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Why Do Some Single Mothers Struggle More Than Others?

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Author Note

Tania Rhiger is an MSW student at St. Catherine University of the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota. This research project was a graduate requirement; however, this subject has been a special area of interest for the past decade. All comments, questions, or suggestions are welcome and all correspondence for this study should be sent to tlrhiger@stkate.edu.

Abstract

This qualitative study explored the interviews and stories of 4 single mothers, ages 25-41, with unique situations. Each mom was different with how their support systems and father-child relationships varied. These moms provided a fair representation of how some of these complex factors can vary and play out in single mother households. Single mothers and their varying levels of struggles are the phenomena that this project studied while considering family systems. The review of existing research guided the framework of the interview questions using grounded theory; this approach was also used to further explore the data found in this project. Through this semi-structured interview, some of their support systems were identified as various financial assistance programs, as well as the many support mechanisms that both fathers and extended family can provide. These factors in connection to their real-life experiences emphasized how such support systems have affected these mothers and their children which then, also assisted with the process of bringing forth a greater understanding of these phenomena. The purpose of this study was to highlight the experiences of single mothers by sharing their stories through their own personal voices; while using a comparative data analysis to determine why some single mothers reported having experienced more struggles than others. Results found that each mother had multiple dimensions of struggle that fluctuated throughout various transitional periods throughout their experiences as parents which were based on what we have identified as compounded factors, impacting the lives of these single mothers and their children.

Keywords: *single mothers, absent fathers, in depth interviews, parenting, struggles, adversity, qualitative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, family systems, compounded factors, grief and loss, culture, contributing factors*

Acknowledgments

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the women who so bravely shared their stories and insight into their experiences as single mothers. Without your participation, this study would not have been possible. It was my intention to paint a picture of the reality of single motherhood and to share your struggles with those inquiring minds. It is my hope that what you shared was interpreted fairly and I want you to know that I have no ill intentions with this study. I hope the findings have been presented in a way that seems respectful to you, especially so not to bring any negative feelings about your participation in this study. Again, I thank you and I wish you and your children the best.

I would also like to thank my committee members for bearing with me through this tedious process that came about for this project. Sharyn DeZelar, Patricia Herrbolt, and Eric Hansen, your support and input was very helpful, and boosted my confidence through this all. Thank you for your patience and understanding through everything.

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Why Do Some Single Mothers Struggle More Than Others?

Introduction

Single parent households continue to be a concern for many, especially because these types of families have continued to increase over the years with women heading most of these homes, in many cases leaving one parent to do most of what is needed for the upkeep of a family (Anderson, S. A. & Sabatelli, R. M., 2007; Armos, 2017; Gustafson, Swan, Gillingham, & Parsons, 2016; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011; Vespa, Lewis & Kreider 2012; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). The American Psychological Association reports that “over the past 20 years single-parent families have become even more common than the so-called ‘nuclear family’ consisting of a mother, father, and children” (2017).

Approximately 40% of all 2015 births in the United States were born to unmarried women, between the ages 15-44 (CDC, 2015). To paint a picture of this reality, one 2013 United States Census Bureau Report found that women head single parent households more than men at 5 to 1; while 1,956 single father families were reported, there were 10,322 single mother families (Vespa et al., 2012). Because most single parents are mothers this research emphasizes the struggles of single moms versus single dads however this study will include some details noted about those fathers as it relates to this project’s target population and findings in this study (Anderson, S. A. & Sabatelli, R. M., 2007; Armos, 2017; Gustafson et al., 2016; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011; Vespa et al., 2012; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). At least one article points out that mothers are not the only single parents who need some assistance however the dads were a smaller group of only about 2%, which again, emphasizes this study’s concern for lone mothers. Let us not forget a valuable point that one author had stated, it should not be overlooked that "single fathers need help too" (Armos, 2017).

Although there are households headed by single fathers, a considerable number of children are living life without fathers or a father like figure (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Many would agree, parenting is not a one-person job which is the case for too many mothers; which can put these single parent households at a greater risk for adversities, including both the parent and child(ren) involved (Cairney et Al., 2004; DeJean, McGeorge & Carlson, 2012; Dufur et al., 2010; Freeman & Dodson, 2014; Gustafson et al., 2016; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Kingston, 2013; Koh et al., 2017; Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011; Reichman et al., 2001; Samuels-Dennis, 2007; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). This includes the stress related to lone parenting which will impact the parent and ultimately can directly affect the whole family as well. These concerns are not limited to family and child development, especially when other risk factors like inadequate finances and food insecurity are issues, which can also relate to multiple health issues that can become compounded. Over time, if these issues are not adequately addressed, they can increase, contributing to greater challenges to overcome in the future.

Parenting is considered by many to be one of the most difficult yet important obligations for adults in general who choose this path, yet some parents are not doing their share. In the case of a single parent home, oftentimes one person is left with that responsibility topped off by the tasks included in running a household, with very little, if any, financial and/or moral support or parenting time from the other parent (Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011). With one provider handling all the responsibilities entailed in raising children, it is not uncommon for a single parent to feel overwhelmed and in some cases to be subjected to repetitive and frequent stress. In many cases this can contribute to the adversities of single parent families; including mental health concerns such as depression, especially when one parent is left to parent with little or no

support, which ultimately can add to a sense of loss for some, resulting in even more grief (Cairney, Boyle, Lipman, & Racine, 2004; Samuels-Dennis, 2007; Kingston, 2013; Wang, Wu, Anderson, & Florence, 2011). Other considerations contributing to the struggles of such single parent households are their household family constructs and characteristics; whether they have a partner and whether that partner offers varying support mechanisms (i.e. monetary, physical, and/or emotional support); the quality of the relationship with the other parent of their child/children; whether they have other resources and/or social supports in place; and the temperament of their child/children to name a few. Ultimately, there are myriad factors that impact single parent households. These household components can alleviate adversity or contribute to an even greater extent of challenges for the members of single parent household which is especially concerning for the children whose development can be directly impacted because when parents struggle, their children can and will struggle too.

There has been an abundance of research over the years comparing different life challenges in families (e.g. financial adversity, social and health concerns) and single parent households were found to be at risk of having more of these hardships than their counterparts (Cairney et al., 2004; Dufur, Howell, Downey, Ainsworth, & Lapray, 2010; Freeman & Dodson, 2014; Gustafson et al., 2016; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Kingston, 2013; Koh, Stauss, Coustaut, & Forrest, 2017; McLanahan, Garfinkel, Mincy, & Donahue, 2010a; McLanahan, Garfinkel, Mincy, & Donahue, 2010b; Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011; Reichman et al., 2001; Vespa et. al, 2012; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Books-Gunn, 2010; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). Of course, not all single parent households would consider themselves to be disadvantaged and some might feel insulted with these implications which would likely be related to what has been said about these households; single parenting, alone, is not the reason

for adversity (Kingston, 2013). There are several reasons why some single moms would not identify with struggling, however these reasons and those household constructs have generally not been a focal point related to the studies highlighting adversity and associated risk factors. These families would include but are not be limited to those households led by those who have planned for and chosen single motherhood. We point to the reality that although parenting is a challenge no matter the household composition, the challenges and risks associated with this study may not necessarily apply to those single parents by choice. This is especially because there is an entire population of women who have chosen motherhood whether through adoption or artificial insemination to name a couple methods which often requires thorough planning and financial means to take this route into parenting. Such informed choices will likely indicate some financial security which is needed to accomplish those goals. When families are missing critical components such as planning and financial security, this can often lead to some of the adversities discussed in this study. Although this will not always be the case, we have noted numerous risk factors that might add to the challenges of single mothers which was found in the literature review of the existing research.

As previously mentioned, parenting is not an easy task in general, so it would seem likely for any parent to struggle and encounter some challenges, whether single or not. But as it will be noted during the interview, the definition as defined for this current study was more specific; one who has discomfort in their situation and/or has some difficulty meeting their needs (see Appendix A). As we will discuss, there are a range of factors that can and will contribute to a person's hardships and in this case, the struggles of the single mothers interviewed for this study. If parenting is a challenge in general then one can imagine how those varying situations and contributing factors can impact to what extent a parent will encounter life experiences; and

possibly more so for single parents without support from another parent, partner, or family member(s). As this study will also mention in the following sections, although single father households will not be a focal point to this research, there is said to be factors related to why single father households have been noted to be at less of a risk than single mothers. Whatever the case, there seems to be minimal studies that address the varying challenges from the perspective of the single parents themselves. This brings us to this study's purpose; highlighting the individual experiences of the single mothers interviewed for this study; through their shared stories; hearing their voices; and in turn, analyzing the data to determine why some single mothers report more struggles than others.

Literature Review

A review of the literature related to single parent households, and specifically mothers, has found several topics relevant to this research. Single parent families are also known by some professionals as *fragile families*; these households are most often headed by women as previously mentioned, which is part of the reason why this study is zooming in on the individual experiences of single moms. Noted concerns include those for both the parents and the children in these households such as social and health concerns, as well as issues related to socioeconomic status to name a few (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; McLanahan et al., 2010a; McLanahan et al., 2010b; Reichman et al., 2001). Some gender differences were found in the data as well, including the comparison of single mothers and single fathers and social attitudes towards both (Cakir, 2010; DeJean, McGeorge, & Stone, 2012; Gustafson et al., 2016; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013). Along with risk factors for single parent households, some protective factors were also noted, such as father-child relationship in those single mother households (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel; 2011). Overall, adversity stood out the most in these findings

which pointed to all the issues related to single parent households, while single mothers were highlighted as being at the greatest risk than the compared family structures (Cairney et al., 2004; Dufur et al., 2010; Freeman & Dodson, 2014; Gustafson et. al, 2016; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Kingston, 2013; Koh et al., 2017; McLanahan et al., 2010a; McLanahan et al., 2010b; Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011; Reichman et al, 2001; Vespa et. al, 2012; Waldfogel et al, 2010; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). This concern and the fact that most single parent households are headed by women are the key reasons as to why this study will focus specifically on families led by women.

Fragile Families

Historically, single parent families have created such a concern that researchers from Columbia & Princeton Universities initiated a nationally representative longitudinal study called the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*, allowing researchers to take a closer look at the characteristics of this family construct. Their dataset comes from the interviews of 5000 single parents of newborns throughout different cities across the United States, from 1998-2000; this data is available to the public and particularly for other professionals to use with their own research (McLanahan et al., 2010a). *Fragile families* are those families of unwed parents, many but not all who are teenage parents. These families have been deemed fragile because of the outlook their relationships have. According to McLanahan and her colleagues, although most of these couples are in serious relationships and even considering marriage at the time of their child's birth, they are said to have a greater risk of breaking up (2010a). Most of them do, which leads to further complications such as strain on parent-child relationship and between mom and dad (McLanahan et al., 2010a). These complications include future relationships due to the breakup with more children born to yet another partner and children who end up being teen

parents themselves, to name a few concerns noted (McLanahan et al., 2010a). The attributes of these families “complicate getting good jobs, forming stable families, and performing successfully as parents” (McLanahan et al., 2010b, p. 2).

Single Parents

The reality of single parenting can be challenging but those challenges vary along with the circumstances of each household. This reality should be well known to all who work with single parents, even though it does not seem to be common knowledge; which is why it should also be a focal point to consider for future studies as well because single parents do not all fit into one categorical mold when it comes to challenges. Not all single parents have the same scenarios and/or workload especially because not all single parents have access to the same resources such as housing and financial, social, and family support to name a handful of these variations. Some of these varying situations have been found to be even more complicated than most of the studies have shown (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2011). Despite this realization, those more in-depth, and complex details related to the father-child relationships in single mother households will only be touched on, because as previously noted, these complicating factors are numerous (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel; 2011). Most of the studies examined basic household challenges such as financial and health concerns. However, a few studies examined family structures comparing fragile families and the traditional married couple with one finding that was significant to this current study, which discussed how single parent families are structured differently (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Reichman et al., 2001; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). Single parents by choice such as those who adopt or use artificial insemination were not a part of this discussion. Other single parent family constructs were divorced men and women who are now considered single fathers and single mothers with shared or even sole custody, cohabiting never-

married single parents; and those that were not cohabitating (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Reichman et al., 2001). The findings of these studies aligned with the findings that single mothers fare worse than all other families resulting in more risk factors and negative outcomes such as socioeconomic issues, poorer health outcomes, and social challenges (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Reichman et al., 2001; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014).

Because such support systems can add relief to household providers when they have fewer responsibilities, there are other variations that could act as protective factors in single parent households, which includes but is not limited to: co-parenting, shared custody, owned homes, alimony and/or child support payments, and family and friends who help with such things as moral support; physical support like childcare and transportation; and financial support to name a few possibilities. Then there are those single parents who have none (or fewer) of these noted resources and support systems. Ultimately, all parents need support; single parents might need a little extra and some single parents might need even more support if their circumstances warrant a greater need. Having little or no support can be another crucial missing component in a single parent household that can create even more stress (Kingston, 2013; Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011). For many single mothers, the factors involved in parenting alone can play a key role in higher reports of depressive symptoms while stress, lack of social support, and financial struggles are also positively associated with these effects creating even more layers of challenge that adds to their list of concerns (Cairney et al., 2004; Samuels-Dennis, 2007; Kingston, 2013).

Gender Differences

The studies included in this review have pointed out certain factors thematic to gender differences between those households headed by single mothers in comparison to those of single

fathers (DeJean et al., 2012; Dufur et al., 2010; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Reichman et al., 2001; Vespa et al., 2012; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). One important emphasis was made on the role of a father in the lives of children (Reichman et al., 2001; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). As previously mentioned, children being raised by single mothers are said to be at a greater risk for poorer outcomes related to overall health, financial, socioemotional development, education, and social concerns, more than any other family constellation, which included households led by single fathers (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Reichman et al., 2001; Vespa et al., 2012; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). Although studies have not specifically focused as to why this is, there were a few details in the literature that may provide some ideas regarding this phenomenon. Even with what some may see as gender-based parenting differences including parenting styles and preferences, one study questioned whether the moms were found to be at a greater risk due to those noted parenting differences or whether it related to the fact that these children were being raised by one parent instead of two (Dufur et al., 2010). With some fathers heading single parent households, another possible explanation had to do with the age of the father and what led them to their single parent status with most of them having divorced resulting in becoming a single parent versus being never-married as with the majority of single mothers (Armos, 2017; Vespa et al., 2012). In those cases where the father is granted sole custody the men have oftentimes been found to be older than the women, many of these fathers having greater incomes and socioeconomic standing including homeownership (Armos, 2017; Vespa et al., 2012).

With the single fathers having greater financial means than the single mothers compared in these studies, another gender concept noted in more than one case is the socioeconomic differences in the labor force; females have been shown to earn less than their male counterparts (Dufur et al., 2010, Gustafson et al., 2016; Koh et al, 2017). Many single mothers are then living

on lower incomes and in some cases without regular formal methods of financial contributions, that is, if they receive any financial aid from the father, at all (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2010). Without a college degree, this puts single mothers at an even greater disadvantage, especially because without a degree it is even more difficult to get out of poverty (Gustafson et al., 2016; Koh et al., 2017). Through such experiences, the need for (more) resources has been pinpointed to assist with those challenges associated with pursuing a degree as a single parent (Koh et al., 2017). Programs to support parent students, particularly those who do not have the support of another parent have proven beneficial; especially with the impact it has had on influencing the children watching their parent excel due to obtaining a degree, to eventually pursue higher education for themselves in the future (Koh et al., 2017). Other gender differences could be considered for this study; however, we have noted some of the most relevant details related to the main themes for this current study.

Social attitudes. Another important gender difference with social attitudes towards single parents involves the stigma regarding women having children out of wedlock; although it is believed not to be as prevalent as it used to be. The reality is that negative attitudes towards single mothers were found to be greater than those towards the single fathers with women being just as guilty of having such judgements towards single moms (Cakir, 2010; DeJean et al., 2012; Gustafson et al., 2016; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013). Stereotypes involving sex roles contributed to these attitudes; those sex roles include men being providers and women being homemakers and caretakers. These concepts go back to old school ideology and could be a focal point for such a study involving single mothers, on its own. As for the literature review in relation to this study, in these instances where such attitudes exist, while single fathers are said to be looked upon as noble for going above and beyond their role, those women who are single

mothers are looked down on as having failed (DeJean et al., 2012; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013). Such double standards seemingly allow men to start over in some cultures, while households headed by single women are said not to even be recognized which is yet another reason to be concerned for women as single parents (Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013).

Single Mothers

Entering motherhood itself entails many life changing components that make a woman sensitive and vulnerable in ways; hormonal and physical changes to the body involved in the conception and birth of a child alone are both experiences like no other. Abrams and Curran (2007) stated, “Many women experience the transition to new motherhood with some degree of adjustment stress,” however for some, prolonged physical and emotional disturbances could signify symptoms of Postpartum Depression (PPD). These researchers also reminded readers of such news headlines highlighting severe cases of PPD with devastating outcomes where women like Andrea Yates and Mine Ener had slipped under the radar for whatever reason with these women killing their children (Abrams & Curran 2007). The seriousness of untreated PPD is part of the reason for the emphasis on routine postpartum screenings; through early detection to address related symptoms. However, Abram and Curran emphasize the need for more research on PPD focusing on vulnerable populations including concerns for single mothers who were found to be at a greater risk than those who were married (2007). The stress involved with parenting, especially as a single mother with little or no support can and will affect her physical and emotional health putting both the mother and child at an even greater risk if these concerns are not addressed (Kingston, 2013).

Although one might think that most, if not all single mothers face the same types and levels of adversity as the next; these households and experiences will vary (as with all

households and experiences in general) so one should not mistakenly put single mothers (or single parents) into one category. The origin and the make-up of the single-parent system will vary which will have their own distinct challenges and variations (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2007, p. 304). Several but not all the possibilities as previously noted, can range from divorced parents sharing parenting time and responsibilities, single parents by choice, unwed cohabiting parents, single parents with extended family support, and those children born to single mothers who raise them on their own (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Kingston, 2013; Vespa et. al., 2012; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Books-Gunn, 2010). These scenarios are then affected by those varying circumstances as mentioned, adding more layers of diversity and for some this means more uncertainties to an already complex scenario. Whatever the case, each situation will have their own struggles, but as highlighted, these situations will range on multiple levels.

Fathers

One example of a unique and complex situations of its own kind has to do with the quality of relationship both mom and child have with the father, which again, can add even more layers of additional stress. Those father-relationship factors will vary as well and can make things even more difficult to an even greater extent (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel; 2011). On the other hand, these relationships can also have a positive affect which will not have the same type of influence on the mother's situation; even though this is important to make note of, we are looking at what contributes to the struggles of a single mother. Another conflicting situation has to do with the fact that some single mother families have more than one father which can complicate matters even more (McLanahan et al., 2010a; McLanahan et al., 2010b). These dads may or may not be involved in numerous ways with variations involving such support as financial means, parenting time, transportation and/or extended family involvement or none of

this may exist at all; topped off with more challenges when relations are strained (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel; 2011). All these varying factors can impede on a child's emotional status and development, which can also affect social outcomes for assorted reasons such as behavioral and identity issues complicating situations even further, not only for the kids but for the mother who must deal with these concerns (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel; 2011).

Children

Other concerns for children noted in one study found that those raised by single mothers have less time with their fathers who are absent from the home, which can contribute to the adverse effects of being raised in a single parent household (Waldfogel et al., 2010). A second parent usually provides an extra income and/or hand in the household, among other support mechanisms, that can alleviate the burdens on the other parent, in this case the mother. Without healthy parents, children are at a greater risk as well. For those children living in poverty, the results can be even more devastating because this could add to an already financially challenging situation and some may go without basic needs, such as proper nutrition which can lead to developmental and health concerns (Gustafson et al., 2016; Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2011). Other studies have emphasized fathers as another essential component that is missing for children in *fragile families* (Reichman et al., 2001; Vespa et al., 2013; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). This highlights the void in the lives of many of the children who are raised by single mothers; the missing piece in numerous cases is a (consistent and/or healthy) relationship with their dad. This involvement could also lighten the load for those mothers who struggle with the responsibilities of parenting alone, as previously noted (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2011). In general, however, that extra support could allow for a break that some single mothers might not have otherwise or even allow them to work without the cost of daycare, all of which are separate

necessities involved with parenting and all of which could ultimately contribute to the mom's wellbeing, which, in turn would also benefit the child as well (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2011; DeJean et al., 2012). Furthermore, the child would have the support of two parents which is an even greater gain which highlights one positive aspect of not having been brought up in an absent parent scenario that can negatively impact the challenges of parenting (Dufur et al., 2010).

Although time with the other parent can be a positive experience for kids in more ways than one, having inconsistency, with only a few quality interactions and spending less time with that parent can also put a strain on the parent-child relationship, especially during their younger years when essential development is taking place for that child (Koh et al., 2017). If a child's social, emotional and physical development are impacted this would add more layers of adversity especially if there were issues from the beginning. Preexisting concerns such as health issues and poverty can all intertwine with the various factors related to father-child relationships, causing even more stress and trauma; and with more hardships the chance for increased risks is strengthened if not properly supported and addressed, specifically targeting such areas of needs. With such possibilities, each case's outcome will be different but ultimately it comes down to contributing factors such as financial stability, mental and physical health of the parent and child, social support and stability in general that can make one situation more manageable than the next (Waldfogel et al., 2010).

On another level, there are also some children that have no relationship with their father at all. Those kids who are left facing life without a father, are left in a position that can lead to other concerns, as they are said to be at a greater risk of negative health and social outcomes in comparison to children with their father's involvement (Reichman et al., 2010; Vespa et al., 2013; Ziolo-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). However, for those kids raised by single mothers, having a

stable family environment has proven to be a benefit regardless of the structure of the family itself (McLanahan et al., 2010a; McLanahan et al., 2010b; Waldfogel et al., 2010). Healthy adults providing for healthy relationships while co-parenting with all those involved (e.g. other parent and step parents) is a major component of a stable household (Waldfogel et al., 2010). To ensure optimal mental health, having some type of support system is beneficial in more ways than one, to relieve some of the stress that single parenting entails (Kingston, 2013). With optimal mental health in mind, there are ways to provide support to children who live without a relationship with their father; which in turn can also prove supportive and/or beneficial to the mothers as well.

Gaps in the Literature

The literature review highlighted several challenges for single mothers and their children, which pointed to some concerning situations for those families. The adversities that these families were said to be at risk for put them at a disadvantage in multiple ways, with some of them facing even greater trials than others. The challenges of single parent households vary along with their circumstances; which should also be a focal point to consider for future studies because single parents do not all fit into one categorical mold. This is especially true when considering their varying circumstances. Another gap in the literature is to answer the questions: what do single mothers have to say about these experiences and why do some single mothers report more struggles than others; what are the contributing factors to these challenges? Once we learn more about the single mother perspective, how will this data compare to what the literature says? The research does not say much about any of these questions. To learn more about this and to paint a clearer picture of the personal stories of single mothers, this current study uses a qualitative research design to take a closer look at the individual experiences of the

single mother themselves, to begin to understand why some mothers report more struggles than others.

Conceptual Framework

Qualitative Research

The first step in determining the conceptual framework for this project was the decision to use a qualitative research approach versus quantitative as we were seeking details through the single mothers' personal stories; using their own words and descriptions of their subjective experiences (Grinnell, R. M., Jr., Williams, M., & Unrau, Y. A., 2014, Chapter 7). Therefore, a qualitative study was the only option to meet this goal while seeking detailed data to determine why some single mothers struggle more than others. As previously noted, there had been numerous studies that pinpointed single mothers as being at a higher risk of one concern or another, yet studies had not specifically focused on struggling single mothers, or anything that seemed specific to this topic. Because of this gap, the proposal was to interview moms to hear what they had to say about their experiences and struggles. Sharing the details of these described experiences aided another goal which was to highlight their stories and paint a picture as to why some single mothers struggle more than others. Because this study was seeking new data while comparing the existing literature, a grounded theory approach was an appropriate method.

Phenomenology

Another piece of this qualitative research project was phenomenology as this study sought to learn about and understand those shared human experiences amidst the single mother phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, Chapter 4). Creswell wrote, "A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (2013, p. 76). Although a phenomenon is usually about the "common meaning"

and these women have single parenting as a connection or something they have in common, they did not share the same level of struggle (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). One might also see an aspect of narrative research being used as we seek to paint a picture of "the lived and told experiences" of the mothers who shared their stories for this study, which will be used to highlight their individual perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 71). Through a comparative analysis of their narratives, identifying both the commonalities and differences as related to their struggles as single mothers were emphasized, which will be brought to light in the research findings and discussion sections (Creswell, 2013, p. 71).

Grounded Theory

The first few steps involved in finding a research topic, searching the related literature, and identifying a research question, was all executed through grounded theory which was also used to answer the research question. Because this study sought to “generate or discover a theory” as to why some single mothers struggle more than others, using qualitative research and grounded theory was found to be the most suitable method to meet all the goals for this current study (Creswell, 2013, p. 83.). Although Creswell discussed grounded theory studies as using a sample size of “20 to 30 individuals,” and that of a phenomenology having ranged from 1 to 325 subjects, this study only included 4 participants (2013, p. 157). Creswell also described how formulating a theory in this manner is to be “shaped by the views of a large number of participants” which one could say goes against this study’s methodology (2013, p. 83). Despite these concerns, we have theorized that the findings of this study would be validated with a larger number of subjects; challenging others to test this theory. Confidence in this has been made through the literature review and current research findings, in combination with personal life experience and speculation that compounded factors as described by this study’s results would

be a struggle for any one person to handle alone, especially a single parent with little to no support (see Reflexivity Statement).

As for grounded theory and how it played out for this study; it was a continual process from start to finish. Grounded theory was a constant through the nature of this project, even up until some of the very last edits were made to the write up of this paper. This researcher continuously sought to either confirm or deny the findings of this project; although some of the results had been highlighted previously through the literature review. Grounded theory occurred through going back and forth from reading, re-reading, and seeking data in the literature, the interviews, and other resources to support and seek answers which have assisted with the evolution of the findings. This process could have continued to grow into something even more in depth but there will always be time constraints; some shorter than others. There are myriad varying factors and infinite details that one could explore. Each of the identified themes could be focal points of their own, some more detailed than others. This Grounded Theory Study is a starting point that begins to explain what has been found to be a very complex equation for many (if not all), single mothers.

Family Systems Theory

Another major model in the framework of this study used a family systems theory lens to the explore the various family dynamics and support systems that these mothers reported having had access to (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2007, Chapter 1). Application of this theory involved the examination of how these families operated as a combined unit versus as individuals and how one individual's hardships can affect the entire family although most of these families ultimately had one sole manager which were the mothers (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2007, Chapter 1).

Although the family system was the focus of this study, we also considered the functioning of

individuals as well. This study examined the use of other extensions of these single parent families. This included the support offered by fathers, extended family members, and friends; and examined how these components have affected these families, as well as how these extensions also affected the struggles they reported. Through the shared experiences of those single parents who were interviewed for this study, their support systems were identified and examined to determine how these key elements (or lack of), have affected the challenges these women have had also providing further insight into their family system.

Methods

Reflexivity Statement

Before getting into the design of this study, I would like to take Creswell's advice and make a reflexivity statements, which is to explain my position and experience with the single mother phenomenon and how this experience has shaped my stance with this topic and in turn, this study (2013, Chapter 9). However, my statement will be more detailed as it has been a lifetime experience with a profound impact. I have been surrounded by single mothers all my life; with family members and my own mother having raised children alone. Eventually I witnessed numerous friends and acquaintances go through the same situation of lone parenting over the past twenty years. Despite my ultimate dream of having a husband and children of my own, I also became a single mother just after my thirtieth birthday. At that time, I realized I had not been as prepared for parenting as I had thought when my life became turned upside down; having taken a several years to turn it back around.

I have had to ask myself how I got to this point and why I had been struggling as much as I had; and I had also realized several concerns for individuals who seemed to need more support and care from the providers (i.e. doctors, social workers, teachers, or any other

providers/workers) in their lives. A major concern for single mother like me had been the possible outcome of such compounded factors described in this study. Many, if not all the challenges described by the mothers interviewed for this study, along with the risk factors found in the existing data included in this study, have impacted my family's life in multiple, concerning ways. I still remember the first time I realized how much I had been struggling and I remember thinking that single mothers have been doing this all along and I had no idea, as I thought back to my mom who had raised three children on her own for over 18 years of her life beginning in her late teens. At the most vulnerable and trying times of my life I have been so grateful to have been as strong and self-aware as I am and even more grateful for the resources and support I have had access to over the years through the community I had lived in during that time.

To get to the point of this reflexivity statement; as a student, every time research has come up, I had always wanted to focus on the challenges of single parents because of the challenges I had been going through. This is what brings me to how this project's research design came about. At times, I began to wonder if I was alone with my struggles. I began to search the literature to find answers, but I could not find specific data about the challenges of single mothers. This was surprising, especially with all the existing data that had pointed to risks related to such adversities for single mothers. But I could not find the answer or the data in the literature to explain my situation and I eventually found myself on a mission to find out why this was the case. Why did I struggle so much? Am I alone with these struggles, and if so, what is wrong with me? Why do some single mothers struggle more than others?

Study Design

As described in the previous sections, this qualitative study was informed by phenomenology, grounded theory, and family systems, using some narrative features as well.

For this project, the details and the findings related to why some single mothers struggle more than others, are grounded in the entire research experience. First there was the interest in single mothers then more specifically their challenges. Initially, the plan was to involve both single mothers and single fathers, but the shift to focus on single mothers was made due to the number of moms heading most single parent households. Besides this reason, we wanted to narrow it down as this topic was already extensive. The existing research constantly pointed to single mothers being at a greater risk which also fueled this interest, especially having seen so many single mothers, with this population continuing to grow and seeing the need to speak up for those who struggle as single mothers (Cairney et al., 2004; Dufur, Howell et al., 2010; Freeman & Dodson, 2014; Gustafson et al., 2016; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Kingston, 2013; Koh, et al., 2017; McLanahan et al., 2010a; McLanahan et al., 2010b; Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011; Reichman et al., 2001; Vespa et. al, 2012; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Books-Gunn, 2010; Ziol-Guest & Dunifon, 2014).

On this path to designing a study, the topic evolved into the specific research question which was to find out why some single mothers struggle more than others. This was specifically formulated stemming from this researcher's personal experience with the single mother phenomenon. The previous topic, challenges of single mothers did not seem to exist in the literature. Much was said about single mothers but not specific to the concept of those challenges related to their single parent experience. This brought forth more questions and curiosity and eventually the current research question. The data found through those inquiries served as a guide to shape some of the questions related to the topics and risk factors of single mother households. However, not all risk factors were specifically asked about in the interview (i.e. poverty, health, social). Personal experience also assisted with framing some of the

questions; searching for answers with as little bias as possible. These steps were taken to determine what the mothers reported about some of those factors included in the conversations. A qualitative approach was essential to meet one of the main goals of this study which was to elicit individual experiences from the mothers' shared stories, through their own words and descriptions, as this approach added depth and meaning to the quantitative data from the existing research (Grinnell, R. M., Jr., Williams, M., & Unrau, Y. A., 2014, Chapter 7).

Participant Recruitment

Population. The targeted group for this study was single mothers who were needed to participate in the interview process. This population was to be mothers who were at least 18 years of age or older to be considered an adult and they were expected to have at least one child under the age of 18 years of age living at home with her. The goal was to find women who were actively parenting, without a live-in partner to get a better picture of the challenges of parenting without that support which is generally true with an extra adult and income in the home. Although, we also know this is not always going to be the case for cohabiting parent households. The concept was to do a comparative analysis of a group of single moms to determine contributing factors for adversity or those factors that have acted as buffers against such hardships. The criterion was used to target mothers who could be deemed as being at a disadvantaged (i.e. a single mother who is actively parenting with no live-in partner/support; &/or living without the extra income) to see how this experience had been for her. In meeting these criteria, the idea was to hear her personal reports and how it compares to the existing data and the other mothers' stories, to gain further insight related to those factors, and to learn whether they identified such factors as challenges or not. We knew nothing more about this sample until the first respondents inquired. The plan was for the first women who had responded

to the following recruitment process, having met the criterion, to be participants for this study. This plan resulted in a successful goal, as will be described in the following sections.

Recruitment. Qualitative research uses “purposeful sampling strategies” to determine who the participants of the study were to be and, in this case, to meet the purpose of this study (Creswell, 2013, Chapter 7). Having some criteria was required to assist with this phenomenological study; to understand the single mother phenomenon the participants should at least be single mothers. Focusing on single mothers who struggle in comparison to others, the criteria required active parenting with other requirements as previously noted which would assist with this purpose as well. This study used the most convenient method of targeting participants which was social media networking because of the number of people who use this form of communication.

An invitation was presented via two social media outlets; Email and Facebook, which also included word of mouth through these sources to allow for any interested single mothers to inquire about participation in this study (see Appendix C). The intention was to find 4 to 5 single mothers from the Rochester, MN area; if possible, to avoid travel and in hopes of doing face to face interviews. To be respectful of other people’s time, specific details were shared through the invite; inviting only those single mothers who met the research criteria to inquire and only if they met those guidelines, which will be further explained in the following paragraphs. These social media platforms were used as many of their members were mothers who may have qualified or knew others who met the criteria.

Facebook was not limited to this researcher’s “friends” as this database had the capability to link innumerable people all over the world and this invitation was sent to allow others to share. However, as previously noted, the goal was to connect with single mothers who lived in and

around Rochester, MN. We posted a public notification using the invite which only shared minimal details to gauge qualifications and interest in this study (see Appendix C). Via Facebook, two other groups were used where single mothers and their friends were members including this writer who had access as a member. These Facebook groups included WSU Student-Parent Task Force and Parents Are Important In Rochester (PAIIR) Friends. Both groups are networking resources for parents involved in those support groups through PAIIR and WSU, so these pages were targeted with the intention of bringing better search results for more single mothers than Facebook in general. Another social media network that was used was Rochester Mamas, which is an email group for a local church that consisted of members, including single mothers. This also included friends and family members of single mothers. The same process, as described previously, had also been taken to target single mothers using this email database.

Once an interested participant inquired, we double checked the criteria requirements because there had been a few inquiries made by women who did not qualify. This included moms who had married since their experience as single mothers and those who were cohabiting. After this criterion was met, this researcher then did a brief overview of some of the details of the consent form to determine if the mother would like to move forward to the next step. The main piece of the consent form that was important to determine was whether the mother was interested in continuing to the next step is to review the research procedures. At least one mother did not want to do a face to face interview; she thought it was a survey as she had learned about this project through word of mouth. Once it had been determined that the moms were interested, then the next step was to schedule an interview to move forward with the research procedures.

Participants

Each of the mothers interviewed for this research project had unique situations. They had been selected to be participants because they were of the first 5 moms who were qualified to participate; meeting all the criteria mentioned in the invitation. As previously noted, there were several other inquiries made including single mothers whose children were now adults. All the inquiries emphasized how mothers, no matter their current situations, felt compelled to share their stories. The overwhelming responses showed that single mothers want to be heard. Ultimately, all the moms who were contacted as possible participants had responded on the first day that the invitation had been launched as described. We were surprised by the response, especially because this made the recruitment process quick and easy. The posts had to be removed and temporarily put on hold due to the number of inquiries made on the first day. This was done because if all went as planned then no more participants would be needed to meet the goal of this study. The posts had not been shared again because all mothers except for one were able to follow through with the next step of contacting this researcher to move forward with scheduling and moving on to the interview process.

There was a total of 4 single mothers ranging from 25-41 years of age who participated in this study. Each mother had at least some college and all but one of them were still in process of furthering their education. Each mother qualified as being low income at one point during their lives as single parents although 3 of the 4 were qualified as having low income at the time of the interview. Their incomes ranged from \$10,900-13,000 for one child, to under \$20,000 for three children. The mother with the greatest income estimated \$52,500 plus possible bonuses; this mother had the most education as she was one class away from a master's Degree with a graduate teaching license. None of these income amounts included the various resources related to the cost of food support, free lunches, child care, medical and other scholarships, etc., that

low-income families may utilize for financial support. In the case of those not considered low income, those expenses would come right out of the annual income amount versus through such financial assistance programs.

These mothers have unique situations in more ways than one. Each of these women except for one, had a different situation with the father of their children being involved with their children's father to some degree and these father-child relationships varied as well. Two of the mothers had been married and two of them were never married. The common factors found for each of these single moms is that they all reported struggles; but to what degree these mothers struggled varied. These experiences had variations in the level of struggle and the focal points for each discussion varied based on individual experience also; even their perceptions of these reported struggles were different. How the moms perceived their encounter with the struggle itself brought forth insight into an altered sense of what some might be experienced as a struggle for one and not another. This included experiences of basic needs not being met. This study aimed to take a closer look at these single moms' stories to examine some of the other contributing factors and see if we can determine why some struggle more than others.

Protection of Human Subjects

Confidentiality and the protection of human subjects was and is a priority of this study. To ensure this, steps had been taken (and will continue to be taken) in support of the safety and security of the single mothers, their families, and the stories shared for this project. Participants were informed that there are risks associated with this research as determined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), because we had asked for very personal details which was considered probing for personal and sensitive information. Having had the moms recall traumatic or distressing events may have also occurred through this process. All of these actions can cause some

emotional distress including a sense of mental fatigue or embarrassment. Because of this, all participants were reminded that they may choose to withdraw at any time and that they should share only what they wanted to share during their interviews to avoid or minimize discomfort that may have possibly occurred during the interview process. The mothers were reminded of this when and if any hesitation had been noticed. Not one mother seemed to hesitate as to whether they wanted to answer questions or continue at any point. However, one mother started to tear up with the recollection of one part of her experience. Although she seemed to be reminded of the pain she had endured, she was sure that she wanted to continue and move forward with the rest of the interview. Check-ins were offered periodically and there were no children present to be cautious with on the subject matter being discussed. The protection of human subjects was fully covered by this researcher to identify any possible issues and keep participants safe from any harm.

Consent. The interview process began with each of the individual's informed consent; after reviewing the consent form to ensure the mothers' understanding of the study along with the terms and procedures involved (see Appendix D). Once this information had been reviewed and deemed understood by the participant, each mother's signature supported the acceptance of their participation along with a verbal consent that began each audio recorded interview.

Through this discussion, the mothers were informed that their participation was voluntary; while background information of the study had also been explained including an explanation of how the interview would be transcribed for coding purposes. Although no harm had been anticipated, it had also been explained that the study had risks as previously noted. In case of any emotional distress, resources were provided which were also included at the end of their copy of the consent form (See Appendix D). Two of the resources and their services were briefly described, including contact information and phone numbers. These agencies could be utilized to address

any emotional concern including emotional support for parenting in general. Contact information for this researcher, along with the University of St. Thomas' (UST) committee chair, Sharyn DeZelar and the UST IRB had also been provided to the mothers as to whom they should contact for further questions or concerns regarding this study.

Confidentiality. During the informed consent process, the steps that had been taken to ensure the confidentiality of each mother's identity and any of the other identifying details shared during the interview had been explained. Anonymity was also ensured by omitting the documentation of any names and by keeping contact information such as phone numbers separate from the files. This process was followed so those pertinent details could not have been linked to their corresponding interviews. Their personal information had been stored in a locked briefcase and on a locked laptop in a coded file, of which, only this writer had access to. The transcription process also proceeded to take these same precautions when information had been shared through conversation because more than one mother had no concerns about keeping their identities confidential and shared everything freely. Some of the moms interviewed gave all their information along with their approval for this study to share their personal identifying information. However, pseudonyms were used in places of any identifying details as an expectation of the IRB to follow through with the original plans of confidentiality and with that each mom and child had been given aliases (Creswell, 2013, Chapter 7). Mom 1 will be called Tamara; mom 2 will be called Veronica; mom 3 will be called Amber, and mom 4 will be called Victoria. Other details that could have been used to identify research participants were changed to assist with anonymity especially with sensitive topics of domestic violence being a concern. Through the steps taken, confidentiality and anonymity were and will continue to be ensured.

Data Collection

Research Setting. The interviews occurred in various settings where each mother felt comfortable sharing. One mother chose a public coffee shop in the middle of a shopping center, with many people present. This mother was not concerned about confidentiality and even shared her personal information and took no precautions with the details of her story. Two of the mothers reserved private rooms with only the interviewer and the mom present. The last interview had been completed over the phone even though the original intention was to have a face to face interview so not to miss such details shared through body language and facial expression. Despite this concern, this researcher was comfortable interviewing this mom over the phone. This would be the last interview and it had been realized that this would not conflict with the collection of data. Working with a tight schedule, the last mother seemed to appreciate being able to answer most of her questions on the run, while multitasking as she usually did according to the stories she shared.

The mothers had been reminded that the interview was being recorded, and that notes would be taken as needed. These moms had also been reminded that they could have taken a break and/or stopped and withdrawn at any time if they had felt the need and if they had changed their mind regarding their participation. For the participant who had chosen a public setting, as the recording began, she had been asked if she was comfortable sharing confidential information with the people that were around. She laughed pointing out that she had chosen that location and that she was comfortable. Periodic check-ins were also offered as needed, to see how each mom had been doing and to determine if they still felt okay with continuing with the discussion. These steps had been taken in attempt to ensure that each mother remained comfortable during their interview.

The Interview. The data collection process started after signing the consent form and the mother's verbal consent had been recorded. The interview began with an open discussion using a semi-structured interview guide to gather data (see Appendix A). Grounded theory had been involved in the composition of the list of questions as they had related to some of the emerging themes in the literature review (Creswell, 2018, Chapter 8). The conversation was dominated by those concepts as well as topics identified by the mothers. The intention was to illustrate each mother's experience and the challenges she identified or encountered as a single parent. Through these stories we were seeking to know more about what their support systems consisted of and what they wanted to share or get off their shoulders; and/or including what they wanted inquiring minds to know about their experiences as single mothers. The interview guide ended up being thoroughly covered because the first respondent went down the list and soon, it had been realized that always asking the questions would allow for more thoughts to be shared even after the respondent had already covered the topic pertaining to the question. Stating the questions (again) specifically, often prompted more sharing and more data than had been previously shared.

A semi-structured interview method was the original plan for this discussion, in that one open ended question was going to be used to start the interview. Depending on the mom's lead, more questions would follow as needed; offering a more flexible approach to the interview. Although as previously noted, all interview guide questions ended up being asked (yet), in many cases the interviews were led by the individuals to allow them to speak freely. This method allowed for this researcher to follow the participants conversation flow as she shared her lone parenting experiences. This aided with determining each mother's prevalent topics as we began by saying, tell me about your experience. What each mother highlighted to start and whatever dominated their conversations was noted in the mother's dominating themes section as this also

says something about what it had been like for each woman individually. As previously noted, after the first interview, the interview guide acted as a reminder to cover the themes incorporated into the questions and had been utilized as a checklist to see what each mom had to say about each topic (See Appendix A). Probing questions assisted with further exploration of what each mom had shared. The use of such probing questions assisted with understanding the mothers' answers more thoroughly by saying or asking, "Tell me more about that" or "Can you think of an example?" Other grounded theory questions included those about children and their relationship with their father, support systems, opinions and experiences with societal attitudes, and the types of struggles they had experienced. Some demographic information such as age, marital status, education, income, and employment status had also been collected to gain a greater understanding of her situation but ultimately related to valuable data and prevalent themes as well.

Because of the purpose of this study and wanting to be respectful of each participant's time, it was crucial to enter the interview process with a plan in hand which is to stick to the topic of single parenting, including the themes previously identified previously. At the same time, the interviews were relaxed, and no one seemed to be in a rush. The plan to ensure these topics had been covered during the interview, we were to remain flexible and allowed for open communication yet checked off themes when discussed and payed attention to the time to keep track of and respect the participant's time. This researcher checked in with each mom throughout the interviews to ask if they had time for a couple more questions as needed. Active listening skills including eye contact, facial gestures, and body language were important to use throughout the discussion to let these mothers know the interviewer had been listening and cares (Zastrow, 2012, Chapter 5). Acknowledging the mother's feelings by having used such skills,

while having included some validations of her feelings had been important to help her feel heard, but then having asked a different question to follow would then contribute to keeping the discussion directed towards the goal of this study, if needed. Although in this study, this plan was not necessary to implement and much of this came naturally as a part of the flow of discussion and communication.

To assist with the focal point of this study, the interview guide had been given to the participants a week or more before the interview. Giving them a copy of the questions allowed for the participants to have an idea of what we were seeking to learn more about as well as to have provided a sense of ease and/or comfort in allowing the mothers to prepare for their interviews. As previously noted, time did not seem to be a concern for these interviews and they occurred naturally in what also seemed to be a relaxed setting. As described, these conversations occurred in a natural fashion and the recommended active listening and social work skills also came naturally for this interviewer which contributed to this effect especially with being able to relate on the topic of single parenting.

Data Analysis

Some data analysis began prior to transcribing interviews because “memoing” occurred during the interview process as notes were made, whether emotional reactions, participant affect, and/or surprising or emergent themes; anything that stood out was noted as such during the interview (Creswell, 2013, Chapter 4). Notes had been taken during and after the interview to emphasize pertinent data, feelings, thoughts and ideas evoked through those first steps of each interview. Taking a moment to ponder on the interview experience and meeting with each mother; this time for reflection allowed to make note of anything that felt pertinent at the time. After the interviews were completed, each interview was then transcribed, one at a time, and

later used for round one of an open coding process to identify the emerging themes found in each mother's written story. Those themes that related to the current research whether in agreement with or in opposition of the findings or those details that stood out were all noted as the first steps of coding.

The transcription of the interviews also acted as a reminder to what had been shared; bringing that experience of the interview with each mother alive again through listening to the recorded discussions and later re-reading them as written in the transcribed interviews. This researcher continued the memoing process throughout the entire research project as ideas came to mind; during and after the transcription process and as needed. Reading through the interviews is when most of the coding occurred but all of this took place in steps and as a continual process. All these steps depict how grounded theory applies to this study as the data analysis process took place through constant movement, from the evolution of the research question to the theory made to answer that question (see reflexivity statement).

After the initial transcription had been coded and the themes had been identified, we reviewed the codes and narrowed them down into subcategories as needed. Once this had been done for each interview, reviewing the transcribed interviews together for a comparative analysis assisted with identifying common themes and those that stood out as well. Then, reading through the transcripts and listening to them again for another round of the same steps assisted with identifying other details that may have been overlooked or misinterpreted which increased validity and reliability of the details transcribed as well. Based on these comparisons, as previously noted, a theory began to evolve and was in the process of being developed and hypothesized to seek understanding and explain the differences in the reported level of struggle for single mothers (Creswell, 2013, Chapter 4).

The details of why some single mothers struggle more than others began to come together and to paint a clearer picture as to why this is the case. Creswell discussed grounded theory as being a process that occurs over time through steps, including the development of the research findings (2013, Chapter 4). Although what the mothers reported may not have aligned with the literature findings, which ultimately influenced how those findings were used and related to the current data shared by the mothers. This is another highlight of how grounded theory was applied to the data analysis process as the data evolved from the ground up and moved back and forth as well (Creswell, 2013, Chapter 4). The last steps for this researcher was to discuss the project's initial findings with the research committee, and more specifically consult with the research advisor, about those identified themes and subthemes to improve accuracy, reliability and validity of the data analysis and interpretation process (Creswell, 2013, Chapter 8).

Results

Themes

To comment on some of the first few themes, whenever we add more people to a situation (i.e. members of a family or other people involved with “parenting” a child), that alone can complicate matters, especially when considering challenges that each mom had encountered, and how that struggle may impact the next person. In these cases, we are considering how these complications affect the children and the mothers in these stories. First comment to note about the themes and other related details shared in each section is how they can fall into more than one category. This writer will attempt to present the findings and related information as they came up with each theme. To start, one must first understand that, as individuals, people are complex in nature as there are myriad details that can alter anything and everything in an individual's life. A few of the most essential components in the life of a single mother will

include her children and the father(s). However, other individuals who can play similar roles of affecting each situation will include people like family and friends; especially those who are involved on a regular basis which also include but is not limited to childcare providers.

Although we will not thoroughly examine these individuals and every other factor involved, one can imagine the outcome of adding even greater (or fewer) options, while considering the current data and results described in this study. The bottom line is that varying factors and circumstances in the lives of the single mothers, added to an already complex situation, will have various outcomes when adding more layers. Whether the effects of these components are positive or negative, will also determine how this plays out in the lives of the single mothers and in turn their families.

Mother's Dominating Themes. The following sections will discuss themes found in this project's overall findings; with each of the mother's responses combined. We will also discuss each mother's dominating themes as this seemed to have spoken loudly as to how these contributing factors have influenced each mother's experience as a single mom; having had affected her struggles as well. This may also assist readers in making their own interpretation of this writing and this project's findings. The prevalence of these themes in each mother's story will be noted in this section to gain a clearer picture to the individual experience and how this played out for each other. These factors will also be explored with more details in the following sections, but this write-up can assist with understanding each mother's focal point as interpreted by this writer. Identifying what seemed to have led each conversation the most is what will be briefly highlighted here for each participant.

Tamara's story seemed to have been led by details of her "loss" of the whole family ideal (i.e. mother, father, children) through divorce and her transition into single motherhood. This

involved feelings about her ex-husband's infidelity and the challenges she had encountered while struggling to provide for her teenage children and adapting to her new lifestyle. At the end of her interview it was apparent that she was still working towards acceptance as she had answered her three-wish question with answers to fix her marriage (See Appendix C, Question 6). At the time of the interview Tamara seemed confident and optimistic and thankfully for her she was trying to work on healing as she had explained, she was taking a break for herself. Veronica's story was similar as it also entailed a divorce; through the aftermath of leaving a situation entailing domestic violence. Her story's focal point seemed to entail a rocky beginning and how she had transitioned into single motherhood as she found herself trying to provide for her family through higher education. Much of what Veronica shared was about making due with what she had access to despite her needs and learning to cope with other various issues including getting through school, and mental health concerns for herself and her child. Although we will not discuss domestic violence in the following sections, leaving her previous life as a stay at home wife in an unhealthy situation is what brought her to experience life as a single mother as well as some of the other issues related to mental health.

Amber's story seemed to have been led by the disappointment in her daughter's dad and how she struggled through bringing a baby into the world on her own. Constantly moving forward, she shared how she transitioned through various stages throughout that process to the point of acceptance and loving herself again. Last we had Victoria, whose stories seemed to have highlighted a lot of struggles she had encountered over all the years she parented alone with nothing at all from her son's dad. For over 14 years at the time of this interview, she reported the different hurdles that came with various ages and stages of her child's life. Along with this, her son's lack of a father-figure had resulted in grief for her, through watching him hurt with this

void in his world. Because Victoria's experience was the longest with the least support it is not a surprise that much of what she had shared was about the challenges she endured over more than a decade of single parenting which will be discussed more in depth in the following sections.

Single Parent Status. Each single mother in the shared stories is unique, in that their single parent statuses and particularly their marital statuses varied. Only one woman who was visibly a woman of color ended up being a part of this study; we did not ask about race/ethnicity. As a black woman she brought up a racial concern that she had experienced as she shared when asked about societal attitudes, white women can be single mothers too. Some demographic data had been collected for this study, including marital status. Oftentimes, other assumptions are made based on which marital status a person identifies with; married, widowed divorced/separated, and single/never married. Especially as parents, some of those judgements relate to social attitudes as discussed in the gender differences section. However, the status theme goes deeper because the status of parents in general, when they transition into parenthood, can and will make a difference when it comes to parenting. Examples of how status affects single parents includes the following: educational, financial, health, developmental, and experiential status will impact a family's wellbeing depending on how they influence an individual's ability to provide for and interact with their family. In cases where some single parents enter the world of parenting alone, their status could make their situations more challenging, if for some reason they are lacking in one area of need over the next; and more so if this occurs in multiple areas which may result in an even greater disadvantage. As for marital status, how these mothers came to be single parents varied which was then influenced by other status factors including varying circumstances and support systems. For a moment we will examine their statuses, without getting too in depth on other dimensions of status as we have described, except for what is shared

and discussed in the following sections as it relates to other predominant themes noted in this study.

In the stories shared, two of the mothers had been married previously with one of them who had been a victim of domestic violence, which further complicated her situation. Veronica had left her husband when her daughter was about 2 years old and had an order for protection (OFP) for the past 2 years. Veronica was a stay at home mother as well and according to her reports she did not always have enough food which signified some concern related to food insecurity possibly due to financial issues. Ultimately, these factors contributed to her status as she entered the world of single motherhood. Veronica reported having started school amidst her domestic situation and soon after she left her husband with their relationship having ended with a divorce, soon after. Although we will not examine these components of status, all these factors seemed to have impacted her transition into single motherhood. Transitional periods will be discussed in the following sections as well.

Tamara had been a stay at home mom for 16 years when she learned that her husband had been unfaithful. According to Tamara's reports before extramarital concerns were brought to light, her experiences and lifestyle seemed to have brought forth some ease to start her venture as a parent as she was able to stay home and focus on her children and family. She reported having lived comfortably with financial security prior to becoming a single mom. However, the way in which her relationship ended seemed to have contributed to much of her struggles which can be better understood in the section about transitional periods and experience. These concerns and the fact that she had struggled financially to support her three teens; with the cost of living and food, were related to her status at the time she became a single mother. Tamara's situation is

another example as to how single parent status and those related details vary in multiple ways; which in her case, seems to have contributed to many of her struggles.

The other two women were never married however their situations were also different. The difference for these two moms is the relationship with their children's fathers which also affected their levels of support including financial support. Amber described what seemed to have been a cordial relationship with her child's dad although they do not live together, and they parted ways due to his substance abuse. Victoria did not have any relationship with the father and because of these differences, one mom had support in more ways than one and the other one had none. Although there are other ways to become single mothers, none of those alternative methods pertained to the stories shared and none of these mothers were cohabitating which would also have an influence on household characteristics; whether positively or negatively.

Fathers. The role of a father will vary by household and ultimately a partner will not necessarily identify as a father in every co-parenting household. This might be the case in some same sex marriages or where individuals do not identify with gender or gender roles. For the purpose of this study we will identify these roles as the role of a mother and father. Whatever the case may be, having a partner usually entails someone who provides some type of support and for many, that partner will provide support in multiple ways. These support mechanisms are not limited to an extra income, a body to physically contribute to household responsibilities, and a partner to provide emotional and physical support to the child and other parent, including parenting in general.

For this study, the fathers' contributions have several dimensions. What and how they contribute to the life of their child and how often, and whether these experiences are positive or negative. How a father and mother interact with one another will affect each other, along with

the child(ren). Even more concerning is when a single parent must deal with the impact of a negative relationship with the other parent that is negative and two-fold. For example, in this study, when the father has had an inconsistent and/or unhealthy relationship with both the mother and the child it adds more stress. And sometimes more stress can be added if there are other involved such as the father's extended family, including a new partner. In all these mothers' stories, the topic of fathers was a predominant theme throughout each conversation and these factors varied as well.

As previously noted, Victoria was unique in more ways than one stemming from the relationship with her son Jacob's absent father. Jacob had never met his father and they had never received any financial or other types of support or acknowledgement from him or any extended family over the entire 14 years of his life. Victoria said, "I don't know any other woman that does not have the man somehow there. At some point they have been involved, whether it's just a little or not, they've been around. There's something going on, there's some form of communication" (personal communication, April 24, 2018). Later in the interview she goes on to talk about how this had impacted her son over the years. Victoria stated, "The older he gets, the harder he gets. The absent father thing, I'm finding, is so much harder than it was when he was younger" (personal communication, April 24, 2018).

Veronica's daughter, Annie, had been impacted by having been in a home with domestic violence for the first two years of her life; which mom feels has had some influence on her daughter and she is still learning to what extent at this time. While the OFP was in place, Annie did not have contact with her father and had struggled with some anxiety issues for some time now which is believed to be related to those early life experiences. Veronica says that Annie worries about her (mom) and had sometimes expressed this to her grandparents. When she

cannot see mom, she must have her eyes on her before she feels comfortable with whatever she is doing while they are at home alone, together. Since the OFP ended, Annie is now spending time with her dad as she has had visits with him every other weekend. Veronica said, “At least from what I can tell, she’s not scared of her father anymore. There used to be a certain amount of that. For the most part she had gotten past that part anyway, but I wouldn’t say they are super close. And it’s also not uncommon for my daughter not to mention her father at all” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Although mom had some worry for her daughter in the past, she felt that Annie is old enough to talk to her now which had brought her comfort with this concern.

Amber’s daughter Sophie sees her dad and talks to him but had not spent time with him alone. Amber reported that she has had a positive relationship with him and spends time with his family; Sophie’s grandparents and dad are always there, yet mom is always there too. Mom stated, “It’s not like he is taking her on the weekends” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Sophie’s dad had to go to treatment to address his substance abuse issues and as mom explained, he had slowly made improvements. Amber laughs during part of her comment as she states, “He’s there but he’s not like there. You know, no matter what kind of relationship you are in, someone always does more. So, at the end of the day, I’m doing 100%, I think he’s maybe at 30%. To be honest, because it’s not like he’s picking up Sophie from daycare or making any of her appointments” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Amber said before that she had to let go of the anger with feeling left to raise Sophie on her own as this young mom found herself facing motherhood just before the age of 21. Now she says, “I just feel, well I said that I was angry because Sophie is at that age where she wants to see her dad” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Amber says her daughter understand that they do not live

together, and Sophie will say, “Dad, I want to go to your house. I mean, he and Sophie do have a decent relationship for a 3-year-old, but it could be better. I can see that” (personal communication, April 10, 2018).

Tamara’s situation is also unique in that her children’s father is more involved in their lives; especially in comparison to the other mothers. When Tamara and her ex separated, he kept the house while she and her three teenagers moved into an apartment. She had custody of them during the week and they would go with dad on the weekends. However, when she struggled with the cost of feeding her kids, she needed to send them to their dad’s place more to bring in extra money for other household needs and to afford to feed them, even with food support through county assistance. Tamara noted, “That’s why I had him take them every other week because I was paying at least \$200 every other week for groceries because I try to plan it out” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). Having dad involved as much as he is seemed to have alleviated some challenges for mom as she had that support. She has had the option and had told her kids to ask dad when they need something when she cannot provide; including rides or whatever else. When discussing how she juggled and prioritized her responsibilities Tamara had been able to tell her children, “If you want to have your dad take you to a movie, that’s fine, but I need to be here for your sister because it’s an academic thing” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). In considering whether needs were met Tamara also stated, “Their father does meet their needs by making sure they have clothes, they have shoes, they have food. So, he does meet their needs” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). Overall, this mother’s children have had more involvement with their father which ultimately seems to have affected Tamara’s experience as well through shared parenting and added support; including financial support to name a few.

Children. Although in depth details about the children were not a focal point in these interviews, this topic was predominant enough to have come through as a theme as it related to the struggles of these mothers and providing for their children. Besides these basics, with their parenting experiences and children being identified, aspects of their children naturally became a part of the conversation. Ages, stages, development, disabilities, health, temperament, and how many children each mother had were several of the elements that were different for each parent and will also vary for others. Only one mother addressed this next concern, but we only touch on it for a moment to bring it to light. One mother was conflicted about raising a boy without a male/father present, with potential racial issues because of bringing up a boy of color as a white woman. This issue brings about even more challenges for such families as one mother brought this up; not only did this affect her son but perhaps this contributed to her own internal struggle as well. Knowing from experience and even through the mothers' reports, children and related experiences can be as unique as snowflakes although situations can be very similar as well. Even some of the most basic factors related to children will affect a parent's experience contributing to the ease and comfort level as these pieces will affect how children act and interact with others. Children will vary in multiple degrees and this is essential to the understanding of the parenting experiences in general; based on some of the basic variations of characteristics, the ease of parenting and handling of children will too.

Childcare. Discussions about fathers and children leads us to another theme related to the support and care that a partner/father can provide in families. In cases where there is a partner, if one parent works, another might stay at home with the kids or else both parents work and pay for childcare expenses together. Either way childcare is a service needed whether one parent tends to this necessity by staying at home to care for the children or a childcare provider is

hired; childcare enables parents to go to work and provide income needed for the cost of living, including everything entailed with raising and parenting children. For example, childcare needs can also include the time and energy put into meeting other household responsibilities and when one parent needs to run to the store or wherever else, the other parent can watch the children. Even more important would be to tend to personal needs as parents, such as physical and mental health needs and alone time to just take a break which also can be difficult without an extra hand to care for the children. Whatever the case is, in a single parent household with one parent covering childcare needs alone, this can be taxing if no one can help with all these essential components required to thrive and function more comfortably.

Each of the mothers' situations varied with their stories and needs related to childcare. However, Tamara pointed out another reality when it comes to caring for children; "People who have little kids, it's more of a hardship. I feel for parents who have smaller children because they have to worry about daycare, they have to worry about someone picking them up" (personal communication, March 29, 2018). Tamara did not have a need for daycare because she was that provider for her household while married and her children were old enough to care for themselves when she became a single mom. For two of the women interviewed, there was no one else to help with such needs or with childcare. Although Amber didn't have anyone else to help with these responsibilities locally, she did have her mom and grandmother who would help with watching her daughter if needed. However, because they lived an hour away, it was more difficult and more of a hassle to access that option. Victoria had no one from the birth of her child and even now that her son is 14, she still had the responsibility of paying for childcare "just to have someone spend the night at my house" while traveling for work (personal communication, April 24, 2018). Plus, now that her son is a teenager she feels she still must

watch him closely because “he’s going to get into stuff and again, there’s not that father there, there’s not that other parent” (personal communication, April 24, 2018).

All three of the four single mothers who had a need for childcare, qualified for daycare assistance through county programs, although utilizing some of the Department of Human Services (DHS) programs had been reportedly complicated at times. Amber stated, “I don’t understand how that process works sometimes. You have to work like 20 hours a week but how can you get a job with those hours while in school and they don’t cover school, they only cover work. It’s weird like that” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). This was one rule relating to her status in school; Amber noted that at one point she received a postsecondary scholarship and at another point she had assistance through the DHS. Those complex rules had led to a little scare for Amber as she was left to figure out a bill of over \$1,000 that she had no way to pay at the time. Ultimately Amber was able to sort out this dilemma and had it paid for through one of her resources but confusion and extra stress for a low-income single mom who did not have the means, even when on childcare assistance, is one example of how complex the system can be for those who have access to these programs.

Financial Assistance and Child Support Payments. Childcare assistance related to another theme found to be prevalent in each mother’s story; financial assistance and child support payments. These topics were major components to the shared stories for each mother because without financial security to assist with the cost of living and parenting, there may be unmet needs. Each mother had concerns with stressing over financial security, whether it was a fear of not knowing how they would handle the financial burdens entailed with raising a child as a single parent or whether the worry and wonder came about due to an actual experience with struggling with financial insecurity, each mother expressed such distress. Without financial

assistance and child support payments, this would leave these families at a greater disadvantage. This seems to be a legitimate argument because all the mothers interviewed for this study have had the need for financial assistance through welfare programs and other related programs supporting these families' financial needs through their transitional periods of financial difficulty.

Although these homes were led by single mothers who were not cohabiting, some families require supplemental food support and whatever else, even with two or more incomes in a household, due to not being able to make a 'livable wage.' This aligns with the data analyzed for one report that highlights how individuals and especially working families are not being paid enough to afford the cost of living or make a livable wage; "half of public total spending on public assistance programs—goes to working families" (Jacobs, K., Perry, I., & MacGillvary, J., 2015). In these cases, single mothers in this study are living off one income to provide for their children. This data was included to support this discussion regarding financial assistance and child support payments, especially with these moms all being employed and even one of them having more than one job at a time. With this, each mother had also had the need for child support (&/or alimony) payments to help provide for their cost of living as well. However, not all single mothers end up receiving child support assistance from the fathers, for one reason or another and not all mothers can count on consistent payments; this was the case for two of the mothers which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Three of the moms received at least some amount of child support payment ranging from \$300-\$2,000 per month; one mom received \$300 and another one received about \$500; both had one child. Another mom's payment ranged from \$1,500-2,000 per month depending on how often she had her three kids. Again, Victoria is the only one who does not receive anything for

child support. Each of these moms received some type of assistance at some point; whether it was Women Infant and Children (WIC), cash assistance, Medical Assistance (MA), or Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) to make ends meet. SNAP is especially important because it is a program to help family pay for food through electronic benefits (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2018). At least one mom had Housing and Redevelopment Assistance (HRA) for rental assistance up until she no longer qualified. Ultimately, these women were fortunate to have some type of assistance to help them make ends meet but according to their reports it did not alleviate their struggles and accessing them and meeting the program criteria was sometimes more complicating, in more ways than one.

In the beginning of her parenting experience, Amber was able to move home with her mom and in turn her mom also offered childcare, which allowed Amber to stay at school and study. The question had not been asked whether she paid for anything while living with her mom, but these details would highlight the support that some parents offer to single mothers. This could be because some parents who allow their children to move back home during such times of need, also offer them the opportunity to save and prepare for future expenses. Amber referred to her mom as a saint for the support that she had provided. When discussing concerns of money, at one-point Amber recalled how she felt sort of disconnected when her baby was on her way, “I was so busy thinking about money. How am I going to pay for things” (personal communication, April 10, 2018)? She explained, “Formula is expensive, and Sophie developed an allergy to the formula and I was on WIC, but they didn’t cover Enfamil, so I had to pay for that out of pocket and her dad never helped with that” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Eventually because Sophie’s dad was not helping with the cost of raising a child, Amber filed for

child support and she started receiving some financial assistance through child support when her daughter was about 12months old.

Veronica reported having financial challenges prior to becoming a single mother to the extent of having food shortage and going without meals. When Veronica left her husband, she moved back home up until she and her daughter found an apartment; again, the question had not been asked as to whether she had to pay for this time at home which will vary from one household to the next. Although she had the financial need for this resource, housing assistance was not an option as she reported, “I couldn’t even get on a wait list. They had stopped accepting applications. So, I had to just figure ways around it” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). When asked about the struggles she had, she said, “Yeah, it’s financial. Just like the money. A lot of it was through accessing resources. We spent a little time on welfare and that was enough of that, I think we spent about 5 months on it. That was enough where I was able to save up what I was getting from work so that we could get off it and handle it by ourselves” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). When it comes to child support Veronica says they do not count on the money coming as she explained that her ex had not always been good with money so at times he did not pay. Veronica talked a lot about stretching money and cutting corners. She said that she had come up with what she referred to as “my own system using the *Dave Ramsey’s envelope system*” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). She said she saves the child support for emergency funds or when less money is coming in because she is working less and attending school more. Veronica said, “When the cash is gone that’s it and the way that I run my system is if there is any left-over money then I put in its own envelope and use it for fun stuff. Like if we want to get a candy, we can do it with that money” (personal communication, April 10, 2018).

There are more details with the financial assistance and child support payments theme that stood out with what Veronica reported about her financial status and utilizing programs. Veronica stated that her \$13,000 annual income was “just above the federal poverty line” which shocked this writer to imagine (personal communication, April 10, 2018). When asked about her challenges part of her answer entailed, “For the most part, I’m financially stable so I wouldn’t consider myself economically struggling anymore. Probably why we are economically stable is that I’ve found areas where corners can be cut. So, I don’t always eat every meal and I’ve figured out where I can get free food” like snacking on goodies people bring to work most days (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Despite these reports, Veronica said her daughter always had enough; she must only be concerned with his meals 3-4 days out of the week because he eats at daycare or her parents which she said she feels blessed for. Like what Amber had reported about the process of accessing programs, it can be difficult and even though there is a need, some women do not use the programs as with Veronica’s case with housing and others. When considering the cost of childcare for her educational goals she said, “I will see if I can get assistance, but I won’t count on it. I don’t even have time to do all the paperwork until after graduation, but it will be a problem for May” (personal communication, April 10, 2018).

As previously stated, Victoria does not receive child support; she had never received a dime for the financial support of her son, from his father. Victoria said, “Just child support alone would be nice. Just to have something extra to help raise this child. But you don’t get it, at least I don’t. It’s just me and my child and it always has been” (personal communication, April 24, 2018). Throughout her son’s life, Victoria had utilized such programs as Medicaid, SNAP, and housing assistance to name a few; these programs helped her to reach her educational goals. Even to this day, with her recent promotion and pay increase which doubled her income, she still

reports having financial adversity. Although she is now considered independent because she is free from utilizing those resources, it comes out of pocket and she is still financially challenged. Later in her interview when asked about her struggles, among other things, Victoria said, “Struggling to pay off the bills. Just having that extra income in the house, would be so nice. I don’t even care if it was minimum wage at this point, it would be so helpful” (personal communication, April 24, 2018).

For this investigator, one of the most surprising stories came from Tamara’s interview which related to the need for financial assistance to get on her feet and provide for her children. Tamara commented, “I was on welfare for a little bit” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). This now single mother once lived comfortably as a stay at home mom, supporting her family, while her husband worked on his education and career goals. Tamara explained, “I felt that he should get his bachelor’s Degree before I went to school because he was the bread winner for our family and I wanted to stay home and take care of the kids” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). She had also provided support for her family as the homemaker while her husband was pursuing his career in the military; oftentimes he was away for a year at a time. After the divorce, her ex-husband kept their family home and the same income when she and her children moved to an apartment. At that time, she decided she should go back to school to support her children because she knew she needed to make more than \$8.25 per hour.

Much of Tamara’s story seemed to support some of the details shared in the gender difference sections with the socioeconomic differences in the labor force, although Tamara did not receive payment for her contributions to the household as housewives do. This could be the reason for the higher child support or spousal support payments. Although this writer still saw this scenario as unfair with what Tamara had contributed and sacrificed as a housewife and

homemaker for her family during the time her husband pursued his career and education. Because in the end, Tamara's lifestyle completely changed while she struggled to make ends meet in an apartment with her children, while her ex's lifestyle remained what she described as unchanged. She kept the children most of the time and struggled to continue on this path without finding creative ways to make ends meet financially, and see her children as much as possible because as she had explained, "my children are my life" (personal communication, March 29, 2018). Tamara struggled financially to the point that she had the need for financial assistance, and at times felt she was not able to afford to feed her children. She explained that sometimes she did not have gas money for transportation either; which all of these details were surprising aspects of her story.

College Degrees. For the mothers who had been interviewed, another common theme was their pursuit for higher education in effort to obtain college degrees. The idea for each of these single moms was and/or is to bring in a greater income and allow for more job opportunities. Going to school seemed to be a factor that had both positive and negative effects for assorted reasons. Mainly, attending college while juggling life and parenting responsibilities as a single parent resulted in more work and deadlines contributing to extra stress; to name a few possible factors related to each of them pursuing a college degree. Going to school also comes at a great financial expense, because of the cost of college tuition. Individuals with a college degree are said to have greater income which one would think more money would provide for more comfort and ease with the cost of living. However, even with a master's level degree, comfortable living may not be the case for everyone; especially with one of the mothers in this study whose experience with the price of pursuing a higher education will be shared in this section.

The stress related to pursuing a degree came up for each mom except for Tamara. This could possibly be because she was not currently raising little ones as she had noted, or even that she is just beginning to pursue her educational goals and she was not actively taking classes at the time this study had been conducted. Or maybe this was because the topic did not take the focus of what had been discussed as she had other more predominant struggles that stood out more for her; the only way to really know this for sure is to ask Tamara herself and this question did not come up at the time of the interview. For Victoria, due to a shortage in teaching jobs in her area she was not able to complete that goal for now, but she does have a graduate teaching license and a bachelor's degree. In the meantime, she needed a job and accepted the next best opportunity. However, now that she is near the end of her educational journey, she wonders how she will repay the money she borrowed to pay for the cost of living, and everything related to her quest of pursuing a higher education. Although Victoria's education brought forth an increase in her salary, yet she is still struggling financially and had not even started to pay her student loans.

On top of the stress related to repaying the cost of her college tuition, Victoria still struggles with the cost of living. Now that her college degree salary had doubled, she went from accessing programs like WIC, SNAP, HRA, and others that she qualified for during part of her life as a single parent. Because her income doubled, Victoria reportedly made about \$41 too much to qualify for assistance with lunches and somewhere around \$3-400 too much for medical assistance (personal communication, April 24, 2018). In considering the annual cost of these two expenses, this did not add up. With the size of this income qualification gap and the cost of these necessities, one might wonder how a single parent like her could afford to pay this out of pocket, afford the cost of living, and attempt to move out of poverty; this almost sounds impossible when families cannot even afford to pay their monthly bills with ease. To add to this

picture, free or reduced lunches qualify children for other programs such as sports scholarships (among other opportunities) which families like Victoria's would no longer qualify for either.

Perseverance and Perception. The motivation that each of these mothers portrayed, especially in relation to their experiences pursuing higher education and not letting their struggles keep them down, brings up perseverance which was a strong presence during each of these interviews. Perception will also be included in this section, mainly as it relates to the endurance of the struggles reported. Perseverance is an essential quality to endure tough times, especially through all the challenges in a single parent's life. However, having determination not to give up in life is essential for parents and people in general. One's perception of those life challenges is also important because how people perceive things can and will influence the outlook on these obstacles and how they are handled as well. In this study, these concepts stood out because each mother was motivated to make it no matter what hurdles they had encountered, and their perceptions varied with how they reported the struggles they experienced which will be emphasized in the two examples shared below.

When each of these mothers had challenges they found ways to cope and adapt; which included cutting corners. Some of their coping methods were healthier options than others, but despite the hardships described, each of these women are still standing and going strong as parents, providers, and students. When Amber found out she was pregnant, she was in process of earning her Associates Degree and children were not a part of her plan at the time. She said, "This is not my ideal" but all throughout her interview her stories and presentation gleamed with perseverance (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Giving up was not an option for her and even though her daughter's father had not been as supportive as she had envisioned, she stepped up on her own and learned to handle her situation. Her perception of becoming a mother

to start had been different than it was at the time of her interview. She explained, “I had this baby, and I was 21 and I just felt like my life was over” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). This changed in time as she adapted and persevered to where she is today. When asked about how things have been different, she explained, “It’s better, it gets better. You just find new ways to cope with it. It’s like okay, well we can’t do it all in one day, there’s tomorrow” (personal communication, April 10, 2018).

Tamara’s perception was accentuated through how she had reported her hardships, in that she did not specifically identify many of the obstacles she had encountered as struggles. Yet, as she shared her stories, the details were interpreted as hurdles as her words and stories painted this picture; most if not all her experiences would seemingly be identified as a struggle to the average person. How Tamara seemed to have perceived these challenges, was highlighted as a strength by this interviewer. Tamara reported that she had struggled to pay the bills when she went to part-time status, so she could go back to school in pursuit of more opportunities, so she found ways to deal with this obstacle. Her teens use to live with their dad on weekends, as she explained, “I had to give them to their father every other week, just so I could afford to feed them, even with my food stamps, because my job would pay for some of the miscellaneous expenses like electricity and stuff like that, which money my ex gave me didn’t cover” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). She learned to manage her situation and afford the cost of living; including feeding her children; and she even founds options to spend more time with her kids when they were on their father’s time by picking them up from school and having dad pick them up on his way home.

Tamara’s perseverance and perception stood out because although she had struggled immensely with various effects through her separation, divorce and becoming a single mother,

she chose to continue to parent and provide for her children which is not always the choice for parents as some parents give up and/or abandon their children. All the mothers in this study should be acknowledged for not giving up, just as Tamara did. Despite Tamara's challenges to feed her kids as described, she stated, "My ex-husband does do right by me and the children" (personal communication, March 29, 2018). Later in the interview she commented, "I'm not struggling but I'm not, not struggling either. So, I'm in the middle; I'm like perfectly in the middle. Now if my ex-husband did not provide me with the retirement that I helped him earn then I would be living, very, very, badly" (personal communication, March 29, 2018). Despite the trials she had also reported, Tamara spoke highly of the father of her children throughout her entire interview, except for when specifically referring to his infidelity, which highlighted how her attitude and perception of her struggles and experiences stood out.

Experience and Transitional Periods. Experience and transitional periods are two closely related themes highlighted in the single mother stories that can also be connected to perception in multiple ways. These concepts relate because how individuals perceive their situations and challenges, may oftentimes influence how they handle them. To understand more about how one of these themes applies to this study, we will consider some of the noted synonyms of experience as one source listed several; know-how, practice, reality, training, skill, observation, exposure, understanding, struggle, maturity, wisdom, and familiarity (Dictionary.com, 2018). All of these are words identified as similar meanings, if not the same meaning as the word experience as defined by the dictionary. Yet we can see that they describe several aspects and levels of the word, which can assist with understanding specifically how this theme applies to parenting and how experience was found to be related to the stories shared in these mom's stories.

With or without insight, transitional periods occur naturally through lifespan development and other encounters over time. Transitions entail adapting to the new elements of living as applied to the involved timeframes; learning about what to expect as one progresses through life can also bring forth various levels of experiences and understanding. Although observing another person's encounters can bring some insight, there is something to be said about hands on experience; especially undergoing challenges through exposure and practice. In these cases, having experienced single motherhood and the expressed struggles, seemed to have brought about understanding and a new outlook about single mothers and parenting in general. This perspective had been different for some, prior to their personal encounter as a single mother. Each mother's level of experience as parents and as single parents had varied which was emphasized as a contributing factor as to why some single mothers report more struggles than others which will be discussed in some of the following paragraphs in this section.

Veronica's experiences related to her transition out of a home with domestic violence which included her daughter's anxiety that was believed to be linked to this experience. Victoria and her son transitioned through several life stages over almost a decade and a half, without the support entailed in the other mothers' lives connected to the many support mechanisms that fathers and other family members can offer. Other sensitive timeframes related to another mother's experience as a new, young, single parent which included another metamorphosis. These changes included those that come through pregnancy, into motherhood and post-partum; including the changeover to where she was, at the time of the interview. Amber commented on her passing from pregnancy to motherhood, "It's different when you're pregnant. There's no baby around so you don't really have to worry about anything and then when the baby comes out, the baby needs you" (personal communication, April 10, 2018). She goes on to describe her

struggles as she shifts into the world of parenting, “That first year was off the charts because you’re a new mom. Not only are you a new mom, you’re a new, single mom. You know what I mean. It’s not like hey, watch the baby so I can take a shower. You have to think of new tricks on what to do and I was young, so I was like, what the heck” (personal communication, April 10, 2018).

Inevitably Amber had experienced even more changes along the way and fortunately for her and her Sophie, these were positive changes, as explained in her story. Although she felt something was going on, she did not seek treatment for these concerns and she bypassed the postpartum depression questionnaires that had been a routine piece of her follow-up medical appointments. Amber described an emotional introspect, “I didn’t really think I was struggling, I said I was fine but really I was actually just dying inside” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Later she talked about what also seemed to be a point of acceptance with her situation and letting go of certain feelings about being a single mother, along with feelings towards her daughter’s dad. Amber explained what she did to make progress with her maturity on handling this disappointment, “...And let it be okay, that I was okay to have a baby by myself and stop being so angry at her dad for making it seem like he put me in this position. I really did care about Sophie’s dad a lot and I was just angry. So, I had to let go of the anger, so I could actually focus on me and my daughter,” which reemphasizes how this transition and mentality related to her new perspective as a single mom (personal communication, April 10, 2018).

Although mental health was not thoroughly discussed, Tamara reported to have suffered through depression related to transitional periods she encountered in her world, all of which contributed to her reported struggles. Because depression was not a focal point, this interviewer did not ask about preexisting conditions, diagnosis, and/or treatment of depression. She

described the emotional battle she endured, “I cried myself to sleep every night for 2 years because I wanted my marriage and my ex-husband” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). Tamara explained how she felt about this reality, “I felt horrible because it’s not like I wanted to be depressed but when you had your life all planned out with the person that you loved, and they change their minds, that’s like a drastic thing” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). As with Amber, Tamara continued to adapt, and changes continued for her as she described throughout her story at the time of the interview. She commented, “I’m taking time for myself, away from my situation so that way I heal because that environment was toxic for me...” (personal communication, March 29, 2018).

Tamara had also discussed the shift from marriage to separation and divorce, as she explained, “It was a hard for me to get used to being a single mom and getting used to doing things on my own” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). She also shared comments on how her children’s ages related to the challenges she encountered as a single parent which also coincided with the turning points she underwent as these factors seemed to have impacted the ease of some of her trials. She explained, “Because I have teenagers, they can do for themselves. Now if they were younger, I would probably have been a hot mess--See mine are not as difficult because I got a divorce and became a single mom when they were teenagers. So, they were able to stay by themselves, they were able to cook their own meals, if I had to work or if I was in college” (personal communication, March 29, 2018). Near the end of the interview Tamara commented on choices made throughout her marriage that have also contributed to her experience as a single mom, “But now, looking back, I don’t regret what I did because it helped accomplish so much for my ex-husband and for the things that he was able to do so he can better provide for our children” (personal communication, March 29, 2018).

Time. Another theme that seemed prevalent and essential to note related to time, but more so the lack of time. Three of the four mom emphasized this concern, two of them lacked time and/or worried about time to tend to meeting household needs and more so concerning was the time needed to execute crucial components of well-being (i.e. alone time, time for a break to tend to personal needs). Another mother questioned the concept, not having understanding as why there is a concern for some mothers, as will be discussed. Having time and energy to handle responsibilities is something that everyone needs. Parents require more as they are responsible for tending to their needs along with the needs of their children which generally would require more time and energy to manage. In the case of a single parent, time would be more of a concern with one person tending to those needs, especially in the cases of mothers like those in this study where they are the sole provider; or even “main” providers (at times) as described by Tamara and Veronica when their kids went to their dad’s home on the weekends.

Time was not a concern for every mother as previously noted. Tamara did not talk about having this concern however she had the time and means to tend to her personal need to take a break and move away while her children stayed with their dad during that time; as previously expressed in the experience and transitional periods section. This did not seem to be an option for the other mothers as they did not have another provider involved as much as she did. Tamara had also addressed the reality for her and her children when she had first left her husband’s home explaining how if her children were younger, “I do not know how I would have done it. I probably would have had to move back home with my parents had I had smaller children.” Her perception and description of this alternative for caring for her children, had there been the need, is indicative of the idea that if her children were at different ages, requiring more of her time and energy, she would also require more physical support to execute these demands.

As previously discussed, parenting multiple children at once, along with other child related themes will affect an individual's parenting needs; this could be the case for these mothers having different reports because some children are easier to handle than others. Some parents are also better equipped to handle challenges as well for one reason or another. Whatever the case for these women, their stories related to time also varied. Two mothers who struggled the most with time were Veronica and Victoria. Veronica's story was the most evident of this theme as time was a repetitive concern; possibly correlated with everything in her married life which most likely contributed to her prenatal and pregnancy time, along with postpartum on through her transition into becoming a single parent. All the challenges from there until the present were difficult as she expressed needs and had to find ways around those deficits (i.e. childcare costs and housing) and she is still struggling to graduate so she can take a break and address other personal issues that have come to surface throughout that time. Her perception of those challenges and how she handled them also seems to have contributed to her situation because even though she qualified for assistance, she did not access them at the time she was interviewed for various reason which may also affect her levels of stress or ease of living too as she handled these issues independently.

Veronica described always being too busy trying to meet her household needs so she could not tend to her own needs because she was busy working and going to school. She described some of those time constraints related to food as well. "Not having the time to go to the grocery store. It's like I'm working or at school or I've got my daughter and it's just like I don't have time--as long as Annie has enough to eat I can usually be alright" (personal communication, April 10, 2018). She also commented about time related to making meals with convenience foods as will also be discussed in this section. "We don't have the time to cook and

then do the dishes afterwards when I have a 20-page paper to write and my daughter is wanting a bedtime story, and I have a quiz and a post to make online, and like 6 worksheets” (personal communication, April 10, 2018).

Veronica reported looking forward to when she graduates and having more time to “make healthy food again” (personal communication, April 10, 2018). She mentioned not having time to address other important needs such an outstanding emergency room bill that should have been covered, applying for public assistance for childcare that she qualifies for, addressing and adjusting sleep routine concerns for her daughter, and even going to the doctor to tend to her own physical needs, including the time to rest and even sleep (personal communication, April 10, 2018). When asked if she had three wishes, what they would be, she said, “God that’s a hard one. I don’t know. I’d like to have time to spend with my kid. To not be so stressed out. If I could bring my stress levels down that would be great because that affects a lot of things. It would give me more time, if not give me more time to at least make the most of the time that I’ve got; quality over quantity.”

Victoria’s experience had been the longest with the least support out of all the women involved in this study which is one possible aspect to understanding why this theme was also more prevalent in her story. She had had the longest amount of time in her situation which also relates to how this theme could be reflected but also not an emphasis in the interview and conversation. Although she discussed the time put into a child’s activities once they get older in comparison to the needs of a child who require physical assistance with care. Time was more so found to be a concern for Victoria when it came to taking time for herself. This was determined when asked by this investigator, how she had taken time for herself over the years which also emphasized a concern that some single mothers have. “I didn’t. Honestly, I did not. I don’t

think I ever took time for myself until Jacob got a little older. No, actually I didn't because he didn't spend the night at anyone's house until, yeah, it wasn't until I started traveling for work. So right now, I took an hour or two to lay in the sun before I got to the airport. So up until I got this job I didn't take time for myself because I couldn't. How am I supposed to take time for myself" (personal communication, April 24, 2018)? She talked about not having someone to watch her son or not having money to pay for a night out except for "once in a blue moon—maybe four times a year," which included the expense for childcare among other expenses (personal communication, April 24, 2018). Most of her time for herself was at night once he was in bed and even to this day she needs to hire a sitter for her work travels even though he is a teenager as previously described in the section about childcare.

Amber only talked about time in relation to two things that were not as prevalent during her conversation but enough to note in connection to this discussion about how this theme affected each mother. First, her daughter's father who is not spending time with Sophie which in turn results in Amber not having alone time outside of work and school. Then there is the time which is required of her when it comes to work and school because as a student, going to school allowed for less time to work. She gleamed with a positive affect and talked about how she managed her responsibilities as noted in question 9 of the interview guide (see Appendix A). "Uhm, I keep a list. Not like I get everything done. I have missed a couple of assignments, but I just try. The fact that I try says something--It's not beneath me to have ramen noodles, my daughter is eating. I don't know how I do it sometimes. I think sometimes you just do it, if it fails it fails, if it doesn't and you're like okay, if everyone's alive at the end of the day it's okay. I think after my daughter made it to age one I was okay" (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Amber had the opportunity to move home and it sounded like mother and grandmother

had provided her some support through the first couple years of school, so this could have contributed to some of why her perspective about time was different. She did not seem to grasp the concept or even report the time insecurity issues that some of the women had described. This was noted when this interviewer was relating on certain areas of discussion, this interviewer had mentioned not having time to do some of the things Amber had found time to do for herself (i.e. exercise and other me time stuff), and she asked, “What is this time thing” (personal communication, April 10, 2018)?

Food and Health. Food and health were also crucial contributing factors to the life of these single mothers which also relates to time and stress; this includes mental health as well. Financial challenges and even lack of time contributed to less nutritional food; whether a mom buys 10 chicken nuggets for \$1.49 on the run or a package of thirty cent ramen noodles, these are tasty, cheap, quick meal fixes with very little nutritional value. Most parents can probably relate to this concept whether they are single, low income or neither. An adequately nutrition diet is said to consist of a variety of food including fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and milk; as well as “vegetable subgroups several times a week;” while avoiding foods with little salt (Whitney, E. & Rolfes, S. R., 2008, pp. 38-40, 5). However, most people would also agree that healthier fresher foods are more expensive than much of the faster, more convenient foods available to families. So, when food, money, and time shortage is a common occurrence in a household, a person’s health can be jeopardized. Top this risk off with an extra heaping serving of stress and one can imagine what the answer to this equation will be.

Three out of four moms talked about mental health even though it was not a question; two of them suffered from depressive symptoms as previously described, while the other mom seemed overwhelmed by not having the means for all her parenting and household

responsibilities along with keeping up with college and other family mental health issues.

Veronica had access to school resources where she learned some coping skills for her anxiety and she got to the point that she did not need a therapist to remind her to use those skills anymore (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Veronica also brought up not having the means to address other personal issues, and problems at home as she explained her plan to take a semester off once she graduates; “I just need the time to take care of some things before going back to graduate school” (personal communication, April 10, 2018).

Grief and Loss. With all the expressed concerns highlighted in the lives of these single mothers, grief and loss were a grave concern that was brought to light. These concerns came about through the grounded theory process involved with seeking answers and data to understand the struggles of single mothers. Each mother expressed various amounts of grief and loss in their lives and their children’s lives. Failed relationships, lone pregnancies and childbirth, disappointed children, and even fatherless children, along with other traumatic experiences that were entailed in the lives of these single mothers. Oftentimes grief and loss are both closely related and oftentimes associated with death, but we know that grief and loss can be applied to more than this type of life altering event. Existing research seems to have also failed to make the connection related to grief and loss in single parenting. Emotional distress, sorrow, and suffering is all associated with grief; added to the loss that many of the women had described which will add more risks and contributing factors to an already extensive list of concerns for many single mothers and their children.

Social Support. There were several findings that this study could delve deeper into but to keep this project at a minimal this writer will only touch on those included in this conversation, some more briefly than others. Social support will not be discussed as thoroughly

as it was not a big piece of the interviews. However, each mother had identified some social support whether through friends or through family; some had both and some had more social support than others. Any positive social support can be helpful especially through such trying times that these women have encountered. Social support was significant enough to bring attention to as this is also an important component that may have altered the situations for some of the mothers, had their social support been different for them. Social support, no matter the source, can prove beneficial and it does make a difference as it was shown through these mothers' stories.

Compounded Factors. The previously noted concepts are the most predominant themes that have been highlighted for the reasons shared in each section. These factors vary and are correlated with the challenges these single mothers reported having. Each of the participant's situations and experiences varied. Some of the mothers had several difficulties; and some had greater levels of those noted difficulties; while others had been impacted by every theme noted. These assorted factors that vary in dimensions have been deemed compounded factors to assist with meeting the goal of this study which is to explain why some single mothers struggle more than other. The assorted degrees of struggle and myriad possibilities are entailed within the complex equations used to determine why some undergo more adversity than others. Awareness of how compounded factors contribute to the lives of single mothers and their children is one of the fundamental explanations to understanding this researcher's theory, which had been designed to explain why some single mothers report more struggles than others.

This concept can be applied to more than just the phenomenon of single mothers who struggle and can apply to more than this population. This should especially be considered for vulnerable populations in which multiple risk factors exist. In this case, compounded factors

applied to the lives of single mothers refers to how each of these women have been affected by complex elements of parenting as explained, that have compiled into more complicated and demanding situations. These compounded factors contribute to the mothers facing numerous struggles as some, if not all the women in these stories. These noted themes vary and are compiling factors that affect single mothers and their children, whether negatively or positively, which also depends on how they are applied to the lives of these families. Whatever the case, the compounded factor theory can help inquiring minds understand complex situations as those involved in the reality of single parenting.

Two basic metaphorical visual aids have been designed to describe and explain the layers of unique and varying factors. Basic, in that we are not displaying the finer details of these components although another chart could easily be formulated to assist with pinpointing how intricate the topic matter is. This has been the first study known, to focus on such details related to single moms especially with such compounding elements in relation to one another and to the struggling single mother phenomenon. Because of this, the visual aid created for this research project had been designed to paint a clearer picture of this phenomena. This image should assist in understanding the complex nature of what single mothers have experienced, which exemplifies the compounded factor theory behind why some single mothers struggle more than others (See Appendix B).

Figure 1 is the main visual aid entailing the basic details involved in a situation. Layers can be added but because some people may mistakenly see this figure for what it appears to be, another figure was created to get more in depth with the noted categories in this study. The basic design can be applied to any elements of parenting or adapted to any complex situation. Figure 1 includes the single mother, the father (including the father-child and father-mother relationships),

the child/children, and the support and other contributing factors (See Appendix B, Figure 1, 2018). Figure 2 was also designed to explain some of the variations but note that not all single mothers are affected by these factors, so this will vary depending on each mother's elements of struggle involved in their parenting experience (See Appendix B, Figure 2, 2018). Other components to apply to this equation is to determine whether these factors act as buffers or contribute to adversity, which will also vary depending on the situation. The ultimate reality is that people and their situations are different, and they handle things differently so there is no way of knowing unless you ask because single mothers and their circumstances, along with people in general, do not fit into one mold.

Single Parent Culture. Culture was not a theme that was prevalent in the interviews, however this writer identified the single parent culture as an aspect to consider when working with this population, including research. This is particularly so, due to the shared experience and struggles that these single mothers described; despite their unique situations, they had similarities as well. For distinct reasons, single parents and especially those that are mothers, could be considered a culture of its own. It is important to be open-minded in knowing that cultures vary and may prove to be unique, even within the same ethnicity or nationality. Culture in general will also influence the single parent equation although oftentimes when it comes to the topic of culture, the spotlight usually seems to be more so about language, nationality and ethnicity. This is true to an extent, but culture is a term that may hold different meanings depending on who you ask. Hooyman and Kramer describe a broad definition of culture to include “shared beliefs, values, behavioral norms, and practices that characterize a particular group of people with a common identity” (2006, p. 78). To gain a sense of cultural competency when providing services to individuals and their families, it is important to have knowledge about cultural

differences and/or access to ways of learning about various aspects of culture. But it is even more important not to make assumptions and stereotype individuals and families based on what you think you know especially based on ethnicity and nationality or in this case, marital and parenting status. One book that talks about family interaction, asks, “if we cannot know the extent to which culture and ethnicity shape the form and organization of a particular family without actually observing or communicating with that family, then of what value are ethnic-focused profiles of different ethnic or subcultural groups” (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2007, p. 75)? Ultimately, to determine cultural factors and meanings within a person’s world, the best way to get to know information about their culture is to ask the clients themselves.

Comments on Single Parenting. Although most of the moms who were interviewed sided with one of the general ideas that being a single mother is hard, and they would not recommend it, there were also some positive comments made. In all fairness, this study was not about the joys of single parenting or the love these women have for their children. Because the focal point to the interviews inquired about the struggles they had encountered, most of the conversations addressed more of the negative aspects of single motherhood due to the nature of what was found in these mothers’ reports. However, with all the adverse elements this paper is bringing to light, it would not feel right to omit those statements made about the love these mothers expressed for their children as each mom had positive comments about their children, especially two of the heartfelt comments that stood out the most.

Despite Amber having had several challenges to describe in her experience as a single mom and even though she felt she needed more support from her daughter’s father, she gleamed with a positive light. Her response was a surprise when we asked, what would you want others to know about single parenting? Amber said, “It can be great. People make it seem like it’s the

most horrible thing ever, make it seem like it's the hardest thing ever. It is hard but it's not all bad. There's some good out of it" (personal communication, April 10, 2018). Amber had survived the hard times and came through with optimism despite her doubts and worries at the beginning of her venture as a single mother.

Victoria presented as a confident woman with an upbeat personality, just as Amber did. This comment is important as the following comments may seem negative to some. Through the 14 years of being a single mother with very little to no support, what she shared was interpreted as blunt words of wisdom from a woman who had many years of experience with the topic of single parenting. When asked the same question about what she wanted people to know about single parenting, Victoria said, "It sucks. That's what I want people to know. I want them to know it sucks and it's hard and they have no idea and it's not that anyone needs your empathy but if someone asks for help, don't roll your eyes and make a big deal out of it. They don't have anybody else. They are asking you because they have no other options--It's like privilege; step down from your privileged little life of having two parents or having your support or having whatever" (personal communication, April 24, 2018). Victoria specifically requested she be quoted on some of the other things she shared, that really bothered her. She goes on with an emotional plea about what she felt that people needed to know as she quoted what someone had once said to her. "Oh yeah, my hat goes off to you." Victoria was thinking as she shared her thoughts, "I don't want your hat to go off to me, I want some help man, that's what I want" (personal communication, April 24, 2018).

She came up with what she felt was a great example of what it had been like to be a single mother. She was asked if she were to teach a single parent class, what she would teach her class. This was Victoria's response: "I would have them build one of those Ikea

entertainment centers. You know? They would get all the parts and a picture of what it should look like; but I would give them no instructions, no tools, and they would have to put it together by themselves. That is what it's like to be a single parent. And then, in the midst of their work, I would pat them on the back and say, I don't know how you do it. My hat goes off to you" (personal communication, April 24, 2018). At this point both Victoria and this interviewer laughed together in agreement.

Despite how difficult single parenting had been for Victoria she ends this topic with a heartfelt response about how her son had affected her life:

I wouldn't change anything for the life of me. I *love* [emphasis added] my son and he is literally the best thing that has happened to me. So, if I had to choose, either not to have him or to have him knowing I would have this exact same experience, I would do it all over again, every single time, because I *love* [emphasis added] my son. He has changed my life and he has made my life better, but it is *so hard* [emphasis added] and it is *unfair* [emphasis added]. It's unfair to my son but it wasn't my choice--I want a mentor for my son, I don't want your hat to go off to me, or you know, your pat on the back. I want someone to take my son out and teach him how to shave or you know, that's what I want.

(personal communication, April 24, 2018)

Outside Comments on Single Parenting. The subject matter involving this research project became a conversation piece with a man who had been raised by a single mother and whose children were being raised by single mothers. To clarify, according to his report, his mother had been married but raised her children alone due to personal issues including health concerns experienced by his father resulting in an absentee-father scenario. From first-hand

experience and speculation, he explained that single mothers fall on a spectrum when it comes to the challenges of single parenting which made this researcher wonder. For just a moment, this writer wondered if it were that simple and if this study had been a waste of time, examining and including too many details for nothing. But it had quickly been concluded that this study's findings support the realization that there is more to understanding why some single mothers report more struggle than others. However, one could gauge a single mother's level of struggle on a spectrum to determine needs and decide whether a chart could be applied to gain further understanding. With this study; we look deeper than what level of struggle each individual woman had encountered because we are considering why they are at one end of the spectrum or another; not where they are on that spectrum; although both methods can be helpful in providing and gaging services.

Discussion

This study highlighted stories of adversity shared by the single mothers interviewed for this project. We identified the commonalities and differences related to the challenges they expressed. We heard the voices of the women who participated in this study and through this process we identified many contributing factors to their hardships. We also painted a clearer picture of the personal stories of these single moms, to begin to understand why some report more struggles than others. Every story could not be shared to the fullest without turning this writing into a book. Amidst their challenges there were positive pieces to each story. The most positive details shared were laughed off by both the moms and this investigator (together) because of how the moms presented their struggles through positive and humorous attitudes. Although each mother had some positive comments to share, the two that stood out the most were shared in the comments on single parenting section. This project's goal was to understand

and explain what contributes to their adversity versus the positive aspects of their experiences as single mothers, which is most likely why part of this information was particularly minimal.

As pictured by the compounded factors theory, it seems that taking into consideration all the challenges, including the assorted dimensions, is the key to understanding their struggles and why some moms reported more than others. This concept combined with the other intricate elements of life resulted in varying and sometimes unique circumstances which will also be buffered by the support systems and resources each mother had had in their lives. Why some of the mothers reported (more or less) struggles seems to have also been influenced by perception and experience as discussed. There does not seem to be one concise answer to such a complex equation. These themes along with myriad influencing factors are why some single mothers struggle more than others and these factors vary in degrees of complexity and detail. A simpler picture of what a single parent is or is not could be better understood with knowing that single parents do not fit into one mold while considering the compounded factors theory visual aid to gain some understanding to this complex equation.

This study has begun to pave the way for further research into the challenges of single parents and the complexities of these challenges. However, this researcher questions if we really need to investigate these topics if we know how complex, difficult, and concerning it can be for some? This question seems more troublesome with all the existing data that had been available for decades, highlighting single mothers as a vulnerable population in general. If we know these single mothers are struggling (some more than others) and we know families are going without crucial elements needed for optimal functioning, then what more do we need to know about this besides what can we do to help support these families, to aid with reducing and preventing risks with these areas of concern? Do we really need to further study the compounded factors theory

if we know what happens when factors compile and compound and, in this case, contributing to the severity of their struggles? This reality thrown at one person had shown to be overwhelming and even worse for some; especially for those who may not have the means to cope. This study could have taken other directions with all the details shared especially in relation to the existing research findings, but for now, this current interpretation of this new data compared to the previous information should answer some questions and paint a picture as to why many single parents struggle and why some struggle more than others.

Strengths and Limitations

This study is unique in that the perspective of the mothers themselves are being used to highlight their experiences as single parents, while most studies have primarily pointed out the risks associated with these households. Through the voices of these mothers, we have painted a picture and highlighted their experiences, seeking to confirm or deny whether their experiences related to the current research findings. This current research compared some of the risk factors highlighted in the literature to the data shared through the stories of the moms who were interviewed. The answer to whether single mothers are at a greater risk in comparison to other family constructs cannot be confirmed by this current study, although, this study does support the concept that single mothers are at risk as each of these mothers had experienced several concerns at various points, and the literature's noted risks can also be confirmed as it relates to the findings of this study. With only 4 single mothers included in this study, one cannot generalize to all single moms, even though this is said to be true of most qualitative research.

This study did not focus specifically on the children's perspectives in these single parent households. Ultimately what affects the mother can and will affect the child and vice versa.

Without providing support for the mother who heads these single parent households, we are not,

therefore, providing support for the children in these single parent households. Whatever the case with providing support or not, the perspective of the child may very well differ from the mom's which would provide valuable data either way. Another limitation of this study is that they only share the perspective of the mothers' point of view and not the fathers. This writer feels that knowing that these families benefited from various resources and that they could continue to use the support of such programming to thrive, the father's input does not seem to be needed to validate this. However, with both the child and father's input missing, this could be an avenue to consider for future studies; whether together or separately it would bring the other missing sides of the experience to light for whatever purpose one deems fit.

Bias is a factor that had been continuously monitored throughout this study especially because bias is a factor by nature with this researcher being a single mother. This could be considered both a strength and a limitation for this project. Personal experience provides for an insider view of the participants; allowing for this interviewer to be able to relate and understand the struggles that the mothers reported. The laughter that occurred between the mothers (both the interviewer and the participant) came about naturally, through having shared experiences. The concept that experience brings understanding, was a theme that may not have been noticed without the insight and even experience of being a single mother. As previously noted, one might also see the biased experience of being a single mother as a limitation due to possible assumptions being made and/or angles used (to name a couple possibilities) which is why we utilized select methods to reduce bias as much as possible. These techniques included assistance from committee members who were not single mothers but work with single mothers as a behavioral specialist and through special education and early childhood education. Last, having themes and interviews double checked by the committee chair, and later discussed by committee

members, while keeping a bias journal to be aware of this concern were a few other strategies to assist with monitoring bias. Knowing how important it is to keep bias out of social work and practice in general, is a strength that this writer brought to the table from the beginning, which assisted with avoiding such concerns for this study. However, some bias is inevitable as it will always be a factor because it is impossible to eliminate all bias.

Several new concepts have come about from this study including the compounded factors theory; along with the visual aid to support this, the consideration of trauma, and grief and loss in relation to single parenting, and awareness of a single parent culture. These will be noted as strengths that brought forth innovative ideas and information. Ultimately, this comparative analysis had allowed for the opportunity to gather valuable data that should assist with guiding future studies related to the exploration of the single mother experience. It was found that single moms wanted to be heard, which was the first detail highlighted at the beginning of this study. The overwhelming response from the women noted, who wanted to share their stories, emphasized their desire to be heard. Future research should include such data needed to assist with advocacy to support programming and policy involving single mothers and their children. Interviewing and sharing the perspectives of these single mothers has begun the process of filling some of the gaps in the related literature however more research is recommended to strengthen this approach. With that suggestion, this study also offers an easy to follow research design to be replicated.

Recommendations

Multiple recommendations have come about from this current study; although more could be brought to light depending on who you ask. This is especially true if we had more time to thoroughly examine and/or consider all the finer details noted, as well as those only briefly

mentioned in this study. Considering this study's findings has brought about several ideas to further explore if needed. For now, we will discuss some thoughts that have come to mind as they related to the most prevalent themes and areas of need as discussed in the stories shared. Many, if not all, of the women in these stories have benefited or could benefit from the following ideas because without such programs and support, women and families like these would be left to get out of their sometimes financially debilitating situations on their own. Although, financial demands are only related to a handful of the many issues mentioned, we know that many of these women have already been supporting their families on their own through the most trying transitional periods and still struggled regardless of the financial assistance and programming that was available to them. From the stories shared, we can generalize that this could be detrimental if such aid had not been there for them during those times of need, however we can also see that more could be done to help set them up for the future so these women and their children can thrive and be as healthy and productive as possible versus constantly struggling with one concern or another.

Implementing concepts and programming to aid with assisting families out of poverty to keep them off "the system" is a crucial to reach these goals and make these programs more successful and beneficial to our society in numerous ways. Also, considering trauma and/or grief and loss as focal points for future research related to single parents is another gap, we recommend filling. These topics do not seem to exist in the current research about non-violence related trauma and non-death related loss which should be considered for this population; the stories in this study have portrayed much grief and loss although not generally recognized as such. Although this could be important to consider and recognize for all individuals, especially those who are vulnerable, these recommendations would be especially important for single

mothers who are lacking those essential components needed to assist with healthier outcomes; especially those who have little or no support along with greater compounding factors.

Recommendations to follow this study's lead include such ideas as using a larger sample that would allow for even greater understanding and/or a more thorough analysis of the themes found through this research. Using a more strategic questionnaire would allow us to learn more about the specific challenges of single mothers versus this approach, which was more explorative, more so because this type of study had not been done before. The methods used were selected to explore the research question and there was no guide to follow to determine how best to execute this. For this study, methods had been tested and now we have more ideas how best to accomplish these goals and what areas to analyze in the future. Conducting other studies like this, to include more voices of single mothers will allow for myriad details to further explore why some single mothers struggle more than others and to confirm or deny this study's findings.

Single Mom Awareness. Having awareness of the reality of the single motherhood experiences is a must, especially for those individuals who work with these women and their children; this would be like any cultural awareness suggested to provide best practice. This recommendation is extended to include workplace laws and practice to take into consideration a parent who has had little to no support from a partner or co-parent. The 'golden rule' has always told us to treat people how we want to be treated but modern cultural competence has taught us otherwise in some cases. Realization, that each of these mothers had similar yet different stories and even some of their own awareness regarding these differences, did too. This is important to take into consideration, to begin to help single parents in need because people in general, sometimes (if not many times) fail to acknowledge that everyone's situation is different. In turn, this contributes to the lack of understanding, empathy, and/or compassion that some people have

it harder than others and some people need more assistance than others; and/or expecting the same from everyone and handling them same way. Even being a single mother does not always bring understanding especially if that mom as we also saw, these experiences can be like night and day that could prevent a single mother with a strong support system from understanding why some other single mothers struggle so much. This is especially important to realize with such vulnerable individuals, especially when they need help and/or are seeking assistance through agencies; those professionals need to be aware of the single mother culture and the varying factors that will affect the level of struggle involved in her life and the lives of her children.

If a single mother expresses distress, knowing that this is not an excuse, that this is a reality for many. Understanding that stories like those shared in this study may be their story too; that some of the issues brought to light in this study may be what they are challenged with; while understanding that some will have it easier while others have it worse. These steps towards awareness and understanding will assist with targeting their needs. Realizing that some single mothers have more complex concerns going on, the only way to know about the life of each individual mom at hand is to ask and not put them all into one category. Listen to them; acknowledge their situations, feelings, and needs; and seek to understand their situation to help them through whatever struggle they may have. Family, friends, employers, providers, and people in general could benefit from becoming more aware, if not already in the know. Understanding is crucial to support those who are struggling because not all people should be treated the same, especially when it comes to certain expectations; awareness of their reality and/or the desire to understand and become more aware is a start to helping single mothers and their families.

Fathers and Child Support. One of the major pieces that is missing for many mothers is another responsible adult contributing to the needs of a child. With most of the women in this study having struggled to receive child support at one point or another; financial contribution should be a minimal expectation for those who choose not to be involved with their offspring. With this, women need more assistance enforcing child support. When parents access county assistance for programs such as MFIP, they also enact the process of collecting child support from the other parent. But even after that is enacted, some parents still slip through the cracks and for whatever reasons still get away with not paying child support and/or contributing at all in any form. As for absent fathers and how this void affects children, this takes a toll on children, some more adversely than others. There could be various reasons as to why some parents are not involved. Sometimes parents do not know how to be parents or struggle with transitioning into parenting or whatever life issues they may have. Whatever the issues, for the sake of both the children and their provider's well-being, it seems worth a try to get the absent parent involved.

For those parents who do not contribute to parenting, some type of educational piece could prove beneficial for the individuals who are not doing their share. On top of parent education, such requirements could be one way of offering options to assist them with whatever obstacles they may be facing which could be preventing them from contributing. One valuable program that works specifically with fathers in Minnesota, through supportive programming is called the Father Project. According to Family Services of Rochester's Father Project, "The positive involvement of both parents is important to the healthy development of children and increases their chances of leading a safe, happy childhood and growing into mature adults" (2018). Not long ago, this program had to close its doors due to budget cuts which was unfortunate for families as there were not many (if any) options to support parenting fathers or

those who needed help getting there. The good news is that the Father Project had since reopened as they found funding from another organization. Supporting such programs as the Father Project is one way to help families like those in this study because helping fathers thrive can and will, in turn, help their children thrive as well.

Another idea that came to mind related to such educational obligations for parents undergoing a divorce or those who are contesting child custody arrangements. The MN Judicial Branch requires parents who are in the process of custody and parenting time disputes, to take a parenting class such as *Parents Forever Classes* to assist with educating adults about topics related to the wellbeing of their children; including topics like self-care, parenting, co-parenting, and caring for children (2018). These components are so important that this became a law. One might wonder why such a program is not mandated for single parents as well, especially those who are not caring for their children. For those parents who might be facing concerns with absent parents and lack of support, including child support, this could be one of the missing links. According to *MN Statutes 518.157*, it appears that these requirements have been implemented since 1998 “for the purpose of educating parents about the impact that divorce, the restructuring of families, and judicial proceedings have upon children and families; methods for preventing parenting time conflicts; and dispute resolution options” (2018). This is a serious concern for all parents to understand such crucial elements of caring for children and it would be worth a try to help all families by offering or even mandating such vital information to be received, to teach the importance of their roles and responsibilities as co-parents.

Enforcing such education for single parents who are not committing to their share or who are struggling to cooperate with one another, would be one way of offering ways to link them to such programs to help families with various needs. Another concern that was brought up for one

family involved women raising boys without that male influence, including racial factors. These topics could be a study on its own but should not be overlooked, as a factor for these mothers, which is why we make note of this. This is especially concerning as it related to the findings of this study because these concerns are involved with the many layers of complex factors in the lives of some single parents. As for what a single mother can control, with resources to help families, these women can control what they do for themselves and their children. But when adverse situations come about, and programs are not available, where do they turn? There are many resources that women and their children need, requiring support for such services and in the following sections we will continue to discuss some of the other implications and areas of need identified by this study.

Childcare Expenses. Childcare expenses are said to average families more than the cost of college tuition, which is a huge concern for families in general, not only single parent families (Child Care Aware of America, 2017). MN was in the *Top 10 Least Affordable States* when it came to childcare for infants in 2016, ranking in at number 5 (Child Care Aware of America, p. 4, 2017). This site offered data for national averages of incomes and expenses related to childcare but some of the numbers are alarming, with the figures for MN providing a clearer picture of how concerning this can be for a single mother. With the median single parent income averaging \$27,555 and the median two parent household being \$97,708, the median annual infant center-based childcare was around \$15,340; which was said to be about 16% of the income for two parent households and about 56% of that for single parent households (Child Care Aware of America, 2017). Another concern related to childcare is what is referred to as a “child care desert,” which is terminology used in one study; “defined as a ZIP code with at least 30 children under the age of 5 and either no child care centers or so few centers that there are

more than three times as many children under age 5 as there are spaces in centers” (Malik, R. Hamm, K., Adamu, M. & Morrissey, T., 2016). MN was also ranked the highest in a study involving childcare shortage in 8 states, with “half of the young children living in childcare deserts” having been found to be in MN and Illinois (Malik et al., 2016).

This brings us to grave concerns with what one survey found through parent experience with childcare. Shortages in quality childcare options for families to choose from, limits the opportunity to thoroughly screen providers to meet all their needs and wants. This would ultimately allow for parents to feel comfort in knowing they chose the best versus the best of the few options available; if there was even more than one option to start (National Public Radio, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation & Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health., 2016). Another interview with a couple pinpointed how trying this can be for parents of newborns because newborns are even harder to find care for (Deahl, J., 2017). This couple had to pay around \$1,000 in waiting list fees but ended up convincing their mother to care for their child because of these concerns (Deahl, J., 2017). Not everyone had that option either. With low income families and those families with only one income, this would most likely be more difficult, making options even fewer and more concerning.

The cost of childcare alone is a huge concern, but this is only one of several issues noted in the reports. This current study will not get any more in depth with examining or including those details besides what had been shared so far. This data was found after the interviews had been completed to support this theme through grounded theory, because it was helpful to clarify the reality of one of many issues for these moms. Luckily, when it comes to childcare, most of these single mothers had been fortunate to have had help paying for this expense through childcare assistance programs offered through scholarships and the DHS. Although, according

to data shared by the Child Care Aware of America, “with or without assistance, the cost of childcare is too much” (p. 23, 2017). To add to this, because in-depth questions were not asked about such details regarding their comfort levels with their childcare providers and related experiences. It would be interesting to learn more about their experiences in relationship to the noted concerns found in previous studies, in conjunction with utilizing childcare assistance.

As for what needs to be done about childcare expenses, this is no easy solution nor is this an area of expertise for this writer. However, there are a few obvious implications to be made from learning about these issues. Families need to have access to more affordable options for childcare in the United States, which is a growing concern and seems to be even more so for single parents. With the current political climate and reform taking place, funding for families is crucial, especially for hard working families who still struggle to meet such needs, as those involved in this study. Knowing that some nations have Universal Childcare (and Healthcare), is an example for our country to consider in the future. In the meantime, being aware of such issues can be helpful to understand the need and to know some of the issues single parent families face. Another piece of the puzzle is to stay informed about available childcare assistance program and related options which is important for those who work with single parent families. On top of this awareness, advocating for these areas of concern and/or supporting policy related to families with such needs are a few ways to support them.

Health and Food Concerns. Each of the women in this study expressed concerns related to health and food concerns which are interconnected. Hunger, malnutrition, behaviors, development, and academic performance are all related issues that food insecurity can affect (Whitney, E. & Rolfes, S. R., 2008, pp. 562-563). This includes maternal health prenatally, during pregnancy, and postpartum (2008, pp. 509-519). Add that to the pile of concerns related

to the life of a single mother, including her own health. “Wise food choices made throughout adulthood can support a person’s ability to meet physical, emotional, and mental challenges and to enjoy freedom from disease” (2008, p. 562). “Inadequate diets lead to poor health in adults and impaired physical, psychological, and cognitive development in children” (Whitney, E. & Rolfes, S. R., 2008, p. 702). Again, most of the moms had all if not most of these concerns (support systems, food, and health) with some more than others which is why the current proposal to save money with programs like SNAP are a concern for various reasons.

Although there had been debate as to whether such reform would be implemented in our nation, the Harvest Food Box is an idea that had been proposed under the Trump Administration to save money, among other concerns. The USDA noted that the Harvest Food Box would (supposedly) provide “nutritious food to people who need assistance feeding themselves and their families” but this seems far from the truth (2018). Because the food box plan would consist of “staple, shelf-stable foods” (such as shelf-stable milk, juice, grains, ready-eat-cereals, pasta, peanut butter, beans, canned meat, poultry or fish, and canned fruits and vegetables) to SNAP households at approximately half the retail cost (USDA, 2018). Generally, nutritious foods do not come in a can which is one concern that had come about from the Harvest Food Box idea. What is considered a staple for one family is not for others. There are special needs (i.e. food sensitivity and allergies), cultural sensitivity, and preference. Children (and people in general) can be picky eaters which would add to this list of concerns for families in need. All of these are important to consider when contemplating such program reform and supporting families to have healthy food options which are other implications of this study. Lack of food, lack of healthy food, and health (in general) are all concerns for these single moms; each one discussed these as

a struggle which is why we need to continue to support and improve such programs because families are already struggling with this, as it is.

Grief and Loss in Single Parenting. With all the grief and loss described by the women in these stories, grief and loss in single parenting was also brought to light. More recognition is being brought to the concept of grief related to loss outside of death. Due to the nature of the responsibility of a single parent who may provide for their family with very little support, grief and loss may apply with some having more than others. Countless studies have pinpointed risk factors associated with single parent households but have never examined the grief and loss in single parenting which is concerning with all the data available to date (Abrams & Curran, 2007; Cairney et al., 2004; Dufur et al., 2010; Freeman & Dodson, 2014; Gustafson et. al, 2016; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Kingston, 2013; Koh et al., 2017; McLanahan et al., 2010a; McLanahan et al., 2010b; Nepomnyaschy, & Garfinkel, 2011; Reichman et al, 2001; Samuels-Dennis, 2007; Vespa et. al, 2012; Waldfogel et al, 2010; Wang et. al., 2011; Ziolo-Guest & Dunifon, 2014). If research has illustrated such adversity for a vulnerable population like single mothers with little to no support, then single moms and their families should be handled with proper care to assist them. If not addressed properly, such grief can put family members in greater jeopardy including “family’s developmental course” especially with multiple layers of loss, particularly when it is directly impacting the mental and physical status of a lone parent (Anderson & Sabatelli, p. 266). With the myriad challenges that single mothers can encounter, professionals should be aware and/or informed of these variations and consider any grief expressed as non-death related loss involved in these families.

Supporting Single Parent Families. Considering these findings, bringing forth single motherhood awareness, and supporting policies and programs that relate to these families are a

few ideas that would be helpful in supporting single parent families. Single mothers and their children receive services in a multitude of settings; from schools and healthcare settings including mental health, to social services through private or state and county agencies such as the DHS, to name a few. The DHS should be well known to social workers in general, especially when dealing with families because of the various services within their umbrella. For example, in Olmsted County MN, programs are not limited to agencies involving child support, nutritional programs like WIC, the HRA, Public Health Services, mental health services and Family Support & Assistance Programs (2017). Knowing the social service agency is important to knowing what resources and options to refer families to but there are other services that could be helpful for single parent families. Also having knowledge of: support groups, camp opportunities, scholarships, mentor programs, educational programming and other options are important to support and have knowledge of (including the pros and cons and/or limitations of these) as these may offer support that families are missing. With optimal mental health in mind, there are many ways to support single parent families that should be considered and accessible for them; knowing them will assist with this.

Any provider who may serve single parent families should have various ways to support these individuals, and especially single mothers with the highlighted issues at hand. Staying up to date with treatment options, keeping informed and/or aware of cultural factors or at least know how to access this information as needed are important ways to provide optimal support and best practice. Also, supporting policies that involve this population, and getting to know those individuals they serve are some other ways to do this. In the case of single mothers, as with stereotyping any culture, grouping all single parents together can be harmful as they will not all have the same needs with such varying circumstances. Considering that single mothers (and

their children) may have suffered from trauma and/or loss and grief effects in their experiences; being open minded and nonjudgmental; and accepting that the client is the expert of their own experiences, are a few ways social workers and other providers can apply these shared concepts to assist with providing the best care to single parents and their families. Most social workers will adopt these ethical concepts, but all people have biases; self-check and awareness can be beneficial to assist with such possible existing preconceptions. Clients need workers who will meet them where they are and assist them to make progress with whatever situation they are in, so keeping these thoughts in mind can also prove to be helpful in supporting and empowering single mothers and their families, to identify and meet their own needs.

Considering the available data which has emphasized hardship and risks for single parent households, as well as the fact that research is lacking information related to trauma and the grief and loss involved in their lives, this gap qualifies as an area of great need (Abrams & Curran, 2007; Cairney et al., 2004; Gustafson et al., 2016; Kingston, 2013; Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2011; Samuels-Dennis, 2007; Vespa et. al., 2012; Wang et. al., 2011). No matter what type of provider and/or client, if grief is expressed it should be addressed and considered in terms of grief and loss even if this matter does not involve death. This is essential because if this is not handled properly, especially within the most vulnerable populations, the outcomes may involve greater risks for those individuals and their families. With such implications as previously noted about PPD, the idea of similar types of screenings for any of the noted concepts (i.e. single mother struggling on a spectrum or grief and loss) could assist with the assessment and detection of higher levels of unresolved grief which could prove a useful preventative tool to consider implementing through future policy reform.

Finally, through this study it is evident that single mothers need help and support which includes their children; and as always noted, some will need more than others. With the lack of consistent programming targeting single mothers and their families (even including fathers) and the research pointing them out as being at risk for multiple concerns, what has been done to help them? Ultimately this is a public health concern to ensure that children in our communities are not left to fend for themselves. Without healthy parents we are not giving these children the support that would best target their needs especially if mothers are doing most of the work and have little or no time or money to care for themselves and bring their families beyond the poverty line. If mothers are struggling and have no one else to lean on, we are leaving these children at a disadvantage if we do not find more ways to provide support and aid for these families. We need to help them get ahead and help them in the areas where they have the greatest challenges to prevent such adversity which contributes to various community and social concerns in the long run starting with single mothers and their children.

Relevant Policies. With need for more awareness about the reality of the single parent experience, whether through some type of cultural competency course or recognizing grief processes in these families due to hardships, trauma, and other non-death related losses- social workers and providers should support related policies. Whichever policies relate to the individuals that social workers serve or those policies connected to devoted areas of interest, are those that should require social workers' involvement of some degree; whatever level of involvement one chooses. Voting, staying informed, spreading the word, and contacting representatives about such policies are a few of the most basic ways to be involved.

One related policy concept that seems crucial to support, would apply to the families involved in these single parent households, along with other working families, is to increase

income standards to reflect a living wage and adjust this system where needed. This should include other income brackets as well because people who have worked hard and paid a lot of time and money for their income should have opportunities to make enough money to live a little more comfortably and specifically, not to be in poverty. Many people are motivated by financial opportunities to provide for their families which is why some choose to work towards a college degree in the first place. Of course, there are some income brackets that are above and beyond what is necessary for comfortable living which also exemplifies income inequality and uneven distribution of wealth in our society. It seems unjust and unethical to hear of working families and especially those who have college degrees to have a need to lean on government assistance to make ends meet or be fighting to make ends meet. Not having means to make a living wage is a concern especially with such broad gaps where families cannot make a living wage, and especially when individuals with 4 or more years of college still struggle to pay their bills while others spend money like water; there should be some change in that system to offer more security to hard working Americans.

Minnesota Family Investment Program. With such concerns for families not making a living wage, Family Support & Assistance Programs provide financial aid through programs like the MN Family Investment Program (MFIP) to people in need of such support including single mother and their families. Punelli described the MFIP as a program in which recipients can receive a grant that has both cash and food benefits, MA, and Child Care Assistance if they qualify (2017). Families live on an income standard determined by the program guidelines and the amount of financial assistance provided by the county increases depending on the number of children and/or qualified individuals. “For example, a family of three’s standard benefit is \$991 per month,” which if one considers the cost of living, this amount seems barely enough to pay

for necessities such as rent, utilities, groceries, and laundry to name some of the basics (2017). If a single mother on MFIP struggles to pay for essential needs for her children, this can add more challenges to an already demanding situation as previously described in some of the stories shared by the mothers interviewed for this study. According to the Welfare Rights Committee, this grant amount had not been changed in over 28 years (2017). This issue had been addressed repeatedly by those who fight for justice through such policies changes like the most recent MFIP reform which was said to have gone into effect in January 2018, increasing the transitional payment standard which now takes into consideration annual inflations involved in the cost of living.

Except in certain situations, MFIP is said to be a work program that provides financial assistance for no more than 5 years in an individual's lifetime; which the goal is to get caregivers back to work through supportive programming including job preparation, searching, and training; which in some cases includes educational goals (Punelli, 2017). There are several components to this program that could be examined to determine ways to best serve the client in these settings, but this paper will only address a couple ideas regarding this program. With MFIP providing services to such vulnerable individuals as pregnant women and other single mothers who are at a greater risk, special considerations should be taken to address and work with those varying circumstances and needs because if the MFIP goal is self-sufficiency through work, failure to handle sensitive situations with care can affect an individual's abilities to maintain long-term employment and meet such goals as self-reliance.

MFIP Amendment Suggestions. Previous ideas suggesting screenings for grief responses would benefit such individuals who may have unmet needs including unresolved grief. This would especially be helpful for individuals such as those single mothers who lack basic

support systems and undergo tremendous hardships as described in some of the stories in this study. This could also apply to any population exposed to traumatic incidents of loss especially those who have experienced such trauma repetitively as some have. Identifying and making referrals for grief as one aspect of MFIP is one of a few key elements to consider offering while training workers to the cultural competency of single motherhood which can entail such concerns and needs. This will contribute to supporting families and ensure that healthier parents are entering the workforce; offering the same screening for the child/children so referrals can be made to help with this need as well. Incorporating such changes to programming should offer this as a part of the program in cases where the interest is expressed and not only as an option, (if and) when the MFIP worker thinks of this and/or (if and) when the client brings it up which is how it currently is with some of the aspects of MFIP.

Due to the prevalence of MFIP having been used at one point or another, in every one of the mothers' lives who was interviewed for this study, this implication is being made. Because each mother expressed grief, along with 3 out of 4 of the women having discussed struggling with mental health concerns and having to learn ways to cope, such screenings and skill training would be beneficial to assist women like these so not to have to struggle to figure it out on their own. Historically, mental health has proven to be a grave concern for some mothers, so this area alone is a huge risk for these women and their children. Why allow single mothers and their children, especially those who have little to no support, to be faced with this extra hurdle? Screening for various concerns could be another way to identify obstacles and areas of need to ensure that women who are accessing such services, not have to face such risky challenges as expressed by some of the women in this study.

Offering more pathways and support to greater education opportunities as described, including college degrees to increase household income will also assist with pushing families out of poverty. Ensuring that low income single parents have such support and knowledge of life skills prior to the push to get right back to the workforce, seems to be one of the basic aspects of self-reliance that is missing from MFIP programs. It seems that professionals and people in general take such details for granted especially for those who may already lack necessary support needed to thrive in such adverse scenarios. Employing such amendments to the current MFIP program while including such screening processes, including assorted testing to set apart those who may require more support than others, would be one way to offer more support to such families with greater needs.

Programming should be tailored to the varying circumstances and needs expressed, including those designed to instill participants with multiple life skills along with work skills currently offered. These types of programs would be important to assist individuals who continue to endure such hardships as those examples discussed because coping strategies have been found to be buffers against adversities experienced by single parent households (Samuels-Dennis, 2007; Zartler, 2014). These suggestions have been made to meet the goal of setting apart those individuals with greater needs which can allow for more strategic programming to target deficits and assist with building individuals up in preparation for the workforce. Such skills to assist with targeted areas of need, including those to support individuals with handling stressful life events and life in general are essential skills that can and will impact long terms goals of success and self-reliance.

Conclusion

Many, if not all single mothers would probably be deeply offended to be categorized at the levels of risk to which this project is exemplifying, especially as stigma still exists in society regarding this family construct. Being born unto a single mother does not automatically signify struggle and risk. With this concern in mind, we remind providers and people in general not to make assumptions because we know single parents do not fit into one mold. Also, even though many single mothers may undergo much adversity, their challenges and grief may not signify a need for clinical intervention. With all the noted factors being brought to light, we know the challenges single parents are faced with are related to those factors that contribute to the upkeep of these households. Bringing forth awareness as to how diverse the single mother phenomena is, leads us to a greater understanding of some of the associated challenges and risks involved with those experiences. Knowing and understanding this is an essential aspect of supporting families to thrive in the world they live. This also includes the reality that some of these moms would also not want to be identified with the noted challenges for various reasons whether they have had similar challenges or not, because for whatever reasons, individuals will handle their situations differently and are subject to other cultural components that might also influence how this is perceived and processed. Parenting in general is a challenge, no matter what. But whether parenting as a couple or as a single parent, these experiences will also vary on multiple levels. Supporting families who lack crucial component needed to thrive as primary providers in single-parent households is an essential aspect of programming that is currently missing. Levels of support and related challenges will vary which is why such screenings, support, and programs are needed to identify and empower families, with the aim of self-reliance and even comfort, for women who are already struggling yet doing it on their own, in every way they can and need.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

Starting questions:

What has your experience as a single parent been like?

If the definition of a “struggling single mother” for this study is one who has discomfort in their situation and/or has some difficulty meeting their needs; would you identify yourself as struggling or not struggling? (What do you think contributes to how you feel?)

What do you want others to know about single mothers and the single parent experience?

If you taught a parenting course to prepare women for the world of single parenting, what would that be like? Tell me what information you feel would be essential; what would that class involve?

Tell me about how you take time for yourself?

Other Questions:

1. Tell me more about your children.
2. How is your child's/children's relationship with their father?
3. How do you think society views single parents?
4. Do you think societal attitudes are the same for single mothers and single fathers alike?
5. Does anyone help you?
6. If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?
7. If you could change anything, what would that be?
8. Do you have anything that you struggle with as a single parent?
9. How do you juggle responsibilities as a single parent?
10. Do you feel all your needs and your children's needs are being met?

Probing Questions:

Tell me more about that.

Give me an example of this or Can you think of an example?

Demographics to collect:

Age, marital status, income, education, and employment status

Appendix B. Compounded Factors Theory

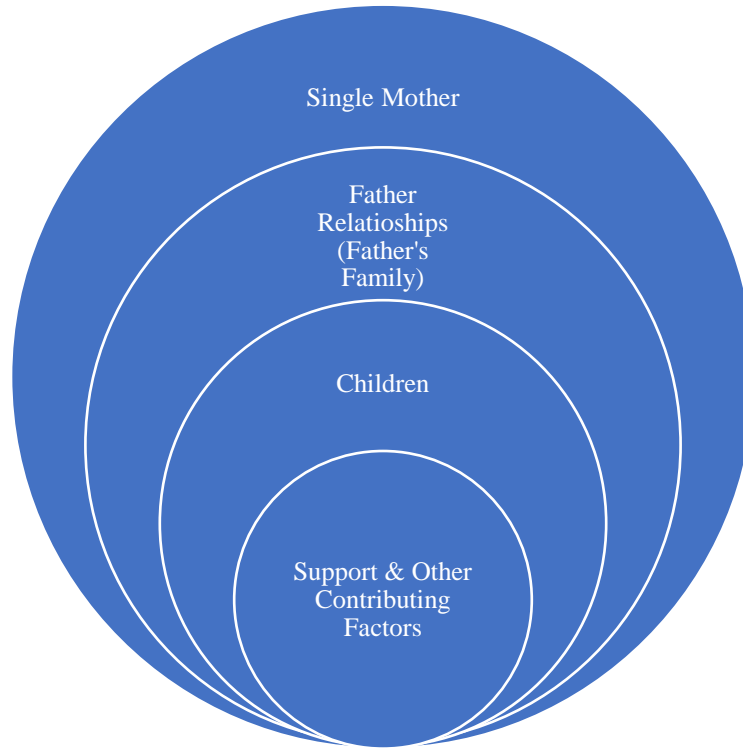


Table 1. Single Mother Compounded Factors

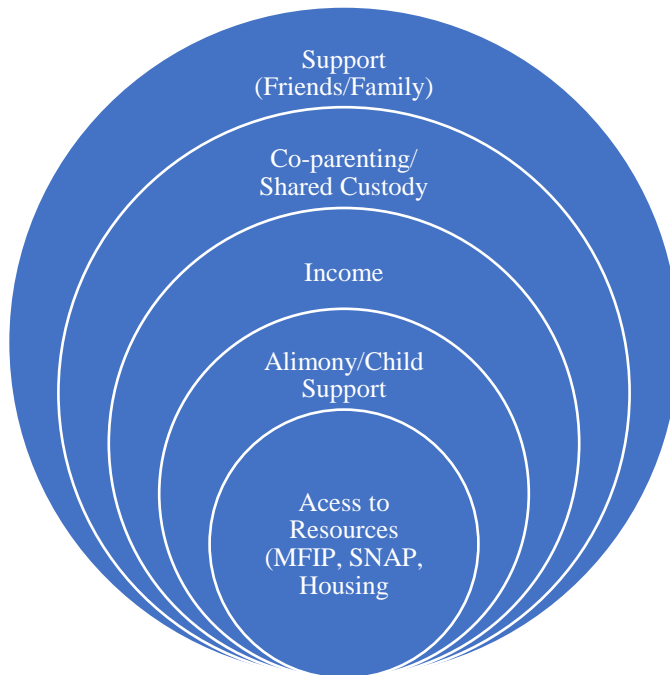


Table 2. Single Mother Compounded Factors: Support & Other Contributing Factors

Appendix C. Social Media Invitation

In search of research participants: I am looking for 4-5 single moms who are willing to be a part of this research project by sharing their experience as a single mother. The purpose of this study is to share the experiences of single mothers and identify some of the reasons why some mothers report more struggles than others.

IMPORTANT: To maintain confidentiality, all interested single mothers should call/text the number listed below.

Please feel free to share this invitation with friends or family who might qualify and be interested.

Are you a single mother who is 18 years of age or older? Do you have at least one child under the age of 18 who lives with you in or close to Rochester, MN? If so, are you currently raising your child without a live-in partner? If you answered yes, to these questions, you are invited to participate in this study.

This study is being conducted by: Tania Rhiger, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Sharyn DeZelar.

If interested, please call/message 507-258-3185 and thanks for taking the time to read this invite!

Appendix D. Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS-GRSW682 RESEARCH PROJECT
Why Do Some Single Mothers Struggle More Than Others?

You are invited to participate in a research study about the challenges of single mothers with the goal of interviewing moms, sharing their stories, and comparing all the stories to see why some struggle more than others. You were selected as a possible participant because you have shown interest in this project and you qualify to participate. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a single mother who is parenting at least one child under the age of 18 years, and you do not have a partner who lives with you.

This study is being conducted by: Tania Rhiger, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Sharyn DeZelar. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges of single moms shared by mothers interviewed for this project; to share their stories and to see why some struggle more than others. Although there are no direct benefits for participating in this study, there is a potential benefit of sharing one's story.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: participate in an audio tape recorded interview at a private location of your choice. This interview should last approximately 60-120 minutes. I will ask you to answer some, if not all of the questions as noted on the interview guide the best that you can and only if you feel comfortable doing so. I ask that you allow me to type an electronic copy of this interview, which will be saved to a file on my laptop. This will also be printed and shared with my project's committee members for this research project. As part of my project this will also be presented and published for the School of Social Work, Catherine University/University of St. Thomas.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

The study has risks. Because this researcher will be asking for very personal information, this is considered probing (or searching) for personal or sensitive information. Recalling traumatic or distressing events may also occur through this process. All of these things can cause some emotional distress including a sense of mental fatigue or embarrassment.

As previously noted, there are no direct benefits for participating in this study, however, there is a potential benefit of sharing one's story.

Incentives

There are no direct incentives for participating in this study. However, contributing to a great cause of helping single mothers and her family who might be struggling, could be an incentive for some. By sharing your story with researchers, this provides valuable data and insight into the experience of being a single mother. In this case, you are contributing to the purpose of this study which is to identify the challenges of single moms, to share your story as a single mom and to see why some struggle more than others. This research could prove beneficial for others for multiple reasons and you would have a hand in helping others.

Important Notice

In the event that this research activity results in an injury, emergency treatment will be available. The University of St. Thomas is not able to offer financial compensation nor absorb the costs of medical treatment should you be injured as a result of participating in this research.

Privacy

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. The interview will take place in a secluded (private) location of your choice. However, if a public setting is selected, privacy may not be guaranteed in some public settings.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report, I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. Any records kept for this study will also be kept private, with no information that can identify you, such as your name or any other information connected to your identity. When driving home from the interview, the recorded interview will be kept in my locked briefcase until it reaches a locked filing cabinet at my home. The types of records I will create includes the audio recording of the interview that I mentioned already; this will later be transcribed (typed) onto an electronic file which will be kept on my computer. My computer needs a password that only I know which will also keep this private. Although phone numbers, addresses, and the audio recording will be deleted, the typed copy will be kept indefinitely, or forever, if you are okay with that.

I will use pseudonyms (replacement words) in place of any identifying information (such as names) from the typed copy if by chance any information is accidentally shared when we are talking so it will not include such information as your family member's names, locations, or any other information like that. A number will be used in place of your name and any papers with your phone number or address will be kept separate. These records will be kept in a locked file in the briefcase of this researcher and will be destroyed after July 1, 2018.

Information from this study will be presented on May 14, 2018 along with my paper which will be submitted to the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas database no later than June 30th, 2018. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of

three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary; so only if you want to share your story and only what you want to share about your story. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer and can stop at any point during the interview. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationships with anyone affiliated with this study, including myself/the interviewer (Tania Rhiger), St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate you are free to cancel at any time without any questions or concerns as to why you are choosing to cancel; please just let me know or you can also contact any of the following numbers to cancel as well. Should you decide to cancel, information collected about you will not be used.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Tania Rhiger. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 507-258-3185 or rhig7506@stthomas.edu or Sharyn DeZelar at 612-987-6004. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

Statement of Consent

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree (consent) to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

Resources

Crisis Response of Southeast Minnesota Phone: 844-274-7472 (1-844-CRISIS2)
crisis2southeastmn.com

Crisis Response phone support is offered 24/7. A trained counselor will assess your current situation, offer support and counseling and be able to connect you with local resources.

Crisis Response mobile response teams are available for dispatch 24/7 for a more comprehensive assessment and crisis management and referral as determined by need.

Parenting Resource Center, Inc offers the Parent Warmline
familiesandcommunities.org

Parent WarmLine is an outreach service provided to parents who need options to questions or concerns about child raising

Parent Warmline has also described as a source for answers, as well as emotional support for those who just want to vent or talk to someone and they do not refuse people from any city or state.

WarmLine Toll Free Phone:
1-800-714-1416

Línea de Apoyo y Comprensión Paterna de los Condados de Mower y Freeborn:
1-877-434-9528

Families First of Minnesota offers Crisis Nursery & PARRK
familiesfirstmn.org

Crisis Nursery provides temporary, short-term care for children (ages 0-12) in Olmsted County while families address a crisis (i.e. parent who need a break, no daycare or backup daycare, or others); Crisis Nursery can provide other supportive services such as parent education, counseling, and referral services.

Crisis Nursery Phone: 507-287-2020 **After hours,** please call 507-281-6248.

PARRK (Parents And Relatives Raising Kids) is a no-cost education group for anyone raising kids. Topics have included fire safety, CPR/First Aid, Zumba, and money management. Child care is provided and there is limited transportation available.

PARRK Phone: 507-424-1547 (Contact Nikki for location and other details)

PARRK Meets: 3rd Tuesday of the month 6:45–8:15 PM (except June, July and August)