

NEGOTIATING MATRIARCHY: THE DISCOURSE OF SINGLE MOTHERS
TAKING CARE OF THEIR FAMILIES
ON SMALL INCOMES

by

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ABSTRACT

NEGOTIATING MATRIARCHY: THE DISCOURSE OF SINGLE MOTHERS
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This study used ten in-depth interviews with single mothers on small incomes to analyze for discursive themes. Three theoretical frameworks of Symbolic Interactionism, Presentation of Self and Cognitive Dissonance were used to guide this analysis. The discourse of these mothers found a matriarchal framework with four discursive themes of centrality, solidarity, moral economy, and support. Centrality refers to the way these single mothers position themselves as provider, protector and nurture. Solidarity refers to how mothers viewed their relationships with their children. Discursive matriarchy is characterized by a moral economy that emphasizes spending

time and paying attention. Support refers to ways that mothers enlist the help of others to provide for their families.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Single mothers who take care of their families on small incomes perform valuable and necessary work. Mothering is the caring work that mothers do to take care of their families. The work that all mothers accomplish is unending, physically demanding, emotionally draining, and essential. Mothering is often unseen, does not receive financial income, and is, therefore, often considered nonwork. Single mothers balance a heavy load of providing for and nurturing their families. Traditionally, breadwinning has been a male role. Considerable feminist inquiry has been given to the role of motherhood describing the difficulty for mothers to negotiate commitments of nurturing and providing.

Over 90 percent of adults on welfare are mothers, and most of those are raising children alone (Hays, 2003). There are many more mothers who live near the poverty line and do not receive welfare. Poverty and welfare are not equivalents, but they do share an abundance of single mothers and their children. There are uncounted combinations of socially constructed factors that cause poverty. A common criticism of the poverty line is that it includes some and excludes others from receiving help. This study uses the broader and socially constructed term of *poor*. It is not based on income limits and government formulas, but on lived experiences as mothers and others perceive their income and resources. Mothers stretch resources to make ends meet, and

when resources cannot stretch, they sacrifice themselves. When poor moms do go to work, they are more likely to have bottom rung jobs that do not provide a living wage, advancement opportunities, or health insurance.

Despite acts of sacrifice and commitment, dominant imagery of poor mothers is highly negative (see Hays, 2003, and Seccombe, 1999, for examples). Poor mothers, on or off welfare, are perceived as lazy, dependent, immoral, fraudulent, and breeders of criminals. The latest backlash during the 1990s was waged against single mothers in a series of welfare reforms. The discourse during those reforms blur between reforming the welfare bureaucracy and reforming the alleged delinquency of the women that welfare helps support. Though not all poor single mothers are supported by welfare, many moms, particularly mothers of minority groups, are adversely affected by this negative welfare imagery.

Previous research on mothering identities has primarily focused on middle class or affluent motherhood. *Intensive mothering expectations*, was the definitive work of Hays (1996), who describes the current dominant ideology of mothering. She describes it as child centered, guided by experts, labor intensive, and an expensive ideal of motherhood. There is a great deal of research that supports intensive mothering as the dominant ideal of parenting, and it is characterized as a myth that keeps mothers entrenched in finding ways of trying to live up to its tenets.

Motherhood is socially constructed (Silva, 1996) and affected by the way we communicate and think about motherhood. Mothers are in between highly negative and highly idealized ideologies of motherhood (see Hays, 1996; Hays 2003, Seccombe,

1999). This thesis will examine the discourses of single mothers and how they negotiate their mothering role. The present study contributes to the body of research regarding motherhood and the roles of women in society. The present study will seek to fill gaps in the literature to discover how single mothers on small incomes construct motherhood. It is particularly vital to understand the discourse of single mothers because they are taking care of their families in a vulnerable and valuable position.

1.1 Review of Literature

1.1.1. Discourse

Personal narrative is the story form of the first person subjective experience that tends to be rich with information and is believable. Beyond an individual narrative, discourse is a dynamic structure of understanding. It is the communication of similar ways of thinking. Dominant discourse is a system of understanding that tends to be perceived as “true” and influential. It affects individuals as well as a people within a system (Elvin-Nowak & Thomason, 2001).

Discourse, is communication that carries and reinforces ideology. A collection of similar thoughts is an ideology. When we talk about life in new terms and new ways, we create new ways of making meaning. Discourse is the vehicle of ideologies, old and new. Ideology is a pattern of believing, ideas, opinions, and values that are used to create meaning (Freeden, 2003). We are both consumers and producers of ideology (Althusser, 1984). They are multidirectional and participatory. We group and ungroup meanings to make sense of what would otherwise seem random. Therborn (1980) describes ideologies as helping us define what exists. Such existentialism is not an

objective reality, but a highly subjective experience that seems powerfully objective and real. It can easily exclude other viewpoints. Althusser (1984) adds that ideology is something that happens “in us” and “to us”. It is difficult, if not impossible to measure the extent that we internalize ideologies. They are historically and socially situated (Freeden, 2003). Ideologies influence entire societies, and dominant ideals are legitimized through political behavior. Freedden (2003) further notes that studying ideologies is identifying structures, contexts, and personal motives that are not readily visible.

Inequalities exist between dominant and marginalized discourse (Duncan & Edwards, 1999). Dominant discourse is legitimized and sanctioned through legislation and culture. Subordinate discourse of single mothers is contextual, depending on national and neighborhood culture. In general, meaning making from discourse is situational, cultural, and contextual. Feminist scholars believe that motherhood is socially constructed through common discourses and ideologies. Elvin-Nowak and Thomason (2001) explain that “each individual understands explains, and gives meaning to different aspects of life” (p. 408). Discourse can shift overtime and adjust to context (Lewis,1995). Duncan and Edwards (1999) found that the local level of discourse is far more penetrating in effecting behavior than national discourse because single mothers have a greater voice in its construction and it is more relevant to lived experiences.

One goal of discursive research is to identify themes of dominant or subordinate discourses. For example, Elvin-Nowak and Thomason (2001) identify three discursive

themes, or positions, of employed mothers in Sweden as accessibility, happy mother/happy child, and separation of work and home. Mothers seem to include levels of discourse in order to view themselves as others may and find ways of adapting to their situation. A second example is the discursive research of Duncan and Edwards (1999) who describe four discursive positions on lone motherhood in England. The first and second positions are at the national level and describe single mothers as a social threat and a social problem. As a threat, single mothers are the source of what is wrong with society. As a problem, they are pitied by others. The third and fourth positions describe how single mothers see themselves finding advantages outside of men and making a lifestyle change. They generally talk about their experiences as finding advantages to being a single mother despite its difficulties. These advantages, which Duncan and Edwards call *escaping patriarchy*, include achieving more freedom and making decisions independently outside of men.

Family and roles within the family, such as motherhood, are socially constructed. How we think and talk about family affects how we make policies about the family. As the family unit changes, so do the roles within the family. And likewise, the policies and practices of a society continue with discursive shifts. The acts of mothering and single mothering continue to be socially negotiated through communication. It is important to understand their lived experiences and how policy can act in the best interest of all mothers.

1.1.2. Policy Discourse Matters

Historically, discourse and ideology have maintained that a woman and children should be supported by a man (Silva, 1996). When it came to the case of single mothers there was ambiguity. The development of welfare policies over the years have made distinctions on the treatment of single mothers depending on if they were widows, divorced or unwed mothers. The law was also unclear as to whether these women should be treated as workers or mothers (Silva, 1996). In twentieth century England, Lewis (1984) notes that it was common practice to send poor single mothers to work houses. Seccombe (1999) points out that the U.S. drew heavily from Poor laws of England to distinguish between the worthy poor (e.g., the disabled, the aged) and the nonworthy poor (e.g., the able-bodied). Political discourse determines who the government will help and how it will provide that help.

Policy is a legitimized and sanctioned form of discourse that often reflects the dominant discourse of a culture or nation. It affects how people construct identities of themselves and of others in society. It's how we make meaning for our lives and how we relate to others. Policy is a way of identifying who is a problem and what should be done about them. However, when it attempts to create solutions, it can also create new problems. Society must construct a whole new set of meanings around it. Policy, enables, discourages, empowers, disempowers and even coerces others' lives (Albelda, Himmelweit, & Humphries, 2005). Discourse and ideology are prone to shift and therefore affect how we restructure law, policy and practice. Hays (2003) notes that, "a nation's laws reflect a nation's values" (p.3).

Not all poor single mothers have welfare benefits. However, the welfare debates of recent years have served to further politicize the situation of single mothers who parent on small incomes. A major point of discussion is the “choice” between low wage work and full time motherhood. Seccombe (1999) asks, “should we pay them to stay home to take care of their children, or should we require them to work?” (p. 27). A storm of clashing discourses about motherhood, gender, work, poverty, children, and marriage all collide into one important person: the single mother who parents with small financial resources.

Millar (1996) compared policy approaches to supporting lone mothers from many western welfare states. She deconstructs the policy implications that tend to blame single mothers for all the problems associated with welfare. Tax payers feel resentment for having to pick up the bill. So, governments make more policies regulating factors that might prevent women from becoming single mothers with low incomes. Millar (1996) notes that “policy does make a difference to employment rates of lone mothers...through the range of measures- employment rights, services, educational and financial support, that influence the ease with which it is possible to combine motherhood and employment” (p. 107). Millar (1996) points out that political discourse should distinguish how policy should treat single mothers: as mothers, as workers, as both, or other ways, such as a special category of their own.

There has been excessive focus on the undeservedness of single mothers who are assumed to have bad morals and lifestyles. When these assumptions become the center piece of discourse, it marginalizes other issues, such as the lifestyle, character

and morals of all Americans. Mothering work is valuable and necessary work by all who perform it and central to this thesis. Sidel (1996) notes that

there is no question that the welfare system in particular and the society in general have not addressed these issues and, in fact, have exacerbated them- not through generosity but through miserliness, not through the coddling of recipients, but through their humiliation (p. 495).

When single mothers raising their families on small incomes are politicized, it moves us further away from creating changes that benefit all mothers.

The lives of single mothers who parent with few financial resources are highly politicized. It is the goal of this study not to politicize them further, but to humanize their lived experiences by examining their discourses. It is important give a voice to the experiences of single mothers raising their families on small incomes. When we consider lived experiences, we remember that we share the human experience and the human condition. By sharing the same frame, we are morally inclusive. Through negative discourses of single mothers we, in effect, morally exclude them from our circle of concern. Such discourses serve to marginalize them from what we consider valuable and worthy of our concern.

1.1.3 Motherhood and Mothering

1.1.3.1 Constructing and Negotiating “Mothers”

Scholarship in recent years has taken up the dual questions of describing what a mother is and what her role is in society. It is first important to distinguish between *motherhood* and *mothering* (Silva, 1996). Motherhood refers to a legal relationship between mother and child and mothering is associated with caring work. The acts of nurturing a child are not necessarily biological, as this work is carried out by adoptive

mothers and others who help nurture a child. Therefore, the work of mothering is a social construction that can often involve more than one individual to carry out its ideals.

Currently, mothering accommodates more roles than ever before, in both ideology and practice. Research reveals that motherhood is a dynamic, shifting way of caring for others that is experienced and perceived differently by individuals (Bhopal, 1998; Liamputtong, Yimyam, Sukanya, Baosoung, & Sansiriphun, 2004; Weaver & Usher, 1997). They enter and travel motherhood in different modes. Bhopal (1998) describes motherhood as “complex and multi-faceted and mothers are not homogenous in their perceptions of motherhood” (p. 486). Mothering experiences are highly contextual, cultural and situational. Definitions of motherhood should take the pluralistic experiences into account. A defining feature of motherhood is the change that it brings to women’s lives (Weaver and Ussher, 1997).

A mother’s heroism may go unremarked, as “mothers regularly transcend self interest in protecting and caring for their children” (Grace, 1998 p.401). Though “intangibles of human relationships are indeed priceless” we are “locking them into expectations of extreme self-sacrifice” (p.401). She asserts that “caring for young children is skilled, demanding work which consumes the time and energy of those who carry it out” (p. 402). Women taking care of children are often discounted because women often perform multi-tasking, and child care is a secondary activity to shopping or laundry. If she is only caring for children it is viewed as “passive child-minding”

(p.403). Such ideologies of the work mothers do “masks the reality of the physical, mental, and emotional demands of caring for young children” (p. 403).

Once any woman becomes a mother she must negotiate a whole new set of variables. All other arrangements and emotions seem to be in continually subject to mothering. Role redefinition is a natural consequence of the advent of motherhood. Work, time management, social ties, and living arrangements all fall into orbit around the lived experience of motherhood. She also notes that these private processes are impacted by larger sociohistoric contexts in which they occur. The clearly defined roles and previously understood ideas of parenting are changing and “the lines between fathering and mothering is beginning to blur” (Coltrane, 1996, p. 5). Though motherhood is increasingly varied in experience and similarly difficult to define, commonly understood of ideals of motherhood persist.

In the U.S., each state defines a mother differently. Some have laws saying that those that donate genetic material have the primary legal right to ownership, while other states say they have no claim to paternity through donation arrangements. This brings up legal conundrums that conventional ideologies are not prepared to deal with. Is a mother defined by biological material contributions, by the emotional labor it takes to carry and deliver a child, or by the act of mothering? Technology has in effect changed parenting discourse to consumer language. The question posed by Nock (2000) is “by what method do we establish *ownership* of a child?” (p. 257, original emphasis). This idea of ownership of children is only exacerbated by frozen genetic materials to be used in reproduction. Nock (2000) asserts that parenthood is largely a symbolic meaning and

representation of self, when viewed as a social construct. Contemporary parenthood is “more fluid...less institutionalized, less predictable” (p. 259). With the emphasis on the science of reproduction, the political discourse completely misses the important emotion work and unpaid work that actual mothering accomplishes. There is little value placed on actual mothering, and the greatest value is placed on the authority of science and law.

A critical issue in investigating how mothers construct their identity is the interplay between their own voice and the voice of others. Some researchers are concerned that other voices marginalize women in the negotiation of motherhood. Wall (2001) describes a “medicalization of reproduction, childbirth, and child care” with the end result as the “control of mothering” (p. 593). She examined breastfeeding information and found that mothers invisibility as subjects are in a highly restrictive position. She observes that, “mothers and mothers’ needs disappear from view here and mothers’ behavior becomes legitimately subject to public scrutiny and moral authority. Women become, in part, builders of better babies or burdens on the social safety net” (p. 604).

Feminist scholars reject the idea that motherhood is natural or biological, but assert that motherhood and mothering are more socially constructed (Silva, 1996). Therefore, mothering experiences are highly contextual and situational. Boulton (1983) found that mothers had contradictory feelings about motherhood. Working class and middle class women felt that motherhood was both a rewarding and negative; a

burden and a pleasure. Weaver and Ussher (1997) found that women felt the idealized image of motherhood caused a sense of lost self.

1.1.3.2 Imagery, Ideology, Discourse and Mothers

Social constructions of mothers are built through discourse, imagery and ideology. These are seen culturally reproduced in life around us as well as idealized images through media. These social constructions imply both negative and positive ideals about who mothers are and what they do. There is the ideology of *just a mother* which implies that mothers are of low intelligence and low status (Liamputtong, et al., 2004). Vincent, Ball and Pietikainen (2004) found traditional roles link women and children together and locate men on the periphery. Hays (1996) explicates that the “the world presents, and mothers experience, the image of the lazy, mindless, dull housewife- and no mother wants to be included in that image” (p. 138).

Social constructions of motherhood lead to social judgments of mothering based on the ideals of the *good mother*. The traditional ideologies that frame the good mother are belonging to a married, white, full-time, stay-at-home mom who is fulfilled in a domestic realm (Boris, 1994). Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) describe the *sensitive mother* as one who is child-centered and housework is a function of child’s play and pedagogy. Hays (1996) defines the dominant ideology of mothering in the present era as intensive mothering expectations. Johnston and Swanson (2006) summarize intensive mothering as a, “child-centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive ideology” (p.519). There is considerable support of

intensive mothering as the dominant North American ideology (Garey, 1999; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Wall, 2001).

It goes without saying that intensive mothering expectations are demanding ideals that are difficult if not impossible for moms to live up to. Oakley (1974) refers to this as the “myth of motherhood” (p. 187). These ideals are unrealistic and tend to reproduce themselves over and over again, which entrenches mothers into an identity and context of intensive mothering (Thurer, 1995). It is in essence not simply good mothering that is expected, but rather the pursuit of exceptionally good and perfect mothering. Mothers with fewer financial resources are then judged more harshly when they are even less able to adhere to the tenets of intensive mothering.

In the modernist framework, the American ideal of individualism requires American mothers to manage larger sets of role-identities with a larger array of definitions for each role (Golden, 2001). Within expert systems, we become “the authors of ourselves” (Giddens, 1991, p. 234). Expert systems include media, which simultaneously create a need social learning through mediated experiences” have created an ecology that makes mothering increasingly complex.

There has been considerable research following up on Hays’ (1996) definitive work. Elvin-Nowak and Thomason (2001) examined how mothers in Sweden idealize and practice motherhood, through discursive analysis. They found three themes: accessibility, the dynamic between a happy mother or happy child, and separate spheres of work and home. More recently Johnston and Swanson (2006) extended this work by conducting a very similar study in the United States. They also found mothers trying to

live up to intensive mothering expectations and supported the findings of Elwin-Novak and Thomson. Johnston and Swanson (2006) determined three discursive themes in their study were accessibility, mother-child happiness, and separation of spheres. About half of Elwin-Nowak and Thomason's participants were described as blue collar, low-income mothers, and one-third of their participating mothers were unmarried. Johnston and Swanson describe their American participants as privileged women and as predominantly married. Johnston and Swanson suggest further research be done with diverse groups of mothers including women in poverty. They also feel it is important to study how women feel about mothering with limited choices of employment.

More recently, Hays (2003) initiated a critical study of the welfare system and how it affected poor single mothers and their children. She finds that poor women and their children are marginalized from getting the help that they need due to the negative power of political discourses about them. This study is an extension and application of this series of previous work. Through this study, I hope to extend what we know about single mothering with a small income as idea and practice through discourse analysis.

1.1.4 Mothers and Work

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the average working-class woman spent an average of fifteen years in pregnancy; three pregnancies would end in miscarriage, and two children would die in childbirth or infancy (Humphries & Gordon, 1993). It was during this time that government began to distinguish the parenting practices of the lower classes as lower quality than those of middle and upper class. Working class servants had very little time to parent in the same manner as middle class

mothers with hired nurses to care for their children. Policy during this time laid the foundation for future political rifting between the classes of mothers. “Fulltime mothering was therefore stressed, but policies to allow this were absent” (Silva, 1996, p. 17). So, the law did not legitimize fulltime motherhood, or working mothers. Silva (1996) calls these competing ideologies a “double burden” (p. 21).

The problem of mothers as breadwinners is not a new one, and little seems to be changing. Bloom (1985) studied the history of breadwinning mothers in the U.S. around the start of the 20th century. She asserts that “working away from the home nevertheless did not change their responsibilities... indeed, it made it more difficult for them to accommodate the varying demands on their time and energy” (p. 609). Potuchek (1992) is concerned that “the equation of women’s labor force participation with breadwinning is problematic; breadwinning is not just a matter of behavior, but of the meaning attached to that behavior” (p. 549). She found identities constructed around paid employment were employed homemakers, co-breadwinners, helpers, supplementary providers, reluctant traditionals, reluctant providers, family centered workers, and committed workers.

At the center of mothering identities is how they will arrange paid work and mothering. Since the industrial revolution, there has never been a high status awarded to the housewife and mother (Cowan, 1983). Vincent, Ball and Pietikainen (2004) describe the ideological context is one where “to be a mother and not to work is becoming increasingly unusual” (p. 571). Critical scholars see mothers being marginalized as it relates to capitalism (Silva, 1996). It is the lack of value for their

work at home and in the workplace that most concerns feminist scholars. Generally, staying at home needs less justification and explanation, than why and how a mother will work. Affluent mothers describe feelings of guilt associated with leaving their child with someone else for purposes of going to work. The mothers in Vincent, Ball and Pietikainen's (2004) study were torn between their value of working for pay and mothering. Thurer (1994) describes the duality of good mothering images. The first is the one of a mother who is at home taking care of her family's needs. The second image is the professionally employed *supermom* who is highly successful and self fulfilled at work, and with her children.

Traditional patterns of women's careers can be described as deferred, interrupted, or not pursued (Gilbert, Holahan & Manning, 1981). Their study found that "increased role conflict caused by role accumulation can be more than offset by the increased resources and privileges and the enhanced sense of personal worth accrued from the professional role" (p. 424). They contrasted career mothers with working mothers, the distinction being that working mothers hold a lower commitment to the work role and a higher commitment to the maternal role, in varied combinations.

1.1.4.1 Unpaid Work

Feminist scholarly research has contributed significantly to discussions on the unpaid contributions that mothers make to society. Those that go out of the home to work are paid and seen as a visible part of life. Because it is not seen, it therefore becomes undervalued and not believed to be significant work that should be rewarded. Hochschild (1983) described mothering work as emotional work, or emotional labor.

Stevens, et al. (2006) was perplexed with results in which wives expressed satisfaction with unequal divisions of labor. They concluded that it was emotion work that facilitates the desire to remain in traditional ideologies. Macdonald (1998) describes mother-work activities as “feeding, diapering, bathing, disciplining, putting children to bed, and playing with them...soothing, stimulating, and connecting” (p.26). She also points out that other important aspects of mothering are conceiving, gestating, and bearing children. She distinguishes these activities as, “separate from motherhood as a social role or identity, mother-work represents a large component of what it means to be a mother, to experience mothering” (p.26).

When a mother’s work is framed as nonwork, it marginalizes mothers and those who take care of children. Grace (1998) argues that “caring for young children takes more hours than a ‘normal working week’ involves high levels of responsibility, and is socially useful and necessary work” (p. 401). She furthers

The problem with conceptualizing this work as non-work is that it promotes the perception that mothers are unoccupied and therefore fully and unproblematically available for employment. It overlooks the reality that children’s attendance at formal childcare relieves mothers of only part of the work necessary to care for a young child. (p.403)

It is important to discuss the meaningful work that all mothers do to contribute to society when they care for their children. For example, Griffith and Smith (2005) studied the largely invisible work that mothers do in order to contribute to school systems. They found women of all economic levels contributing significant portions of support through time, effort, and economic resources. The policy and practice of higher standards placed on schools, in large part, depends on the parent’s abilities to make up

the difference. Families with greater finances are better resourced to take on the challenges. Griffith and Smith (2005) describe the school systems in North America as engines of inequality. They reproduce and enhance inequality by stigmatizing those families who do not have the time and financial resources to support the school systems efforts. The end result is that mothers are blamed as much or more than the school itself for a child's failure.

One of the problems with nonwork is that it gains no credit for mothers, and it is not perceived as adding to their employability. Grace (1998) points out the hypocrisy stating "people who have learned new skills, gained in personal maturity, learned to work harder and smarter than ever before are somehow seen to have devalued themselves" (p. 403). Against a backdrop of equality discourse, mother's employment is typified as short term, part time and bottom rung jobs to best facilitate mothering work and paid work. Such constraints offer little in the way of career advancement, paid leave, training, development, or superannuation benefits. This means that current policy and practice does little to provide true upward mobility for single mothers raising their families on small incomes.

1.1.4.2 Paid Work

When women choose certain patterns of work it says as much about society as it does about the individual women. Job availability and pay for women are being addressed by employers and educational institutions. However, feminist economics have revealed an inherent disparity in women's compensation, benefits, lifetime earnings and subsequent savings that is related to mothering expectations (Yamokoski

& Keister, 2006). Women are far more likely than men to leave a job for periods of time to be a full time parent, which reduces earnings and retirement contributions. When children or other family members are sick, women are more likely to take off, give up or lose their job. These all have long term economic ramifications.

The level of care that a child needs does not diminish if a mother does not have the money to meet the need, or if she is at work. There has been an historical shift in mothering conditions as many mothers see themselves as providers, not dependents (Silva, 1996). She notes the competing discourses saying, “for women to draw between ‘mothering’ and ‘providing’ can be a complex and debatable” issue (p. 21). The result is that many women try to accommodate both ideals according to their situation. Grace (1998) rejects the idea of dichotomizing women between “working” and “non-working” mothers. She points out that “social policy is often seen to favour one group or the other, for example, valuing employed mothers’ contribution to the visible economy by providing subsidized childcare; or alternately valuing the unpaid work of mothers not in paid employment by initiatives” (p. 402). Grace (1998) further asserts that these conflicting political discourses artificially construct “two groups with opposing interests...it’s time to look beyond sectional interests” (p.402).

Mothers find themselves trying to negotiate between the two ideals of mothering and employment. Garey (1995) interviewed women who worked the night shift and found they used this particular shift to best match both ideologies. They worked at night, leaving children with fathers, grandmothers or other caregivers, in order to present themselves as a stay-at-home mom during the daytime. Garey (1995)

found that these mothers were “adopting, modifying, or reinterpreting” (p. 416) hegemonic cultural definitions of motherhood. She describes the traditional family form as “an ideal by which they measure themselves” (p. 417).

Being a good mother competes with being a good worker. While the popular press refers to these as “juggling” and “balancing”, Garey (1995) notes academic literature refers to it as *role strain* caused by the “oppositional demands of work and family” (p. 416).

Because the individual concepts that are fused in the term ‘working mother’ encompass images of ‘worker’ and ‘mother’ that are defined in opposition to each other, ‘working mothers’ face the dilemma of reconciling this conceptual incompatibility, both internally and in their presentation of self” (Garey, 1995, p. 416)

In another study, affluent moms were found to incorporate the ideologies of a working mother and a good mother (Buzzanell, et al., 2005). They presented themselves as *the good working mother*. They accomplished this image by arranging quality child care and feeling pleasure in their working mother role. They summarize that the moms in their study “focus on cues that establish them as different and perhaps, superior to stay-at-home mothers in that our participants feel that they have the best of both worlds and are better moms because of their work” (p. 277).

1.1.5 Single Mothers

There is a variety of terms that scholarly research now applies to what is more popularly referred to as *single mothers*. What we call mothers who parent alone continues to evolve and take on new meanings. Rover (1970) identifies self-described single mothers in the early twentieth century as *bachelor motherhood*. Albelda,

Himmelweit, and Humphries (2005) identify terms such as *lone mothers*, *female-headed households* and *sole parents* to reflect a diversity of meanings and experiences. The connotative definition of female head of household is one of “responsibility and power” and lone mother as “abandonment and loneliness” (Silva, 1996, p. 3). Albelda, Himmelweit and Humphries (2005) sum up the similarities between single mothers by saying she is “almost always both the primary breadwinner and the primary caregiver for her family” (p. 2). Silva (1996) summarizes that the terms reflect “the hardship placed upon women and the agency expected of them” (p.3).

Female-heads of households are considered such only if there is not a man present in the home, even if she provides more capital to the home economy, according to Moore (1996). The legal distinctions of *de jure* and *de facto* headship draw lines for single mothers and though they may have similar experiences, they also have different legal rights, responsibilities and limitations because of their classification (Alam, 1985). The term lone mother, or single mother, is a relatively new social category (Skevik, 2004). “Historically, clear distinctions have been drawn between these groups....socially and legally, it made a dramatic difference whether or not the woman was married when giving birth” (Skevik, 2004, p. 95).

It is important to note the subcategories of single motherhood, but it is equally important to incorporate the variety of ways women experience it. A broad definition of single motherhood is needed to make visible *any time* a mother is assuming the primary role of breadwinning and care giving, while others play a supportive role. From a postmodernist perspective, single motherhood is not a static state, nor does it

have clearly defined parameters. The fact that many women shoulder single mothering responsibilities alone can be hidden by marriage and other relationships when men are physically, financially, or emotionally unavailable. Phoenix (1996) summarizes that “many women thus pass through lone motherhood” (p. 179). Albelda, Himmelweit, and Humphries (2005) point out that, “the likelihood that any mother will at some time in her life become a lone mother is high and growing” (p. 3). Though the variables of single motherhood form different experiences, they also serve to prioritize one group of mothers over another. By taking into account that even some married mothers take on full responsibility of parenting for periods of time, we can focus on meeting the needs of all mothers and suspend moral judgments.

Who is likely to become a single mother? There is not a way to predict with any specificity who will likely become a single mother. Curran (2002) surveyed a great deal of historical literature and notes the paucity of simple predictors of single motherhood. Though there are correlates and commonalities, these are not causes of single motherhood. When Hertz and Ferguson (1997) looked at single motherhood, they found that single mothers are taking risks that are social, legal, and genetic to fulfill their ideal of motherhood. “Because these women see diminishing options for finding men to build traditional families they take the ‘risk’ of being at the frontiers of new family formations” (p. 201). They point out that differing routes to single-motherhood has long term consequences to future construction of family. Nock (1995) asserts that marriage has become “less compelling” (p. 248). He also invites us to seek to understand these changes in order to “appreciate the challenges of redefining the

family to fit the realities of our times” (p. 248). He cites fundamental separations of profound symbolic significance. Marriage, sex, pregnancy and parenting have all been unlinked from each other, where traditionally they were packaged and bundled together. Modern parenthood takes on more of a symbolic meaning and “has been redefined as subject to rational choice and governed by calculation” (p.249).

1.1.5.1 Significant Attributes of Single Mothers

1.1.5.1.1 Less Time

In the economic frame, time is money. For the single mother providing for her family on a small income, it is a scarce and finite resource. Much of a single mother’s time is spent in caring work which “remains invisible, not given a value” (Neysmith & Reitsma-Street, 2005, p. 380). They remark that, “there is a theoretical paucity for thinking about it as a precious scarce resource...balancing time needed to work, care and act within individual and collective life spans deserves more thoughtful attention in social policy” (p. 380). The researchers are critical of policy approaches that have a distinct lack of attention to how women, particularly poor women divide their time. “To devalue and negate major dimensions of people’s work and its use of time is a political act of oppression... it can only be recognized...once the invisible begins to be explicated” (p. 381). Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005) note that women are bound up in time constraints that men tend to escape. When single mothers are both breadwinners and caregivers, time is in short supply. It is important to distinguish between free time and paid time. Bonilla de Ramos (1984) observed mothers ‘free time’ may likely be spent in domestic labor and work time that is not paid. Golden

(2001) notes that, “the successful management of work and family is as much an identity issue as it is a time management issue” (p. 236).

1.1.5.1.2 More Stress

A key characteristic of single mothering on a small income is its propensity to high levels of stress. Ceballo and McLoyd (2002) see psychological distress as one of the defining features of single parenting. They term it *heavy parenting* which is characterized by an unremitting succession of negative events, economic hardship, and social isolation. They also observe that single, low-income mothers “carry the burden of poverty in heavy loads” (p.1310). Single mothers are disproportionately exposed to threatening and uncontrollable life events. Cairney, et al. (2003), found that single mothers were more likely to have suffered a depressive episode, reported higher levels of chronic stress, and negative life events. Ceballo and McLoyd (2002) assert that “raising children in the poorest urban neighborhoods requires as many supporting resources as one can muster” (p. 1312).

The context of parenting matters, but how a mother negotiates her role in that context can make a difference. Jackson (2003) found that poor neighborhoods may or may not have a negative influence on children. The way a mother interprets and manages the neighborhood for her children can make a difference. Different mothers within the same neighborhood can “create different experiences” for their children (p. 183). Jackson (2003) concludes that understanding the conditions and processes that influence different child outcomes will assist in the design of better programs that

“buffer” negative effects (p. 184). Clampett-Lundquist (2003) observed that some mothers adopt a strategy of “staying inside to avoid violence, drug dealing, and public drunkenness” (p. 136). Moving, even when it is away from undesirable neighborhoods are associated with less income from job loss, less social support and receiving less welfare (Harknett, 2006).

There is much we can learn from studies of motherhood in other cultures, particularly for poor women. For example, Bonilla de Ramos (1984) examined the effectiveness of a pre-school for working mothers in the underdeveloped nation of Columbia. She notes,

the most demanding reproductive activities for the family, and especially for women as mothers, are those related with the up-bringing, initial socialization of children , not only because of the ‘natural’ limitations inherent to those activities, but primarily because of the lack of social support” (p. 416).

She found that having a child in daycare “can diminish certain domestic tasks but does not necessarily diminish her whole domestic load” (p. 420).

Family can provide a wealth of support or compound existing stress. Wilson and Tolson (1990) summarize that Black American families are more likely to live together, and offer other support than other major racial groups. They extended the concept of family to include the neighborhood, the church, and subsequently the Black American community. They further that Black, single mothers with small incomes feel their family provides a better quality of care, offsets a variety of negative affects including premature babies, sick children, and father absence. Additionally, informal

adoptions are common, but vary in length of time, and they can be temporary or permanent. However, family support, regardless of race, is not always available.

When single mothers feel the effects of poverty they begin to negotiate a whole set of social constraints. Jennings (2004) notes all mothers are undervalued for their reproductive and mothering work, but low-income mothers are “under conditions of tremendous strain” (p. 115). In general, people with low financial resources are likely to experience stressful life events (McLeod and Kessler, 1990). The stress and strain of poverty extend far beyond financial problems, and the lack of financial resources, can mean difficulty dealing with many other life problems. The researchers also report this stress is associated with unstable employment, difficulties with children, and poor access to health care.

1.1.5.1.3 Less Stability

The *urban ecology* (Oliker, 1995) is one associated with crime. Theft can be psychologically devastating especially to the poor. Seccombe (1999) documented that poor mothers on welfare do not feel that they are allowed to have checking and saving accounts, or other safe means to protect money and other valuables. Not only does apartment theft rob them of precious resources, it is very difficult to recover from. Oliker (1995) interviewed many women who had lost everything to theft more than once. Their sense of security was lost. While affluent families are insured and can replace material possessions and financial means more easily, they also misunderstand how this affects those in poverty. The image is one “that poor people become inured to crime” (p.261).

Urban strategies women use to deal with crime and danger are complex. Oliker (1995) interviewed women who reported being distracted at work for fear of safety of their children at home. Mothers quit jobs and training to guard their homes and families. Jobs, even part-time employment that coincides with school hours are the most competitively sought jobs and not available to everyone. When Oliker (1995) examined workfare (welfare to work programs) job search groups, she observed mothers that were disappointed to not find work that matched their child's school schedule. She concludes that "we see the flaw of incommensurability in the policy maker's calculation that workfare can lead low-income women to the rational behavior of 'other working mothers'" (p. 262). Oliker (1995) provides an important axiom that "parental rationality varies with conditions of parenthood" (p. 262).

Single mothers, even on small incomes, chose to stay home over work for complex reasons. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005) found that men participated less in a very generous paternal leave program because they perceived losing more than wages. Being out of the labor market, even temporarily, can diminish one's chances for promotion and advancement. A mother's work suffers if she misses work to care for sick children, or issues at school. When mothers are out of the workforce temporarily to care for children, and then return, they are likely to return to the same low-level jobs as they had before (Oliker, 1995).

1.1.6 Poverty and Single Mothers

Pearce (1978) observed that a majority of the poor in the U.S. are female heads of household. She called this trend *the feminization of poverty*. She points to the

government's lack of support for women, and more typically mothers. Jennings (2004) summarizes scholarly literature and supports the frame of women in economic terms as a "political strategy" or a "discursive move" (p. 114). Not only does the discourse continue to shift, but it shifts responsibility through economic restructuring "from the federal to the state and local level" (p. 114).

The largest group of adults on welfare are single mothers (Hays, 2003). Even though many mothers have left welfare and begun to work, they still live in poverty (Ellwood, 2000). Not all poor, single mothers have welfare support. Indeed, the controversy of the placement of a poverty line includes some and excludes others. A common criticism is that some people fall just above the line of qualification and are ineligible to receive aid. Therefore, their lives can actually be worse off than those who have welfare help. The complexities of arranging work and childcare are difficult; in some cases impossible, and therefore, many choose to stay home with their children. A full range of welfare benefits are not enough to support a family. Currently, in Texas where the present study was conducted, the maximum monthly welfare support a single mother of two can receive is \$208 (TANF, 2007). A second criticism of welfare, is that it alone is insufficient to meet needs. Mothers need a variety of resources with or without welfare assistance.

Hertz and Ferguson (1997) describe self sufficiency as "being able to raise a child" but not all by oneself. The social support networks are a paradox in that they enable women to be self-sufficient. By arranging a supporting cast, women also alter the construction of their motherhood. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005) oppose self-

sufficiency discourse by countering that it still positions women in the frame of their economic value, instead of around their caring, nurturing value towards those that depend on them. They further challenge that individualistic discourses are flawed methods of dealing with poverty and for policy to take on more collectivist approaches.

Feminist economics advocates for equality in the distribution of wealth, and in particular on the behalf of mothers. Yamokoski and Keister (2006) do not stop at the female gender, but specify motherhood as a primary factor of poverty. Folbre (1987) calls this the *pauperization of motherhood*, blaming ineffective public policies that facilitate the discounting of the unpaid work of motherhood. Yamokoski and Keister (2006) found that single mothers suffer “severe economic penalties” (p. 189) more than other single or married groups.

Poverty is a phenomenon that exhibits such complexity that it confounds our understandings of it. It is the problem of the human race and all of history. Its causes and solutions are each more elusive than the next. For example, Moore (1996) notes that “teenage pregnancy does not cause poverty, however strongly it may be correlated with it under certain circumstances” (p. 63). Moore (1996) further cautions against the notion of the feminization of poverty.

“The straightforward assumption that poverty is always associated with female-headed households is dangerous, both because it leaves the causes and nature of poverty unexamined and because it rests on a prior implication that children will be consistently worse-off in such households because they represent incomplete families” (p. 61).

Moore furthers that many single mothers in poverty can successfully raise children. Welfare and poverty are not equivalent terms. Hayes (2003) asserts that

many women cannot participate in welfare because the political discourse is mean spirited towards single mothers and still judges single mothers as immoral. She notes that TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) states that its values are work and family; the implication being that single mothers do not hold these values. Though the largest focus of TANF is to make mothers be involved in paid employment or training, she sarcastically points out that they do not offer dating services to assist in finding suitable marriage partners. She observed many mothers are simply unable to work or seek work due to complex health and family concerns. Consequently, they were turned down or made ineligible for assistance. This she concludes scornfully, is the touted success of the new policy that sought to end welfare as we know it.

There are many more poor single mothers that are eligible for welfare benefits than who receive them (Blank & Ruggles, 1993). More recently, Acs, Phillips, and Nelson (2003) found that declining participation in TANF among single mothers in the context of an improving economy can be attributed to policy and attitudes shift towards work. However, Hao (1995) found that kin support acts as a substitute for welfare. Intact parents often discourage their daughters to participate in welfare programs, and welfare programs can crowd out familial support when it would otherwise be available. She calls for policy discourse to “enhance the social integration and eliminate the social stigmatization of welfare recipients” (p. 22).

1.1.6.1 Childcare

Childcare is central to enabling a mother to be able to work, but it is not the only factor. Children younger than school age must be cared for by the mother or a trusted caregiver. Macdonald (1998) describes child care as a “necessarily evil” (p.26) in the light of intensive mothering. She describes the dominant ideology of childcare for the middle class as “manufacturing motherhood” (p. 49). Paid childcare replicates the dominant image of the ideal family where mother is at home and father goes to work. Garey (1995) concludes that the competing roles of mothers cannot simply be framed as supplying childcare needs, because this “becomes the solution and corollary to mother’s participation in the labor force” (p. 432). Mothers need help taking care of children, with or without work. Paradoxically, Silva (1996) notes that as women of all social classes go to work, they are playing a diminishing role in parenting.

Middleclass families are able to pay for childcare in order to promote mothering in the home (Gregson & Lowe, 1994). The more affluent a family is, the better they are able to reconcile the demands of two ideologies through buying assistance. Mothers with lower incomes are particularly unable to match these ideals due to situational needs. They cannot afford childcare, or they cannot afford not to work, or both. Older children may attend school during the day and provide a means of care during employment hours. However, many mothers are in occupations or find work that occurs outside those school hours. How school is organized, affects how mothers organize their own lives and work.

It is increasingly difficult for any mother to justify her mothering work as legitimate, but particularly for poor mothers. Their economic value is increasingly emphasized. Oliker (1995) contends that being at home with children is “investing in full time domesticity...is purposely rooted in family commitments and communally oriented strategies of contending with market forces” (p. 263). She further found that many mothers were convinced that work would not pay or lift their families out of poverty. Some mothers found that they were only slightly better off, while others found their situations worsened when making enough money to be removed from medical and child care benefits that now cost more and reduced their living income. Money was viewed by mothers as an important form of capital, but it was measured in value compared to other forms of capital and support.

The commitments that women make to motherhood should be highly considered in the meaning making process. Moore (1996) sites several studies (Dwyer & Bruce, 1988; Folbre, 1986; Sen, 1983) all finding that mothers work more hours, consume less, and supply more resources for her children. Thomas (1990) found that income controlled by Brazilian mothers had positive effects on children twenty times greater than when it was controlled by the fathers. Moore (1996) sites other studies in Africa that find children better nourished in female only households than when the father is present in the household. The World Bank (1993) found that when women earn and control income, it has a more positive improvement on children’s health and social well being, than when men earn and control family income in poor families.

1.1.6.2 Affordable and Safe Places to Live

Where a person lives is a strong representation of self, and has a great deal of influence on how a person experiences life. It may isolate mothers or shape their relationships. In many cases single mothers must show a great deal of agency to arrange safe and affordable housing. This agency is constrained by the lack of affordable and safe housing (Clampett-Lundquist, 2003). She found that they commonly live with their own mothers or boyfriends, also called a *subfamily*. Clampett-Lundquist (2003) concludes that “it is difficult to disentangle the possible cultural and structural factors that play into how women find and keep housing” (p. 139).

When women cannot afford housing their strategies may come with costs. Depending on others for a place to stay is problematic. It means, “women may endure treatment that they would otherwise be able to avoid” (Clampett-Lundquist, 2003, p. 130). In other cases, women made decisions on housing based solely on the low rent. The very lowest rent was associated with unacceptable ways of living that were characterized as unsanitary, containing roaches, empty lots full of trash, disrepair, and unpaid utilities by the neglectful landlord. However, Hertz and Ferguson (1997) found mothers strategize residential stability by sharing expenses in a middle class neighborhood where their children would have access to better schools. They further pointed out that space was brokered in order to work less and spend more time with their children. This gave them further autonomy from work, which allowed them greater freedom to construct their lives. The women viewed living arrangements as economic and commercial value and substituted them for wages.

Affording housing is a major dilemma as poor, single mothers find themselves on the fringes of the housing market. Housing costs alone can deplete more than the monthly budget. Clampet-Lundquist (2003) notes how women could not afford standard rental rates on only welfare support. Social policy has seriously cut back public housing initiatives of all kinds leaving it up to the private market, and the private market does not necessarily feel an obligation to provide affordable housing. Her study highlights the fact that some families can simply afford nothing or close to nothing for housing.

1.1.7 Social Networks of Support

Friends and family can provide a variety of support including emotional, financial, and other types of help. Human relationships are highly complex and not all mothers have access to this kind of help at all times. Harknett (2006) expands the definition of private safety nets as “the *potential* to draw on support from social networks in times of need” (p. 172, original emphasis), whereas older definitions have defined it as in kind exchanges. Private safety nets influence both employment and welfare arrangements (Harknett, 2006). Mothers with more social support were found to work more, earn more, and receive less welfare money than those with the least social support. Similarly less social support was associated with lower employment, lower earnings and higher reliance on welfare.

Kinship has been one of the most enduring forms of safety networks. Its ancient origins are networks of obligation that were in practice in cultures around the world long before national welfare systems. Stack (1974) describes the flow of reciprocity as

one that is not necessarily repaid in kind. It cannot be calculated over a small period of time, but over a life cycle. A single mother's own mother is often her most valuable resource. Oliker (1995) found that relationships were strained by "intrusiveness and claims to authority earned by their valued contribution" (p.256). Relatives helping with child care is preferred because of the assumption that a "relative is more emotionally committed to the child and will provide more loving care than a nonrelative" (Presser, 1989, p. 588). It also "suggests that families are responding in complex ways to facilitate the employment of mothers" (p. 589).

Family support is often highly complex and difficult to negotiate. For example, grandmothers, like their daughters, must negotiate work and mothering responsibilities. The result is a complex navigation of schedules, work priorities, and personal needs. Presser (1989) points out that there is an assumption in research that grandmothers are not employed and free to provide childcare at any time, thus overlooking the complexities of how these women organize their lives. Oliker (1995) found "engrossing kin obligations that are chronically or erratically disruptive of work commitments" (p. 257) and are often outcomes of support relationships. The troubles in the households of their kin, often spill over into their own households with overwhelming effects, such as drug addiction, homelessness, theft by relatives, and long term caring for their children.

Boyfriends were found to be more contributory than the father's of the children (Oliker, 1995). Boyfriends also provided emergency childcare that cushioned against work and family needs. Seccombe (1999) called steady boyfriends in her study *social*

fathers and found they also provided a great deal of emotional support for both mother and children. Seccombe (1999) found mothers were intolerant of free-loading boyfriends. She also found some mothers were in serial exchange relationships that rested near the fine line of prostitution. Several mothers in her study expressed trading sex within a relationship for money, food, or other provisions. The mothers saw themselves in on-going relationships which were distinct from prostitutes, who engaged in one-night stands for money or goods.

Social exchange relationships may affect how mothers negotiate and present self. Nelson (2000) noted the difficulty in studying and measuring exchange relationships, because they are full of subtlety, such as feelings of loyalty and gratitude. Pahl (1984) found that people are concerned about not appearing too dependent on others. Finch and Mason (1993) further observed that people want to keep a balance between giving and receiving in order to not be too beholden to someone else. Nelson (2000) noticed mothers would abstain from asking for help for periods of time, even when they needed it. She further found ways of coping with the dissonance such as gratitude, emotion, affiliation with the giver, satisfying the giver's expectations, and that the giver is satisfied by giving. She also found themes of giving which she categorizes as helping, asking for little, and hoping everyone will have what they need. Some participants indicated that the load of always asking for help is a strain on them emotionally and express a desire for pure generosity from nice people that comes without oppressive burdens.

Mothers try to maintain an image of self-sufficiency, while relying on others Nelson (2000). Hertz and Ferguson (1997) report that mothers in their study value self-sufficiency. Stack (1974) observed that single low-income mothers found support because others assumed there was a need. More recently, Nelson (2000) found that single poor mothers in her study felt they could not assume that others would understand their needs. She also points out that maintaining relationships of support is challenging work. In these relationships, women must “learn to overcome shame and humiliation and that learning how, when, and whom to ask involves complex skills” (p. 313).

1.1.8 Imagery, Ideology, Discourse and Single Mothers

There is little space to talk about the needs of single mothers who raise their families on small incomes without bumping into negative discourses and imagery. In recent history in the U.S., Curran (2002) reveals post WWII journalists began to frame stories of welfare recipients as “chiselers and cheats” (p. 367) and the welfare program as one that “subsidized immorality and undermined family life” (p. 368). Phoenix (1996) points out that lone parenting is often linked with cheating the welfare system. The terms *fraudulent* and *crackdown* are often used help further this image. Furthermore, when making this discourse explicit it is not clear if “welfare reform” refers to the system or the alleged delinquent participants.

One of the most abominable images associated with poor mothers is the “welfare queen”. Lipset (1990) traced the welfare queen imagery that became popularly used against poor mothers in policy debate and casual discourses. The story

does originate from an actual case of fraud that was widely reported in the press during the 1980s. The woman had “80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards, and a tax-free income of over \$150,000” (p. 136). This one powerful image was immediately incorporated into existing ideologies and became the stereotype for poor and minority mothers. Phoenix (1996) describes further imagery as a mother who “gets pregnant in order to obtain welfare payments and housing and then rear children who are likely to become criminal” (p.175). The negative imagery of poor mothers is also a racialized discourse. Single, black mothers are attributed with responsibility for the crime and other ills of society, while single white mothers are constructed as “other and outsiders” (p.175). There is the misperception that most welfare recipients are African American and the system exists in large part to serve poor, Black, single mothers. Seccombe (1999) points out that this is only a myth and nearly an equal proportion of welfare recipients are Black, White, and Hispanic. Still, the welfare discourse more negatively affects African American and other minority mothers. Even silent discourse can have damaging effects. Phoenix (1996) points out that it can be little more than the implication of what “we already know” (p. 187). Billig (1991) describes silent discourse as no longer needing to be made explicit; it is already firmly rooted into our social constructs and language.

Research, political debates, and everyday discourses talk of the poor as “nameless, faceless, genderless and generic beings” (Seccombe, 1999, p.47). Sidel (1996) calls for a recognition that poverty is not only a social issue, it is socially constructed. They challenge popular understandings of poverty saying, “we must

recognize that people are not poor due to characterological defects but rather that the poverty that plagues so many Americans has been socially constructed and therefore must be dealt with by fundamental economic and social change” (p. 495). Katz (1997) notes studies from over a century ago which define and describe the poor as dependent, defective, and delinquent. They reached their condition by idleness, drunkenness, vicious indulgence, and laziness; because they were shiftless, incorrigible, cowardly, and utterly depraved savages. He remarks that we have difficulty naming and defining social phenomena. He traced the term *underclass* that made its way from the popular press to mainstream research, was recognized by some of the highest formal groups of scholars, only to be rejected and withdrawn from use. When we know how to talk about people who are poor, we might have new ways of talking about solutions to problems they face. Katz pities his fellow social scientists because all the words we use tend to dissolve, saying, “even history elides the problem of categorizing phenomena in a postmodern intellectual world” (p. 355).

In addition to how we define a person, it is how we position and frame them that adds meaning. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005) suggest that women be “positioned as citizens trying to marshal resources to meet obligations they carry for themselves and those who depend upon them” (p. 382). The researchers criticize frames that suggest a “citizen’s relationship to the market economy is their defining feature” (p. 382). They contrast “passive images of workers and consumers” with that of people who negotiate and make meaning around “trying to meet needs and obligations” (p. 382). They

criticize the priority of bailing out banks as a worthy cause, while bailing out families is not. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005) describe the lives of low-income mothers as

a range of activities that are never finished, must be performed regularly, and require energy and attention....these activities cannot be separated from the context of social relationships because provisioning consists of those daily activities performed to ensure the survival and well-being of oneself and others (p. 383).

They also point out that providing and caring for others are necessary; “without them, people would not survive” (p. 383).

Women who receive welfare are “distorted” and “stigmatized” (Seccombe, 1999, p. 9) Goffman (1969) defines stigma as the disrepresentation of self. He observed that stigma defines a person as “not quite human” (p. 5). He further points out that we operate on this assumption and “exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances...we construct a stigma theory- an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (p. 5). Sidel (1996) notes that it is easier to refuse to help “them” than it is to not help one of “us”. Seccombe (1999) identifies coping strategies for poor, single mothers as denial, distancing, blaming, and extolling motherhood. Coping helped women frame their life with a claim to dignity and self-respect.

1.1.8.1 The Discourse of Single Mothers

The discourse of single mothers with small incomes tends to change and shift over time. Oliker (1995) notes that, “even when moral commitments and economic aspirations may be unchanging, low-income single mothers may shift strategies frequently as they are buffeted by events” (p. 263). She found that they “negotiate

endlessly”, and “strategize constantly” (p. 263). She points to the confounding process of meaning making that tends to “sharpen the pain of economic shortcoming that a woman might suppress if she did not identify with the feelings of her children” (p. 263).

Single mothers are quite aware of dominant discourse that depicts them in a negative light. Previous research (Phoenix, 1996) observed that mothers do not reject this negative discourse, but consider themselves and others similar to them as exceptions, and attribute the negative qualities to others. Phoenix (1996) finds that they characterize themselves as “deserving and honourable” (p. 179).

Secombe (1999) points out that nonpoor women have a great deal in common with poor women. She further points out that policy reforms are predicated on the belief that poor women enjoy a “free ride” from welfare and the tax payer. Secombe highlights the fact that mothers on welfare have had little input is “glaring” and “troublesome” (p. 13). Walker (1990) noticed that the values of working class and middle class mothers are similar but their circumstances create differences in carrying out their ideals. Walker cites material conditions as an influence of the way women were able to express those values. Similar values found are commitments to work, achievement, personal growth, autonomy in their jobs, and daily involvement in their children’s lives. Differences found were that professional women orient their family around their career, while working class women orient their career around their family. All mothers indicated that it was difficult to integrate work and family together. Walker’s (1990) study indicates that structural differences in the lives of mothers have a great affect on the construction of self identity and sense of status and achievement.

1.1.8.2 Politics

Politicizing mothers, particularly single mothers on low incomes, has not served their best interests. It marginalizes the value of their mothering work and frames them in terms of their economic worth. Phoenix (1996) challenges political processes stating, “the major aim of the legislation and proposals regarding lone mothers...has been to save the treasury money” (p.175). She also notes that there is a popular consensus that single mothers are problematic to the state, society and all “decent” taxpayers. Albelda, Himmelweit, and Humphries (2005) reveal the “resentments that targeted subsidies tend to create” (p.5). Foucault (1972) describes the cumulating process of discourses fitting together as discursive formation. These images and logics repeated and fitted together over and over again take on the appearance of “objective reality” (Phoenix, 1996, p. 176).

Welfare is only one policy that affects single mothers. Policies that affect all mothers are widespread and can remain hidden. For example, at the local level, a mother’s relationship to the public school has strong implications of her expected involvement. Standing (1999) found implied expectations and practices were gender biased and burdensome on low-income, single mothers. The assumptions are that mothers will spend considerable time, money, and other resources that are not as available to a single mother. She points out that “expectations of the school are inextricably entwined with discourses on good mothering, about what the pedagogical and domestic role of mothers involves” (p. 67). Standing (1999) asserts that we move

towards a new typology of maternal involvement. Such an assertion, when carried out will begin to change how we understand mothering, parenting, and our culture.

1.1.8.3 Discourses of Help

There is concern for some that discourses of help are increasingly being marginalized. Lawson (2007) remarks that “we are living in a political-economic context that presents real challenges to welfare states” (p. 5). There has been a general shift from the public to the private spheres for care work. Lawson is concerned that “these shifts are accompanied in North American by the devolution of social welfare provision to nongovernmental organizations, charities, communities, and families, all of which are less well resourced and less publicly accountable than the nation-state” (p.5). She notes that these come specifically from the trend to extend the market, the discourse of personal responsibility, and the subsequent withdrawal of public support. She further challenges these emerging dominant ideologies by saying “marginalizing care furthers the myth that our successes are achieved as autonomous individuals and, as such, we have no responsibility to share the fruits of our success with others or to dedicate public resources to the work of care” (p. 5).

Some research calls for space to be opened to discourses of help, care and altruism. These discourses belong in almost all aspects of life and are not relegated to government policy. Hertz and Ferguson (1997) conclude that single mothers want to be self sufficient, noting that poorer women take pride in providing for their families. Self-support is the basis for their meaning making and construction of self. Generosity of others is a critical factor in gaining this self-sufficiency. Hertz and Ferguson lament

that at present there just aren't enough people to sponsor single mothers towards self-sufficiency. They call for a need to recognize our moral obligations to be active participants in solutions for all parents.

Lawson (2007) challenges that "caring for person-to-person relations involves understanding how difference is socially constructed and so a critical ethic of care must be coupled with analysis of the structures and institutions that reproduce exclusion, oppression, environmental degradation, and on the like" (p. 7). She explicitly states that "care is society's work in the sense that care is absolutely central to our individual and collective survival...it is really quite striking how marginalized care is, when it is so central to every aspect of our lives" (p. 5).

1.2 Theories and Frameworks

The purpose of this study is to analyze the discourse of single mothers who raise their families on small incomes. This study will look at ideology, discourse, social structures, and mothers. Several communication theories are used to examine and understand the meaning making process. This study does not see life as independent actors and actions, but as meaning that is created through an ongoing negotiation process. Three theories and frameworks are appropriate for this study. First, Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1933) focuses on how meaning is negotiated between society and self. Second, Presentation of Self (Goffman, 1959), helps further focus on self as it is situated within larger societal contexts. Finally, Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957) helps us look at cooperative and competing discourses within negotiations of meaning.

George Herbert Mead (1933) asserted that meaning making was a three part process between self, other, and society. This theory is useful in the present study to help describe what role these three forces play in the lives of single mothers with small incomes. Historically and presently, discourse matters a great deal. The consequence of symbolic interactionism is that created definitions will create reality. It determines the value people give to aspects of life. Symbolic interactionism is a structure for learning how to interpret the world. Mead (1933) notes that when we modify our interpretation through our own thought process, we are *minding*. It is the focus of this study to look at how single mothers on small incomes are affected by the ideologies of others.

Erving Goffman (1959) took a dramaturgical view of meaning making. The self was presented on a stage as a social actor. People are not independent actors, but move in context and relationship to others. Likewise, a single interaction does not constitute meaning fully, but carries meaning through a series of interactions. It is discourse and ideology that are formed through these interactions. Goffman asserts that the point of communicating self is to present ourselves as acceptable to others. Previous research indicates that the primary means for a mother to be acceptable is to match dominant ideals of mothering.

The discursive and ideological context for single mothers with small incomes is not positive. Negative welfare discourse makes it difficult for an audience to see them as acceptable. As Goffman (1963) later pointed out, people are stigmatized, or misrepresented, by others on the metaphorical stage of life. Negative welfare imagery and discourse are commonly projected on poor mothers- and even extended to other

minority mothers. Public assistance can be a great resource for those who need help; it can exacerbate their problems, or perhaps both. Duncan and Edwards (1999) point out dominant ideologies inform how we form policy. It is within these contexts that single mothers negotiate self and the meaning making process.

Self presentation is essential in negotiating between society and its dominant ideologies. Hertz and Ferguson (1998) found that struggling middle class single mothers modified their presentation of self to match dominant ideologies of married working mothers. Jennings (2004), found that there was social distancing and critical deconstructions of the dominant discourse about single mothers on welfare. She found discourses of resistance and oppositional thinking. Jennings (2004) juxtaposed their discourse against dominant discourse and concluded that “in the face of dominant welfare imagery their claim to respectability was a fragile one” (p.129). Both Jennings (2004) and Hertz and Ferguson (1998) found that by aligning themselves with middle class ideologies, poor mothers gain “stability” and “protection” (Hertz & Ferguson, 1998, p.14). Self-presentation is central in aligning positive imagery and distancing oneself from the negative imagery that discourse creates.

There is a disconnect between the ideologies of motherhood and the lived experiences of mothers. Feminist scholars have deep concerns that extreme self sacrifice can be expected of mothers, and yet they are still so readily called into question on their mothering practices. The acceptability of mothers is a deceptive question. While on one level, mothers are icons; on another level they are doubted as society negotiates what forms of motherhood it will accept. When mothers become

classified, they are less accepted on their classification. Working mothers are discounted because they work, stay-at-home mothers are questioned for dedicating time to their children, poor mothers are not acceptable because their poverty may harm children, and so on. The ideal mother is illusive. A mother must negotiate “what kind” of mother she is. A mother must make sense of competing, conflicting, and cooperating discourses in order to make her own meaning and ways of carrying out her life. Leon Festinger’s (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance helps us understand the interplay of conflicting discourses. Festinger’s original Consistency Theory, was primarily an intrapersonal process focused on the relationship between personal belief and personal behavior. The present study looks at cognitive dissonance as a more complex interpersonal and social negotiation between ideological beliefs, behavior, and beliefs about self. Through this lens, we can look to see how women strive for consistency and acceptance by how they negotiate and live out motherhood.

There is a growing body of research (Buzzanell, et al., 2005; Elvin-Nowak and Thomason, 2001; Garey, 1995; Hays, 1996; Johnston and Swanson, 2006) that seems to indicate that mothers try to best match dominant ideologies of motherhood. The researchers support Hays’ (1996) assertion of intensive mothering expectations as the dominant ideology, and that research has in large part included married and middle class mothers. Jennings (2004) found discourses of resistance when she examined mothers who have welfare support. While Jennings (2004) primary focus is mothers negotiating dominant welfare imagery, it provokes further questions of how poor mothers see themselves in the light of intensive mothering expectations. Therefore, this

study will seek to explore unanswered questions in the literature about how single mothers on small incomes negotiate and present themselves as mothers. It will incorporate dominant ideologies of both intensive mothering and welfare imagery. Therefore the question of this study is:

R.Q. What are the discursive themes of low-income single mothers?

This chapter has reviewed the current situation of single mothers as presented in the literature. The second chapter will discuss the participation of mothers in the study and the methods used to investigate their discourse. The third chapter details the results of their discourse. The fourth chapter gives a discussion of the discourse as well as implications of this study, limitations, thoughts towards future research, and the conclusion to this study.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

This thesis is the extension and application of previous research on mothering discourses and ideologies. It extends and applies the qualitative works of Hays (1996, 2003), Elvin-Novak and Thomson (2001), Johnston and Swanson (2006). These studies focus on ways mothers viewed their motherhood and how it was carried out in everyday life. They employed qualitative methods that heavily utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and discursive analysis. This study will utilize these studies as an empirical foundation to discover the discursive themes of single, poor mothers. It will use communication studies and theoretical communication frameworks to extend what we understand about mothers.

The present study examines the discourse of single mothers raising their families on small incomes. Meaning is carried through language and the communication context in which it occurs. Language is the basis for negotiating social worlds, and situating the subjective view of self within those worlds. Discourse helps construct the way we think as well as well as serving as a vehicle for perpetuating social institutions (Weedon, 1997). Through discursive positions, each person negotiates his or her own individual meanings to life. It is through these discourses that mothers understand motherhood.

Individuals develop an explanatory value to understand how one discourse negotiates with another (Elvin-Nowak and Thomason, 2001).

Qualitative research is an appropriate way to approach the research questions. It moves away from the conventions of quantitative methods in favor of a rich understanding. The present study makes no claims to a definitive understanding of the lives of single mothers on small incomes. The validation comes through varied understandings of reality that contain aggregate themes (Angen, 2000). This study cannot make any claims to proving universal truths, but it can present a credible picture of the lived experiences of the 10 mothers in this study (Angen, 2000).

Elvin-Nowak and Thomason (2001) note that the first step of their discourse analysis was to make explicit their own subjective experiences of motherhood and to clarify their own personal discourses. As a single mother of two, ages 1 and 4, it was important to explicate as many of my own personal discourses as possible both initially and throughout the process. The goal of making personal discourses known to self is to “be more critical in problematizing and analyzing” interview transcripts (p. 413).

Prior to initiating the present study, a pilot study was conducted. A convenience sample of single mothers on small incomes provided two interviews to test interview skills, the length of the interview and the interview questions. Modifications were made to the interview schedule to better guide the interviews. Additionally, the method of analysis was practiced using grounded theory and axial coding.

2.2 Participants

Ten mothers participated in this study and were recruited through community programs and social networks. The participant group was heterogeneous with the exception of marital status and income level. Mothers had a variety of routes into single motherhood and a wide range of experiences within it. All agreed that they viewed themselves or others viewed them as single mothers who were raising their families on small incomes. Hence, the nature of socially constructed views of self also served to qualify mothers for the study. The sample takes a broad and inclusive look at the way women experience single motherhood with low incomes.

It is important to briefly and generally describe the mothers who participated in this study. Secombe (1999) is critical of approaches to poverty that frame those most affected by it as the nameless, faceless poor. Dehumanization is easy to accomplish in the scientific interest of anonymity. Though it is not appropriate to publish their pictures or print their real names, it is important to establish that these mothers share the human condition. In their appearance, they display their own unique sense of style and practicality. They may not appear to another person as having a small income, or even appear as a mother. Through their experiences, we learn about the reality of their lives. They opened up and let me step into their shoes for a very brief time. The purpose of this study is to share their voices and the context in which they speak, to try on their shoes and walk this short while.

Ten mothers participated in the study and their ages ranged from 23 to 42; the average age was 30. Four of the women described themselves as Hispanic, three as

White, and two as African American. One mom described herself as Hispanic and Native American. All mothers spoke fluent English, with three moms reporting bilingual, English-Spanish homes. The number of children they had ranged from one to five: four moms had one child, and two mothers had five children. There were 25 children belonging to these ten moms. The children's ages ranged from 9-months old to 24 years old. All moms had school age children and younger. The average age of all the children of the mothers in this sample was 9.76.

Details of marital status and history are varied. Five mothers had previously been married and five had never been married. Six of the moms became mothers for the first time during their teenage years. Four of these six moms later married but all eventually divorced, one having divorced twice. Three of the never married mothers had at some point cohabitated with a boyfriend, who was also the father of one of their children. One mother had always lived with her parents and one had always lived alone with her child. The two mothers with five children felt it was important that they had been married to their husbands long-term, and in each case, the children were all born from one mother and one father. A majority of the divorced mothers, and the two other nonmarried mothers cited jail, violence, gang activity and/or drug activity as key reasons why the relationship ended.

It is also important to note the plurality of parentage. By the women's reports, there were 15 men who were biological fathers to a total 25 children. This same plurality is also seen in the mothers. Although I interviewed 10 mothers, there were 13 biological mothers. Both of the African American mothers in this sample had expanded

their families by informally adopting children of family members who were unable to care for their children (see Stack, 1974). Drug use, not desiring parental responsibility, and unknown fathers were noted as reasons why these moms adopted their family member's children. One of the mothers became a mother for the first time at age 18 by informal adoption.

The situation of the fathers is highly concerning. Only two mothers reported a total of three fathers who financially contributed or were otherwise involved in their children's lives. One father was the only parent, out of the twenty eight total parents (mothers and fathers) related to this study who had a job that supplied private insurance for his one daughter. Four mothers reported that they had nothing to do with the fathers because they were known to be violent or abusive. Two mothers reported that their children's fathers were incarcerated. Also, four mothers referenced drug abuse and addiction by their children's fathers. Not all mothers talked about all the fathers in great detail, and there is much unknown about these men. This is primarily because the fathers were not the focus of the interview. All but one mother had serious concerns about their suitability as fathers. The lack of suitability of these men as fathers becomes a defining feature in why these women parent alone.

At the time of the study, seven of the 10 moms were stay-at-home moms. Two moms were employed part time, and one was employed full time on a temporary status. A fourth mom had recently been hired and was slated to start work within a few days. A significant portion of the sample was unemployed due to a disability that prevented

them from taking up paid employment. Three of the four mothers who were disabled, were disabled due to a workplace injury. All four had been disabled long term.

In terms of medical care, children fare much better because of policy provisions that ensure children's health. As noted earlier, only one child had private health insurance, while her half-sibling had none. The remaining children under 18 are covered by Medicaid. Most of the children in this study are healthy and able, but not all of them. Two children were reported to have severe conditions that qualified them for SSI (Supplemental Security Income). One was reported to be mentally disabled and another has a form of bone cancer.

All of the moms had a good work history prior to certain life altering events that made paid employment not possible or not optimal for a period of time. Before becoming disabled, the four disabled women were all employed, some worked several jobs at a time to support their families. The average educational attainment was twelfth grade, or high school graduate. Three moms reported their highest level of education as grades 8, 9 and 11. One of these moms had completed her GED since then. Another mom left school to work and help her own single mother support their family. The two highest levels of education were junior and sophomore in college. Two moms were currently taking college courses on campus and on-line. A total of five mothers had some education after high school. Several reported training and certificates obtained including entry level brokerage, massage therapist, an Associate's degree in graphic design, medical transcriptionist, and car titles.

Mothers identified as much with future educational goals as they did with their current situation. Two mothers reported educational goals to earn both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. A total of five mothers expressed plans to complete a Bachelor's degree. Their goals for those degrees centered on helping careers in criminal justice, teaching, children's ministry, counseling and art therapy. One mother expressed a desire to be an entrepreneur in business. Two other mothers expressed the desire to go to school for training, but were undecided on what to pursue. Three mothers were more interested in simply returning to paid employment and using their current experience and training. One mother, with the most fragile health conditions, had goals focused on the wellness of herself and her family.

The income that these mothers lived on was small. None in the sample currently had a full time, permanent, career track job with benefits. One mother was employed in a full-time temporary position, and presumably not compensated as a permanent employee would be. Two mothers were employed in part time, entry level or non-career track, service sector jobs and earned close to minimum wage with no benefits. One mother, remains without benefits after six years with her employer. Both employed mothers report their own benefits from this kind of work, like attending college and time for mothering. Only two of the mothers reported that three fathers contributed financially. Three mothers said their main source of income was a type of disability benefit or retirement disability. One disabled mother stretches her son's disability income to provide for them both. One mother reported using up her retirement savings from her previous government job.

It is difficult to report how mothers are arranging support. Mothers stretch resources to adapt to time limits, support, moving, growing children, and relationships. All of the mothers reported receiving some type of government support. Eight out of ten mothers said they relied on community outreaches, such as food banks, for support. Six mothers reported some family support, and four of those indicated that family support was a key form of support. Four mothers indicated a church provided support, including spiritual support.

It is also difficult to judge what combination of factors make a situation more desperate or successful than another. By the mothers' own reports, those who received abundant family support of housing, child care, and finances reported being grateful, "lucky," and felt their situation would be a "disaster" without it. The emotional strain of mothers who are in poor health or who have children in poor health is also a heavy concern for mothers. They indicated the unmet desire to go back to work in order to be around people, earn money, provide for their family, and feel successful. Additional concerns are the lack of safe housing one mother continually faces, despite relocation. In general, older moms who have been single for various periods of time expressed being "used to it." Mothers who had more recently become single mothers expressed difficulties associated with their new role. Those who have had to relocate long distances also expressed the difficulties of living without established relationships nearby. Moms with older children talked of how their children were able to help around the house. Moms with younger children spoke of how their children depended on them for everything.

2.2.1. Participant Profiles

Norma

Norma is a 25-year-old Hispanic mother of two, who works in the service industry part time. She is approximately a sophomore in college; she takes on-line classes. Norma became a mother for the first time at age 19, while living with her boyfriend and father of her first child. She currently lives with a new boyfriend, who is the father of second child. She previously had full-time job with benefits, but was fired due to interracial issues with a former boss. Norma prefers her new work arrangements, so that she can devote more time to her children and completing her Bachelor's degree. She owns her own home, but struggles to make mortgage payments. Her first child has private insurance through the child's father, and her second child has no insurance at all at the time of the interview. She has applied for Medicaid and CHIPs, but has not been notified if she qualifies. She has previously used WIC and Medicaid support. Her primary sources of support are her parents and boyfriend. Both fathers are involved with their children.

Mary

Mary is a 42-year-old African American mother of four, who is disabled due to a work injury, congestive heart failure and other health problems. She was awaiting an operation at the time of our interview. She became a mother for the first time at age 18, and subsequently made a critical decision to leave her neighborhood and pursue "a better life". Mary has twenty years of success in retail management and is supported in part by retirement disability. She has been married twice, leaving both men due to drug use and gang associations. She has two biological children and has informally adopted two children from two separate family members. One child has bone cancer. She supports their family with her disability support, her daughter's disability support, a monthly child support check, Food Stamps, and community outreach support. Her disability support does not include all of her medical expenses and she feels forced to choose between her medicine and paying rent. She fears eviction for not paying her rent recently. Her family refuses to help her due to her past success.

Flor

Flor is a 23-year-old Hispanic mother of one, who works part time in the service industry. She is approximately a sophomore at a local community college. She became a mother at age 15, lives her parents and has never been married. She has been at her current job for six years where she

continues to work for near minimum wage without benefits. The father of her child left the country soon after the baby was born and is not involved with his child. She lives at home where she has abundant family support, including being on her parent's insurance. She is deeply spiritual and attends church where she has many single mother friends for emotional support. Her son is on Medicaid, and she previously used WIC.

Alice

Alice is a 40-year-old African American mother of three, who is disabled due to a work injury. A daughter of a single mother, she quit school in the eleventh grade in order to work and support her family. She became a mother for the first time when she was 18 by informally adopting a child from a family member who was on drugs and the father was unknown. Later she married and had two biological children; she left her husband due to his bad influence on their lives. None of the fathers are involved in their children's lives. She worked two and three jobs until an injury caused her to have to learn to walk again. She is supported by a disability check, Food Stamps, and her children under 18 have Medicaid. Alice does not have family support, but she does have extended family members that depend on her for support.

Hester

Hester is a 29-year-old Caucasian mother of one, who is disabled due to blindness which began during pregnancy. She became a mother in her mid-twenties and has never been married. She lives on her own with her child. Before losing her eyesight, she trained and worked as a medical transcriptionist, and with her improving eyesight, she plans to resume this work in the near future. She is supported by Medicaid, Disability, WIC, Food Stamps, and public housing. The father of her child is not involved due to drug use, violence, and incarceration. Her aunt is a key source of family support.

Charlotte

Charlotte is a 34-year-old Hispanic mother of five, who has recently relocated from out of state. At the time of the interview, she was scheduled to start a full time job the following week. She first became a mother at 16, and married the father of her children. Because she has moved from out of state, she is in the process of arranging public and social support. She sees herself as a single mom throughout her marriage,

as her husband has been repeatedly incarcerated. He is not involved in her children's lives for these same reasons. Her new job will start in a few days. She reports in the past having lived for periods of time in shelters with her children. She is currently renting a house but plans to move to avoid a landlord who has raised the rent every month her family has lived there, making it increasingly unaffordable. She does not have close ties with friends or family in the area who can offer private forms of support.

Marilla

Marilla is a 38-year-old Caucasian mother of one, who is disabled due to a work injury. She was previously married but left her husband because he was violent. Marilla graduated from high school and had a strong work history until her permanent back injury at work. She received worker's compensation. When her employer suddenly stopped paying the compensation, she sued and won. She has used up her settlement money, but she still disabled and without any support. She has applied for SSI, and is awaiting notification of qualification. Her son is mentally disabled and receives disability support, which is their main source of income. Additionally, she uses a wide array of community resources, church support, and some family support. She and her son live in public housing, but have extensive problems with crime including a recent break-in and robbery. About a year ago she faced an intruder who threatened to rape her and murder both her and her son. She fought him, called the police, and later participated in his identification which led to his arrest and conviction.

Erin

Erin is a 26-year-old Caucasian mother of one, who has recently left her long-time, fulltime marketing job with benefits due to sexual harassment from a new boss. She is approximately a junior in college, but has not made the progress that she would like since she became pregnant with her child in her early twenties. She is about to complete her training and receive her certificate as a massage therapist. She previously lived with the father of her child, but left him because of drug use, violence, and psychological problems. He is not involved with his child. However, his family does provide substantial support including providing housing and childcare. She is currently in the process of applying for a variety of public support. Additional means of support include her family and community support.

Anna

Anna is a 26-year-old, Hispanic mother of two, who is currently unemployed. She left her government job to be home with her children after the birth of her baby. She is assertively looking for a job because she has been supporting her family from her retirement fund, which has now been depleted. She temporarily lived with her mother until public housing became available. She previously lived with the father of her children until their relationship ended. She also supports her family with WIC, Medicaid, and Food Stamps. Anna does not have health insurance. Additionally she is in the process of obtaining car dealership licenses and hopes to be an entrepreneur. Her mother provides some support.

Jenny

Jenny is a 26-year-old Hispanic and Native American mother of five, who has recently relocated from another area of the state. She became a mother for the first time at age 16 and eventually married the father of their five children. She left her husband due to violence. She works physical labor in a warehouse, which pays better than clerical work. The job is temporary and she does not know how long it will last. It does not provide her benefits or insurance. At the time of the interview, she and her children were living in a shelter. She will move into an apartment provided by a church based housing program, in the days that follow the interview. Her children have Medicaid support and she is in the process of applying for different types of public support. She has applied for TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), but finds it impossible to get through the system finding a case manager that will not talk to her on the phone, meet face to face or reveal her email address. She indicated that she will likely rely on her earnings and not public support.

2.3 Interviews

Research began after receiving thesis committee review and Institutional Review Board approval. Community agencies and social networks were contacted to begin arranging interviews. Interviews were conducted in private rooms of outreach facilities, a room where the mother worked, or a private corner of a restaurant. In one case the interview was initiated in person and completed by phone due to transportation concerns of the mother. All other interviews were conducted face to face. All locations

were agreed to or selected by the mothers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Women were later assigned pseudonyms because I found that women in the pilot study tended to pick identifiable names, such as middle names. Women in this study were named after icons of single motherhood with small incomes.

The interview questions were open-ended and limited to twelve in number. The questions were guided by previous research. Interviews lasted about one hour, ranging from about half an hour to almost three hours. The open ended questions acted as a general guide for the interview. Women consented to the voluntary, audio-recorded interview and were given the option to stop at any time.

2.4 Analysis of the Data

This study used grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Straus & Corbin, 1990) as the method of analysis. There are two approaches to grounded theory: inductive and deductive. The Glasserian approach is primarily inductive analysis, and the Straussian approach utilizes an inductive-deductive approach (Straus and Corbin, 1990). This study relied more heavily on the Straussian approach to grounded theory and employed open, axial, and selective coding (Straus and Corbin, 1990).

With talk as the data analyzed, the process of formal and informal coding began. Interviews were transcribed, and read for general themes of each mother's discourse. As more interviews were conducted, those were each read for themes. In grounded theory, the objective is to gather and organize data so that structure and process are integrated (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Themes refer to conceptually similar data which emerge through the process of dissecting information into categories. Using the

inductive-deductive approach, both broad and narrow themes were looked at. When all interviews were completed, transcripts were re-analyzed to organize both broad and narrow concepts of data. Smaller themes had already emerged in the initial analysis process. Once a clear set of dominant themes emerged, they were grouped into larger discursive themes. Finally, within each category there was an organizing of different properties and dimensions of these themes. Naming was an ongoing part of the process in order to best describe and explain the discourse.

Axial coding helped to identify relational elements of the discourse including a frame, context, possible causal conditions, action strategies, and consequences. Context is an essential component of the meaning making process and has a direct effect on meaning making. Causal conditions were elements of the context that contributed to the current situation. Action strategies are the ways women respond to their context. Consequences are the results of those actions. As previous research has contextualized women, motherhood, and poverty as socially constructed states, it is particularly important to use an approach that incorporated causes, affects, and the overarching frame for their discursive positions. As this research looks at the discourse of mothers and examines the role of powerful social forces exerted upon them, it takes on a slightly critical approach. This is also predicated on the approaches of previous research. It places priority on Seccombe's (1999) criticism of research that the poor tend to be dehumanized in social research. The desired result of the present study is to give voice to these women's experience of mothering on small incomes.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

3.1 Framework of Matriarchy

The question of this research is to discover the discursive themes of single mothers raising their families on small incomes. The mothers who participated in this study see themselves in roles that are solely in control of taking care of their families. They care for their families, often when few others are willing to help. They are assuming both traditional male and female roles of provider, protector, and nurturer. Their discourses revolve around four matriarchal themes. The first theme, centrality, places the mother as central figure who provides, protects and nurtures. The second theme, solidarity, refers to strong bonds mothers form with their children. The third theme characterizes the moral economy that mothers use to negotiate through difficult circumstance with discourses of values and priorities. Finally, the fourth theme of support, describes how these women are able to manage their families on small budgets and still negotiate their central role as single parent. Erin, a mother of one, talks about discovering matriarchy and its moral economy when talking about the father of her child.

I was like-wow- you are not the most honest person. And probably a lot of the reason why you and this person made this baby and fell in love with him was based on a lot of bullshit. And that does not necessarily feel good. Especially your pride, because you feel like you got played. But in the end, I totally got the better end of the deal...there is total security in the worry of responsibility. And wanting to take your life to a better place

and wanting to do something better for your child. For another generation. There is indeed something better to offer other than your own self destruction...I'm not guessing—I know. He's not happy. And that does not make me feel good. I wasn't going out to make him feel unhappy. It's tragic all at the same time. (Erin)

3.1.1 Context

The context of the mothers in this study is that good mothering is not predicated on financial or material resources but on a mother's ability to work around challenges. Poor mothers can be good mothers. The matriarchy of this study is a paradox. The women have assumed power in a space that others have vacated. The mothers in this study did not set out to become single mothers, nor did they desire to do so with small financial resources. The mothers in the present study spoke very positively of their mothering experiences, bonds with their children, and values for mothering.

3.1.2 Possible Causal Conditions

Societal structures and the ideologies that form them are at work. Single mothers are not independently responsible for arranging parenting alone. Nor were they the cause of the threats to their family such as abuse, crime, drugs, or other negative influences. However, public debate and discourse has often cast poor, single mothers as bad mothers who breed and raise criminals. Historically and currently, such discourse has perpetuated policy that reflects these ideologies. Social structures may indeed create economic inequality for those committed to mothering work. Finally, the women themselves are agents negotiating their own exertion against these social forces.

3.1.3 Action Strategies

Mother's agency comes from meeting the immediate needs of their family. They extend families ties to facilitate support such as childcare or a place to live. They provide financial income by arranging work to accommodate mothering commitments and the pursuit of future prosperity. The moms of this study supplement paid employment income by arranging other types of public support, such as Medicaid for their children. They make use of community support to feed and clothe children, when needed. They arrange housing through public, community or family resources seeking to provide safe and affordable places to live. They protect their children through daily practice, and in some cases, true heroic action. When ends do not meet, mothers sacrifice themselves to fulfill her family commitments.

3.1.4 Consequences

This sample group was found to be highly resourceful. They select public and private resources that most effectively meet their needs. They nurture their children with time, attention, and affection. They protect them from potential and actual threats. The lack of material goods or finances is not viewed to have a negative effect on their kids, but serves to build internal values. Parenting alone is harder, but it is believed to strengthen them, not weaken them. Therefore, poor mothers may be good mothers. Their centrality, solidarity, moral economy, and support are the themes of their discourse. This study gives voice to their lived experiences.

3.2 Theme One: Centrality

These mothers are in the center of the action and exhibit great agency. Silva (1996) defines mothering agency as “active subjects of history, who create cultural meanings and moral values for themselves and for others” (p. 32).

The best part of being a single mom is- for anything- they come to me. It makes me feel better knowing that I am wanted and that I'm needed. Not so good part? When they think that I'm the only person that can do anything for them, which is true for the most part. I am glad. (Norma)

The mothers see themselves as the one who receives the credit and takes the blame.

If I make a mistake, I'm like, sorry. I'm not perfect. She' an old soul. She is very sensitive, but she is very understanding. Even if she can't necessarily understand the situation. (Erin)

To ensure success and good parenting, they select who and what will be a part of their children's lives. This includes a simultaneous negotiation that moves others to the margins and their relationship to the center. The moms place themselves in the center of the children's well being and the children are the focal point of their decision making. The result is mothers take care of their children because they are the primary, and sometimes the only, person who has their best interest at heart. She is central because she is principal provider, protector, and nurturer.

3.2.1 Marginalized Men and Others

Many of the mothers have assumed their matriarchal positions as the result of men who they view as unsuitable for them or their children.

I was more committed to that relationship than he was. He was a drug dealer or a dope fiend whatever you want to call it. Whatever they want to call themselves. I left him. I packed up my kids. My son, three-months old; my daughter was five. I packed up my kids. I took whatever I could get into diaper bags, and a backpack and I left. I left

everything behind. Because once again I was in a position that I didn't want my kids to have to be in. And I thought that that would jolt him into reality and he'd say I love my wife and my kids. Two weeks later I went to get more stuff, more clothes. The apartment was empty; he was sleeping on the corner with a blanket- high as kite. Didn't even know I was there. Couldn't tell me where the kid's things were. When I left him, we had everything; I mean I was working a good job. He was working a good job...everybody envied us. (Mary)

Several mothers described dramatic episodes or processes of going into single mothering to do what they felt best for themselves and their children.

I would have continued to fight to get out of that neighborhood, to show my kids that there were better things in life. And my family—I have alcoholics, drug dealers- If my kids were around them; they probably would have been sexually offended. You know, things that I went through growing up. (Mary)

Often times the rewards of freedom, security, and safety came with great costs. Others, found the fathers unable or unwilling to participate in parenting, and mothers were unwilling to go to court to involve them financially and physically. Moms also expressed concerns and reluctance to date because of who would be involved in their children's lives. Even others, who were welcomed in their lives, take supportive roles.

Like I said my boyfriend is there, also. I get them all to myself. I mean, I kind of decide what my daughter does. I kind of make the decisions for them. I am very controlling, very controlling, so that kind of makes me feel better. Just because I know that I can control everything and maneuver everything to how I want it. To be how I want them to be. How I want them to act. How pretty much, they are- because of me. I know it's kind of weird. (Norma)

And what choices that I make- it affects them, whether they were right or wrong. It affects them. So as far as trying to date, I never really got involved with that, because there's too much going on, you know? People don't walk around with the words "child-molester" on their head.... It's who gets into my life. (Alice)

Another mother describes how her boyfriend, who is presumably able to help financially, but walked away from his parenting role. She describes her reasons for not asking for his financial support for their two children:

I believe you're a grown up. You know your responsibilities. And I am not the one to tell you what your responsibilities are, because I mean, you should know them. (Anna)

One mother is negotiating patriarchy with a boyfriend who is the father to only one of her two children.

He didn't like it all. Just because he sees himself as being there and he wants to have a say. We kind of bump heads on that every now and again. He speaks his mind but it's not always—His opinion doesn't always count. In a way it does and in a way I basically do what I want... It's gotten a lot better now because before I was like you're not her father. You know, you are with me, but you are not part of her. (Norma)

Flor realized her sense of patriarchy through geographic and discursive space. Her son's father moved to El Salvador and married someone else, freeing up her mental and emotional energy to focus on her son.

I get all his love. All the hugs and kisses. Other than just having him there, you know that he knows that I'm always going to always be there for him. Even though his dad may not be. He can always count on me, no matter what. (Flor)

It is important to point out that many mothers expressed feeling that this separation did not cause suffering and was beneficial to their children.

I wish that their fathers could have been in their lives but they weren't. I'm glad they didn't suffer because of it. (Mary)

3.2.2 *Gatekeeping*

Once these moms became single mothers and unsuitable fathers were moved to the sidelines, moms continue to negotiate their central role. Moms expressed ways that

they censor, edit, modify, and are transparent about information they pass on to their children. One mother of five has left her marriage due to domestic violence; she talks about how her children can handle the truth when it comes from her. Jenny talks about seeing that some things cannot be kept from them, so she finds it better if she is the one who constructs the reality for them.

...they are very understanding. They've been great through all this moving and switching schools. They are not too happy about it, but they understand. It's something that we have to do right now. They see. I can't keep things from them. But they can handle the truth. Of course you have to make sure it's age-appropriate. I noticed that they appreciate it more when you're actually honest with them about what's going on. It's actually a lot better when you tell them what's going on. Kids are so smart. They're like little sponges and everything. They really catch on really quick. And what's going on, whether you want them to know everything or not- they know what's going on. I used to just keep them in the dark and they were getting pretty angry and starting to act out, but now it's a lot better. Now that we talk more about things. (Jenny)

Mary saw her role as gatekeeper was to prevent the father's illustration of a negative lifestyle for her children to follow.

I never say anything negative about their fathers. My son didn't know until he was 18 that his dad had a severe drug problem, and he only knows because his dad told him. And everybody is saying that I would poison him with this... because sometimes when you put the negative thought into kid's lives, then that's the way they go. You know, he could be like, I want to be like my father. My father was a gang banger or a drug dealer and so- I just made sure that when he was on drugs and when he was doing good-even though he didn't give anything financially-I made sure that my son knew who he was. (Mary)

A mother of a 4-year-old negotiates alternative relationships to her father.

Pretty much everyone that I allow in her life has her best interest. If they don't they're not allowed in. She has a lot of versatility of what she's exposed to. I've got a really good support system, and she's got a really good support system. (Erin)

Erin is prepared to negotiate her gatekeeping role with her daughter when she is older.

I don't feel guilty that she doesn't have a dad. I have no control over that, whatever I did have control over, I gave it my all...I don't want to be the parent who explains. I'm not the parent that says you can't see you dad. You are not allowed around as long as you are still doing drugs and stuff. There is no need for him to be in her life. There is nothing positive. Though, if she ever has an issue with me about that- If she ever asks me about that- I will say you, well, you know, he was living in a tent. How can you see him? I'm sorry. I thought this was bad for you. And I really don't think that she will. She has a pretty good head on her shoulders. (Erin)

3.2.3 Hybrid Role: Provider, Protector, and Nurturer

Single mothers describe their mothering work in terms of providing, protecting and nurturing. By being a central figure, they take on many responsibilities. Some of the older moms who have been single parents with limited finances for periods of time in their lives describe parenting in naturalistic terms. Alice has been a single mother for various lengths of time throughout her life. When she could no longer work due to a disabling injury, she now combines her protective role with the need for social support.

Being a single parent, and I'm not working. I just know how to do that. I know how to fit things in. To fit people in without interrupting what I have going on. (Alice)

Charlotte, a mother of five describes how being a single mother has made her strong.

It doesn't bother me at all. Like I said, I've done this off and on. My husband has been in and out of jail all the time. It's like I've been a single mom when I was married. I've had that title, the Mrs., on the front of my name. It's kind of peaceful to me, you know. [laughing]. I'm used to it now and it doesn't hurt me as much as it did hurt...I'm used to hard times. It's actually been worse. We've been in a shelter and things like that. This is a piece of cake. You know when you've been a single mother for so long, times can be hard. People would think it would be overwhelming. But, I've been doing it so long, you go with the flow...You've got to be patient, stand on your two feet and don't feel sorry for yourself. (Charlotte)

A young mother of a four-year-old and an infant has recently become a single mother and struggles with the reality of central and multiple roles.

I mean, I really like it because I love my kids. But other than that it's just really hard. Because everything comes on you. I mean you have them. And you don't have anybody else, and they depend on you. And you don't depend on anybody. (Anna)

Erin, a mother of a four year-old, offers a critical deconstruction of moms going into marriage and pregnancy and relying on a man to be there to help.

Regardless if she is married or not... I could not imagine myself going into a relationship with somebody and trying to have a baby. And just giving them your trust. Trusting them to make the money...well maybe I could if I had all the degrees and the work experience, because if anything happened, I can go take care of myself. But I don't get the women who go into a relationship and go into pregnancy having a baby for somebody, or anything like that. Because when the shit hits the fan, it's going to come back to you. So you really need to try and be prepared.... I mean we are the women. We are the moms. We are the ones who are going to have to do it all in the end. Even if you are lucky enough to have a father in place...I don't get that. I am a product of my situation. (Erin)

One young mother has fled an abusive situation and finds her new breadwinning role rewarding. Since she made the decision to leave her husband, she has made arrangements to live at several domestic violence shelters along with other forms of support. She was hired temporarily to work in a warehouse doing physical labor, which is traditionally a male job, but it pays well enough to support her and her five children at this time.

I am our main source of income right now. I mean right now I'm not having to pay for rent or anything because we are staying in a shelter. I'm trying to apply for TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families], but they are giving me the big run-around. I'm actually ready to stop trying. I'm tempted just to not even bother. I'm sure we can be okay because I'm making pretty good money right now, as long as I can

keep working. We should be okay. I'm already making more than what my husband was. So that's great! [She is smiling and laughing].
(Jenny)

Marilla's life is marked with defining moments. She is a physically disabled mother who also parents a mentally disabled son. She left a violent husband and worked at a discount retail store, where she was injured. A year before, she woke up one night with a knife to her head when a man was attempting to rape her and to kill her and her son. She fought him off and called the police. Later, she joined other single mothers, whom he had been targeting, to testify against him to put him in prison. She talks about her protective role.

Everybody says I do a good job raising him. We go to church, like I said. I help him with anything he needs help with at school and homework and stuff like that. I'm just more vigilant of people around me. Everybody says I'm a nice person but at the same time I do whatever it takes to protect me and my child first. To keep anything bad from happening. (Marilla)

More recently Marilla's public housing apartment was broken into.

I think it was about a week ago that me and my son, we went to the trash can to take the trash out. Somebody broke in my house. I had to call the police. They had to come fix my door. They stole one of my purses out of my house. So, that was a bunch of identity stuff to go through to get all my cards and stuff back. They stole my wallet. It had all my identity stuff in it.... I thought it was weird. I mean the door was like bashed in, and split down the middle, and just went, Oh man! Yep. They kicked it right from the middle from the top to the bottom....Every time I go out of the house he is with me. I don't never leave him in the house alone. That is something that I don't do. And luckily that's all they took.
(Marilla)

Erin dismisses the idea that single mothers can't be good mothers.

We have looked for a lot of warning signs. I have been freaked out because my family is in education. I was a psych major. I have done a lot of child psych stuff. I was reading all the books, and I was like Oh,

God! I have really fucked her up. She does not have a family and all the stuff that I would have wanted her to have, if I had a kid. But it was really just the one thing, but in everything else she is okay. That's the best part about being a single parent. (Erin)

Flor also sees herself as a good mom when she gets involved in her son's schooling; she is not concerned about what her son's teacher thinks about her financial or marital status.

But not because I'm a single mom. I make sure he's not missing anything. That he's doing good...that he can read and write, focusing him, and that his education level is good. (Flor)

3.3 Theme Two: Solidarity

The matriarchs of this study described strong bonds with their children. Many describe their relationship as very close and improving since they became single mothers. These moms see themselves surviving with and because of their children. Their bond is a powerful form of protection. They construct a circle of trust and love that few enter. One young mother of a pre-school child notes the irony of lots of time to bond.

You get all of their attention and your child just loves you no matter what. Mommy, I love you, mommy. So you know what's going on at all times... You have complete control over the situation, if anything happens it's your fault...I'm with my son 24/7 so it's like when you get that time away from them- you miss them. (Hester)

As the sole decision maker, this mother describes the importance of what she does affects her son.

To make sure that my kids, my priorities come first. But I do everything I can for his well-being. Everything you do you have to reflect. Every decision that you make will affect your child. He comes first. Before I do anything too off the wall or crazy. Take care of myself. Take care of him. (Hester)

Raising children with disabilities fosters an interdependency between this single mother and her children.

So as far as the injury, I had to learn to walk all over again. So, I pretty much had to crawl around the house. My daughter, it was her first year in elementary school. She was coming from Head Start. So, I pretty much raised her to do whatever they can do on their own... I totally depend on her and she totally depends on me. (Alice)

One mom has days that do not end due to family member's health issues, including her daughter's bone cancer and her own congestive heart failure. She describes their nights as if they were days.

Because of my health issues, I can't sleep a lot. So I'm up throughout the night, I'm doing laundry or cleaning house or reading my Bible or just catching up on something on television. I am constantly checking up on my children because my son has severe asthma... I peek in. I peek in on them all the time. And it's funny because they peek in on me, too. She does it to me and I'm like, you scare me when you do that. She says I want to see if you are OK, and my son- I can always hear him. So, I'm up a lot throughout the night. (Mary)

3.3.1 A Reflection of Each Other

Because of their closeness, and intense experiences together, these mothers often have an identity that is closely tied to who their kids are. It's not simply the acts of mothering but how well their children develop that presents the mothering self as a good mother. They present their children as people they are proud of. They often contrast how well their children are doing with the negative life events they have been through.

If you met my kids, you would be like- Wow! And everybody says, especially with my son, you guys did such a good job. I'm like- no. No. It's just me. I get all credit. They are very well-rounded kids. (Mary)

At first it was hard, but it seems like now, I know I'm a good mom. It's important to me. I like it. I cannot see myself without my kids. And I have a lot of kids in my house besides my own. At first it was hard. I've been doing it for so long. It's just like breathing. It means a lot to me. (Charlotte)

Jenny, a mother of five who has left an abusive husband, talks about being questioned, even by total strangers on why she had so many children.

They try to make you feel bad for having so many children. Sometimes I would feel awkward. God! How many kids do you have? Do you know what causes that? Well, yeah. But it only takes one time, and I didn't want to. I've gotten to where I don't feel guilty about it anymore...I am blessed to have the wonderful children that I have. I always get compliments on them. They are really extraordinary kids. (Jenny)

3.3.2 Emotional Support for Each Other

One mom describes how they cope with disabilities, sickness, financial hardships and other stresses by taking comfort from each other.

We don't really get out and do a whole lot. We spend a lot of home and family time. I guess most kids would be bothered by it. But it's comforting to us. A really big comfort. (Mary)

It's rewarding to me. I love my kids and my kids love me. It's great. You get that unconditional love from your children that you might not have gotten from your parents or your husband. (Mary)

3.4 Theme Three: Moral Economy

A defining feature of matriarchy among single moms with small incomes is the moral economy that negotiates values in life. It is a means of mothering that involves defining what money can do and what it cannot. Mothers in the present study emphasize inexpensive ways to bring up good kids. They put emphasis on filling needs without spending a lot of money. Mothers in this study talked of money in terms of

buying diapers and paying light bills. It is juxtaposed against “other” parents who use money to substitute for time, attention and love.

3.4.1 *Self-sacrifice*

When parenting on small incomes, single mothers stretch all their resources to make ends meet. But, often it’s just not enough to pay the rent, buy groceries, and cover health care costs. Matriarchy among these mothers is a moral economy of situational values and priorities. She typically places herself as a very low priority. Several reported bad credit and “wasted” money on late payments. Despite any short or long term disadvantages, these moms often use expressions to indicate that it is all “worth it.” Mothers must negotiate around stress, which affects health and parenting abilities. Many speak of mothering as work that never stops. One mother identifies with the imagery of sacrificial mothering from a popular film:

Did you ever see the *Joy Luck Club*? When she leaves the twins. She is about to go off and die. She leaves the twin babies and gives everything she owns, the jewelry and stuff like that. That is a good mom and she’s got nothing left. She is totally going to go off and die. The last little bit of whatever she has whether it’s a valuable or if it isn’t. The last little bit she gives to her kids. (Erin)

An older mother of five has both a toddler and high school age children. She talks of mothering as a job that never stops and has no boundaries.

You know you just try harder and harder and harder and harder. You just have to keep pressing on and on and pressing on and pressing on. If there is a need. If there is something your kids need. You have to keep at it. Your job is never done, you know... it never ends. They become adults and next will come the grand kids. So it will never end. You always have to do. (Charlotte)

There is a strong sense that mothers have endured a lot of difficulties, and they would go through it all again. They also often talk of difficulties as worth the suffering.

I have had my ups and downs, but for what it's worth, the downs have made me stronger and the ups have been worth it. (Mary)

One young mother challenges the status quo on what doing the right thing is and how new ways can still have positive effects on her daughter.

Those are the kind of sacrifices you have to make. I was doing what I wanted to do, I was in school [university] and I was doing well...I think it's really cool to also be one of those kind of moms, who has gone to law school, whatever their dream was, before they have a kid and then they still do it. And then you can turn around and tell your kid I didn't set this all up. I didn't go to school and then get married, you know. I didn't do it the way the Joneses did. The way the rest of society did. The way you are not going to get criticism...But I had you, and I paid all the bills. And then I worked and I went to school and you came along with me. And you don't have an excuse not be strong. You have watched this happen; you are going to be strong. You are strong... They have gone through that. Nothing was handed to them... there is a lesson in here. A lesson in working for it. (Erin)

3.4.2 Time and Attention

In a moral economy, this group of moms feels that good moms spend time and pay attention.

I noticed that when I was with my husband, we would really spoil the kids. They had a lot of crap. Some of it wasn't even age-appropriate. I think we bought it because some of it was stuff that we always wanted. We got over run with all those things. We would buy like \$100 and \$60 toys and they would play with them for like a week. And they would just sit there or they would break. I notice that instead of us buying all that crap, they would rather spend time with us and be outside playing baseball or kickball. I started a family game night...all they really want is your attention and your love. And sometimes we act like we are too busy. I try to remember because my mom used to push me away. And that used to kill me. And all I wanted was a hug and she was like, get away... You need to stop. They are asking for something. You need to

see what it is and take the time....kids, they really appreciate individual time. (Jenny)

I believe that the time you spend with your child is more valuable than any penny that you can spend on them. (Mary)

3.4.3 Change

The lives of single mothers living on small incomes are characterized by change. Change for these mothers represents growth. One way that moms make sense of hard times and struggles, is that they see it is as temporary. They do not view their own lives as a static state, but one that grows, learns, and improves. Self is often defined by events of the past (often events they had little control over). However, they also choose a self that reflects their choices such in the present and in the future. The present self is often a mix of overcoming past negative events and the present that they have a greater deal of control over. Many of the moms negotiate their presentation of self as not only what she is doing now, but what she hopes to do in the future. Many spoke of aspirations to go to college to enter helping professions like teaching, law enforcement, counseling, and nursing. Additionally, these moms were in the process of obtaining or already had licenses such as massage therapist and car sales.

I mean, you go through steps. I call them steps. I know it's not always going to be the same. But it's hard right now. I know that it can change. (Anna)

When Norma is ask to describe her income situation she describes the temporary balances she makes between relationships, future success, and changing employment situations.

It's not the greatest right now. Just because I am going back to school, and before I started working here I was working at the bank. I made

enough to pay the bills on time now, just in case he was to leave or anything was to happen. (Norma)

Erin sees change as way to maximize opportunities.

Every opportunity that is open to me, just like everything else. It gives me ten other options. So another day I see another option, so I'm zigzagging all over the place. And that's one of the cool things about being a single mom, because I'm not tied down. I'm not relying on anyone other than myself. Really, and so I have more freedom to do stuff. (Erin)

3.4.4 Resourcefulness

Shopping is often stereotyped as a woman's job. These mothers do see themselves as consumers, but not as mainstream consumers. Their values are for resourcefulness, thrift, and bargain shopping. Many utilized community outreach centers which help supply groceries, baby supplies, clothing, or household goods free of charge. Women spoke of how they taught their children these values. They take great pride when buying name brand clothing for their children at thrift stores, and painting garage sale furniture. They did comparison shopping, cut coupons, conserved electricity, and found free and inexpensive activities. They cut and styled their own hair, as well as their children's. When they found bargains at the grocery store, they stocked up. They often spoke of the way other people shop and, by comparison, they presented selves as smart and resourceful. Mary describes how she stretched her food stamps to receive the most value out of them.

I received food stamps for about four months. And what I did with my food stamps is I went and bought all meats. It was \$114 a month. One month I would spend the whole \$114 on meat.... I have a regular refrigerator and a deep freezer- it comes in handy- I can freeze the

meat...Nobody thinks that I'm suffering or struggling because I don't look I am. (Mary)

Hester also feels it is important to negotiate her role as a consumer and provider.

When you're a single mom, and don't have all the money you can't spoil them rotten. You can't just give them everything they want. Well, you can but I mean you can't just go out and spend and spend like some of their other friends. But it's not a bad thing. It just means there's more quality time...You learn how to bargain shop. You can find stores that are a lot cheaper that have good quality clothes and toys. (Hester)

3.5 Theme Four: Support

Part of the matriarch's commitment to her family is to garner forms of support. Being able to reach out for available lifelines is what enables her to provide for her children when paid employment is unavailable or inadequate. In their discourses, mothers identified ways organizations, institutions, and individuals make a positive difference. They also discussed social systems and individuals that make access to resources difficult.

3.5.1 Private Support

Private support systems are highly unique forms of support to a mother from family, friends, and other individuals within their social network. For example, one 23-year-old mother lived at home, so she did not have to pay rent or be responsible for her home; she had abundant extended family in the home to serve as caregivers. She was able to go to school, be on her parents insurance, and work a part-time job. She also enlisted forms of help from her church, including spiritual support and emotional

support from single mothers who share her faith. The equilibrium that she has created from her own private support network, keeps her life relatively stable, and facilitates her optimism about her matriarchal role and her future. She would like to be on her own but acknowledges that it would be a “disaster” if she suddenly did not have this support. She distinguishes between their support and her dependency.

Like sometimes I feel like I just might get my own place. Just me and my son, you know. I don't want to be at home even though they don't pay for me and him. I just want to be more independent, you know, not living at home... I think I would feel overwhelmed if I had my own place. There are some days, I guess, I just want the liberty to feel that it's my own. (Flor)

Norma lives with her boyfriend, who is the father of one of her two children. She negotiates her mothering role around this. By living with him, they are able to pool resources together to pay bills. She is able to work part time, take on-line courses towards her Bachelor's degree, and utilize her parent's abundant help. She does not reject or accept the title of single mother but does see herself as the matriarch of the home saying, “I wouldn't say I'm a single mother, just because, like I said, I have his help....we are more complicated.” Before our private interview began at her place of employment, she had a friendly debate with the woman who referred her for the interview about what a single mother is and if she fits the definition. Norma admits that her parents and other people do see her as a single mother, but she negotiates her own view of self. She does not feel that her family resembles a traditional family, because her children have two dads, and her current relationship is interracial. She talks about how her parents see her; it is a way that elicits their help without even asking for it.

It's just in talking to them, telling them what I'm doing. What's going on. And like my stepmom- I wouldn't say nosey, but that's how they find out about stuff. But, most times if I can help it, I just don't tell them because I already know they're going to jump on it and try and do it before I can ask them. They are always just stepping in....Just because of that. Because they think that I pretty much do everything, but I have his help. (Norma)

Other women, such as Mary, find no support from their own family. She talked of the disheartening experience of helping others in her family but it was not reciprocated.

I really don't get a lot of other support. All my life I've taken care of others. I'm the youngest of nine kids. I got out of that lifestyle. I was the one that was successful. So I always took care of all of my family plus my own kids. The past five years I haven't been able to do that. And now those people are like- if I call them, they won't answer their phone because they think I need something. They would rather see me back in the neighborhood, back to that lifestyle. (Mary)

3.5.2 Public Support

For many of the women in this study private support is not widely available, and for some, not available at all. Many women reported being grateful for public assistance, but also expressed the desire to parent without public assistance. Public support in this thesis includes Medicaid, WIC, HUD, as well as community based forms of support such as food banks and shelters. Though organizations are able to organize powerful resources, many women found that help was also individualistic. How much help they received was often independent of organizational objectives or culture.

I have Medicaid, and he's got Medicaid, which helps because that can get really expensive. And besides insurance they have things like WIC and Food Stamps, which helps...At first, they put you on... and you're going why even bother doing this, but it helps pay for things like bread and milk...It's nice to have help, as long as you qualify, make sure all your paperwork is done on time...Because some people have a hard time. They get denied even though they're struggling, they get denied.

They don't qualify. And their kid goes without basically. You're getting the stuff your kids need: milk, cheese, cereal, things that are for protein, which helps keep them healthy and strong. (Hester)

Flor expressed that the stigma of using welfare support was not a concern to her because meeting needs was a bigger priority.

I just feel like if I needed it and it's available to me, well, I'm going to take it. I'm going to use it, you know. If I need that. Yeah, I'm going to take it. (Flor)

Sometimes organizations and individuals provide help that becomes problematic. Jenny, a mother of five, discusses how she was caught in a difficult situation when she found a good paying job across town and immediately had a chance to earn overtime pay. Yet despite shelter rules and childcare costs for two days, Jenny expressed her great gratitude as she perceived this as support. Depending on limited systems of support can be confounding.

I found a very nice lady who would watch them just two days. It ended up being like \$500 and that's out of my pocket. I hadn't signed up for [state subsidized childcare] or anything like that. I was like there goes my first paycheck. That lady, I told her we were like staying at a women's shelter. They have a rule you have to be there at five o'clock. And if you're not there to pick them up by five o'clock you get written up. And if you get so many write-ups then, of course, you are kicked out. (Jenny)

3.5.3 Individuals

Throughout their discourses, mothers spoke of making ends meet through the serendipitous help of individuals. Mothers also found individuals as obstacles to getting information that they needed. Jenny talked about how some case workers were more helpful than others. She also viewed individuals in her same circumstance as good

sources of informational support. Such support was instrumental in connecting Jenny with a program that would get her out of the shelter and into an apartment.

I was glad I met this one lady at the other shelter that I was staying at. Like where we were staying, some people really like to help and some people just don't. Like my caseworker was not. She was not a very nice person... I'm just like why are you working there? But anyway, I met a lady at the other shelter, who gave me the phone number to (a church-based housing program) (Jenny)

Mary's found a lifeline from an unlikely source: a creditor. Expensive life saving medicines left the rent unpaid and she was facing imminent eviction at the time of the interview. It is her former identity as benefactor-as-consumer that elicited the furniture dealer's response. Without the help of her benevolent furniture dealer, she and her family, with all of their health concerns (congestive heart failure, severe asthma, and bone cancer) would be on the street.

A company, ironically, that I owe money to, opened a trust fund for me. And they put \$1000 in a trust fund to go towards rent, food, and medical bills... The guy told me pay your medical bills; get your medicines, food, whatever the kids need. Get them started in school and we will have a check to you in time to pay your rent....He tells me, he goes, as long as you've done business with us. I've seen you come in here and you buy furniture for your nieces and nephews. A television for your step dad, because he's old and sick and he doesn't have a television to watch. You would put yourself on the line and make monthly payments on them. It's sad that nobody's there for you. Then he said he wanted to be there for me. (Mary)

The women receive help with gratitude; they value it by reflecting the spirit in which it was given. They distinguish between wanting to help and having to help others. One mother of two turned to her family when she had nowhere to go.

She had me in her house. And I was living with them in one room. A really small room with one closet. You know, she offered it to me with her heart. So it wasn't a problem...I was living in a small bedroom with

the two of them, one small closet. And you know kids need a lot of space. (Anna)

One mother must be highly resourceful and describes reaching out to the community when asked about her support.

I don't get none of that [laughing]. My son, he gets SSI [Social Security Insurance]...and out of that I take care of everything-surprisingly. Support, it's usually people at church. Or if I need help on something, there may be some community things out there that help you financially. Other than that I'm doing pretty good on my own...If I need something done usually I call my family and they come. But if it's paying bills or something, I usually call around in the community to see who can help. (Marilla)

Several moms indicated that they are the ones that other people depended on. Alice talks about her family relying on her.

I didn't realize until recently that I was part of the glue that keeps everything together. So, I'm the one that they can depend on...I keep thing pretty much together, as far as the group, they can depend on me. I have an 82 year-old grandmother that I have to see at least twice a week... for Christmas... I sponsored 27 children. On my income! Twenty-seven children. And they had some clothing and some toys and personal needs. You know basically what a child would need and want. (Alice)

3.5.4 Spiritual

Many moms utilized a belief system when they were caught in the clash of ideologies. Several spoke of turning to God to take care of them, or believing in Karma to receive back the good that they have done. One mother found herself completely overwhelmed when she did everything "right" and wound up injured and unable to walk or work long term.

I had to go to work and I didn't have a problem with that. So I worked two and sometimes three jobs...when I was injured on the job I couldn't go back to either job. So I depended on the system and places like this [community outreach center]. And I basically had a nervous breakdown because I couldn't work and I couldn't provide for my children. And they depended on me. So it just drew me closer to Christ, knowing that He was there for me and He wouldn't let me go without. So, basically it hasn't really been hard. (Alice)

Erin, embraces many types of philosophies, and believes that giving will be the way that she is provided for.

Karma. It's in every religion... to send out good energy and do good to other people. And it's going to come back to you ...and it's going to change you if you let yourself grow wiser instead of fighting it. You just take it. You look at in a way that can form you. (Erin)

Flor found herself turning to God as a young, desperate, pregnant teenager. She was having a hard time coming to terms with the situation when the father of her baby left the country, which at first seemed to make her situation worse.

It was real hard for me. But now it doesn't even matter because I know that God can send me the right man. He knows what He does. And what He did was right for me. It was good that he left. You know, I wouldn't always have to keep getting stressed. Is he going to give me money or not? That way I knew he was gone and that was it. So, ever since I was 15, I worked and supported him. (Flor)

This chapter discussed the results of matriarchal discourses in the lives of 10 single mothers with small incomes. These themes include centrality, solidarity, moral economy, and support. Mothers were central because men were marginalized, mothers practiced gatekeeping, and they formed a hybrid parental role of provider, protector and nurturer. Children and mothers had solidarity because mothers perceived the children and mother as reflections of each other and as providing emotional support to one another. Matriarchy is characterized by a moral economy that includes self sacrifice,

time and attention, change, and resourcefulness. Finally women arranged support for their families through private, public, individual and spiritual support.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

4.1 Matriarchal Framework

The mothers who participated in this study view themselves with the freedom and power to take care of their families. The term matriarchy is not without controversy, and definitions can vary widely over time and by academic discipline. For purposes of this thesis, I use it to indicate a discursive space where women are central or hold the primary position of power. It is appropriate to describe these mothers as matriarchs, because they see themselves as central to the well being of their children. Discursively, they have claimed this space for themselves alone, when others, such as fathers, have vacated their claim to a share of the center. Mothers maintain the boundaries by regulating what ideas enter into it.

These mothers are matriarchs because they view themselves as central to their family, having solidarity with their children, operating in a moral economy, and by garnering support. They serve a hybrid role of provider, protector, and nurturer which gives a sense of empowerment. Utilizing help from others is not viewed as marginalizing or weakening their position. If anything, it strengthens their ability to view themselves as single mothers who take care of their families. Hertz and Ferguson (1997) support this notion by defining self sufficiency as something that is not accomplished all by one's self. Lawson (2007) deconstructs individualistic ideologies

that lead us to believe that anyone achieving success did it autonomously and without help. When single mothers on small incomes need help, it is foremost because they are human beings and, secondly, because they are taking on huge responsibilities and commitments.

The overarching frame of matriarchy is a paradox, and not without controversy. From the feminist viewpoint, these mothers are located in a patriarchal economy and political system. These systems leave single mothers, particularly those with small incomes, in a vulnerable position (Pearce, 1978; Sidel, 1996). Therefore, the term matriarchy is justifiably debatable. However, the term used here is from the perspective of how these mothers talk about the way they view their own lives. It is important to consider both viewpoints within the theoretical implications of symbolic interaction (Mead, 1933) and presentation of self (Goffman, 1959).

For the mothers of this sample, mothering is not necessarily measured by dominant ideals, such as Hays' (1996) intensive mothering expectations. This study finds four discursive themes of centrality, solidarity, moral economy, and support. In comparison, the discursive themes of Elvin-Nowak and Thomason's (2001) are similar, but fundamentally different. Similarities are found within the themes. Elvin-Nowak and Thomason found mothers believe that extensive accessibility provides immunization from harm. The present study finds that centrality and perhaps solidarity serves to protect them. Their second discursive theme of happy mother/ happy child refers to the dynamic relationship and connection of a mother's happiness and her child's happiness. The solidarity that the mothers of the current study feel, does not necessarily emphasize

happiness, but both themes emphasize the powerful nature of this relationship to shape meaning. The third theme they found of separate spheres of work and home was not generally supported in the present study. This is most likely due to the high unemployment in the current sample and other factors that contribute to discourses of patriarchy.

Though the discursive positions of previous research and the present thesis are similar, they are fundamentally different from intensive mothering expectations. The key difference is that the present thesis focused on single mothers with small incomes, and the previous research included both married and affluent mothers. This distinction supports Oliker's (1995) axiom that parenting rationale depends on parenting contexts. This alternative discourse can be described as a patriarchal discourse. Like actual patriarchal societies, the discursive patriarchy of these mothers can be characterized by these moms' communication of their own autonomy, economy, and authority. Intensive mothering expectations are fundamentally different because, as feminist scholars (Oakley, 1974; Thurer, 1995) criticize, it is these ideals that entrench women in living up to them. The moms of this study communicated their involvement in negotiating their own unique mothering script.

The first fundamental difference is the women of this study abandon dominant ideologies, in order to utilize an alternate set of values and a moral economy. The moral economy enables mothers to emphasize the mothering activities that do not cost money. The second fundamental difference is the marginalization of dominant ideology, expert voices, and other external voices so that a mother can centralize her

own voice. These mothers present a self as a good mother. Matriarchy, it seems, is an ongoing socially negotiated process by which women escape dominant mothering ideologies in favor of constructing alternative discourses.

4.2 Theme One: Centrality

As the matriarchs of their family, they occupy the central position. This centrality involves men who are marginalized, and mothers serving as gatekeepers, and assuming hybrid parenting roles. Golden (2001) notes that women define their roles by what they are doing. She questions viewpoints that mask their responsibilities. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005) are even more critical of policy that negates their mothering work. The contrast is sharp. Welfare discursive formations (Foucault, 1972) depict those affected by poverty as passive subjects who exert no positive force. Hays (1996) points out passive images of mothers are images that no mother wants to be included in. The mothers of this study dismiss this passive image, in favor of their agency in providing for their families.

4.2.1. Marginalized Men and Others

The finding of marginalized men compares with a discursive theme found by Duncan and Edwards (1999), escaping patriarchy, where single mothers find benefits outside of men. Only a few fathers were physically, emotionally or financially involved in their children's lives. Matriarchal themes were found in all mother's discourses, and did not vary by father involvement. The matriarchal discourses were socially constructed in response to their own situation. Women did refer to dominant ideals of a woman and a man equally committed to each other and to raising children. But, they

also expressed views that this was not likely to happen or it would not happen easily. Therefore, they see themselves in the center and men on the periphery for quite some time to come. Even the mother who had a long-term boyfriend relegated him to the sidelines and labeled him as “help.” Because there are no others who are viewed to share a commitment to her children, motherhood is viewed as her central role. This expands our understanding of Duncan and Edwards’ (1999), discursive theme of escaping patriarchy, because this theme gives placement to the mothers in their own frame.

4.2.2. Gatekeeping

These women saw gatekeeping as an important function of the matriarchal environment. This finding resembles Jackson’s (2003) findings that neighborhood effects are dependent on how a mother interprets them, and mothers in the same neighborhood can create different experiences. In the present study, mother’s preferred to be part of the communication process in order to ensure the wellbeing of their children. Even when mothers were transparent about difficult information, they felt that it was important to add their own voice to the situation. In all cases, it was important that the communication be filtered and edited through their own voice. In many ways, the women endeavored for their voice to be the strongest and most influential voice in their children’s lives. With a mother’s voice centered, other voices, or events play a secondary role to her primary one.

4.2.3. Hybrid Role: Provider, Protector and Nurturer

Much has been written about women as nurturers and providers. Matriarchs in this study maintain their role through the commitments to responsibility which include providing, protecting, and nurturing. These findings support a variety of previous research. For example, it supports Silva's (1996) findings that women see themselves as providers and not dependents, and Coltrane's (1996) assertions that previously defined roles of mothering and fathering are blurring. The mothers of the present study assume both traditionally male and female responsibilities. Breadwinning is an interesting aspect, because a majority of moms in the study are not involved in paid employment. Potuchek (1992) points out that breadwinning is not just a behavior but the meaning attached to behavior. Reasons for their unemployment were varied, but all moms became resourceful to provide for their families' needs. Accessing various forms of support and help was a key way mothers were able to provide. By using such resources, women were able to provide and extend their nurturing role. This would correlate with Nelson's (2000) finding that single, low-income mothers were trying to maintain images of self-sufficiency. A key difference in these findings is that the mothers of this study negotiated this image out of acts of survival and not for mere image building alone.

4.3 Theme Two: Solidarity

This finding supports a wealth of research that indicates the positive effects from the commitments women make to mothering work (Sen 1983; Folbre, 1986; Dwyer & Bruce, 1988; The World Bank, 1993; Moore and Vaughan, 1994; Oliker, 1995; Moore, 1996). When women commit themselves to their children, there is a

growing body of research that shows that their children benefit from these commitments. The mothers of this study believe that their children are better off for their choices to raise them alone.

4.3.1. A Reflection of Each Other

The mother's present themselves through their children. These women feel that their mothering can be judged by their children. It was important for these women to present their children as well behaved, liked and admired by others, gifted, thankful, and many other positive attributes. They believe the struggling together has strengthened them both. The mother's values are passed on to her children. They do not see their children as harmed or having suffered and so the children are a type of "evidence" and "proof" that they are good mothers. They can credit their central and gatekeeping roles for minimized hurts and harms.

4.3.2. Emotional Support for Each Other

Hochschild (1983) called mothering work emotion work. Stevens (2006) presumed that it was the emotional satisfaction that enabled married wives to remain in unequal divisions of labor. It is perhaps a similar sense of emotional rewards that mothers perceive while in heavy parenting situations (Ceballo and McLoyd, 2002). Mothers view themselves as providing a great deal of nurturing and emotional support to their children. And they also perceive their children giving them all their hugs and kisses, unconditional love, and getting all their love. Such emotion serves to bond mothers with their children, and mothers find this part of single parenting highly positive and rewarding.

4.4 Theme Three: Moral Economy

The moral economy reflects the values of the discursive patriarchy of this study. Though the previously discussed themes in this study seem to correlate with previous discourse studies on motherhood (Elwin-Novak, 1996; Johnston and Swanson, 2006) it is the moral economy that distinguishes their discourses from other mothering contexts. Studies including middle class and married mothers found that they try to live up to intensive mothering expectations; the mothers of this study utilized alternative discourses. Oakley (1974) and Thurer (1995) assert that intensive mothering expectations entrench women in trying to live up to ideological tenets. The moral economy sets up an alternative set of ideals and values that women live by. Intensive mothering is characterized as being guided by experts, where the voices of medical and media experts marginalize mother's own voices. Single mothers on limited and small incomes expressed not having the time or money to worry about dominant ideals of motherhood. They, instead, employ alternative economic ideals of paying attention and spending time. Because their voice is central, they determine what is of value and affordable.

The moral economy is problematic in a feminist framework. These mothers believe money is still important for supplying everyday needs such as a place to live, diapers, food, and car repairs. They often try to out maneuver money and supply these needs through programs like community outreach or WIC. However, this discourse is problematic because it portrays women as resourceful; it may hide the fact that single

mothers are still vulnerable. They stretch resources and then employ self-sacrifice. Most of the mothers in this study did not have any health coverage for themselves. They spoke of bad credit, not being able to make mortgage payments, education left unfinished, late payments, and other mechanisms that jeopardize their short and long term futures.

Women take on these responsibilities at great personal costs (Oliker, 1995; Yamokoski and Keister, 2006; Folbre, 1987). Women found existing mechanisms, like C.O.B.R.A. “ridiculous” and completely unaffordable. Women quoted monthly rates of \$600-900 per month, which to these unemployed mothers is not justifiable in a moral economy. When a small income must pay rent, and feed children, and so much more, such large sums of money spent on self is unthinkable. Even married women who leave the workplace for a time after childbirth to commit to mothering (Gilbert, Holahan and Manning, 1981) may also forgo insurance, because it is not possible to depend on her husband’s employer for insurance. This study furthers a great sum of research that indicates that mothering responsibilities under current policies leave women vulnerable, and echo a call for greater attention to be paid to all mothers’ needs.

It is also problematic because these mothers find ways to mother successfully without the need for large sums of money, again, masking the work that mothers do. Feminist researchers have explicated the previously invisible and unpaid work that mothers do (Grace, 1998; Griffith and Smith, 2005). Dominant welfare imagery depicting poor mothers as lazy and dependent elides the fact that poor mothers have the same demands placed on them as more affluent mothers. There is a direct link between

poor, middle class, and affluent mothers in that their mothering work is devalued and unrecognized. When the unpaid work of mothers is recognized and valued, all mothers will benefit.

Grace (1998) warns us against dichotomizing mothers into categories, such as working and non-working. In the case of looking at mothers in terms of income or marital status, it is also problematic. Arbitrary poverty lines and other political mechanisms have long since favored one group of mothers over another (Grace, 1998). However, it almost always is the case that single mothers with small incomes are the most vulnerable. Researchers point out that many women are capable of passing through single motherhood (Albelda, Himmelweit, and Humphries, 2005) at some point in their lives. And many of those who are in and out of poverty and welfare are women and their children (Hays, 2003). Even within marriage, mother's vulnerabilities can be hidden when husbands become financially, physically, and emotionally unavailable.

4.4.1. Self Sacrifice

When mothers do all they can to make ends meet, they then turn to self sacrifice as a way to further meet their family's needs. Self sacrifice, for these mothers seems to embody the definition of themselves and good mothers. Many have former lives that were part of the mainstream ideology. They left behind a great deal of material possessions, better jobs, and more financially desirable situations. Grace (1998) warns us against locking women into expected sacrifice of self. It serves as a sad commentary on the incongruence of how much women are willing to do for their families and how little public policy makers are willing to do for mothers.

4.4.2. Time and Attention

Mothers of this study believe that in a moral economy it is better to pay attention and spend time with their children than burdening them with material things. Mothers believe that material goods are not what kids really want; they are obstacles to learning values in life. The women of this study do not problematize their time and attention. However, a common strategy for guaranteeing their time and attention was sacrifice of self. In the moral economy, a mother's time and attention are for her children. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005) point out that a mother's time and attention tend to remain invisible and not given value. They point out that it is valuable resource that women give to their children. As Bonilla de Ramos (1984) points out, "free time" is time spent in unpaid caring work. Golden (2001) concludes that how a mother chooses to spend her time is also how she chooses her identity and self presentation. The way that mothers in the present study indicated that they prioritize their children with their time indicates solidarity with children, and identity as a matriarch.

4.4.3. Change

Weaver and Ussher (1997) characterized motherhood by the change that it brings to women's lives. Single motherhood, particularly on a small income, can be characterized by the change that it brings to women's lives. Phoenix (1996) describes single motherhood as something women pass through. These mothers did not view the change as necessarily negative. For example, one mother expressed how grateful she was to be living with her children in a shelter. The safety and security away from an

abusive situation is viewed as a positive change for the better. Many of the mothers expressed the present difficulties juxtaposed against a better future. Their discourse, in large part, did not reflect a static and stationary position in life, but one that was fluid, upwardly mobile, sacrificing now for something better down the road. Self is presented in the context of this change. The idea is that, “I am not just who I am right now, I am who I going to be”.

4.4.4. Resourcefulness

Mothers in this study support this notion that mothering means making sure children’s needs are met, including their real material needs. In a moral economy, mothers are sensitive to their children’s needs in a context where materialism and consumerism are powerful ideologies. Many mothers expressed a priority for giving their children something that they really wanted, if it were affordable, for a birthday or Christmas. Mothers talked of their children adopting their values of thrift shopping and resourcefulness. They believed that their children did not suffer for not having as much money or things as others did. Doing activities that cost little or nothing placed value on togetherness. Mothers did not completely dismiss the dominant ideologies of consumerism and financially expensive, intensive mothering. But, they had to adapt this ideal significantly to meet their own needs. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005) oppose talking of mothers in terms of economic value. However, the women in this study viewed themselves as smart consumers. This extends the conversation on how to talk about women in terms of their economic value and meeting materials needs.

4.5 Theme Four: Support

All mothers who take on single parenting responsibilities need support. Single mothers in this study view others who help as occupying a supportive role. Others help them in their multiple roles of provider, protector, and nurturer. Support is an essential human need. Harknett (2006) points out the importance of the potential for support. She further concluded that women with better private support need less public support. For mothers to need this is a sign of the human condition that we all share. It is not necessarily a sign of dependence on others, or a weakness in their abilities. This theme is significant towards policy implications and for society as a whole.

4.5.1. Private Support

Previous research (Hao, 1995) has already pointed out that private networks of support can be some of the most valuable. They are typically from family or friends. It is a highly personal form of support. There are several factors that make private support highly effective. Hao (1995) found that mothers prefer kin support over welfare, when available. It is presumable that is due to the manner in which help is given and the lack of stigma. Where Seccombe (1999) points out a tendency to dehumanize the poor, this removes some of the stigma. Unfortunately, this type of valuable support is not available to all single mothers. If welfare support continues to discursively shift away from the public and lay increasing responsibility on mothers (Lawson, 2007), this area may also be of increasing importance.

4.5.2. Public Support

All the mothers expressed feelings of gratitude for the public's help. Mothers feel that public support is a resource that is there for them to utilize. They are breadwinners by applying for and maintaining this support. Though some expressed ways that it is problematic, it still seems to make a positive difference despite the costs and problems. Millar (1996) points out that public policy does make a difference by the measures that it puts in place. However, a point, well worn by those who study mothers, is that public policy and support can do much more (Hays, 2003). Not only can policy create better work, insurance, and childcare provisions for single mothers on small incomes, but it can do so for all mothers.

There is a disconnect between the public's perception of their help and how the mothers perceive it. As Phoenix (1996) points out, negative imagery of mothers on welfare are those that are passive dependents on the system. The mothers of this study, particularly those without family to help, see themselves as agents providing for their families and very grateful for the support. It is important for the public to understand that government programs can help others, in the same way that nongovernmental organizations do. Sidel (1996) is critical of even society at large for miserliness and humiliation of the poor. It is important to look at ways to extend discourses of help into public support in order to reduce resentments (Millar, 1996).

4.5.3. Individuals

Women in this study spoke of individuals who made a difference, though, the difference was not always positive. The women noticed the spirit of the help, as much as the actual help, itself. It is not only helping people, but kindness that that humanizes or dehumanizes the experience. Individual support, similar to private support networks, is a personalized ways of including others. It is not simply up to the government and non-governmental organizations to help those who need it. It is also up to corporations, and small businesses, too. Every individual has opportunity to help others who are in need.

4.5.4. Spiritual Support

Mothers feel caught between a number of competing discourses, and several spoke of turning to a third belief system to reconcile the conflicts. Competing discourses and cognitive dissonance can work in similar fashion. Both need a way to reconcile the differences and achieve some sort of internal consistency. Women turned to God, belief in Karma, or other ways of believing, such as “things happen for a reason”, to help reconcile the discourse. Spirituality and alternate beliefs helped to present self as one better able to deal with the stress of parenting alone.

4.6 Theoretical Implications

Lingering questions revolve around the ownership of children (Nock, 2000). The discursive contrast mothers give between the solidarity with their children and the marked scarcity of father involvement raises concerns. Do parents view children in terms of ownership? And, if so, do some mothers feel that they may “own” their children? Do some fathers feel less or no ownership? The implication is that this may,

indeed, be the case for the moms in this study. The women in the present study found mothering and motherhood a discursive area of power and freedom. In terms of Goffman's (1959) theory of presentation of self, these mothers presented themselves as "*the parent.*" The discursive space of parenting, in the present study, was almost always solely owned by the mothers in this study.

The theoretical application of symbolic interactionism is also concerning. Mead (1933) asserted that meaning is constructed through self, others, and society. The discourses of the women were almost completely void of custody arrangements or parenting rights. Their discourses were abundant with men vacating the parenting space through a variety of circumstances. It is highly concerning how mothers, together with the fathers of their children, have negotiated this space. As child support laws attempt to step in and make fathers financially support their children, mothers in this study indicated that this was not desirable or possible. Most concerning is that the dominant, socially constructed answer is what Grace (1998) has warned of: women are locked into acts of extreme self-sacrifice. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this is not a positive collaboration. The outcome for both the men and women related to this study is troubling.

Self-sacrifice and garnering the support of others are the most common strategies that the mothers of this study use to feel independent and a sense of control. Leon Festinger's (1957) theory of Cognitive Dissonance claims that we want consistency between our behavior and our beliefs. This study approached cognitive dissonance from an interpersonal perspective, looking at personal behavior and

dominant ideologies. Discourse is in both behavior and belief. The discourse of mothers in this study, reflected dominant ideologies that single mothers should be independent and provide for their children. They are told by dominant discourse to not depend on anyone, and discursively they depend on themselves. It is through discourses that they are able to be somewhat consistent. In the case of the dominant mothering ideology, the mothers of this study do not match their behavior with intensive mothering. Instead, they form alternative beliefs and discourses of mothering to better match their behavior and achieve consistency.

The discourse of single mothers on small incomes in this study extends the discussion of mothering ideologies. While intensive mothering expectations are supported by studies that include married and middle-class mothers, the mothers of this study differ significantly. Though, the discursive themes bear resemblances, fundamental differences show the possibility of an alternative discourse to intensive mothering expectations. These fundamental differences are that mother's voices are central in taking care of their children. A second key difference is that mothers employ a moral economy that allows mothers to determine what they value. Intensive mothering emphasizes expert systems and centers on the children. Because the discursive themes shared similarities, but fundamental differences were found, this indicates that mothers have different sets of meanings. In other words, similar activities may have different meanings attached to them.

4.7 Limitations

Inherent in social research is the meaning that is communicated via the words that we use. One of the most difficult aspects of this study is what to “call” the women whom I studied. Initially, in my prospectus, I used the commonly held term *single, low-income mother*. However, it became apparent that this term carried all the stigmas that are attached to the word “welfare”. Where possible, I simply used the words women or mothers, because it carries the widest range of positive meanings. Talking about people who are affected by poverty often tends to make them less than human (Seccombe, 1999; Goffman, 1963). It is difficult to find respectful and personal ways of talking about people and often language itself inhibits this accomplishment. Duncan and Edwards (1999) found that many of their single mothers in their study were not comfortable with new terms like lone mother. Indeed, making up new terms is problematic, as Katz (1997) pointed out. It is still important that we find new ways to talk about problems, in order to explore new ways of addressing them.

Another limitation was the small size of the respondent group. The findings of this study carry implications, but they are not necessarily generalizable to a larger population. What we can say is that these findings are compelling points for academic discussion and future inquiry. This study reveals the possible alternative discourse of matriarchy.

5.8 Future Research

The situation of many of the mothers in this study is concerning. Perhaps even more concerning, however, is the situation of the fathers of their children. The mothers in this study told of some of the most compelling social problems of our time: drugs,

crime, violence, gangs, etc. It is vital and urgent that we understand what is happening to men who become physically, emotionally, and financially unavailable for fatherhood. A matriarchy where fathers of children are unknown, homeless, addicted to drugs, involved in criminal activity, and subsequently incarcerated, does not empower women. In comparison to women's studies, men's studies have been given significantly less emphasis. And, therefore, the discursive theme of marginalized men is a concern academically, as well. To foster egalitarian discourses and societies, it is important that we understand how to strengthen both genders.

The most compelling implications from this study are the ways people view help and support in an individualistic culture. Lawson (2007) points out that care is being marginalized by taking it from the public arena, to the private, to individual responsibility. Questions we need to look at should include who should care, who should we care about, and in what ways will we express that care? Conversely, under what conditions will we withdraw our help from others and by what discourses do we justify it? We are at a time when perhaps the boundaries of moral inclusion and moral exclusion are some of the most globally relevant topics to address.

As we learn more about motherhood, it is important to understand alternative experiences and discourses of motherhood. Though, intensive mothering is the dominant ideology, it is certainly not the only one. It is therefore, important to learn what alternate discourses mothers are using. As Oliker (1995) observed, parenting rationale depends on the conditions of parenting. Therefore, it would be helpful to understand as many mothering and fathering conditions and their corresponding

discourses as possible. Further research is needed in the area of mothering and fathering on small incomes, because parents are vulnerable and valuable.

4.9 Conclusion

Poverty is the unanswerable question. The poverty of single mothers is but one dimension. Despite human advancements, ubiquitous poverty persists. Government welfare has not ended poverty. Even giving and helping have not ended its effects. Yet, critical scholars find it irreconcilable to see the great wealth of the world reflected by a great poverty existing within it as well. Indeed, the situation of single mothers in the U.S. does not compare to the extreme crisis of similar mothers in the developing world who face true scarcity of food, or the HIV pandemic.

Some of the greatest minds and hearts of history have pondered the dilemmas of poverty. My thoughts are, at best, humble. The moral economy in this study is particularly interesting as we search for ways to talk about women in poverty. Women's issues are human issues. It would seem, that the just way to study and talk about others is to be morally inclusive. Morally inclusive economies value others and intangibles above money. How we communicate, shapes our perceptions and realities (Mead, 1933). As one mother in this study said, "money is what you choose to do with it." It only has the meaning that we attach to it. Likewise, mothers are how we choose to think and communicate about them. To unlink mothers, or any person, with money discursively is an important deconstruction. To say that poverty is an economic issue is to miss out on discourses of moral economies and moral inclusion. To shift the

emphasis from money to people is an important discursive move that may further us towards minimizing poverty's effects. If we talked about our moral obligations to others in the quantity, quality, and tone that we talked about poverty, what changes could we see? Perhaps new discourses can open up new ways of thinking about both. New ideologies and new discourses can shift whole societies, the kind of shifting that it would take to tackle something like poverty. Otherwise, there will never be enough money to end poverty or moral exclusion.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Preliminary Questions

1. Do you consider yourself a single mother raising her family on a low income?
2. Do you have elementary school age children or younger?
3. Age
4. Highest level of education
5. Do you consider yourself African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, White, two or more of these or other?
6. What language is spoken most often at home?

Open Ended Questions

1. Describe what it means to you to be a mother? What are your days like?
2. How are you different from other moms? How are you similar?
3. What kind of support do you have? How do you do it on your own?
4. How do you feel about being a single mom? What are the best parts? What are the worst parts?
5. How are you doing with the finances? In what ways does money matter and what ways does it not matter?
6. How does work and life fit together? How does it not fit?
7. How would you describe your relationship with your children? How would describe your relationship with yourself?

8. What do you feel others expect of you?
9. What is a good mother to you?
10. How are you a good mother? When do you feel you fall short of your definition of being a good mom?
11. How do you think people that are important to you would describe you?
12. Do you ever worry about what “other” people think? What matters and what doesn't matter?

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form

I have been asked to participate in a research project on the experiences of low-income single women.

This research is being collected as part of a graduate program resulting in a Master's thesis. I understand the purpose of this study is to interview participants on their experiences in everyday life as a single mother living on a small income. All responses are intended to be anonymous. Any response given will be published under a pseudonym.

Number of subjects participating

The approximate number of subjects involved in the study in the study is about 10.

Procedures

The procedure for this research is an interview. Participation in this research is completely voluntary.

Benefits of Participation

This study will allow mothers to share their experiences of mothering in order to help others learn about those experiences.

Risks of participation

There are non known potential risks from participation in this study.

Standard Clauses

1. I understand that informed consent is required of all persons in this project.
2. The principal and alternate procedures, including the experimental procedures in this project, have been identified and explained to me in language that I can understand.
3. The risks and discomforts from the procedures have been explained to me.
4. The expected benefits from the procedures have been explained to me.
5. An offer has been made to answer any questions that I may have about these procedures. If I have any questions before, during, or after the study I may contact:
Dr. Markham Shaw 817-272-2678
Tonya Redman 972-572-0586
6. I have been told that I may refuse to participate or stop my participation in this project at any time. All new findings during the course of this research which may influence my desire to continue or not continue to participate in this study will be provided to me as such information becomes available.
7. If I am injured or have an adverse reaction because of this research, I should immediately contact one of the personnel listed in Clause #5 above. No

additional compensation will be provided. Agreeing to this does not mean I am giving up any legal rights that I may have.

8. If I have any questions regarding my rights as a subject participating in this study or research- related inquiry, I may contact Dr. Markham Shaw, Department of Communication, Chair, 817-272-2678.
9. I have a right to privacy, and all information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with me will remain confidential as far as possible within state and federal law. However, information gained from this study that can be identified with me may be released to no one other than the investigators and my physician. The results of the study may be published in scientific journals without identifying me by name. I understand that Texas state law requires researchers to report criminal activity, communicable diseases and abuse.

I voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in the above named project. I understand that I will be given a copy of the consent form I have signed.

Signature of participant _____ date _____

_____ *check here for verbal consent* _____
date _____

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed above with the subject and/ or his/ her authorized representatives.

Signature of principal investigator _____ date _____

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Tonya Redman earned a B.S.E. in Speech and Theatre, with a minor in Journalism from Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. This thesis was funded in part by the Andrew M. Clark Scholarship for thesis research. Upon completion of this thesis, her plans include devoting time to mothering as a single mom. Additionally, she hopes to continue documenting the lived experiences of those whose stories have not been heard, and pursuing her Ph.D. in Communication.