her classmates and with group work. The only issue she has encountered has been with the timing of her group meetings. She shared that she is the only student in her group with a child, so when the others are ready for a serious discussion at 9:00pm on meeting days, Charlotte is exhausted from a long day of work and mothering. She told me that she agreed on the time to suit the others. She said, "...it's not very convenient for me, but it works best for everybody and that, that's kind of what we've got to do." She added, that she does not know for certain if all of her group members are really up for the late meetings either, but that "I don't feel like they would be sleeping!" like she normally would at that time.

Sarah also has a positive outlook on group work. She recalled an instance when her instructor set up a group project for the class. She said she did not know working collaboratively could even happen and thought it was interesting and fun. She said she

really enjoyed getting to work closely with students living all over the United States and even the world.

Mary Ann shared that she finds group work to be "...very, very challenging..."

She said:

...sometimes you come across people that are just plain old lazy and they're riding on your shirrtails because they realize you're going to do the work and the research. And then you have some people that are full charge, full speed ahead. They take charge of the whole thing and, I mean, they practically complete the whole thing and it makes the rest of us look bad...just because they could get their work done on a Monday and it takes me till a Sunday, I run into that, too.

Mary Ann's experience has been rather like Amy's but quite different from Charlotte's.

As I spoke with the women about their online classroom experiences, I wondered if their personalities have anything to do with how they feel about working with their classmates. Upon reflection, I think they do. For example, Amy mentioned a few times that she is something of a loner, that she prefers more control over her life, and that she is very sensitive about certain aspects of her military experience. It makes sense that she would not want to work in groups or in discussion boards where she might be questioned or challenged in a way that is upsetting, concerning her military knowledge and experiences, or that she would be uncomfortable with trusting strangers with her grade and learning outcomes in group work. Charlotte, on the other hand, works for a university where collegial relationships are highly regarded, valued, and encouraged. In her case, I'm not surprised to hear that she values networking with and learning from her

classmates. In this study, it seems to be true that what works well for one person will not work for others. It all depends on the individual's wants, needs, and personality.

### **Instructors**

The relationship between online instructors and their students is an important one. In fact, Moore (1989, p.87) calls the learner-instructor interaction “essential”. In many cases, instructors are something of a lifeline for their students and their presence, or lack there of, can make or break a class. In their discussion of the community of inquiry theoretical framework (CoI), which is “a comprehensive conceptual framework designed to capture the educational dynamic and guide the study of online learning a effectiveness...” (p.105), Garrison and Akyol (2013) also stress the importance of what they call ‘teaching presence’ in the online classroom, which they say “is crucial for realizing intended learning outcomes...[and]... is the key element in integrating social and cognitive presence during the inquiry process.” (p.110).

The student-mothers all have strong opinions of their instructors. Some have had very positive interactions while others have had experiences that are quite appalling. I think that the student-mothers’ stories support the assertions from the literature about the importance of quality instruction online.

Amy’s responses to my questions about her thoughts on her instructors brought her personality front and center again. It is interesting to note, considering her description of her nearly entirely absent instructors, that when I asked Amy to rate instructor quality in her program she gave them a ten. I think this is because Amy does not want to interact with her instructors or her classmates, so even though her

relationships with them are almost nonexistent, that is what she wants, so she is happy with the arrangement.

Like Amy, Charlotte has also had an overwhelmingly positive experience with her professor in her first online class. She said “The professor is very engaging...very responsive to emails...encourages us to talk to one another...[and] initiates group discussion of all the topics...”

Hannah agrees with Amy and Charlotte’s positive rating of her professors. She said, “I haven’t had a really bad professor.” She described a time when she was very ill and her instructor gave her an extension on her work, which she appreciated and has remembered. Hannah said that most of her professors tell their classes at the beginning of their courses that they will be flexible. Hannah also shared that if students want instructors to know them online, they have to reach out to them, because to her, “they [instructors] don’t know you from the next person.” However, she likes that her instructors seem to try to help students get to know one another by encouraging time to get to know one another during the first week of classes. Hannah said she looks to see who else has a family and who the adults are during introductions. Doing so makes her feel more connected to her classmates.

Mary Ann agreed that the best instructors are those who check in regularly and promote good communication in the class. Unlike her peers, however, Mary Ann has had decidedly negative experiences with her instructors. Instructor quality and good communication is very important to her. Mary Ann shared that she has been in classes where the instructors gave no feedback at all and did not participate in the weekly discussion. She also said she has dropped classes before because she had a bad “gut

instinct” about an instructor. She explained, “It’s just like if you meet someone in life and they’re a huge jerk to you right off the bat...you know you’re not going to want to be near them or talk to them. You’re going to avoid them.” Dropping classes when she has a bad impression of her instructors is how Mary Ann ‘avoids the jerks’ in online learning.

She gave two examples of bad experiences she has had with instructors online. The first was in a general education course she took. The course required students to sign up on a website not affiliated with her institution. Mary Ann said she is not computer literate enough to feel comfortable with new technology or websites. She said that this particular site was “just completely foreign” to her. She said the directions from her instructor were poor, so she emailed her instructor to ask for help. Her email was ignored. She then did her best to set up an account on the website but did so incorrectly. She said the instructor then emailed her with a condescending note saying that it was not difficult to do and to please correct her mistake. That was it. She said it was a very insulting experience. The lack of warmth and condescending tone upset her. Her second example was with an instructor she described as young and also lacking in warmth in her communications. This instructor had a zero tolerance policy, meaning under no circumstance would she grant an extension, even for adult students. And, the instructor would respond to her questions with belittling remarks such as calling the answers to Mary Ann’s questions a “no brainer” or “common knowledge”. Mary Ann said the instructor regularly made her feel “dumb”. She said the worst thing that happened was her instructor’s cold refusal to grant Mary Ann an extension when her daughter became sick, keeping her from finishing an exam. Mary Ann made clear that she knows some people might take advantage of online instructors and policies granting some leeway to

adult students, but that she thinks it is unfair for instructors to assume all students will do so. She said she also thinks the best instructors are those who can empathize with what it is like to have a family, job, and other adult commitments. She said, "...I make a better connection with the instructors that do have a family...that's odd to discriminate against anyone who doesn't have a family, but I think there is a difference whether we like it or not..." Mary Ann never reported her issues with bad instructors nor has she asked anyone at her university, like her advisor, for help.

Mary Ann's experience is a good example of a warning given by Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke (2009, p.2) who said, "...most people [instructors] have little formal training in how to successfully interact or work with others and that the social milieu of online activities is quite different from in-person interaction, thus requiring new skills and behaviors." I think it is obvious that the instructor who treated Mary Ann so callously was not well trained in teaching online, or even in teaching at all, for that matter. Higher Education professionals and researchers need to hear stories like Mary Ann's, as well as the positive stories. They need to see the effects of poor teaching and how deeply detrimental they can be in the already isolating and lonely online environment.

### **Anonymity in the Online Environment**

Anonymity in the online environment is a topic that many of the student-mothers talked about. For them, it shapes their experience as students. Some like it while others are conflicted. Amy feels anonymous in her online classes and likes it. She said:

...some people might struggle with it [anonymity online] but that's the ...I have an avoidant personality. So, sometimes that's easier for me, like I said, I can just avoid. I'll get irritated in the moment about what somebody says but I can avoid it

and I can move on. And that's one of the things I sometimes like about online classes...I don't have to see that person everyday.

Hannah said that anonymity can be a good thing or a bad thing. She said that when you are anonymous, your risk of being stereotyped—based on looks, age, or other characteristics— by your instructor diminishes. She compared this to the television show *The Voice*. The best singers are chosen strictly by their voice and not by their appearance. Charlotte does not feel anonymous in her class. She said her picture is posted along with her introduction. She said they do not know her as a person, but they know her professionally and as a fellow student based on their active engagement in class. She wondered if maybe the class she is in now, her first online course, is unusual, but added that she would not mind if she finds that she is more anonymous in future classes. However, she would like to continue to be known enough to be able to reach out to others, to "...feel like I'm on the same page in my thought waves on things." Mary Ann does not entirely feel anonymous, either, but she does not feel like she is known personally.

Here again, personality and personal preference are evident in their online experience. Amy, who prefers to focus on the purely utilitarian purposes of distance education and is not interested in personal connections, likes being anonymous. Hannah thinks anonymity can be useful; students are judged only on what they produce, not on how they look or other superficial reasons. Her concerns as an adult student who might feel awkward in a room of traditionally aged students come out, here. Charlotte and Mary Ann, both outgoing women, do not feel anonymous, nor do they wish for anonymity. It could be that an option exists in the online environment that is good for

students. Those who wish to be anonymous are free to blend into the background while those who wish to have a more pronounced presence, may do so.

### **Is Online Learning Easier or More Difficult?**

The final aspect of the online environment that I explored with the women concerns their view of the level of difficulty of online learning and how it compares to traditional delivery methods. I was inspired to ask this question largely because of the prejudice I have seen and experienced myself, as an online learner. How often people responded negatively to me when I said my master's program was online! From a simple raised eyebrow to blatant disdain, I experienced all levels of impolite reactions. I knew my program and my university had a reputation for rigor and did not deserve the reactions they garnered concerning my program, but it bothered me, nonetheless. I asked the women about the rigor of their programs because I wanted to find out if they, too, think their programs are on par with traditional, classroom based programs, or if they are possibly even more challenging, and why.

When I asked if they thought online learning was harder, more difficult, or about the same as the traditional method of educational delivery—classroom based—the women agreed that it is all of the above. Amy, Charlotte, Hannah, and Sarah all mentioned that the flexibility of working just about whenever and wherever they want makes scheduling their lives much easier online than in traditional classrooms where you have to be at a certain place at a certain time each week. They do not have to miss work or other obligations to attend a class online. Hannah, however, said that she finds it difficult sometimes to keep herself on a schedule. She said there is often less accountability in an

online class and that it is easier to fall behind, especially if you are not disciplined or do not pace yourself throughout the week. Mary Ann agreed saying:

you have to have the drive. You have to force yourself 'cause you have no one else to depend on. You have no one else to blame. Your performance is solely on you...even though you have all these schedule and obligations and distractions you still have to buckle down and make it happen.... It's so easy to get behind, so easy.

Charlotte agreed that time management can be more difficult online, especially for students new to the format. Amy, Mary Ann, and Sarah all said that they prefer lectures in the traditional format overall, while Charlotte prefers lectures for classes that she finds more difficult such as Math courses. They think they learn better when they can hear a professor, ask questions in real time, and have opportunities for one-on-one communication. In fact, Mary Ann said, "I would give anything to take my college courses in a classroom setting." Amy added that she thinks communication is better in traditional courses. Some of the women mentioned that in the online environment, they feel like they are teaching themselves, which is much harder than being guided by a professor. Sarah said that she finds it hard to be on her own in the class without people to bounce ideas off of or to make sure she is on the same page with, regarding assignments and the like. Charlotte also said connecting with classmates is an issue for her, to some extent. Not only are there issues with not getting to know classmates, which can make online learning more difficult, Mary Ann added that instructors do not get to know you as well which could be harder on adult students who might occasionally need special consideration. The example Mary Ann gave is if her child is sick, she fears that the

professor in an online course might be less likely to believe her excuse than if they knew her in person. They might be less likely to have empathy for adult students' obligations when students are faceless.

The women overwhelmingly thought online learning is somewhat more difficult, but not for the reasons I expected. None of the women talked about academic rigor during this line of questions, although many did mention throughout their interviews that their programs are just as hard if not harder than traditional classes. They focused instead on how the online programs affected their lives and on personal relationships. I think this shows how important these issues are to the student-mothers.

Over the last dozen or so pages, I have focused closely on the details of the student-mothers' experiences in their online classrooms. What happens in the online space shapes the virtual aspect of their experience as online learners. I have shown the importance of quality instruction and opportunities for appropriate group interaction. I also highlighted how beneficial the malleability of the online experience can be for each student by showing how personal preference for differing levels of anonymity or relationships can be fulfilled online. Finally, I gave evidence that showed that the most significant determinants of difficulty in the online environment, for the women in this study, were not what we might expect. They did not judge difficulty by level of academic rigor but by how the online classes affected their lives.

In the next section, I will switch my attention to what is happening in the world around them as they work in their virtual space. I will explore how it affects their experiences as students and as mothers.

## **“Unless This House is Burning or There is Blood, Don’t Bother Me!”: Coping With Interruptions**

Another thread that runs through all of their stories concerns interruptions. This is the seventh theme I found in this study. In a traditional classroom, students can expect an hour or more of uninterrupted, sustained focus on the topic they are studying. They can lose themselves in conversation or become engrossed in a lecture. When they are taking a quiz, they can be assured they will have silence. There are no such assurances, or even a hope for them, in online learning. Students in a traditional classroom do not have to contend with a six-year-old repeatedly asking for a snack, or a teenager asking homework questions, or a husband wanting to chat after a long day of work, or all three during one evening of online class time. Even if they seek the seclusion of a dedicated home office, they are still not in an educational environment with educational expectations. They are in their home, and they are mom, and mom is always on-call.

Mothers facing interruptions by children while they are trying to work at home is nothing new. Adrienne Rich, in her book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, recounts events from her time as a young mother in the 1950s and 1960s:

I remember a cycle. It began when I had picked up a book or began trying to write a letter, or even found myself on the telephone with someone toward whom my voice betrayed eagerness, a rush of sympathetic energy. The child (or children) might be absorbed in busyness, in his own dreamworld; but as soon as he felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys...it was as if my placenta had begun to refuse him oxygen...there *was* authentic need underlying my child’s

invented claims upon me when I seemed to be wandering away from him. He was reassuring himself that warmth, tenderness, continuity, solidity were still there for him, in my person. My singularity, my uniqueness in the world as *his mother*...evoked a need vaster than any single human being could satisfy... (1986, p.23-24).

Sixty years later, the women in this study face a similar dilemma while trying to do something outside their usual purview when at home and many of their children behave similarly to Rich's children so many years ago.

Amy said her son is fairly independent and can entertain himself if she needs to work. She said she thinks he understands that she needs to get things done, but she also said, "If he needs something, all bets are off! He doesn't care what I'm doing!" Amy tries to use his infrequent interruptions as an opportunity to teach him about priorities. She said that if he interrupts her because of a legitimate need, like he is hungry, she will stop what she is doing and attend to his needs. But, if he stops her to find a television station, for example, she will explain to him that she understands he thinks what he needs is important in that moment, but that in the "hierarchy" of needs, it is not. She said he will sometimes exaggerate and say things like, "mommy I NEED you, like he's dying." Amy said in cases when his need is not imminent, she will talk with him, go back to her work, but then help him a short time later, so that he learns the lesson but is still getting all of his needs met. She said, "...because he was so young when such tragic things happened to him, I try to be very up front with him of what I expect, and what we need to do to accomplish something and how we get there."

Amy said that one of the most frustrating aspects of being interrupted is the starting and stopping: taking her attention from one task, to another, and back again. She said that at first it was really frustrating, but that after more than three years in school—counting her first nursing program— she has somewhat gotten used to it. She explained:

I sit back down. I do have to still reorganize my thoughts and figure out where I left off and if my son's just too much, like if he's interrupting more than two or three times and I have to sit back down and rethink two or three times, I'll stop because I can't focus if I have to do it two or three times. I don't have the patience. But, if I can refocus and get something done after just being interrupted once, I'm good. But if it's two or three times, I can't. I'll stop. I'll literally stop 'cause I just can't.

She said that, typically when her son interrupts her repeatedly, he is “attention seeking” and it is for something silly or unnecessary. She said that sometimes this will cause her to lose her patience with him, which then makes her feel guilty. She said he just wants to spend time with her. She will then stop because even though whatever it is he wants may seem small or unimportant, the real reason is that he needs time with her, which is her priority. She said, “After my husband passed away, I realized that you can have all the money in the world and time together is still irreplaceable. Homework doesn't outrank time.” For Amy, putting school before time with her son or meeting her son's needs, however small, is “unacceptable”.

Hannah's daughter tries not to interrupt her when she is doing homework, though she will interrupt for something they agree is important. Hannah said, typically, her daughter's interruptions are quick questions about what Hannah is up to. Hannah said

her daughter likes to sit with her while they both do their homework. It is a way for them to spend time together.

Her husband will also interrupt her occasionally. Usually, it is because he is genuinely interested in what she is studying and asks if she wants to talk about her work. Other times, he will just “pop in his head” to quickly tell her something unrelated to her work. But, she said, “He would never sit there and waste a whole bunch of my time.” She said that she does not mind when he interrupts her. She said, “Sometimes that’s okay because I think sometimes we need to turn our brains off a minute and have some conversation and then go back to work.” Though she does not mind interruptions when she is doing schoolwork that is not urgent, she said her family understands that they cannot interrupt her when she is working on an urgent assignment, like something with a looming due date.

Hannah wanted to note that her decision to pursue her degree online has probably affected her husband more than anyone else. She stressed that it takes away the most time from him. She explained, “People always say to me, [in the] evenings they wind down. They have dinner. They do whatever and then they have time to maybe watch a program or something, but I don’t do that.” She said that her husband has to get up at 3:30 in the morning to be at work by 5:00 am, so he has to go to bed early. That means they do not have time together in the evenings like many other couples do. He goes to bed and she does her schoolwork. Because of that, she does not mind when he interrupts her work. She said, “...it’s okay if they [husband] want to come over and sit down and tell you something because they don’t want to interrupt you, but their like, “But I really want to talk.” You accept the interruptions because you don’t want to block them out...”

It is important to Hannah that her husband knows he is her priority over school, especially because of how much he does to help her succeed.

Hannah said that her family is not always to blame for her interruptions. She said she will frequently interrupt herself. She explained:

One night...everybody was gone and I had a couple of hours to myself. But for whatever reason I feel like I was reading the same page over and over again. So, it's just kind of funny that when you start realizing what's holding you back, that it's not necessarily always someone else or something else. Sometimes it's literally just, you can't explain it. Sometimes you just can't focus. It's just not the right time [to study].

Charlotte tries to not do schoolwork when her daughter is awake. Her little girl is "highly interested" in computers and, according to Charlotte, she will, "climb all over you or freak out if you don't let her be near the laptop." Her daughter also does not like Charlotte to be distracted with schoolwork when she is nearby. Charlotte said her toddler will, "come over and pull my hand to come down and play..." Sometimes Charlotte can distract her little girl with a kid's TV show, but not for long enough for her to be able to get much done. Charlotte said she needs a quiet setting with no distractions in order to "be able to think critically" while she is working, so schoolwork usually waits until her daughter is not awake or around.

Mary Ann said her teenagers are old enough to know not to interrupt her when she is doing schoolwork. She said they are "pretty independent" and are able to mostly take care of themselves. But, she said, "They don't 'cause they're kids! ...normal study nights it's just: "Mom! Mom! Mom!"" She said usually they interrupt her when they are

not getting along. Mary Ann said, "...they expect me to play referee." She said she is not proud of this, but when she is completing something like an online, proctored exam, she has had to tell them, "unless this house is burning or there is blood, don't bother me!"

Interruptions are especially difficult for Mary Ann because she has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and takes medication to help her concentrate. She said that when her children interrupt her, it is often difficult for her to "get back in the zone". Interruptions from her children are not the only ones she has to contend with, though. She finds that she interrupts herself with intrusive thoughts. Mary Ann keeps a notebook on her desk that she quickly writes off-topic thoughts in. This practice helps her to stay on track and not break her concentration. When she takes a break or is done studying, she attends to what she has written down. Mary Ann said that no matter what she does to alleviate interruptions, though, inevitably, the dog always needs to go out just when she is getting into her "zone"!

Sarah's kids seem to have a limit for how much uninterrupted time they will let her have. She said they understand that she needs to get her work done, but eventually she said they will:

get bored and they're antsy and they want to go and they want to do this and they want me to make cookies and they want me to make lemonade and they want to go to a friend's house. They want to go to the park. They want to go skating...when they interrupt I know it's time for a break.

The women allow the, sometimes frequent, breaks in their studying because they put their children's' and partners' needs before their own. They do not want their family members to feel neglected. They want to be 'good moms'.

### **Other interruptions.**

Immediate family members are not the only instigators of interruptions. Sometimes extended family members can struggle with allowing student-mothers the time they need to do schoolwork. Technological interruptions can also pose problems for the women, although some have found ways to use off-topic technology to their advantage when studying. The women all discussed these types of interruptions, how they deal with them, and how they affect their experience.

Amy can move easily from technological or virtual interruptions, but not physical interruptions. She said she can text her sister or boyfriend while doing schoolwork without losing her train of thought. And, she said she rarely surfs the Internet during study time; she is very disciplined in that way. However, if her father calls or stops by to visit while she is working, which he often does, or if she has to get up from her desk to attend to a household chore, she struggles to regain her concentration after she has been interrupted.

Amy has had to establish an understanding with her father about interrupting her while she is working. She said he was resistant at first and would continue to want her attention during her study sessions, but that he is beginning to understand that she needs uninterrupted time and cannot stop to visit any time he calls or comes over. Amy explained her interactions with her father regarding her need for uninterrupted time to do her schoolwork:

...my dad is good at intentionally making me feel guilty [laughing]. So, normally it's okay. Sometimes he'll be like, "Oh, I just wanted to tell you how much I love you" to try to make me...to try to get more out of me. Unfortunately, I don't have

patience for that [laughing]. So, I'm very patient with him; don't get me wrong. But at the same time, I'm just kind of like, the more you try to pull things out of me, the more guilt you try to make me feel, the less I feel guilty...because I get angry. I have established that that's the way it is now [laughs] because he'll say things like...then he'll come over later and he'll be like, "Oh, are you don't being mad at me know?" And, I'm like, "I wasn't mad. I'm just telling you this is what I have to do."

She went on to explain why she thinks her father does not seem to understand:

...my first week of school I told him, I'm like, "I have thirty-two assignments due my first week of my online classes." And I thought, "Oh, my God. What did I get myself into?" ...I said to my boyfriend I had thirty-two assignments. Well, I said to y dad first and my dad was just like, "Ho, hum" you know, "whatever" and changed the subject. When I said it to my boyfriend [who has a college degree], and my boyfriend's like, "Holy shit! That's a lot of homework!" ...It's just my dad has no concept, I guess, of exactly what that means.

Charlotte also has little difficulty regaining her concentration when she is distracted by technology, as long as she initiated the interruption. She explained that she will sometimes go to Facebook or her favorite shopping sites for a moment, to take a short break, and then easily return to her work and train of thought. She likened it to resting her eyes for a moment and said that the short, technological distractions that she initiates help her to clear her mind, especially if she has writer's block. She has found that she cannot easily recover from outside interruptions, though. When she works at home, she makes sure her phone is not nearby and will turn off the Wi-Fi to her

computer, to avoid emails from popping up. At work, she is often inundated by phone calls and emails that require her complete attention, pulling her concentration away from anything else. She explained:

If I get an email that pops up on my screen and it's something I need to pay attention to right away or respond to or work on right away then I pull that up and my mind completely goes a different direction in terms of fixing something I need to get done. Then at the point I have to completely refocus my mind on and rethink...I think when I'm on Facebook or when I'm like, window shopping or something like, I am still thinking about my, what I want to write and my tasks and everything. It's kind of floating in my head and I'm thinking about it while I'm doing other things. Whereas, having to respond to an email or having to return a phone call requires all of my brainpower to completely turn in a different direction...

Hannah's strategies for coping with technological interruptions are similar to Charlotte's. She knows that she is easily distracted by the urge to surf the internet, so she will turn off the Wi-Fi, if she is typing on her computer, or move her computer and phone out of reach, if she is writing notes by hand, which she often does; writing by hand helps her to remember better than typing.

Like Charlotte, Hannah also talked about the difficulties she faces with switching her attention when interrupted by outside influences. She said that if she is reading and is interrupted, she will not only have to reread what she had just read, but sometimes must go a bit further back in a reading to remember what she was reading at all. She said that she sometimes finds herself rereading the same page over and over again. She has

difficulty retaining information when she must switch her attention to other things and then switch back. She said, “If I have to completely turn my brain off and go turn my brain and switch gears to do something different with her [daughter] to help her out so then you have to...then be done with that and then come back and then get back into it.”

Mary Ann also has to avoid the Internet in order to stay focused on her work. She thinks technological distractions are even more difficult for her to avoid because of her ADD diagnosis. She cannot “just pop over” to Facebook or another website without getting completely off track. Her solution has been to print out her schedule, lessons, and readings, everything she would need to read online in a week. She admitted that this practice wastes resources like ink and paper, but it is a solution that works for her, that saves her from being tempted by technological interruptions.

Sarah also avoids technological interruptions by turning them off. She said putting her devices on silent is, “Kind of like actively ignoring them.”

Three findings arose from the women’s experiences with interruptions, overall. The first is that they have difficulty with switching tasks and then regaining their attention. The second is that they are coping with the effects of continuous partial attention and media multitasking. And the third is that they often interrupt themselves.

Task switching causes us to be slower and more error-prone in our work (Monsell, 2003). The women who reported struggling with switching between their schoolwork and attending to their families’ needs found this, too. They said they had trouble remembering where they had left off in their work, causing them to have to re-read or re-do work.

Continuous partial attention, the second issue, is a phrase used to describe what happens to our attention when we engage in media multitasking (Rose, 2010). We engage in media multitasking when we partake in multiple online activities at once (Rose, 2010). For instance, students media multitask when they are working in their online classrooms but then switch to a social media site or to a shopping site. Media multitasking can happen between just two forms of online media or it could happen between multiple forms. For instance, one could be working in their online classroom while periodically checking social media and email and at the same time have a shopping tab open while listening to music on iTunes. While this is happening, nothing we are doing online has our full attention, just our “partial attention—continuously” (Rose, 2010, p.3).

Rose (2010) says that the phenomenon of continuous partial attention is our attempt to stay constantly engaged and a part of what is happening in the world at large and within our social circle who may also be online when we are. I did not find this to necessarily be the case with the women in this study. For the most part, they realized their issues with media multitasking and had behaviors in place to head off any issues with continuous partial attention. Also, when they did allow themselves to media multitask, they were not doing so for an information or social ‘fix’, if you will. On the contrary, they would Internet surf or look at social media as a break from their work or to help them clear their heads. They were not compelled to constantly get updates on what everyone they know online was doing. This makes me wonder if the fact that they are adult women and mothers has anything to do with the difference between my findings and Rose’s (2010). It could be that her theory applies best to a subset of the population

for whom a constant sense of connection to others is more important than it appears to be for the women in this study.

The third issue I noticed was the problem the women face with self-interruptions. The work done by Dabbish, Mark, and Gonzalez (2011) on self-interruption in the workplace can shed some light on what the student-mothers' experienced with self-interruption in their home work places. They shared that workers in their paid workspaces experience interruptions multiple times an hour and that about half of the time, they are self-interruptions. They described self-interruptions as “abandoning an ongoing task prior to completion, and changing focus to a different task without prompting by an external event or entity.” (Dabbish, Mark, & Gonzalez, 2011, p. 3127). The researchers found that working in an open environment and being responsible for working with other people was associated with more incidences of self-interruption (Dabbish et al., 2011). They also found that individual differences significantly affected workers' propensity to self-interrupt (Dabbish et al., 2011). Finally, they found that workers are more likely to interrupt themselves before they had gotten into the flow of their workday (Dabbish et al., 2011).

When applied to the student-mothers doing schoolwork at home, I am able to draw a few conclusions and offer a few suggestions. First, it appears that some people have a propensity to self-interrupt more often than others. I would suggest that those who are aware of this issue would have to be especially mindful of it. Second, some of the women work in open spaces with family, whom they are responsible for, around them. My suggestion is that they find a quiet, solitary place to work. If they cannot see their family, they may be less inclined to think of reasons to interrupt their schoolwork in order

to attend to family members; out of sight, out of mind. Lastly, student-mothers should be aware that they would be more likely to self-interrupt as they begin their work. I would again suggest that they find a quiet, solitary place to work that will not inspire them to switch to another task—such as a kitchen where there are dirty dishes or a bedroom where laundry has piled up— so that they can get into sustained, deep concentration faster.

Dabbish et al. (2011, p. 3127) said “Focused attention is critical to solving problems or completing complex tasks that require a great deal of information to be held in working memory.” The issues the student-mothers face with interruptions from their family members and technology all impede their focused attention. The women in this study all reported thinking that they are doing a fairly good job of mediating interruptions, but they are still there and will remain there as long as they do their schoolwork in the same place where family or paid work occurs. The question remains for educators, though. How do we design online courses around the inevitable interruptions that student-mothers (and fathers) face?

### **The Sacrifices Mothers Make**

The student-mothers all said they like their online programs, are glad they have access to high-quality higher education, and are happy with their choices to enroll. However, there are issues. They sacrifice sleep, free time, and all else that might take any time or resources from their families, leaving them exhausted. They are also often so plagued by feelings of guilt, they are compelled to sacrifice even more. For that reason, the eighth and final sub-theme that is found in the data from this study is sacrifice.

## **Guilt and the Differences Between Mom and Dad**

Liss, Schiffrin, and Rizzo (2012) state, quite matter-of-factly, that guilt and shame come with the territory for mothers, especially those who are intensively mothering. Standards and expectations are too high and workloads are too large leading to an impossible situation when trying to be a ‘good mother’ (Arendell, 2000; Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2012). Mothers are left feeling guilty that they cannot do it all perfectly and shame when they fear that they will be judged negatively by their families, friends, or society (Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2012). Liss, Schiffrin, and Rizzo (2012) found that women who do not achieve their definition of what a good mother is feel high levels of guilt and shame and that those feelings can even lead to depression. Most of the student-mothers reported feeling tremendous guilt from time to time when it comes to the job they are doing as mothers. The one student-mother who did not frame her feelings this way, described in detail her negative feelings of being overworked and stressed.

Amy struggles with feelings of guilt. She said, “I guess guilt would be the number one thing that comes to mind when I think about motherhood and going to school at the same time. Her mother left her as a small child and she does not want her son to feel like she did, like his mother is not there for him. There are a number of things Amy feels guilty about. She feels guilty when people tell her she is doing this for her son when she says that, to a certain extent, it is also a personal accomplishment for her. She feels guilty that she did not finish college before he was born, even though she was only nineteen. She feels guilty that she has to be away from him to go to work, so she tries to get her schoolwork done when he is not home and so that they can have weekends to do what he wants to do. She told me:

I feel guilty a lot...that's usually why I stop [doing schoolwork] just to take some time with him and we'll do something like...he wanted to watch a movie or something and we watched Frozen. He picked a movie and we watched a movie. And then that's when I ended up staying up 'till like 1:00 am to finish the laundry and finish schoolwork because he wanted to watch a movie that evening.

Amy will sacrifice sleep and getting her housework and schoolwork done to make sure her child does not feel neglected. She said:

I would rather give up my...sleep time that would have been a catch up night for me. I could have slept the whole night. However, I'd rather give up some of my sleep time so that he feels like I spend time with him as opposed to doing homework.

Amy thinks this guilt is "100%" a feeling that is predominantly felt by mothers. She shared that her boyfriend has primary custody of his own child, but that he does not understand her guilt about not being there for her son as much as she thinks she should be. She explained:

He doesn't really understand why I get so worked up.... he's understanding in the sense that he supports my decision, however, he truly doesn't understand how I feel.... He's not like misunderstanding and then he's rude about it; He just can't understand. He doesn't have the capacity to understand that I can't do things sometimes because I feel like I need to be there all the time.

Amy thinks, in addition to her feelings of abandonment as a child, her guilt and tendency to make difficult sacrifices because of her guilt, stems from having grown up in a family where every woman was a stay at home mom. She said:

All the time whenever my dad needed my grandma, she was there. Or, whatever we needed my stepmom—might not have been perfect—however, she was there...Somebody [a woman] was always there.

Amy feels guilty that she cannot always be there so she sacrifices more and more of what she needs in order to give more to her child. To her, the stay-at-home mom is the ideal. Intensive mothering comes close to mimicking that ideal. Her work takes up the time that she would need to fulfill the ideal, so she sacrifices things like her own sleep in order to accomplish as much of the ideal as she can. The ideal is not something she is willing to give up because, to her, it is how she will accomplish her goal of being a good mother and raising a loved child.

Sarah reflected on the differences between men and women and their experiences with guilt as well. She does not think the differences between mothers and fathers, in the extent to which they experience parenting guilt, are gender issues, but personal issues. She compared the men, who are fathers, in her workplace to nurses that she knows who are mothers. She explained that the men in her office will work long days and are often away from their families “a great deal”. She said that it does not seem to be an issue for them, but that they say they would never let their wives work the same hours. It is okay for them to spend many hours away from their families and they do so guilt free, but it is not okay for their wives, who most likely would be made to feel guilty about their choice. However, Sarah said that the nurses she knows who are mothers work hours that are as long or longer than the men she works with and they seem to be okay with it and do not express feelings of guilt. According to Sarah, guilt, and what one is willing to sacrifice because of it, depends on the person.

Charlotte also talked about guilt and the differences between her and her fiancé. She said that she and her fiancé are usually “on the same wavelength” about most things regarding their household and family. But, her fiancé’s lack of guilt over diverting his attention away from their daughter when they are together, “aggravates” her. She said this is not something that happens all of the time, but often enough that it bothers her. She explained that he spends a number of weekends away as a college basketball coach and when he is home, he does not always pay attention to their little girl when she is trying to interact with him. For example, he might be checking a basketball score on his phone instead of playing with her as she climbs on him. His behavior in these circumstances is difficult for Charlotte to understand, and is a difference between them, because she tries very hard not to take away more time from her daughter than she absolutely must; it is why she sacrifices her lunch breaks in order to do schoolwork and why she sacrifices free time or sleep to do schoolwork when her daughter is in bed, so that she can always be completely present when she is with her child.

Hannah talked about differences, as well. There are pronounced differences between Hannah’s role in her home and her husband’s. Hannah is the household manager. She delegates roles and responsibilities. This includes to her husband, who she said she has to remind of everything. She keeps track of her schedule, as well as everyone else’s, and organizes who does what and when. She then reminds everyone of what they have to do that week or day. Keeping it all straight and everyone on track is not easy. She said of mothers, “...we have a lot of stuff on us. Although we may get stressed...it’s just what we do.”

She said this is not the case for her husband, who she said cannot handle the complexity of their home life without her guidance and who gets “frazzled” by all they have going on because he is not as able with multitasking as she is. She explained, “Sometimes when men have more than a couple things to do, oh, my gosh, the world’s crashing down!”

Hannah admitted, though, that she is somewhat guilty of enabling her family’s inability to manage themselves by doing too much for them. She wondered aloud what would happen if she stopped reminding them, but did not entertain an answer. And, when I asked her why it is her job and not her husband’s job to manage everyone and everything in the household, why does it all fall to her, she was genuinely bewildered, laughed, and said simply, “I don’t know.”

Upon reflecting, like Amy, Hannah said that, growing up, “...the woman did absolutely everything based with the home and the husbands went to work.” She said that in her home now, they split the chores, something that she never saw as a child. But, she does not know why she is still ultimately in charge of running the household, even with the egalitarian changes in household work that have taken place over the last twenty years or so. She ended the discussion by taking control of the narrative around her domestic situation. She stated, “Mom still wants her house done a certain way and she’ll let other people help her. But, she’s still the boss. I’m the one that says, “I know you’d like to do some laundry and try to help out, but please stay away from the laundry room.”” Hannah makes sacrifices in order to keep control of her household, the way she saw it done by the women in her childhood.

Unlike anything the others had expressed regarding their relationships with their spouses, Mary Ann shared that she thinks her level of respect for her husband's work and role in their family is different from the level of respect he has for her role. She said that because he works away and very long days—up to eighteen hours—she tries “not to dump anything on him” when he is home. But he, on the other hand, is not as understanding about what she goes through at home to keep things running smoothly. She said that if she were to tell him about a hard day or ask for a break in her domestic work, he would tell her to “suck it up”. Mary Ann explained, “I think he doesn't value my and my schedule and obligations as much as what I value his.” But, she said that she does not think he “could handle” her life and work. He would not do paperwork, make phone calls, run their kids “all over God's creation”, and he would not know what bills need to be paid, how to “run a checkbook”, or the details of the kids' extracurricular activities. She said she has told him many times, “...you better hope that nothing happens to me!” Not only does he not know how to do her jobs, she said he would refuse to do them. Mary Ann gave this example:

He doesn't have the tolerance for running the kids everywhere and going to every baseball game or every softball game. There is times if my daughter has a 4:00 softball game but my son has a 6:00 baseball game, I'm doing both. So, I might be tired, but I make it a point to try and find a balance so that I'm there for both of them and not letting them down.

She said that this is something he would not do.

Mary Ann explained more about how she feels about the burden of the daily caring for the family being placed on her shoulders almost exclusively. She said that she

appreciates how hard her husband works at his job, but that when his day is over, he gets to go to a quiet hotel room. She, on the other hand, is always on the clock. She feels sorry for him that he has to be away from his family and that he gets lonely, but that he does not understand the heavy load she constantly carries...with no breaks in a quiet hotel room.

I asked her if she could do what her husband does, be away for weeks at a time, and she said, "I don't think I could handle that." She would be filled with worry about things not getting done and with sadness knowing that her children miss her. She said she would feel "a lot of guilt...so much guilt" if she had to work away from them. And, she laughed when she said that she does not think her husband feels guilty. She explained that she thinks it "comes down to the difference between men and women." But, she alluded to the ways she feels about her childhood experiences and how she felt about her own father not being around very much as a reason why she and her husband are different. She said her father was a good provider and a great father, but that he just was not there for her the way that she wants to be there for her kids. She said, "I put a lot of pressure on myself with my performance in everything that I do..." She wants to be there for her kids because she knows what it is like to want a parent to be there when they are not. With her husband being away so much, she said, "I have to make up for two parents not just one, and that's my mindset on it."

Mary Ann also works hard to keep her husband informed about what is happening at home. She texts him multiple times a day with family news and updates. She said that even though he does not feel guilty about being away to the extent that she would, he does miss the family and wants to be a part of their daily lives.

Mary Ann feels guilt that leads to her sacrifices. She feels badly that her husband is frequently away, so she forgoes free time, sleep, and anything else that gets in the way or her goal of being a good mother, in order to make up for his absence or to make him feel happy when he is home. She pushes herself to perfectly fill the role of two parents when her husband is away and continues when he is home.

Sarah also struggles with guilt. She feels enormous guilt because of the time her online program takes away from her being able to contribute more time to domestic work. She said:

I feel sometimes like I stress and worry that I'm not pulling my fair share and then I get upset and then it's just a vicious cycle sometimes. I discuss everything with him [her husband]. You do one thing and you feel guilty 'cause you feel like you're neglecting another. I think any mom who's carrying anything on her plate other than family and maybe a full or part-time job is struggling with "who am I neglecting now? What am I not doing that I'm supposed to be doing now?". And that's just one of the things that I think I always struggle with 'cause I can never feel okay to just sit and do homework and watch everybody else do stuff and me not help out. That's my own struggle.

She said her feelings of guilt do not come from anything her family says to her. She said they never complain. This is a feeling she has put upon herself. It is something that she struggles with.

Even though she is going to school in order to make a better life for her family, she feels guilty that the time she spends doing so is taking away from her kids. She feels guilty that she cannot seem to sacrifice enough for them.

The student-mothers feel guilty because they think they should be able to do everything, and do it well, but they cannot, no matter how much they sacrifice. While at the same time, their partners do not feel the same burden and in some instances, cannot understand. These women blame themselves because they cannot live up to an internalized, socially constructed motherhood ideal when they are all working full-time and taking care of at least half or more of the domestic and caring work, all while being enrolled in one to seven classes. And, in an attempt to overcome their guilt, they try to do more.

### **Fatigue**

According to the National Institutes of Health (2012) or NIH, adults need between seven to eight hours of sleep each night. People who do not get the minimum hours of sleep each night develop a sleep debt (National Institutes of Health, 2012). Thus, if a student-mother only gets six hours of sleep each night, by the end of the week, she will have a sleep debt of at least seven hours. According to the NIH (2012), napping and sleeping more on certain days cannot make up the sleep debt; napping does not provide enough of the needed sleep stages and sleeping more on some days and less on others disrupts sleep-wake rhythms.

Sleep is critical to good mental and physical health (National Institutes of Health, 2012). Chronic lack of sleep is a serious health issue that can result in a plethora of problems including but not limited to: learning and attention difficulties, trouble remembering, mood swings, depression, lack of motivation, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, immune system disruption, and increased human errors from

slowed reaction times that can cause accidents of all kinds (National Institutes of Health, 2012).

The student-mothers in this study are not getting enough sleep. Some are getting as little as four hours of sleep each night while most are getting around six. Many said they try to make up their sleep debt, but overall, they are all feeling the effects of chronic fatigue. Many also said their lack of sleep is due, at least in part, to the demands of their online programs. They sacrifice sleep so that they can do their schoolwork or housework when the children are asleep and do not need them or because there is so much to do to live up to their mothering ideals, they have to sacrifice sleep in order to get it all done.

Amy gets four to six hours of sleep at night, that is, if she does not have to work a double shift. She said that she can usually go three days and function well enough during the day. Then by day four or five with little sleep, she has to have a nap before work. She looks forward to her days off when she can sleep a little longer through the night instead of relying on naps. She said her lack of sleep is both “frustrating” and “depressing”. She actually mentioned feeling depressed five times in the approximately three minutes that we discussed her fatigue. In order to “counteract” the depression she felt emerging from lack of sleep, she began an exercise routine and started to watch her diet more carefully. Amy said she does not want to rely on caffeine to give her energy. She wants to be as healthy as possible if she has to be sleep deprived, which she has little choice in. She said that before she started her online program, she was still not getting enough sleep, but that she had time for hobbies that helped her to relax. She could do things she enjoyed and that helped her to relax instead of homework, which causes more stress. But, she had to sacrifice her hobbies to make room for school.

The student-mothers can expect even less sleep when their family members are not sleeping well. During the course of our three interviews, Charlotte experienced greater than usual fatigue. Her daughter had been sick on and off for a few weeks and so had Charlotte. Having to care for a sick child when she was also not feeling well herself, on top of doing her schoolwork and going to work every day, is a difficult sacrifice that took its toll. She wrote throughout her journal of feeling exhausted, needing to go to bed early, not getting schoolwork done, and hoping that, “Maybe tomorrow will be a better day.” It is clear that her sleep deprivation caused Charlotte to feel emotional and physical strain.

Much like Amy, who does not get the recommended hours of sleep each night, Hannah averages about six to six and a half hours of sleep each night, though she prefers seven. Her sleep deprivation causes noticeable learning problems. She said the fatigue “definitely” affects her ability to concentrate. “It’s hard to concentrate when you’re tired.” Hannah tries to make up her sleep debt on the weekends when she can get about seven to seven and a half hours of sleep each night. She recalled that, before her online program, she got more sleep because her time in the evening was her own, now she stays up at night with schoolwork. Hannah sacrifices sleep in order to do her schoolwork, but then her schoolwork suffers because she is fatigued. It is a vicious cycle.

Mary Ann sleeps four to six hours each night, just like Amy. And like many of the other student-mothers, she stays up late in order to complete schoolwork when her house is quiet and she is not needed. She also suffers from insomnia, which is a symptom of her bipolar disorder. She said, “I do good for three, four days and then I just crash. I have a day where I come home from work and we have a real quick dinner and

pretty much I tell the kids, “Mom needs to go to bed.” Then I’ll go to bed early.” She typically cannot make up for the sleep she is missing on the weekends because that is when she does most of her schoolwork. That said, Mary Ann will take time to recharge when she can see that she needs a break. She explained, “I’m not trying to be lazy, per se, but I’m trying to kind of take care of myself...”

Mary Ann told me that her insomnia has gotten severe enough that she has discussed it with her doctor. She realized that her insomnia worse now that they live in their rural home. She said that the kind of stress that comes from living in her rural area is rooted in her position in her bank, her side business, and “all the running” she has to do every day to get her kids to practices and appointments. She explained previously that the environment in her bank is unique to rural areas and can be stressful and even upsetting, that she must have a side job to make enough money to have extras for her family because rural jobs are scarce and do not always pay well, and because living in a rural area means that services and activities can be far from home—some can be more than a thirty minute drive away.

Mary Ann said of her insomnia, “my body’s tired and my mind is just trying to make sure I did everything that I could today, and then I’m thinking about preparing for tomorrow...” She said that she has to accept that it is just going to be a part of her rural life. With her husband working away and an extended family that does not offer support of any kind, the “...weight is on [her] shoulders”, but she said, “I’m a mom. I think that’s part of being a mom...if you want opportunities for your kids, you have to make them happen.”

Mary Ann is willing to sacrifice her own mental wellbeing to give her family what they need. She will allow herself to become run down and sick before she will put her needs before her family's.

Sarah also does not get the recommended amount of sleep. She said that she goes to bed around 1:00 am and wakes up around 7:00 am on most days. That is roughly six hours of sleep each night. She said her lack of sleep affects her day to day. She said, "I think I'm a little wore out from time to time." Like many of the other student-mothers, she said that her sleep deprivation is because of her online coursework and that she got "quite a bit more" sleep before she enrolled, about two hours more each night. Sarah noted that she is so tired that she has fallen asleep while reading or with her computer on her lap. She said that there are times when, "Unless you put toothpicks under my eyelids, I don't think I'm staying awake." Sarah's reasons for being tired are the same as the other student-mothers. She said she is fatigued because she has too much to do and not enough time to sleep. Sleep is sacrificed so that she can continue to meet her family's needs.

All of the student-mothers sacrifice sleep so that they do not have to sacrifice time with their families. None of the student-mothers get the recommended amount of sleep each night. Some try to make up their sleep debt. Others cannot find the time to try. They all have to make due with what sleep they can get. They are caught in something of a vicious cycle of staying up late to do schoolwork, but then being too tired to be able to concentrate. Some report working themselves to the point where they crash and are forced to rest. While one was sure to note that her needing to rest should not be misconstrued for laziness.

This struck a cord with me. It concerned me that she would feel the need to say that because she needed to rest, she should not be seen as lazy. She does so much, in fact, that she pushes herself to the point of exhaustion and that leads to crashing. I think the reason for her apology for needing to rest lies in the patriarchal, cultural, motherhood narrative that says mothers must be and do everything, selflessly, tirelessly, and without complaint in order to be good mothers (Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Baraitser, 2009; Chodorow, 1978; Christopher, 2012; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Duarte & Goncalves, 2007; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2012; McCormick, 2010; O'Reilly, 2006; Smart, 1996).

### **Forgetfulness.**

Lack of sleep can lead to forgetfulness (National Institutes of Health, 2012). Three of the student mothers reported suffering from forgetfulness that could be greater than what they consider to be normal, and is mostly caused by their fatigue. Most said that their forgetfulness is not something they necessarily worry about, but is something they are aware of. They work to alleviate their forgetfulness by utilizing methods to remind themselves of what they need to do.

Amy said she experiences a “low level” of forgetfulness. She attributes her forgetfulness to being so busy and having difficulty remembering all that is going on in her life, but thinks she has it mostly under control because she keeps multiple calendars. She has a homework planner, a calendar for her son’s school, a monthly calendar with activities on it, and her work schedule. These calendars are kept near each other and are accessible to her sister, who lives with her. She provides her father, who helps care for

her son, with all of the calendars, as well. They help to keep him informed of when he is needed.

Even with the multiple calendars, Amy is still forgetful. Usually she forgets something that has to do with her son's school. This causes her to feel extreme guilt. She said, "Those are the things that upset me the most because I'll remember to do all my homework, obviously, but I will forget to look at the calendar and see that the Dr. Seuss money is due. And that's what upsets me the most because I don't want him to miss out because I'm so busy with something else."

The thought of him missing out on fun parts of his childhood is especially raw for Amy because she missed out on things as a child. She shared that what she wore and listened to was strictly controlled, down to her "weird" haircut. She was not allowed "anything that was "in"". This made her feel different from her classmates and caused her a lot of pain that she has carried with her into adulthood. She does not want her son to feel odd and left out like she did because she sometimes forgets his activities.

Like Amy, Mary Ann has a lot on her mind. She becomes overwhelmed with information and forgets things, even things that are important to her. Her husband works away for weeks at a time leaving the responsibilities at home entirely with her. She said, "...in my world, it's me. It's me running the whole ship it's constant from one thing to the next." She shared that she has overlooked assignments in school, resulting in lower grades than she expected. She said it is always shocking and upsetting for her when she discovers that she has forgotten an assignment. Also like Amy, she tries to overcome her propensity to forget by keeping multiple calendars: one on her phone, one on a dry erase

board at home, and one on her computer. She keeps the same information on all calendars to help her remember.

Mary Ann said she is rarely forgetful at work because she addresses her work immediately, but that she is forgetful with her family. For example, she has forgotten to pick her kids up after school several times. She said, "...they're my children, for God's sake, and I've forgotten them before!" She said that most of her forgetfulness involves "silly stuff" or "nothing that's going to be the end of the world." Yet, she forgets things often.

Sarah also struggles with forgetfulness from time to time. Remembering to do things is especially troublesome for her, things such as calling people, making appointments, or what she needs at the grocery store. She said, "If I don't write it down, it does not get done." Sarah said she was not this forgetful before her online program and places the blame with being overwhelmed with information regarding school. With work and school and her household and family, she has too much to remember. She said her family has noticed her troubles with her memory but that they make light of it. They have patience with her. But, Sarah does not have patience with herself. She said, "I get mad at myself for forgetting."

Amy, Mary Ann, and Sarah all get less than six hours of sleep each night and are feeling those effects of their sacrifice in the form of forgetfulness. They all feel overwhelmed with information and things that they need to remember. They all try to counteract the effects of their sleep deprivation and forgetfulness by writing down what they need to remember either on multiple calendars or as notes to themselves and others. They all place at least some of the blame with their online programs. The programs keep

them up when they would normally be sleeping, or at least relaxing, and have added more things to remember and worry about to their already hectic lives.

### **Conclusion**

Porter and Robinson (2011, p. 63) said, “We live our lives like a pendulum that swings into and out of an authentic understanding and awareness.” When the women are living their daily lives, they are not reflecting or consciously making connections or meaning from their experiences, they are simply being. By utilizing our interview data and their journal data, I have endeavored to connect the seemingly unrelated stories they have shared about their past and current lived experiences to examine the meaning they have found in their lived experiences as a whole and how their historical and current experiences interact.

I found two overarching themes, one primary and one secondary, and eight sub-themes in this study. The primary theme is mothering. The theme that is secondary to mothering is online learning. The sub-themes that touch many of the aspects of their lives are: remaining rural, the effects of childhood experiences on mothering and online learning, intensive mothering, student-mothers as household managers, the importance of a supportive partner, a lack of close relationships with others from their rural community, interruptions, and sacrifice. In Chapters 5 and 6 I used phenomenological methods to illustrate the role each theme or sub-theme has each woman’s lived experience. I also showed how the themes and sub-themes are connected and interact to enrich and sometimes complicate the women’s lives. In Chapter 7, I will utilize CHAT to further unpack the complex lived experience of being a student-mother to develop a deep, rich understanding of their mothering and online learning activities and goals.

## Chapter 7

### CHAT and the Contradictions Student-Mothers Face

CHAT was the ideal theoretical framework for this study. Foot (2014, p.3) explains that CHAT is built on three ideas. First, humans learn through their collective actions. Second, humans use tools, or mediating instruments, to learn and communicate with others. And third, humans interpret and make meaning within their socio-historically influenced communities. Lord (2009) and Lord and Sawchuck (2006) describe what CHAT, as a theoretical framework, can do:

CHAT is a specific tradition of analyzing learning and human development that accounts for informal as well as formalized learning; consciously directed as well as tacit learning; individual as well as collective practice; material, organizational and cultural barriers and supports. This offers a systematic social analysis of learning throughout its full range of variation, but never loses sight of the deeply human face of human development (Lord, 2009, p. 51; Lord & Sawchuck, 2006, p. 1).

CHAT allowed me to see the entirety of the student-mothers' experiences by taking into account how their pasts have affected their current lived experiences, while keeping in mind that their activities are mediated by their cultural contexts which have always been grounded in history and have evolved over time (Foot, 2014, p. 2). I examined many pieces of their collective lives in order to truly see their whole experience. As Roth and Lee explained, "...a unit can be analyzed in terms of component parts, but none of these parts can be understood or theorized apart from the others that contribute to defining it." (2007, p.196).

In this chapter, I utilized CHAT to undertake my own systematic analysis of the complex, collective, lived experiences of rural student-mothers pursuing higher education online. Using CHAT, I was able to take into consideration the most salient aspects of my participants' past and current lives and how each aspect interacts and either supports or hinders their goal completion. I looked at the subjects, the student-mothers, as always functioning as a part of their rural Pennsylvanian contexts. I used the stories they told me about their past and current lives to examine the two themes that I have identified: mothering and online learning. I endeavored to understand the two themes as activities (mothering and being online students) towards their intended outcomes (to raise happy, healthy, well-adjusted children who feel loved and to help provide a better life for their families). Each activity system is a unit of analysis. I explored how each element of these activities (rules, division of labor, mediating instruments, community, and object), which are also always immersed within the rural context, interact to “inform, shape, and guide” (Lord, 2009, p. 53) one another. I then analyzed the contradictions that arose from the interactions within each, individual activity system and between each activity system in the activity system network. Finally, I discussed my findings.

All of the previous chapters in this study informed the CHAT analysis, but Chapters 5 and 6 were particularly useful. Chapter 5 set the foundation for this analysis. In that chapter, I learned how the student-mothers' rural context of their childhood, which itself has a rich and long history, shaped who they are today. This understanding became the cultural and historical aspects of the CHAT analysis. In chapter 6, I delved deeply into their current lived experiences as student-mothers and drew portraits of the multiple aspects of their lives and how they are connected and interact. These aspects became the

elements of the activity systems in the CHAT analysis. The data works together in this chapter to show how their activities and goals have developed over time and work together to help them achieve their intended outcomes.

### **The Activity Systems and Network**

The student-mothers' lives are multifaceted. They embody many roles and cope with many competing demands. They also each have many hopes, dreams, and goals.

For this study, I chose to focus on two of their shared, primary goals: to be a good mother and to pursue higher education online resulting in a college degree. I chose these goals, or motivating factors, because of the importance they placed on them during our discussions, based on my own experiences as a student-mother, and because of the gaps in the literature on this topic.

This is where the strength of CHAT and the activity system comes into play. I used CHAT to look closely at each element in each activity system and developed a holistic view of the women's lived experiences in each role, grounded in their cultural context and with their contextual histories in mind. Foot explained the utility of the activity system as a unit of analysis by stating that "it is representative of the complexity of the whole, it is analyzable in relation to multiple dimensions (i.e. cultural, historical, economic, etc.), it is specific to human beings by being culturally mediated, and it is dynamic rather than static." (2014, p.9).

### **The Mothering Activity System**

The student-mothers all reported that being a mother is the most important and meaningful part of their lives and that it drives everything that they do. Accordingly, I consider the Mothering Activity System and its object, shown in Figure 1, to be the

primary, and strongest, motivating force in their lives. All other activity systems in the network might influence or be influenced by this system, but the Mothering Activity System has the most influence on all others and, typically, whatever is needed to reach the goal of being a good mother is placed ahead of all other goals.

The student-mothers are keenly aware of the importance of mothering well. They learned from the love they have received and through the love some were denied by their own mothers. Rich explains the gravity of the mothering role:

Because young humans remain dependent upon nurture for a much longer period than other mammals, and because of the division of labor long established in human groups, where women not only bear and suckle but are assigned almost total responsibility for children, most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman. We carry the imprint of this experience for life, even into our dying (1986, p. 11).

The type of mothering they received, whether by their biological mothers, stepmothers, aunts, grandmothers, or others who tended to their needs fundamentally impacted the women in this study. They are fully aware of this fact and have devoted themselves to being mindful of the impact they have on their own children.

There are six elements in the Mothering Activity System that are each informed by “cultural and historical dimensions” (Foot, 2014, p. 5). The subject of this activity system are the student-mothers, as a collective, and their object is to achieve their shared definition of being a good mother with the intended outcome of happy, healthy, and well-adjusted children who feel loved. The object and intended outcome are culturally and historically created notions shaped by their rural, 21<sup>st</sup> century, working and middle class

context, not just by their experiences but also by their community. I developed the object and intended outcome based on what the mothers told me time and again, both directly and indirectly, through descriptions of what they needed in order to be happy as children and what they want for their own children as well as what parents in their communities tend to want for their children, i.e. their culturally expected outcomes of good parenting. Some of the shared determinants of what constitutes happy, healthy, well-adjusted children include: children who are performing to or beyond their abilities in school, children who occupy their time with constructive extracurricular activities, children who have loving and respectful relationships with their family members, and children who are on the path to being adults who contribute positively to their communities via fulfilling work and family lives. The community involved within this system are the people who share, to some degree, the object with the student-mothers. They include the student-mothers' partners, children, extended family members, and rural community. The division of labor and rules guide both the student-mothers and the community (Foot, 2014; Van der Riet, 2011 ). The division of labor consists of parenting responsibilities that are shared with their partners and childcare that is shared with their partners, extended family members, and caregivers. There are also domestic chores that are shared with family members. The rules that influence this activity system are socio-historically influenced and come from the gender and mothering narratives learned from childhood until now from immediate and extended family members, their communities, and society at large. Lastly, the tools, or mediating instruments, that they use towards achieving their goal are largely conceptual and are mostly unconscious (Foot, 2014; Van der Riet, 2011). They include their love for their children, lessons learned from their own childhoods,

time, determination, commitment, and feedback from their children, partners, families, and communities. The more tangible tools used in conscious actions include their incomes and their physical, domestic labor. Past mothers in the women’s lives and communities have shaped these tools over time as well as by the student-mothers themselves. These tools reflect the “...needs, values, and norms of the [rural and larger] culture.” (Foot, 2014, p. 5).

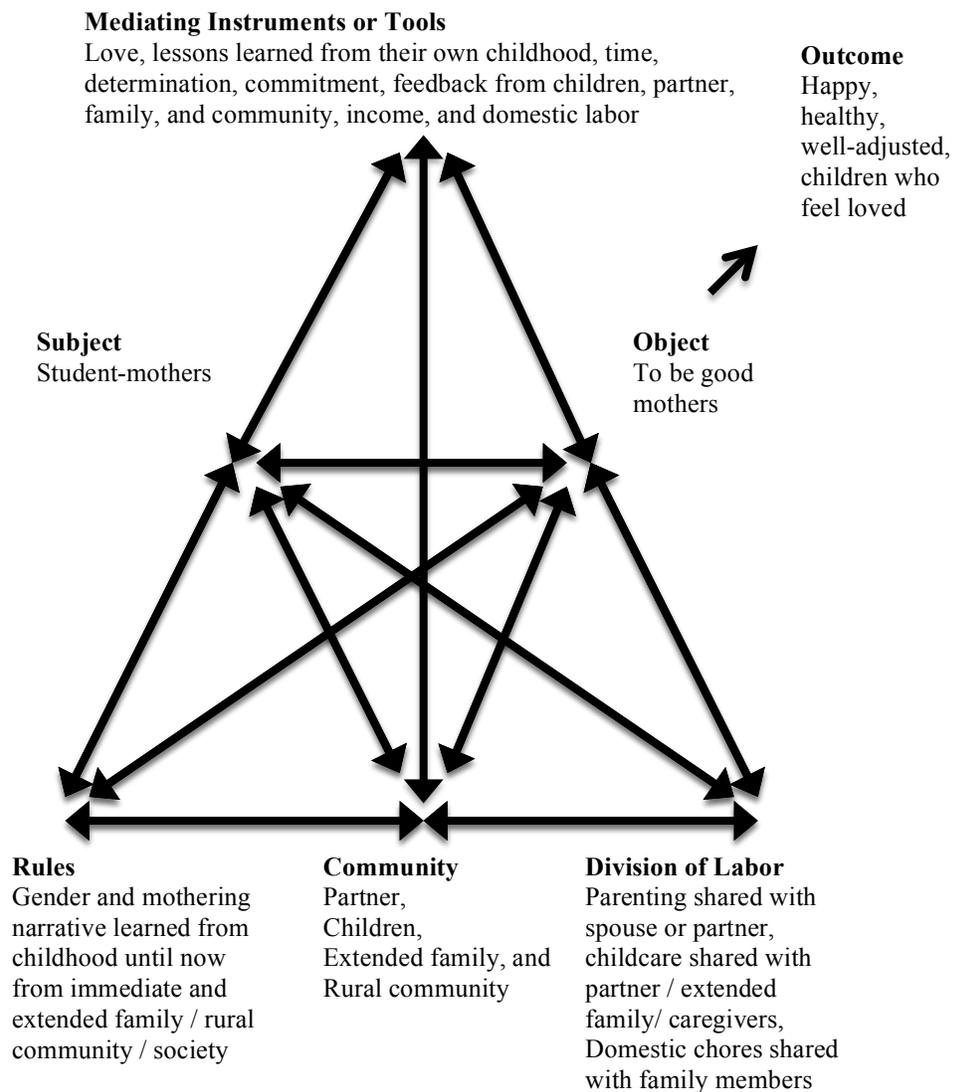


Figure 1. Mothering Activity System

## **The Online Learning Activity System**

The Online Learning Activity System (Figure 2) plays a secondary role to the Mothering Activity System, but is still influential in the student-mothers' everyday lives. It is also comprised of six elements that each play a part in the activity towards their goal of earning a college degree online. The subjects, again, are the student-mothers and the object, or goal, is to earn a postsecondary degree online. The intended outcome of the goal is the ability to provide a better quality of life for their family through a number of possible benefits such as higher pay, more flexibility at work, better hours, and improved satisfaction with life. The rules for this activity system include due dates, group project and communication guidelines, and program and university policies. The community includes classmates, instructors, and university administrators from advisors to program directors to instructional designers. The division of labor rests primarily with the student-mothers as they complete individual work but also includes shared assignments in groups, and homework help from friends and family members. The mediating instruments, or tools, that the student-mothers utilize towards reaching their goal in this activity system includes flexible work environments, time management and organizational skills, internet and computer access, discussion boards, and the Learning Management Systems where their classes 'live'.

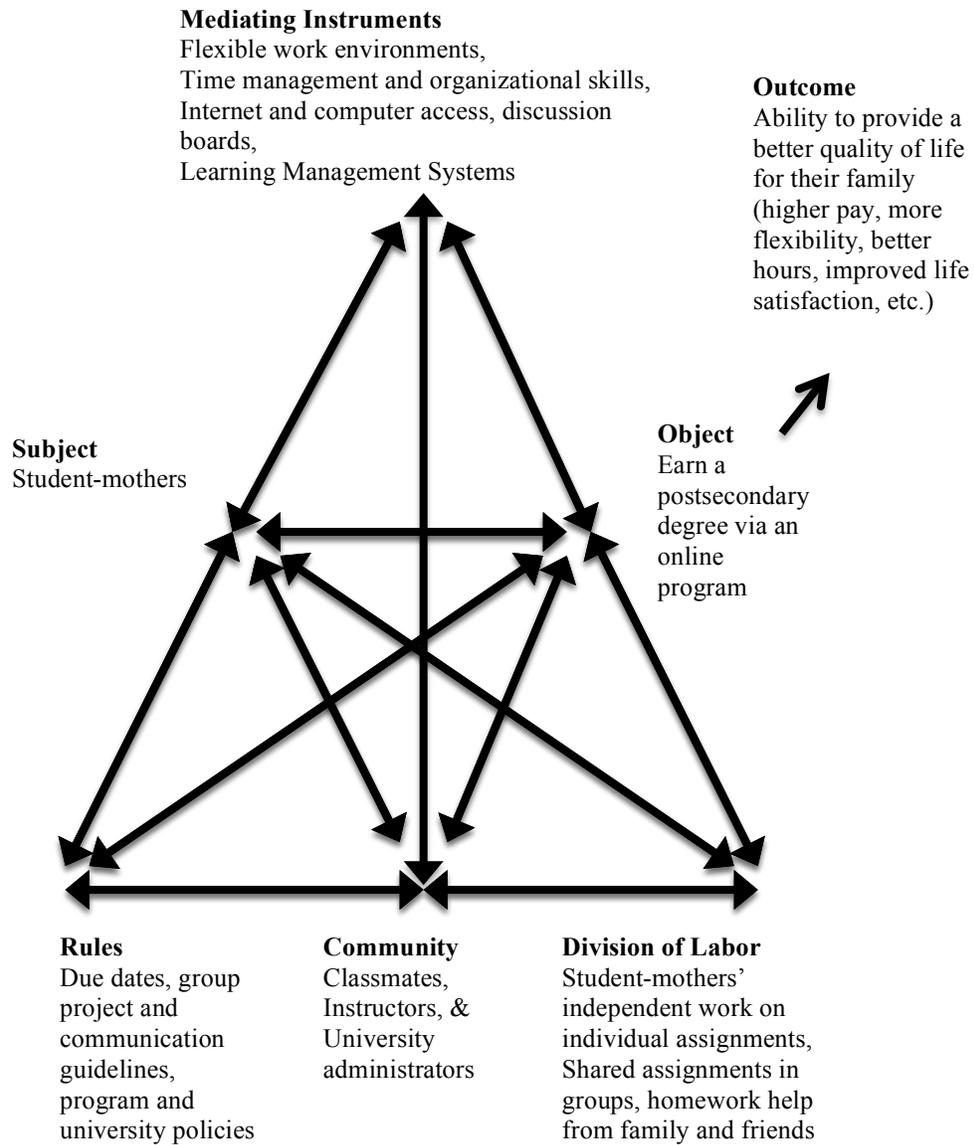


Figure 2. Online Learning Activity System

### The Activity System Network

With CHAT, we also have the ability to examine the interaction among multiple activity systems together in an activity network (Foot, 2014; Lord, 2009; Madyarov & Taef, 2012). The two activity systems combined in an activity network will result in a new, combined object as well as intended and unintended outcomes (Lord, 2009). The

overarching intended outcome of this activity system, that originated with the object of the primary activity system (Mothering) in the activity system network, is to raise happy, healthy, and well-adjusted children who feel loved. To come to a deep, rich understanding of their lived experiences as students and mothers, I have also analyzed the contradictions that arose from the interactions between the two systems in the activity system network. It should be noted that the student-mothers have many activity systems in their activity system networks, but for this study, the focus is limited to the two most pronounced systems and that a possible third system, paid work, has been integrated into their mothering activity system primarily because the women consider their paid work a tool towards reaching their goal of being good mothers. It could be isolated from the mothering activity system and analyzed as its own activity system in a future study.

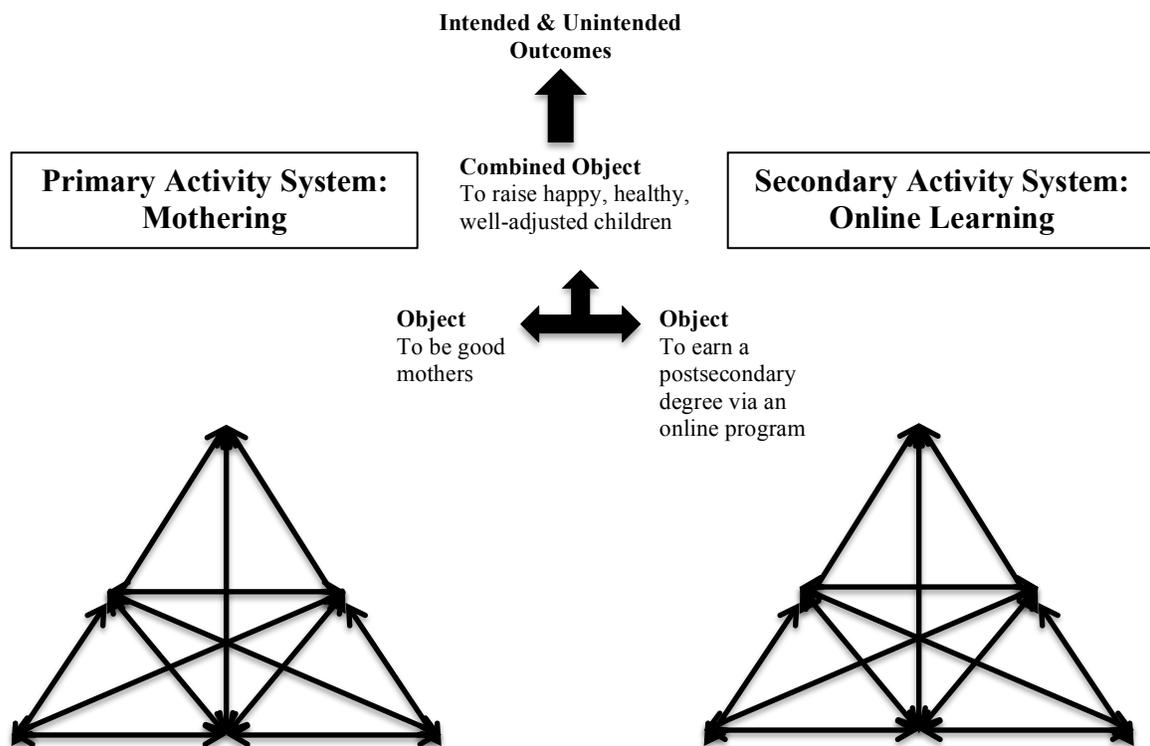


Figure 3: Mothering and Online Learning Activity System Network

## **Contradictions**

Contradictions occur both within and between activity systems and create a disturbance that leads to learning, whether the contradictions are resolved or not (Lord, 2009). Lord explained that:

Contradictions are dialectical in nature in the sense that two elements that may be rooted in the “truth” are nevertheless diametrically opposed, sometimes causing a potentially no-win situation, but always creating an activity system disturbance, and thus the potential for change and development (2009, p.61).

Accordingly, Foot (2014) explains that contradictions should not be viewed as a negative occurrence when they are, in fact, not problems but the beginnings of possible new ways of thinking or doing. Foot says, “In order to better understand how, when, and why an activity system develops, close attention to all four levels of contradictions is essential (2014, p. 21). Contradictions cannot be alleviated with quick fixes, but should be questioned, reflected upon, and learned from.

There are four types of contradictions that the student-mothers have encountered. As the women work through their activity systems, contradictions may arise within each element in the activity system. These are the primary, always present, and unresolvable contradictions in CHAT (Bonneau, 2013; Foot, 2014; Roth & Lee, 2007). Another type of contradiction, the secondary contradiction, may occur when there is tension between two elements, such as rules and division of labor (Foot, 2014; Lord, 2009; Roth & Lee, 2007; Madyarov & Taef, 2012). Tertiary contradictions, the third type of contradiction, could happen “...when a culturally more advanced activity introduces a more advanced motive- driven object.” (Joo, 2014, p. 46). This may occur in response to tensions

resulting from primary or secondary contradictions and could result in a changed activity system (Foot, 2014). As the student-mothers attempt to balance mothering with their pursuit of a degree, quaternary contradictions arise between the two systems in the activity network (Lord, 2009; Foot, 2014; Roth & Lee, 2007; Madyarov & Taef, 2012). For the student-mothers, the quaternary contradiction exposes the gap between what should be, or their expectations, and what is.

### **Contradictions in the Mothering Activity System**

A contradiction that can be found within the rules casts something of a shadow on the other elements in the system. The student-mothers had developed rules for how to mother based on the gender and mothering narratives they had learned as children and throughout their lives from their immediate family members, extended family members, their rural communities, and society. These rules were often built on conflicting narratives resulting in tensions between which rules to follow. For instance, Amy was raised in what she described as an “extremely traditional” home and would like to embody the persona of a traditional housewife herself, but at the same time she was told and taught to be fiercely independent. She said, “I’m extremely independent, but I’m also semi-traditional.” She embraced both narratives, which caused her to take on personality traits that make her want to be completely in charge of and responsible for the domestic and caring work in her home as well as traits that led her to become a soldier, a decidedly nontraditional role for a woman. Amy explained how embracing both traditional and modern roles has affected her:

...I always thought it was interesting how I ended up the way I ended up because my dad was big on “someday you might not have a man there to do this for you”.

So, my dad was big on making sure I knew how to change the oil in the vehicle, making sure I knew how to change a tire, making sure I knew I had to help with the wood 'cause we had a wood burner...at the same time it was always ingrained in me that the traditional things around the house had to be done by the woman.

These conflicting messages sometimes make it difficult for Amy to know which rules to follow when both sets work well in different areas of her life, creating a contradiction.

The other student-mothers all experience this primary contradiction to some degree, as well. They all grew up hearing narratives about traditional, female gender roles in the home and/or seeing examples in their own mothers or grandmothers. They all also, subconsciously, hold onto the ideologies today. Even though they all say they live in egalitarian homes because they actively work to share domestic chores and caring work equally and without regard for gender, they all consider themselves to be the household managers, or the person to whom the ultimate responsibility for the traditionally female work—and sometimes all of the work— falls to. So, they say they follow contemporary 'rules' about gender equality in the home, but ultimately take on the role of traditional mother when admitting who is primarily responsible for the home and family.

Primary contradictions occur inside other elements, as well. One lesson many of the women learned as children, and that they use as a tool, is how it felt to be abandoned, physically and/or financially, by their mothers. These women are now driven by this experience, to some extent. For example, Sarah's mother did not support her financially through most of her childhood. This deeply upset Sarah, who said her mother "...wasn't a good role model of a hard worker, by far". But, because of her mother's example,

Sarah feels good about her decision to enroll in her online program. She said, "...I'm just going to make things better from this point for my own kids. And, to see me try and work hard and handle it now, I think is a great inspiration for them." She is doing what her mother did not and what she always needed and wanted from her. She is working hard to support her kids.

The other women also reported viewing working for an income as a way to show their love and commitment to their children. But, the feedback that they receive from their children, which is also a tool, sometimes is that the children want more time with their mothers. For instance, Hannah said in her journal one day: "I have a daughter who can't seem to do anything without my help. Ugh." There are days when the kids will not hear that mom has work to do; they do not care. They want mom.

Sometimes the mothers themselves will say that they feel guilt about the time away from their children and that they work hard to be present when they are home. Those who were abandoned by their mothers do not want their own children to feel the same in any way, which leads to the next tool: time. Spending their time on or with their children allows them to be 'present', which many said is very important to them. But, how the time is used can cause tension. Should it be spent playing games? Should it be spent cleaning the children's home? Should it be spent doing homework with the kids or driving them to practices? Or should it be spent making more money to pay for the things the kids need? Whichever they choose, they feel pressure by the other, competing needs. Mary Ann described a day filled from sun up to far past sun down with mothering duties:

Today I worked at my full-time job from 8:00am until 4:30pm. I picked my son up from tutoring at 4:30pm. We left again at 5:15pm to pick up a friend, drop my daughter off at my mother-in-law's, and we got to [nearby town] around 6:00pm, stopped at McDonald's to get dinner, and I had my son and his friend dropped off at their choir practice at 6:30pm. Choir lasts from 6:30 to 8:15pm every Monday night. During this time, I ran to the car wash and bought groceries. My husband, who was away for two weeks working in [county] for my brother-in-law came home this evening and picked my daughter up for me. We got home around 9:00pm after dropping off my son's friend. I didn't do any schoolwork tonight because I spent time with my husband because he's leaving Tuesday to work in [another state] for two to three weeks before returning home.

This is a good example of how hard the women work to be present for their families. They fill every minute of their days trying to be and do it all, and yet, there never seems to be enough time with the children.

I said earlier that the primary contradictions in the rules element cast a shadow on the other elements in the system because both the traditional and contemporary gender and mothering narratives that they ascribe to, as well as those they eschew, will affect all of the other elements. This is where most of the secondary contradictions appear. For example, by choosing to forgo the traditional role of stay-at home mom in favor of work and college, the student-mothers develop a conflict between the traditional mothering rules they learned and still hear in their communities and their mothering community members.

Some of the student-mothers described how community members, such as traditional thinking mothers-in-law, did not agree with their decisions regarding work and school, such as Sarah's mother-in-law who she said thinks Sarah is "...neglecting everyone because [she is] not at home".

There are also other contradictions that occur between the rules element and other elements. Their decision to work and go to school, which falls under rules (narratives about what good mothers should do) and tools (income), also affects their children who often want more of their mothers' time and attention. The division of labor conflicts with the rules element when family members, who claim to agree to contemporary egalitarian ideologies, do not do their fair share of domestic chores or caring work, instead assuming the responsibility is ultimately the student-mothers', based on traditional gender roles. Contradictions can also occur between the rules in the mothering system and the mediating instruments or tools. In order to be what they view as a good mother, one who provides financially for their families, the student-mothers agreed that they need to work. Work and the incomes they bring home becomes a tool. But this tool creates an internal tension with the rules they learned growing up, especially the ones that said a good mother should stay at home with her children. They are torn between needing—and often wanting—to work to help support their families and the traditional mothering narratives that tell them good mothers stay home.

Contradictions can and do also occur between other elements in the Mothering Activity System. A contradiction occurs between the division of labor and childcare needs when community members are unable, or unwilling, to help. For example, many of the women do not receive any childcare help from their own parents, even though their

parents live in the same community. This creates tension and makes it more difficult for the women to achieve their goal.

The tertiary contradiction leads directly to the quaternary contradiction that I will discuss under the heading, *Contradictions in the activity system network*. The tertiary contradiction is the tension that is occurring between the student-mothers' and their community members' traditional way of defining good motherhood with that of a more contemporary understanding of parenting. It is a tension that is throughout the motherhood literature. It is basically a tension between how motherhood has been socially constructed and how it should be (Miller, 2005). The traditional way said that good mothers stay home and are solely responsible for childcare and housework while fathers provide financial support. The traditional model states that good mothers do not receive assistance with their work from anyone, even their own partners. They also do not go to college while mothering. The contemporary narrative, on the other hand, says that good mothers may provide all types of support for their family: emotional or caring, housework, and financial. It also says that partners are expected to contribute to the traditionally female work, as well. This tertiary contradiction, an upheaval in the mothering narrative, paves the way for the quaternary contradiction that occurs between the mothering activity system and the online learning activity system.

### **Contradictions in the Online Learning Activity System**

Primary contradictions also occur throughout the elements in the online learning activity system. One occurs in the learning management systems, from the tools element, where their online classes are hosted and take place. Amy, for instance, said that her program is in the midst of changing the learning management system. Some of her

classes are in the old system and some are in the new system. She said, “Two of my classes are on [the new LMS]...five of them are on [old LMS], and it’s just back and forth between the two programs. It’s a little confusing.” The inconsistency caused her to miss a quiz. The learning management system should be a tool to help the women achieve their goal, but when it is not working properly, it can be detrimental to their success.

Another primary contradiction also happens within the tools element. Flexible work environments have been very useful for many of the women, but they have their downside. Hannah explained that she cannot do certain schoolwork, such as timed or proctored quizzes, while in her office, even on her lunch break, because she could be interrupted. Hannah said, “I feel like sometimes at work even though I have my door closed, I sometimes get interrupted. So, I try not to do anything at work that I don’t want interrupted with.” Her ‘flexible time’ then, is not always really her time. Amy said that even the idea that workplaces can be a flexible place to do schoolwork has been harmful to her. She said people make the assumption that she can do homework at her nursing job, which she says is impossible. Amy explained: “...a lot of people assume that I can work on my schoolwork at work because I have a computer, and I can’t...I don’t have time for schoolwork while I’m at work...I can’t double dip.”

A third tool, the discussion boards, are another place where tensions can arise. Some of the women were okay with them, while others dislike them very strongly. For those that dislike them, this tool that is supposed to help them achieve their goal, is actually a hindrance.

Three primary contradictions occur in the community element. Mary Ann told me that she has had instructors who are rude, unwilling to give adults extra time when life slows them down, and that make belittling comments that harm her confidence. This negative behavior on the part of her instructors makes her classroom experience very difficult, and instead of assisting her on her way to her goal, the negative instructors hold her back. She has dropped classes that had instructors with whom she did not think she could work. Mary Ann summed up her thoughts on instructors, “It’s just like if you meet someone in life and they’re a huge jerk to you right off the bat, you’re not going to want to be near them or talk to them. You’re going to avoid them.” Uninvolved advisors also cause tension in the community element. They are there to support students as they work towards their goal of degree completion, but they do not always. Mary Ann said that her advisors rarely communicate with her, leaving her feeling alone and isolated. Difficulty forming relationships with classmates is another area where tensions can exist. Some of the women do not mind, but others say would like the kinds of relationships that traditional students are able to develop or opportunities to network.

One primary contradiction was noted in the rules element. University policies regarding general education are also an area that causes tension. Amy mentioned how annoying she finds it that she must take classes to fulfill general education requirements that she cannot see adding value to her discipline or that she thinks do not get her closer to her goal of being a better, more highly educated nurse. She said, “I’m already a nurse. I kind of want, I guess, the meat and potatoes of a nurse.” General education courses have a purpose, but some of the women do not understand it or cannot see it. The policies that are in place regarding them, then, are not fully achieving their purpose. If

the students do not understand why a requirement is helpful or necessary, it is not going to be entirely helpful or necessary in that student's estimation and they will not understand how it helps them to achieve their goal.

The division of labor element is the final place where primary contradictions occur for the student-mothers. Group work causes the most tensions in this element. For some, group work is simply often unfair, with some students completing more of the work than others. Other times, groups cannot find convenient times to meet, meaning some people are inevitably inconvenienced. Some of the student-mothers have experienced these issues. Charlotte, who generally enjoys her group work, has had some issues with when her group holds their weekly meetings. She shared that the other members of her group are childless. When they suggested meeting at night, she agreed so that she would appear to be a team player. But, in reality, nighttime meetings are difficult for her. She is tired and has trouble concentrating on their meeting. Consequently, even though group work is generally enjoyable and provides valuable educational experiences for her, the difficulty with meeting times creates a tension for her. Charlotte has not shared her issues with the time of their meetings with her classmates. She explained the situation, "It's not very convenient for me, but it works best for everybody and that's kind of what we got to do. I will say that, there's five people in our group. I am the only one that has a child."

Secondary contradictions also occur throughout the online learning activity system. One occurs between the mediating instruments element and the division of labor element. Time management and organizational skills (tools element) are important to all of the student-mothers. But regardless of the calendars they use and the time they try to

set aside throughout the week, some of the women struggle with staying on track with their individual assignments (division of labor element). This can create tension for the women who make serious attempts to stay on schedule, but sometimes cannot. Another secondary contradiction occurs between the rules and community elements. Due dates can cause major tensions for the student-mothers. For instance, when children get sick, school has to come second. Most of the women said that their instructors have generous policies concerning extensions on due dates for legitimate issues, but other instructors have strict policies in place that will not allow extensions for any reason, even for adult students. This can cause irreconcilable tension.

I was unable to detect any tertiary contradictions, and thus quaternary contradictions, entirely originating in the online learning activity system. I surmise that this may be because online learning is a newer format and the online learning system is also new to the student-mothers. They have not been active in the system long enough to create or find new ways of operating within the system or to develop or find a new object. However, the online learning activity system does play a role in the quaternary contradiction that has occurred with the mothering activity system as the primary system.

### **Contradictions in the Activity System Network**

For the women in this study, the contradictions that are the most difficult to resolve, or find a compromise for, happen in the activity system network. The activity system network is where the quaternary contradiction happens between the mothering and online learning activity systems. The primary system is the mothering activity system and this is where the quaternary contradiction originates. When the student-mothers added the online learning activity system, they further complicated an already

delicate balance between all aspects of mothering including domestic chores, caring work, and full-time paid work within the mothering activity system. The object of the mothering activity system is to be a good mother with the intended outcome of happy, healthy, well-adjusted children who feel loved. The object is difficult to achieve within the current activity system, which is in an upheaval of sorts because of the tertiary contradictions that are causing the entire mothering activity system to change. Quite simply, the tertiary contradiction has occurred because the rules about what being a good mother entails are changing in society at large and because the families have all adopted both intensive mothering standards as well as egalitarian values. None of them grew up witnessing or experiencing intensive mothering or egalitarian households, so they represent a new way of life that the families are learning how to operate within as they go. As the mothering activity system is in flux, it is experiencing tension with the online learning system. Simply put, as the rules of the mothering activity system now stand, it is difficult to achieve their object of being a good mother while also pursuing an online degree, or any degree for that matter.

It should be noted, however, that the new mothering rules, those they are learning from the intensive mothering ideology that say mothers must be everything to their families at all times while also doing paid work, may also prove to be difficult to follow once the new mothering activity system takes hold. It seems the new mothering activity system that is emerging from the tertiary contradiction may not necessarily be better or easier than its predecessor.

The mothering examples that became mothering lessons that the student-mothers observed and learned growing up could be described as complicated. The mothering

examples they saw as children were almost all stay-at-home mothers who tirelessly cared for their families and homes, or they were troubled women who did not work outside of the home and who abandoned their children. Some of the women also learned what a good mother is supposed to be from their churches, the definition of which is the traditional stay-at-home mother who fulfills all of the caring and housework herself. Accordingly, many of the women received conflicting messages. They want to be the nurturing mother who can take on all of the responsibility for her family and home, but at the same time, they want to financially support their households and be role models for a strong work ethic. They want to provide security. And, on top of these already high standards, some of the women aspire to also be Godly women, as described in the Bible.

Miller (2005, p.13) explains "...our experiences can vary significantly from expectations that have been shaped by available cultural scripts and particular ways of knowing. In relation to mothering and motherhood, our ideas will be culturally and socially shaped and, importantly, morally grounded." The women grew up seeing that the 'good' mothers in their families and communities did not work but stayed home and embodied the traditional mothering role. But, many of their own mothers did not work and wanted the role of traditional wife and mother but were, according to the student-mothers' reports, from neglectful to abusive. Their mothers did not follow the cultural script of their time. Their way of being a stay-at-home mother did not achieve children who felt loved by their mothers. Accordingly, the student-mothers have diverged from their own mothers' scripts and have taken what they saw of 'good' traditional mothers and have merged that script with their own realities of work and school.

However, when the online learning system is introduced, the already complex mothering system experiences more tension. The online learning system is meant to be flexible, but what does that mean in reality? Mary Ann described her annoyance with online learning commercials on television that are meant to depict the flexibility of online learning. She talked about how unrealistic the images of smiling women sitting down to a desk in perfectly clean room, usually at night, are. That is not what a real home looks like and she thinks there is no mother who would be smiling late at night, after a long day of paid work, caring for her family, and taking care of her home to then begin another shift of work! These images make her angry and she thinks they are misleading.

All that the promise of flexibility really means is that students typically do not have to attend a class at a certain time in a certain place. It does not mean online learning is easier. In fact, the women often struggle to find enough time, cobbling together bits and pieces of time where they can find it, starting and stopping with their attention often split between what they would like to be working on for school with whatever is going on around them, be it work or family interruptions. They are always poised to stop school and attend to something else, making full immersion difficult.

Full immersion in their schoolwork is not only difficult because of their physical attention being pulled from mothering task to mothering task, but it is also difficult emotionally. When a mother feels guilty about the time she is devoting to a task that is not directly related to caring for her children, a pall is cast over her schoolwork. It becomes something to just get over with so that she can get back to what she really wants, and what she hopes this time spent on school will eventually get her, more time with her children.

This is why they often self-interrupt. They may be sitting down to work and realize someone in the home needs to have their softball uniform washed or no one has given the dog a bath in months. Guilt sets in as well as worry. If they do not do it, who will? After all, they are the household managers, chiefly responsible for the smooth running of the home and family and primarily charged with the guilt and worry when things are left undone.

However it conflicts with their mothering activities, the online learning activity system is necessary to help the student-mothers become the type of mother they need to be in order to fulfill their definition of a what a good mother is and to achieve the intended outcome of healthy, happy, well-adjusted children who feel loved. No matter what they have seen or have been told about the traditional way of mothering, their drive to be and do better than their own mothers, which includes contributing financially to their households, demands a change in the old mothering system. The online learning system will create much less tension with the mothering activity system when, and if, the women ever fully change the mothering activity system by denying the old mothering ideology that said women are good mothers only when they are traditional stay-at-home mothers and by fully embracing the new mothering ideology that says women are good mothers when they guiltlessly share all of the work towards their goal.

I think the activity system network might only be tension free when the mothering activity system changes once again to a parenting activity system where there are truly egalitarian divisions of labor, rules, tools, and a community of equal partners who are not just playing supporting roles, but who are working towards exactly the same object and outcome.

The feminist author, Tina Miller, in her book *Making Sense of Motherhood*, explains that when it comes to parenting, “Gendered assumptions and stereotypes continue to shape experiences and knowledge claims...whilst structural and material inequalities prevail” (2005, p.7). Mothers will always face tensions while the work is ‘her’ work, in thoughts or actions. The tensions will not resolve until the work of the family is ‘our’ work in every way, until we banish the narrative that says our partners ‘help’ us or that we are lucky that they do a share. For the contradictions to resolve, the current narrative, which is “defined and restricted under patriarchy” (Rich, 1986, p. 14), needs to change to one of equitable sharing of the labor with no one partner in charge or ultimately responsible. I think it must be, ‘our home, our children, our shared work’. The home cannot be the mother’s domain. It must be the family’s domain. Until that time, tensions will always exist between the mothers’ activity towards their objective for their children and whatever other systems are involved that splits her time, energy, and attention and makes her feel guilty about doing so.

### **Conclusion**

I chose to use CHAT as a layer of analysis because of the ways that CHAT complimented the phenomenological analysis, to look at the women’s lived experiences from another angle in order to uncover deeper levels of complexity. Lord (2009) explained that understanding history and context can help us to understand conditioned driven behavior that goals or motives cannot; we do things or think about things in a certain way without questioning until we find out why and make a change. By taking the student-mothers’ histories and contexts into consideration, I was better able to understand where their goals originated and why they developed in the way that they did. Lord

(2009) also explained that our goals or motives give meaning to our actions and make sense of why they move through the activity system the way they do. Everything happens for a reason. There is always a ‘why’ behind the decisions the women make and the things they do, even the seemingly unconscious behavior. CHAT allowed me to see the reasons. And, the reason for it all is to make their children feel loved.

Mothering is complicated and loving in all its forms can be hard work. For all of the blissful moments in motherhood, moments that Rich (1986) says flood mothers with intense and even fierce feelings, many moments can also be excruciating. This is especially true for women who were not always mothered with care or who were abused by the women who stood in as mother, like many of the student-mothers. For them, the fear of repeating the pain they suffered as children at the hands of the women who society says were supposed to tenderly care for them unconditionally, is part of the driving force that pushes them forward towards their goals to be good mothers and to raise children who feel loved. This deeply rooted need to be and do better than the mothers before them intensifies the contradiction between the mothering activity system and the online learning activity system, really between any other system and the mothering system.

The findings from this study, uncovered using CHAT, raise nearly as many questions as they resolve. For instance, the student-mothers’ self-described experiences with abusive mother figures as children raises questions about how abuse is defined in rural Pennsylvania as well as the cultural and historical derivation of their definition of abuse. Another question concerns the experiences of single mothers. One single mother participated in this study, but she was in a long-term, committed relationship and lived with her sister. What are the experiences of single student-mothers who live alone with

their children and who are not in a committed relationship? How do they navigate online learning? Another question that arises concerns the impact of the rural context. How does the experience of being a student-mother in rural Pennsylvania compare to other rural areas in the United States? What would the student-mothers' experiences have been if the women were urban or suburban, particularly their experiences with family support and gender roles? And, just how much of a part does rurality play in their experiences as student-mothers? The answers to these questions will bring us even closer to a holistic understanding of the experiences of student-mothers in online programs.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study have begun to fill gaps in the literature and in our understanding of the lived experiences of student-mothers enrolled in online programs, especially those from rural areas. However, I would argue that the experiences of the mothers from this study, based on the motherhood literature and on what I know of mothers, in general, seem to be rather similar to the majority of mothers, in many respects (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Kramarae, 2000; Lundberg, McIntire, & Creasman, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Pare, 2009; Scott, 1993; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Like the women in this study, I think many mothers would concur when I say that we usually put our children first and that our primary goal is to make sure they feel loved.

Of course, these feelings are not entirely universal nor are they even ‘natural’ in the biological sense (Chodorow, 1978; Rich, 1986). There is no motherhood gene. We are not born knowing how to nurture, we learn how (Chodorow, 1978; Rich, 1986). The stories of many of the student-mothers show this first hand. They were emotionally neglected, abandoned, and even abused by the women whom they called mother, what I thought was a rather unusual and unexpected commonality. But, as mothers themselves, they shine.

They learned what a child needs the hard way, by doing without. This has made them all the more determined to make certain their own children never feel the pain or sadness or loneliness or longing that they felt for a mother who they can count on and who is always there for them. In response to the poor mothering examples many of them grew up with, they have adopted the prevailing, cultural, and some would say flawed,

mothering ideology of intensive mothering (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). They do not want to mother the way their own mothers and stepmothers did, so they are doing the opposite. They put their children's needs first, always, even to their own detriment. They are tenacious in their goal to raise children who are healthy, happy, well adjusted and, most importantly, who feel loved. This is, interestingly, the example many of their fathers set.

We now know eight aspects of their lives that affect their experiences and chosen roles, first and foremost as mothers and secondarily as students. We have to look closely, though, to see the nuances of how. Two of the themes I have already discussed. They deal with the women's choice to intensively mother in response to the effects of their childhood experiences. Found hand-in-hand with these themes is another common thread that runs through their mothering, they all make daily sacrifices in pursuit of their overarching goal to make their children feel loved. They sacrificed money, time, sleep, friendships, and even their mental health, in order to ensure that their decision to pursue a college degree—which they chose to do to benefit their families—would not negatively impact their children in any way. This is a finding also supported by the literature (Kramarae, 2000; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010).

Another thing they all shared was that even though they all have supportive spouses and stressed how necessary that support is to their success, and even though they all said they no longer live in households where the gender roles fall along traditional norms, they are all still primarily the ones in charge of managing their households. This finding is also supported by the literature (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Lundberg, McIntire, & Creasman, 2008, Pare, 2009). Their partners may do dishes and laundry and

pick up the kids at soccer practice, but it is usually the student-mother who made the schedule or reminder that those things needed to be done in the first place.

But why is it important for those working with adult students in higher education to know and really understand what mothering means to their students or what kinds of demands or time constraints they are working under at home? It is important, nay, critical to fully understand the gravity of the mothering role when considering them as students because the mothering role often supersedes all other roles (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2013; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Pare, 2009). In order to serve the needs of the student, we must also attend to the needs of the mother. To ignore them as mothers, is to ignore them entirely. Student-mothers are not parts of a whole to be compartmentalized and dealt with in a piecemeal fashion. One aspect of their lives does not operate independently of the other. When one piece of the system is out of step, the entire system is at risk of failure.

An additional theme that was somewhat unexpected considering the fact that most of the women have chosen to stay in or near the rural hometowns where they or their spouses grew up, is that they are not particularly close to the people in their rural community, including their own extended family members. Only one woman relies on her extended family for support, such as childcare. None of the others do.

This is a worthwhile detail to pay attention to because it runs counter to the stereotype of rural people being from tightly knit families or communities (Struthers and Bokemeier, 2000). It reminds us, as educators, to check our assumptions about our students. So, when an adult student, whom we know still lives in her hometown, says she cannot meet with her online group because she does not have a sitter, we should not

assume that she can just call Grandma or the neighbor for help. The women in this study demonstrated that sometimes we can be entirely alone even when surrounded by others.

A final theme that relates directly to online learning is their shared struggle with interruptions. There are no boundaries in online education. There are no walls encircling the classroom to block out the world outside, no doors we can shut with the certainty that social conventions will tell others that silence and uninterrupted time is required until the doors open again. Unlike traditionally aged students in a traditional brick and mortar setting, when studying at home, student-mothers do not get to switch into student mode and play the role for extended amounts of unbroken time in proximity to many others in the same mindset with nothing else to be in those moments but a student. Traditional students enter the world of academia when they step onto campus and can allow themselves to be enveloped by it, losing themselves in it. For online students, their virtual classrooms exist in their minds alone. No one else can see them. The online student inhabits one world within another, but is only partially in each. At any moment they can be snatched away from one or the other by those inhabiting the unseen space; children will take them from their virtual space, while online classmates have no idea what is happening around them in the real world.

To understand what the online student-mother needs in order to be successful, we must devote more resources to learning about interruptions, how to mediate them, and how to plan courses and programs accordingly. And, we need to remember that the home is not the classroom and families are not the equivalent of classmates. A classmate would never interrupt us in class—repeatedly—for a snack or a drink, or a hug. And, we would never put everything on hold—repeatedly—to lovingly give them whatever they ask for.

Issues that student-mothers face are not just women's issues. They are also not just family issues. They affect everyone affiliated with institutions of higher education. There are lessons to be learned within their stories. If we want to truly understand our student-mothers, we must see them as the complex people that they are. They are never just students. They are always mothers, too. They embody both roles in tandem. If we want to serve the student in them, we must be mindful of them as mothers. Every need, every desire, every goal, they can trace back to their families in some way.

### **Pragmatic Implications for Practice**

First of all, the student-mothers' reported overwhelmingly positive experiences in their online courses. Even though they are all very different women with vastly different personalities and expectations for their classes, they are, across the board, happy with their experiences. However, the issues that did come up in our interviews require serious and sustained attention.

There are steps that can be taken immediately towards meeting the needs of not just student-mothers, but all adult students studying online. First of all, as we saw in the data from this study, there are still online instructors who, quite frankly, do not belong in the online environment. This could be because they were not carefully selected or because they were not trained properly once hired. Or, possibly, they are overextended and have chosen to push their online courses aside in favor of other responsibilities. It is easier to ignore someone online or treat them rudely than it is in a traditional classroom where you have to face them. Or, maybe, they simply do not have the right personality for the job. Communication in the online environment is notoriously tricky (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Meaning can easily get lost in translation. Instructors must be extra

vigilant with their written words. There are no body language cues to tell our students that the snarky phrase we used was an awkward attempt at irony, like there would be in a traditional classroom. The online students only read snark. For instructors who are poorly trained in the needs of adult students, or who are overextended, or who are just poor written communicators, online instruction should wait. And for those who administer these programs, it is their moral and professional obligation to ensure that only properly trained instructors who have the time and ability to understand adults, work with them online. Otherwise, the results can be disastrous as the most impactful lesson students learn is how inhospitable the online learning environment can be for parents.

Most of the same can also be said about advising. Students should not report that their advisor never checks on them. Advisors are a necessary part of the online learning experience (Steele & Thurmond, 2009). They can act as the students' touchstone and as a constant in an, oftentimes, anonymous and transient environment. Good advising means advisors have the time and resources they need to prioritize each and every student on their roster. As my data shows, online students need to be known and valued. They flourish when they are.

Institutional barriers could be partially to blame for some of the issues students encounter with faculty and advisors. For instance, if a policy is in place that prohibits communication concerning individual students between faculty and advisors, faculty members and advisors will not know of issues with students unless the students tell them. Opportunities to assist students could be lost. Universities should evaluate their policies with the online context in mind and make changes as needed to suit the format and its students.

A final recommendation for universities, specifically, is that more attention should also be paid to how students interact with and are affected by their learning management systems (LMS), keeping in mind that every minute of a student-mother's time is precious. Amy's case is a good example. Her program was in the process of switching their old LMS for a new one, which they were doing gradually. Amy is a strong and exceptionally intelligent student, but even she could not keep up with the differences in the systems and ended up missing a quiz because of the confusion. Situations like this should not happen. Students, who are sacrificing enormous amounts of money and time to enroll in online classes, are not guinea pigs on which to practice. Bug and kinks must be worked out before students are expected to use new technology and when new technology is introduced, programs should have already gone to great lengths to ensure their ease of usability.

So far, my recommendations have all concerned universities' practices. However, there are also implications for stakeholders outside of academia, namely the student-mothers' employers, especially in cases where the employers are contributing to the costs of the students' tuition. Employers who have an interest in their employees' professional development may want to demonstrate support for their employees' academic endeavors by considering the following recommendations: 1) Allow employees paid time off to complete continuing education classes or training. 2) Incorporate study time into the workday, taking pressure off of the family domain and relieving stress.

## **Conclusion**

Research shows that adult students are driven and goal oriented (Hansman & Mott, 2010; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). For many, like the women in this study, it is their love for their family that drives them while making their families feel loved is also their ultimate goal (Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Scott, 1993; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). They can reach that ultimate goal via a better job that allows for more flexibility or higher pay, lessening stress, for example. They pin their hopes on their online programs getting them there. But, as I have shown in my data, student-mothers will not allow their pursuit of an education in hope of a better career—even though it is ultimately for the good of their families—harm their families in any way. They will sacrifice even more of themselves to prevent that eventuality, which in turn makes it even more difficult for them to be the student they need to be in order to achieve their educational goals. It is up to their university administrators, programs, and instructors to understand this cycle and to help ameliorate the difficulty of mothering while pursuing higher education online.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Message

Are you studying in a 100% online undergraduate, graduate, or certificate program?

Do you live in rural Pennsylvania?\*

Are you a mother?

If so, you may be eligible to participate in a research study that seeks to understand the experiences of rural mothers who are distance education students.

I am conducting this study for my dissertation research in the Adult Education Program at The Pennsylvania State University. The data from this study could inform all aspects of distance education from course design to delivery.

Participants will be asked to complete up to three interviews lasting a minimum of one hour each. The interviews will take place via telephone, Skype, or in person. Participants will receive one \$15 gift card per interview. All participants will also be asked to write in a journal documenting their schedule and thoughts about their work/life balance. The journal will require about 10 minutes each day and will be completed over at least one week. Additionally, I will ask some participants to visit them in their homes while they are studying or working on assignments for their online programs. The observations will last from one hour to five hours, depending on their schedule and what is most comfortable for them. Participants will receive one \$15 gift card per observation.

The data collected in this study will be used in a dissertation but may also be used at professional conferences or symposia, and may be published in professional publications. All participants will remain anonymous.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email at your earliest convenience at [mlf164@psu.edu](mailto:mlf164@psu.edu).

Thank you for your time!

Michelle Covert, PhD Candidate  
Adult Education program  
The Pennsylvania State University

\* Adams, Armstrong, Bedford, Blair, Bradford, Butler, Cambria, Cameron, Carbon, Centre, Clarion, Clearfield, Clinton, Columbia, Crawford, Elk, Fayette, Forest, Franklin, Fulton, Greene, Huntingdon, Indiana, Jefferson, Juniata, Lawrence, Lycoming, McKean, Mercer, Mifflin, Monroe, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, Pike, Potter, Schuylkill,

Snyder, Somerset, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Tioga, Union, Venango, Warren, Washington,  
Wayne, Wyoming

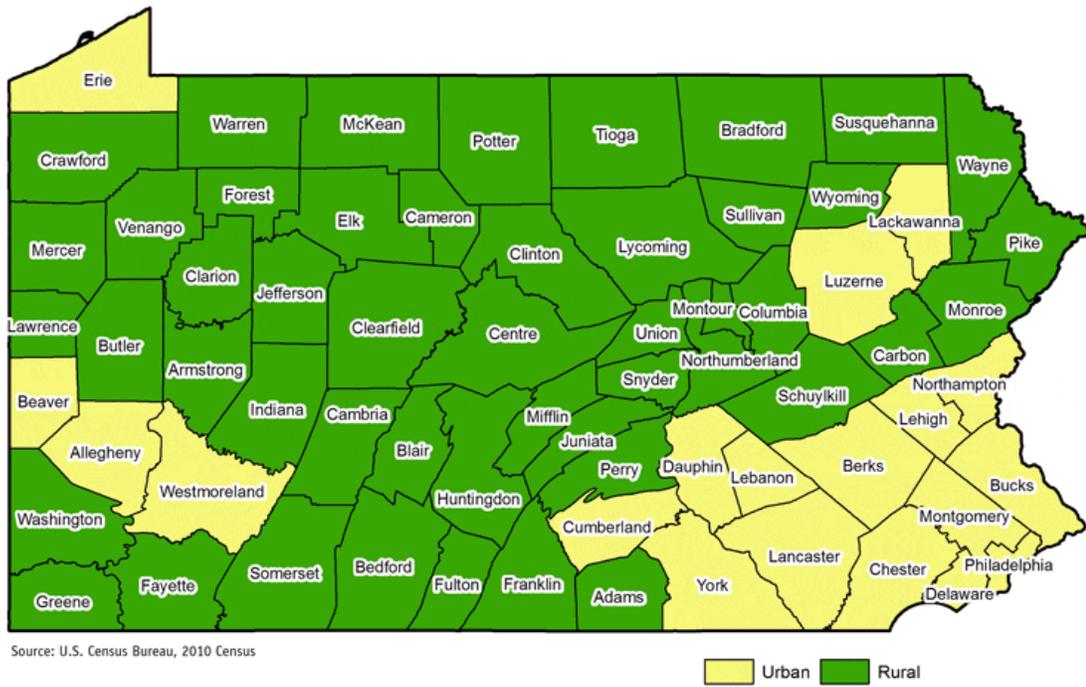
**Appendix B**  
**Screening Document**

1. Are you a mother?
2. Do you have at least one biological or adopted child under the age of 18?
3. Are you the custodial parent of the child[ren]?
4. Does the child[ren] reside primarily with you?
5. Are you currently enrolled in at least one class in an online undergraduate or graduate program at Penn State?
6. Is the program 100% online?
7. What is the program?
8. Do you live in Pennsylvania?
9. What county do you live in?

## Appendix C

### Rural Pennsylvania Counties Map

#### Rural Pennsylvania Counties



The Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2014)

## Appendix D

### Interview Guide

#### Topic Areas:

##### Interview 1

- “Housekeeping”
- Demographics
- Focused Life History

##### Interview 2

- Online Degree Program
- Paid Employment
- Home and Family
- Extended Family
- Social Life

##### Interview 3

- Demographics, continued
- Reflection on Meaning
- Participants’ questions, comments, concerns

#### Open-Ended Questions About:

- ‘Housekeeping’
  - Informed Consent
  - Journal reminder
  - Recording the interview – speakerphone
  - Code name
  - Transcription of interviews
  - Who may see and hear raw data
  - Who may help with coded data analysis
  - Schedule next interview for 3-5 days from now
  - \$15 gift cards at the end (type?)
  - Explain what we’ll cover in each interview
    - Focused Life History
    - Details about the experience of being a rural student-mother in an online program
    - Reflection on meaning
  - Tell who I am (briefly)

**BEGIN RECORDING NOW**

- I hope our conversation can be one that is between two women who are going through a very similar experience and who want to share their stories. Please try to reconstruct your experiences for me in detail. Feel free to add anything you might think is important or helpful.
- Demographics
  - Age
  - Marital status
  - Kids
  - Location
  - Work
    - Work schedule
    - Take me through a day at work
    - commute
    - childcare
  - School
    - How program was discovered by participant
    - Student support
    - Cost
    - Level of difficulty
    - Study Schedule / what does a typical day look like?
      - When
      - Where
      - How long
- Focused Life History
  - Tell me about your family growing up (delve deeply)
    - Community
      - Reconstruct what it was like for you, growing up there?
    - Who you lived with
      - What was life like in your home?
    - Parents' work
    - Family views on education/work/family
      - Parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, etc.
    - Her views about education/work/family
  - Educational history
    - Friends' outlook on education/work/family
  - Tell me about your family now (basics, not deep)
    - Tell me about where you live
      - Tell me about how you came to live there
    - Who you live with

- What they do
- Educational background

## **END INTERVIEW ONE**

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## **BEGIN INTERVIEW TWO**

- Online program
  - Why PSU?
  - Why online?
  - Cost
  - Overall thoughts and feelings about
  - Issues/concerns/positive aspects
  - Instructors (supportive? understanding of adult learners? etc.)
  - Classmates
  - Anonymity
  - Comfort level online compared to traditional classroom
  - How do you stay organized?
- Current paid employment
  - Need for paid employment
    - Thoughts and feelings about contributing financially to family
  - Other issues/concerns/positive aspects
- Family
  - Children
    - Childcare?
    - Behavior when participant studies at home
      - Frequency, purpose, and duration of interruptions
    - Conversations about participant's schoolwork, schedule, etc.
    - Children's perceived thoughts and feelings about participant's schoolwork
    - Participant's thoughts and feelings about balancing schoolwork with mothering
    - Other issues/concerns/positive aspects
  - Spouse
    - Tell me about your spouse
      - Age, where you met, how old were you when you started dating/got married?
    - Perceived thoughts and feelings about participant's schoolwork/decision to attend online program

- Level of supportiveness of participant
  - Involvement with children now and pre-online graduate program
  - Frequency, purpose, and duration of interruptions while participant is studying
  - Paid work/financial contribution
  - Could you do this without husband's support?
  - Other issues/concerns/positive aspects
- Home
  - Domestic chores
    - Who does what and when
      - now and before beginning online program
    - How division was determined
    - How much time is devoted to chores
    - Participant's thoughts and feelings about chores
    - Spouse and children's perceived attitude about chores
- Extended family
  - Perceived thoughts and feelings about participant's decision to attend an online program
  - Time with extended family now and pre-online graduate program
  - Financial help
  - Childcare help
  - Emotional support
  - Other issues/concerns/positive aspects
- Time with friends
  - Amount of time now and pre-online graduate program
  - Thoughts and feelings about time with friends
  - Friends' perceived thoughts and feelings about time (or lack of time) with them
- Time spent on other social activities
  - List of other activities now and pre-online graduate program
    - Time spent on activities
  - Thoughts and feelings
- Other work/life balance issues proposed by participant

**END INTERVIEW TWO**

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**BEGIN INTERVIEW THREE**

- Demographics:
  - Race
  - Economic Class: Below poverty level, Working Class, Lower Middle Class, Middle Class, Upper-Middle Class, Wealthy, etc.
    - Now and as a child
  - Religious affiliation and level of religiosity (i.e. Spiritual, affiliated but not practicing, practices at home regularly but does not attend religious services, attends religious services on holidays, attends religious services regularly, attends regularly and practices at home regularly, etc.)
- Reflection on meaning in journals
- Online cost
- Interruptions
  - Dog, Facebook, Internet surfing, texts, kids, husband, emails, work, etc.
- Is online easier, the same, or more difficult than traditional?
- What does being a student mean to you?
- Break down your goal to earn a degree into individual motivating factors and how much weight each one has for you as far as importance.
  - Can you elaborate on why you place each factor where you do in your rank of importance to you?
- Do you prefer living in a rural area?
  - Tell me what it is about it that you prefer over urban or suburban areas?
  - Tell me about the people – what you like and dislike
  - Do you think your rural community has played a part in who you are, how you think, behave: as a mother / as a student? If so, how?
- What does being a mother mean to you?
- Have your childhood experiences affected how you mother your own children?
  - How?
  - Where your parents affectionate?
- Sleep? Tired?
- Forgetfulness?
- Difference between men and women / fathers and mothers, i.e. guilt.
  - Where do you think these differences come from?

**END INTERVIEW THREE**

## Appendix E

### Coding Sample

Who She Lived with	A:	lived with my grandparents for a little bit and then I moved back in with my parents. And then when I turned 18 in my senior year of high school I moved out.	° Moved around in High School
	M:	Okay.	
	A:	The day that I turned 18 I moved out of my parent's house. And then I lived with my grandparents and then immediately after I moved in with my, my husband.	° Left parents' home asap
	M:	All right. And military in there too. Is that right?	
	A:	Yeah I joined um the military when I was 17. So I went away for like the summer between my junior and senior year of high school. And then I went to basic training and then I came back for my senior year of high school.	° Joined military in High School
	M:	Okay. And you can do that when you're 17? How does that work?	
A:	Um my dad had to sign a paper releasing . . . and my, my biological mother um wasn't involved and she hadn't had contact with me for over seven years. So there was a waiver that she did not have to give me permission to join the military.	° Absent bio-mom	
Rural Hamletown	M:	Okay. All right. Um so your community. Um you're in a . . . it was in a rural county. Was it a rural town? Or was it a bigger town?	
	A:	No very rural. Um there's like um the closest like grocery store or anything would be like at least 15-20 minutes away. You know so if we needed to go grab anything . . . we had a little, wee tiny one or two, three, small mom and pop shops like where you can get a little food or something you know or a gallon of milk if you need it. But um nothing major. We don't even have like a lot of community, like centers to go do things or anything like that. We do live right beside a state park though however and that's, that's a lot of what my family did when we were little was a lot of outdoor things.	° Very rural ° Inconvenient ° Not much to do ° Family Time spent outdoors
	M:	Okay. All right. Um tell me um what your parents and grandparents did for work when you were a kid.	
Parents' Work	A:	My um biological mother never graduated high school. So she did not work. Um I guess she went and got her GED then when I was around seven I think she started doing hair and nails or something. And then she quit that as well. She still to this day doesn't work. Um my stepmother was a stay at home mom. Um around the time I was 13 she went and became a medical assistant or medical billing and coding I guess—not a medical assistant. And she worked for maybe six months and she quit that. Um my dad however was a big back breaker. Like he did intensive labor for the entire time I was growing up. He traveled during the week and came home on the weekends. And he worked for [redacted]. I don't know if you've ever heard of them.	° Bio Mom = Poor Role Model ° Stepmother's Work/Peer Role Model ° Dad's work ethic ° worked away
	M:	No.	
	A:	And they build roads and stuff. Yeah.	° Dad's job
	M:	Okay.	
	A:	And he, he was a very, very, very hard worker.	° Dad's work ethic

**VITA**  
**Michelle Covert**

**EDUCATION**

2016	<b>Ph.D., Adult Education</b> The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
2013	<b>Graduate Certificate in Distance Education</b> The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
2011	<b>M.S., Higher Education</b> Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA
2003	<b>B.S., Human Development and Family Studies</b> The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

**PRESENTATIONS**

Covert, M. (2016, October). *"I have a vision for my life.": The experiences of rural student-mothers pursuing higher education online*. Concurrent session to be presented at the Association for Continuing Higher Education (ACHE) 2016 conference, New Orleans, LA.

Covert, M. (January 26, 2016). *Work-life balance in graduate programs*. To be presented to HIED 490: Professional Seminar in Higher Education, Higher Education Program, Department of Education Policy Studies, The Pennsylvania State University.

Choi, J., Carr-Chellman, D.J., & Covert, M. (2015, November). *Online and learner-centered?* Poster session presented at the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education 2015 conference, Oklahoma City, OK.

Covert, M., Choi, J., & Carr-Chellman, D.J. (2015, October). *One professor, two TAs, and an online course: A teaching team shares their experiences*. Discovery Session presented at The Online Learning Consortium 2015 International Conference, Orlando, FL.

Covert, M. (March 24, 2015). *Understanding the work/life balance of student-mothers in online graduate programs*. Presented to INSYS 574: Applied Qualitative Research, Learning, Design, and Technology Program, Department of Learning and Performance Systems, The Pennsylvania State University

Covert, M. (2014, November). *Exploring competency-based education options for adult learners at a Penn State branch campus*. Poster session presented at the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education 2014 conference, Charleston, SC.

Covert, M. (2014, June). *Understanding the work/life balance of student-mothers in online graduate programs*. Roundtable Discussion presented at the Adult Education Research Conference Annual conference, Harrisburg, PA.

Covert, M., Feldman, M., & Stark, M. (2013, November). *Online learning from the student's perspective: Three successful online students share their knowledge*. Information session presented at the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Sloan-C International Conference on Online Learning, Orlando, FL.

Doctoral Student Panel (2011, April). Panel participant at the Drexel University Master of Science in Higher Education Program Conference, Philadelphia, PA.

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

2016 - 2016	<b>Teaching Assistant</b> , Historical and Social Issues in Adult Education (online) The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
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