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Graduate students/mothers negotiating academia and family life: Discourses, experiences, and alternatives

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Graduate Students/Mothers Negotiating Academia and Family Life: Discourses, Experiences, and Alternatives

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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In memory of my grandmother, Magnita Williams.
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# Table of Contents

List of Figures vii  
Abstract viii  
Chapter One— Women in Academia: Situating Graduate Students who are Mothers in the Conversation 1  
The Inception 1  
Statement of Purpose 7  
Rationale/Justification 8  
Work-family Conflict in the Lives of Academic Women 8  
Family Responsibilities 10  
Policies and Women 11  
Women of the Organization 13  
Race and Class 15  
Rhetoric of Choice 17  
Putting Graduate Students in the Conversation: Challenge and Problem 21  
Preview of Chapters 28  
Chapter Two— The Heroic Quest of Inclusion and Elitism, or Exclusion and Inadequacy: Analyzing Graduate School Guides 31  
Searching for Support Online 34  
Description of Online Content 38  
Going the Traditional Route 39  
Visiting the “Source” 45  
Metaphors of Graduate School 48  
The Journey 48  
The “Call to Adventure” 52  
Orientation 54  
The Trials 56  
The Rewards 58  
Driving Metaphors 60  
The Political Game 61  
Negotiation as Part of the Game 63  
The Grind 64  
The Balancing/Juggling Act 65  
Defining the Norm 67  
The Construction of Women in Graduate School Discourse 72  
A Discourse of Exclusion and Inadequacy 74
Chapter Three—Perceptions and Experiences of Graduate Students who are Mothers  81
   Introduction  81
   On Becoming a Feminist Researcher  82
   The Recruitment Procedure  86
   The Participants  87
   The First One-on-One Interview  89
   The Follow-Up One-on-One Interview  90
   Defining the “Normal” Graduate Student and What’s “Important”  91
   Negotiating Identity through Role Discrepancy  93
   Performing Discrepant Roles  99
   The Rhetoric of Choice  107
   Conclusion  110

Chapter Four—Focus Group: A Step toward Action  113
   Introduction  113
   Group One  113
   Group Two  116
   Overview of Focus Groups  118
   Procedures  120
   Inside the Focus Group Meetings  123
   Focus Group and Action Research  124
   Challenges  130
   A Pleasant Surprise  134
   Action Steps  135
   Conclusion  139

Chapter Five—In our Words: The Need for Support  143
   Introduction  143
   Support from the University  145
      The Need for Support in My Participants’ Words  154
   Departmental Support  157
   Support from the Workplace  161
   Support from Family and Friends  162
   Conclusion  167

References  170

Appendices  190
   Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer  191
   Appendix B: First One-on-One Interview Schedule  192
   Appendix C: Follow-up One-on-One Interview Schedule  194
   Appendix D: Princeton University’s Childbirth/Adoption Policy for Graduate Students  195
Appendix E: Childbirth Policy for Women Graduate Students at Stanford University

About the Author
List of Figures

Figure 1. Responding to the “call”: A graduate student contemplates his options 54
Graduate Students/Mothers Negotiating Academia and Family Life: Discourses, Experiences, and Alternatives

Shirlan A. Williams

ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences and perceptions of graduate students who are mothers. Based on discourse analysis, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups, this study argues that institutional discourses and practices place graduate students who are mothers in untenable and irreconcilable positions between “mom” and “student,” between “family” and “the academy,” between “self” and “success.” These irreconcilable differences are created in discourse, enacted in institutional policies, and lived by the participants. The study offers action-based alternatives to the status quo policies of the university based on the self-described needs of these women. It reveals that support from all fronts—the home, the institution, departments—is instrumental in altering the discourse of exclusion and inadequacy to one of inclusion and adequacy.
Chapter One

Women in Academia: Situating Graduate Students who are Mothers in the Conversation

The Inception

More than four years have passed but I remember it like it was yesterday. The dizziness and uncharacteristic sleepiness overpower me. I complain to my husband, Marlon, who dismisses my symptoms as my body’s way of begging for vitamins and iron supplements. I have waged a war against supplements because of the effects on my body. These supplements, when imbibed, claim to have a plethora of health benefits, but they increase my cravings for unhealthy foods and result in the unwanted weight gain, which I would settle around my midsection.

I examine my finger nails. According to my mother, the white spots are evidence that my body is mineral-deficient. My nails are no stranger to these spots, but add the dizziness—something else is going on here. “This feels different than just my body’s cry for supplements,” I tell him. “What if I am pregnant?” I ask hoping that I am wrong.

“You are not going to raise my expectations.” He responds. Raise his expectations? Ha! I am not trying to raise anything, I tell myself. I am not trying to have a baby. Not now. I am about to start my doctoral work in two months. I want to complete my degree, have my career first and then children after. I know what Marlon’s reply will be if I share my sentiments with him. The right time to start a family has been a point of contention between us since my journey in grad school began. He fears that pursuing a doctoral degree would mean that I would put off having a baby until it’s too late. I
remember his disappointment when I informed him that I wanted to attend graduate school beyond the master’s degree. “What does that mean for us? Are we going to start a family? Do you know the trend within higher education as it pertains to women and family life? How many of your female professors have children?” he had asked. After several discussions about starting a family, I believe I weighed him down. The subject exhausted us and put a strain on our relationship but I know he secretly hoped that I will change my mind and give the baby gig a try.

**Sunday, July 12, 2002.** Clearwater Beach, Florida is not what I expect. I am from Grenada, a small island in the Caribbean, where beautiful, pristine beaches with their crystal clear water wash her shores and are part of life. Lush, green vegetation embraces the eyes and myriads of palm trees provide shade from the glaring sun. Here, I am blinded by miles of white sand, and not a palm tree to divert the light away from my eyes line the shore. I put my feet into the water, which fails the “I have to see my feet test.” I have one rule beach rule, if my feet are invisible in the water, then I am getting out. What lurks beneath the opaque water scares me. Sharks? The little fish that playfully nibble at my feet? The shards of glass left behind by irresponsible beach goers? I do not wish to find out.

I am a stereotypical island girl in many ways. Usually, any activity on the beach is fun. But today fun does not describe my experience. My head spins. I still taste the breakfast I ate more than three hours ago. For sporadic brief moments, my surroundings grow dark around me. I am lightheaded, nauseated. The symptoms are clear. I cannot ignore them. I sit on the sand. The heat it emanates exacerbates my symptoms. “What’s
wrong?” Marlon asks.

“I think we should purchase that pregnancy test,” I respond.

“Do you want to leave now?”

“Yeah,” I nod my head. My body speaks pregnancy, but my head begs it to stop. Not now. Not at this important juncture in my life. I need no setback. No inconvenience.

Marlon and I slowly walk away from the beach to our silver 1989 Nissan Sentra coupe. I welcome the air conditioned car. If heaven exists, this is what it must feel like. We drive home in silence. I dread what lies ahead. I glance at Marlon. I see anticipation. I resent his attitude. I think about the impact a pregnancy would have on my graduate school career. My academic future looks bleak.

We approach the local Wal-Mart: me tentatively, Marlon purposefully. Buying a pregnancy test is like buying condoms. Everyone knows. The truth is out that I am sexually active. I quickly grab the test and conceal it from condemning eyes that pierce into my back. They seem to say, “We know what you did.” The Catholic girl in me cringes. I can’t wait to get the test and get out of the store. My face burns from embarrassment. Hot. I should have waited outside. Will the cashier or someone in line recognize me if she sees me somewhere after tonight?” I ponder. I should have volunteered Marlon to get the test himself.

At the apartment, I rip the test from its protective cover, pee on the test strip and wait. My heart pounds rapidly and loudly. The minute it takes to complete the test feels like hours. Whoa! The two lines turn pink. Positive! Maybe it’s just this brand, I thought. Some are not that reliable. I have heard stories of people who thought they were pregnant, took the test, which showed a positive result, but after they went to the doctor,
it turned out to be otherwise. My mouth drops open in shock. “Not now. Oh Lord, what
am I going to do?” I ask myself.

My pregnancy gives birth to this dissertation. Out of place and always on display,
my growing belly squatted on space not designed with it mind. I felt trapped. I didn’t
know where to turn, who to talk with, and what to say. Being pregnant was one of—if not—
the most awkward feelings I have had in my life within the walls of academia. My life
changed drastically since I discovered that I was pregnant. Suddenly, instead of living a
life where everything was about academics, I had two lives. Within the walls of academe,
helplessness and embarrassment reigned. On the outside, I was still scared of the
unknown, but each day I grew happier and more excited knowing that a life was
blossoming inside of me.

Undertaking this project comes at a risk (perceived or not) that I weigh each day
as I become more invested in this topic. I am an academic. Much of what I have become I
owe to academia. I do not reveal much about my background to anyone because doing so
exposes my vulnerabilities. I am a first generation college student. My grandparents
didn’t make it past the eighth grade, my mom attended high school but couldn’t afford to
attend college, and my father got as far as elementary school. On my island, to this day,
not everyone has the opportunity to attend high school. Therefore, when children receive
that opportunity, it is met with excitement similar to getting into college in the U.S.

The year I passed the qualifying exams, I was one of six students from a class of
25. I was the top student in my class at the elementary school and in my high school, but
still I had no vision of going beyond the high school level. No one even pushed me in that
direction. Growing up, college was never part of my vocabulary nor of my family’s. While my mother wanted me to have what she never had, she never asked much of me. She never asked about my grades or how I was doing in school, and I never told her. Higher education came to me by accident. I dated guys who attended college and talked about becoming lawyers. Their academic performances in high school weren’t better or even comparable to mine, so I figured if they were smart enough to attend college, then I could. I gave college a try and registered at the community college. I enrolled knowing that I couldn’t afford the required textbooks once I paid tuition.

The first day of classes, in addition to registering for Speech, Spanish, and Algebra, which went toward the associate degree requirement, I decided to register for A’level sociology, European and Caribbean History and Economics because my boyfriend was majoring in those areas. It didn’t matter that I knew that I was a stronger student in the sciences and foreign languages.

My beginning relationship with college is something I would rather forget, but the miserable grades reflected on my undergraduate transcript do not afford me that absolution. My students would probably ridicule me if I told them that I attended and didn’t graduate from a community college—my 1.7 GPA was below the required 2.0. You see, even though I gave college a try, I was barely sixteen when I started and to make matters worse, it was there I found out that I was not the only love of my then boyfriend’s life. We broke up and he threatened to physically abuse me whenever he saw me on campus. Although I reported him to the dean, who talked to him about it, I lived with that fear over my head—not fear of abuse; he had done it before—but fear of embarrassment. I didn’t want to be the girl who was beaten by her boyfriend on campus.
So add my distress, and a developed speed dating habit to no textbooks, and my grades paid the price—not that I cared about my grades then to make the effort.

When I was 17, I met Marlon who became my boyfriend and is now my husband. In a lot of ways, he was and still is the stabilizing force in my life. Three years later, he went away to college. I had no intention to pursue college beyond the community level. But Marlon wrote me letters about college life. He liked it. He was learning and having fun. He then started making plans for me to join him. I applied to the college he attended because he wanted me to. I was accepted and attended because he was there. In retrospect, graduate school was the only part of college I really wanted.

When I look back—from then to now—sometimes I can’t help feeling like an outsider or a fraud. As an undergrad, in a department where most semesters I was the lone minority student in my classes, the outsider feeling clouded the air where I sat. Coming from an island where I was in the majority and race wasn’t really a factor in my daily life, the American college classroom was the first place I was forced to stare at my blackness in its face. It was there that I came to terms with the fact that my black body—a site of avowal and ascription—speaks volumes, and sometimes does more than speak, but rather interrogates the room in which I stand or sit. Now, my status is complicated by my motherhood.

I worry. As I undertake this project, I worry that I am implicating my professors, my department, university, and myself. I worry that I will alienate some members of my audience, but I cannot twist the words of the women I write about. To misrepresent the experiences and perceptions of these women means a further silencing of their voices. This issue, graduate students who are mothers, has found me and I have to see it to
fruition. I owe that much to the women who have participated in this study and have helped me conceptualize and develop this project.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is threefold: to analyze the discourse of graduate school survival guides for the reigning metaphors of graduate school; to gather the perceptions and experiences of women who are mothers in graduate school; and to offer action-based alternatives to the status quo policies of the university based on the self-described needs of these women. Based on discourse analysis, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups, this study argues that institutional discourses and practices place graduate students who are mothers in untenable and irreconcilable positions between “mom” and “student,” between “family” and “the academy,” between “self” and “success.” These irreconcilable differences are created in discourse, enacted in institutional policies, and lived by me and the women who participated in this study.

This dissertation confirms much of the research already known about women in organizations and motherhood in the academy, but argues that graduate school is a space and a place where real changes can begin to enact different policies, build a different community, draw on functioning and effective support systems, and make inclusiveness and diversity a reality. These changes can happen only if support comes from all fronts, only if graduate students who are mothers are not the only ones making all the sacrifices, and only if children and family life are coded in the academy as symbols of encouragement rather than problems to be managed by individual women.
**Rationale/Justification**

To gauge the experience of graduate students who are mothers in academe, it is salient to survey the literature on the state of women in academe and literature on women in organizations. The experiences of women, in what may seem to be separate spheres, overlap. The following sections look at how the timing of childbirth, childrearing and family responsibilities, institutional policies, and rhetoric of choice affect women.

**Work-family Conflict in the Lives of Academic Women**

An emerging body of research has shown how gender is inextricably linked to success in the academy. Some of this work has focused on pregnancy and the changes it introduces into a woman’s professional roles and relationships. The timing of childbirth, for example, is an important factor in a woman's career. Paula Caplan (1993) notes that the academic tenure clock and women’s biological clocks coincide. “The average age for receiving a PhD is 33,” and “many professors do not secure tenure under the age of 40.” (Mason as cited in Wilson, 2003). Therefore, some women find themselves facing the decision as to whether to sacrifice a career for a family or vice versa or to delay having children. This led Hensel (1990) to argue that the verdict is clear—"having children is detrimental to a woman's career success" (p. 4). Hensel points out how difficult it is for women to pursue academic careers and family life. Academic life assumes that people have “uninterrupted” time (Hensel, 1990). Therefore, choosing to become a mother gives the appearance that a woman is unmotivated, less committed, less interested in doing what she must do to get to the next step on the ladder. The discrepancy between how women without children and women with children are viewed in academia is noted by Williams (2002), who says that “female professors and staff members report that they felt treated like valued colleagues until they had children, and then they felt their colleagues' assessment of their
competence start to plummet” (Williams, 2002).

Mason and Goulden (2002) analyzed data from the Survey of Doctorate Recipients from 160,000 people who earned their doctorates between 1978 and 1984, and continued working in academe. The researchers use this data to determine how having children affected the academic careers of both men and women. Mason and Goulden conclude that the timing of children or having children affected the academic careers of women. The study concludes that the timing is imperative for academic women. Having a baby within five years of a PhD undermines a woman’s academic career making them 30 percent less likely than women without babies to attain a tenure-track position. 56 percent of the academic women who had children before going on the tenure track earned tenure within 14 years after receiving their PhDs. For men with children before going on the track, this number is 77 percent (Wilson, 2003). This trend shows that ‘having early babies seems to help men,” but not women (Mason & Goulden, 2002).

Mason and Goulden (2002) also examined how many people who put their career first eventually had a family. Only one-third of women without children who took a university job ever became mothers, while men were 70 percent more likely to become parents after securing that first assistant-professor job. Male professors were much more likely to marry and have families than female professors. Only 44 percent of all the tenured women in the study were married and had children within 12 years of earning their doctorates, while 70 percent of tenured men married and became fathers during that period. For that same time period, about a quarter of tenured women were still single and childless compared to 11 percent of tenured men (Wilson, 2003).

These numbers are sobering and all too real. What this data possibly demonstrate is that there is an ongoing discomfort in academia with the pregnant body, which puts the academic
woman with a stroller in a precarious position (Srivastava in Kelly & Srivastava, 2003). Thus, this unfriendliness leads many academic mothers to begin their careers as part-time teachers or adjuncts, while some women take time off before going on the clock, which is professionally and economically risky. Some women even choose to stay home for a while with their children. For these women, however, it is hard to get back on the track (Wilson, 2003).

*Family Responsibilities*

While women as a percentage of doctorate recipients increased from 12% in 1966 to 42% in 1998, women PhDs are predominately obtaining employment as adjunct faculty, lecturers, and staff rather than as tenured professors (Mason & Goulden, 2002). Mason and Goulden (2004) suggest that this is due to family roles that expect women to maintain primary responsibilities in the home. Coiner (1994) writes that the academy assumes a freedom from responsibility for maintaining a home and family. This freedom does not exist for many academic women. Fathers are more successful in academe than mothers are because they are more likely to have a spouse who stays at home. “In 1999, only 48 percent of men who were married and were full professors in the sciences and social sciences had wives who worked fulltime, while 91 percent of women who were married and were full professors in those disciplines had spouses who worked fulltime” (Wilson, 2003, p. A1). Academic mothers do not have at their disposal someone who is responsible for daily responsibilities of a family or the maintenance of life (Coiner, 1994).

Not every academic mother views academe as a "chilly" climate for mothers. Fothergill and Feltey (2004) surveyed and interviewed faculty who voiced that academe provides them with a flexibility to raise their children, while pursuing a career that they wouldn't have in some organizations. Hirshman (2005) points to the great hours of an academic life compared to a
career in law or the corporate world. The general consensus, though, from the literature is that flexibility is an illusion. For example, according to Mary W. Gray, former head of the American Association of University Professors' Committee on the Status of Women in the Academic Profession, "There is an illusion of flexibility in academe that leads people to believe that they can do everything" (as cited in Wilson, 2001a, p. A11). Academe boasts great teaching hours in the sense that one gets to choose the hours during the day he or she works. However, the hours required to publish, teach and to render services to the university and community are insurmountable. The number of hours an academician puts in any given day may very well exceed the hours put in by a professional.

**Policies and Women**

Mothers in academe have benefited from labor laws, which now allow women to take time off from work. The Family and Medical Leave Act guarantees a maximum of three months of unpaid leave for childbirth for employees who have worked for a particular employer for 12 months. However, if a new or recent hire is or becomes pregnant before the 12-month period, she is left under the mercy of her department's policy. Some departments may have flexible policies to deal with situations like that. In the case of the faculty member who has 12 or more months of service, it has been reported that some universities allow a semester of paid leave and stopping the tenure clock (Heiberger & Miller Vick, 2003). On campuses where stopping the tenure clock was an option, 80 percent reported that it was “rarely used” mostly because faculty feared “career penalties” (Wilson, 2001b, A10). For example, one professor at Rutgers University complained that she was denied tenure because she stopped the clock for a year (Wilson, 2001b). "Interrupting career for family carries draconian penalties out of proportion to the time taken. Generous tenure plans allow a year for a baby; take two years with the toddler and
you're off the tenure track forever” (Cook, 2002, p.1).

Women are starting to fight back. In June 2000, the University of Oregon paid $495,000 to a former assistant professor who claimed that the two maternity leaves she took were used to deny her tenure. The university's provost had warned that maternity leave would "prejudice the case for tenure” (Williams, 2002). An article from the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal* (reprinted in *Women in Higher Education*) states that in September, 2002, Professor Laura Myers sued Sam Houston State University, Texas and a dean for discrimination. The basis of the lawsuit was that Myers was demoted and her salary decreased from $77,000 to $56,000 (I assume that this was the rate for the new position) because of her pregnancy. Myers claimed the announcement of her pregnancy resulted in discrimination against her. Her duties changed in that she was given problem cases in her role as assistant dean. She also earned less than males with lower rank. Professor Myers’s lawyer stated that the Dean “didn’t want to deal with a woman having a baby” (p. 4).

In spite of the labor laws, and the fact that a few brave women are taking on the system, the data still reveals that although there have been changes, much needs to be done to bring more positive outcomes for women in academe and to put them on par with the men of academe.

The following section looks at the issues faced by women in the organization and how they very much mirror those faced by academic women. The academy doesn’t shield women from the issues of gender equality. The academic mother encounters similar work and family issues as other professional mothers. She faces issues such as timing of childbearing, and childrearing, acceptance and resistance to organizational policies that attempt to dichotomize work and family life, and perceptions by others that her struggles are the result of her own “choices.”
Women of the Organization

In the general body of literature on women in the workplace (Hardesty & Jacobs, 1986, for example), the prevalent theme is that the successful women are those who warp themselves. Watchful women have seen corporations promote and reward only the women who have excessive male traits. The women who are frequently recognized think and feel on the male model because being 'all I can be' within the corporation means being stereotypically male. They have the same ambition as the men, the same drive, and they never mention their children. (p. 252)

Also, some of these women are childless. According to Hardesty and Jacobs, women’s professional lives intrude on their personal lives. Hewlett (2002) states many high achieving women delay or postpone having children for fear of jeopardizing their careers. Women are pressured to choose between the two. The ones who choose their careers end up “depressed” and “regretful” when they realize that the clock is ticking by or has passed them by. After years of service, many of these women ask, “Is this what I gave up children for? Is this really the fuller, richer life I was promised?” (Hardesty & Jacobs, 1986, p. 261)

Jorgenson, Gregory and Goodyear (1997) interviewed women engineers to explore the perceptions of women in traditionally male-dominated and managed organizations. The researchers examined the plight of female engineers as they try to manage their homes and careers in a low tolerant organization that demanded the separation between family and work life. The engineers revealed that they had to learn to "manage" these roles in ways that were compatible with the organization’s goals.

Swiss and Walker (1993) summarize the experiences of 902 women graduates of Harvard professional schools who combined mothering and professional careers. From surveys and
personal interviews collected over a ten-year period, the authors/researchers explain how this
group of lawyers, doctors, and businesswomen juggle family and work. They discuss the
detrimental effects of taking maternity leave. The authors/researchers provide suggestions for
employees and employers to begin a transformation of the workplace to better accommodate
workers who combine work and family. For example, employers might support job-sharing teams
and telecommuting, while employees should establish themselves professionally before having
children and should not be afraid to establish personal criteria for success. I find Swiss and
Walker's (1993) advice to women reinforces the status quo that tells women that you can have
children now, but know that there will not be a place here for you; or you can delay having
children and there might be a place here for you; but if you do not have children, then you will be
the better woman to further the organization's goals, which often means that there should be no
overspill from family life into the work environment.

An anthology edited by Ruddick and Daniels (1977) shares experiences from women in a
wide range of professions (scientists, artists, scholars, and writers) and backgrounds. The
personal testimonies of these women confirm the many issues women who are working toward
attaining legitimacy experience. Here women share their stories about how their works were
trivialized, the loneliness and ambivalence they experienced, their sacrifices, how they were
silenced or how attempts were made to silence them, and the guilt they felt about not working
when they spent time with family.

Some authors discuss the false dichotomy of the private vs. public sphere that
organizational practices promote towards work-family (Martin, 1990; Jorgenson, 2000; Farley-
Lucas, 2000). Martin (1990) discusses so called "family friendly policies" and asks, "...beneficial
for whom?" and argues that pregnancy reveals a series of sexual organizational taboos with
regard to displays of intimacy and nurturance, and the sexual activity of the woman that men in the organization are not part of. It highlights "suppressed gender conflict" in organizations (Martin, 1990; Jorgenson, 2000).

Like academic mothers, other career mothers try to find ways to fight back. While some mothers resist organizational polices by accepting them, others engage in resistant behaviors such as the formation of informal "mommy" groups at work where they discuss matters of parenting (Farley-Lucas, 2000), networking, occasionally "circumventing and subverting official policies," negotiating certain flexibilities (Jorgenson, 2000). They also turn off phones and beepers, and threaten to quit if their organizations do not attempt to accommodate their family lives (Gregory, 2001). Women creatively use these forms of resistance "to transform structures and dominant organizational narratives in ways that allow them to construct positive identities" (Gregory, 2001, p. 274).

Race and Class

Researchers such as bell hooks argue that any discussion about women and their relationships to the institutions cannot ignore work and class. Race, class and gender are interconnected (hooks, 2000; Ngan-ling Chow, 1996). Ngan-ling Chow (1996) argues that, in fact, race, class, and gender are “basic principles of social organization and of the human interaction process” (xiv). She claims that “the interlock simultaneously forms multiple systems of domination and meaning that have interactive, reciprocal, and cumulative effects on structural conditions and processes that shape the life experiences of women and men” (xxi).

The issues faced by women in academe are complicated by race and class, none of which have been given much attention. hooks (2000) states that when class, race, and gender coincide, black women usually are the most disadvantaged. Reid (1990) sums up the state of black women
in academe by observing that little research examines the dual impact of racism and sexism on the black female scholar. She suggests that the lack of data is symptomatic of black women's representation in academe. According to Hamlet (1999), "The study of African American women in academia has suffered from scholarly disrespect and neglect. Their stories are ones of struggles, frustration, and at times, even rage, but none are defeat" (24). Unless black scholars take an aggressive lead in identifying who they are, they will continue to react to distortions and perceptions created by others (Howard-Vital, 1989; Hamlet, 1999). As members of two minority groups, black women represent excellent subjects for research into the dynamics of discrimination, motivation, and occupational achievement (Alien, 1979, as cited in Tally-Ross 1995) because “race and gender are ineluctably intertwined” (Dyer, 1997, p. 30).

If race has been given little attention in the research on women in academe, there is more of a silence surrounding class issues. According to Bell and Golombisky (2004), there is the “illusion that all students come from material privilege” (p. 317) in higher education. This illusion persists thereafter. There appears to be a consensus that being educated and becoming a professional denote that one automatically belongs to the middle class. hooks in Childers and hooks (1990), for example, notes that class and education are intertwined. hooks (2000) states that “it is uncool to talk about class” because people are “tense, nervous, and uncertain” (p. vii) about their stance. hooks goes on to mention how her PhD has prepared her for class mobility. While this may be true, this unstated assumption neglects factors outside that may make this middle class position less than true and attainable for all. What about single mothers within that group of professionals who do not have the family support or the financial backing to assist with childcare? By virtue of being single and maybe having to depend on one salary, the middle class ideal is less attainable for these women.
A conclusion that can be drawn from the literature on motherhood in general is that across a range of professions women continue to have a hard time combining career and family (Hewlett, 2000). A woman is limited by the resources she has to work with—the level of support she receives from family, institutions, and her workplace. Hewlett (2002) writes that the professional women she interviewed revealed that their careers and sometimes “high maintenance” husbands stifled their desire to have children. According to Hewlett, 33 percent of high achieving women are childless at age 40, which rises to 42 percent in corporate America, while 49 percent of the “ultra high achieving” women are childless. Hewlett contends that younger women face even harder choices. "The tradeoffs faced by the breakthrough generation women dog the footsteps of younger women, who are having a harder time balancing work and family than their older sisters" (p. 90).

What is unique about Hewlett's perspective is that her sample consists of professional women across the board (corporate, lawyers, doctors, professors, etc.). It shows the overlap of issues faced by professional women and mothers across professions—academic and nonacademic. The literature highlights the fight for equality and recognition, and the chilly climate that greets such women, who try to progress in traditionally male dominated professions, which frame motherhood and a career in academe as incompatible goals. Many people continue to harbor the notion that child caring is primarily for women and that we cannot handle the strain of being in highly "exclusive privileged" and demanding positions and having children. As Crittenden (2001) puts it, “whoever cares for the kids will always get the short end under current arrangements” (p. 44). When mothers take on the responsibility, their marginalization in the workplace is coded as choice “or as part of life’s inevitable compromises” (p.44) rather than
systematic and institutionalized policies that affect their participation in the workforce and require them to take on the caretaking mantle at home.

Most troubling is the trend that many women are opting out. An October 2003, *New York Times Magazine* article by Lisa Belkin, "The Opt-Out Revolution," examines the phenomenon of highly educated, successful women giving up or curtailing their careers to stay at home. This opting out has been conceived as a choice. However, Crittenden (2001) argues:

> The big problem with the rhetoric of choice is that it leaves out power. Those who benefit from the status quo always attribute inequities to the choices of the underdog. The current rhetoric about choosing motherhood sounds suspiciously like the 1950s rhetoric about “happy” women…. The modern version of the old “true woman” argument – the true woman appreciates that her proper place is in the home—is the choice argument. (p. 235)

Women did not write the rules that govern their participation in the home front or in the organizations. Nor have they written the rules in industry that doesn’t include good part-time jobs (Crittenden, 2001).

I have grown wary of the rhetoric of choice because of its use in justifying injustices and the status quo, and to explain why people behave the way they do. It seems to be the word that is readily available to describe situations like these. If the choice were that easy, wouldn’t the world be a place where more women succeed, more poor people become richer, more fat people become skinny, etc? The rhetoric of choice has its functional value, in that it serves to maintain and reinforce the status quo. Belkin (2003) argues that “It’s not just that the workplace has failed women. It is also that women are
rejecting the workplace” (p.42). She went on to further to say that she is:

very aware that, for the moment, this is true mostly of elite, successful women
who can afford real choice…To which she says she “would argue that these are
the very women who were supposed to be the professional equals of men right
now, so that fact that they are choosing otherwise, is explosive. (p. 45)

Do I think that feminists will feel betrayed by these women? No. Feminism is also
about equal rights and giving voice. However, I think it will be a slap in the face to read
one of the women of the “opt-out revolution,” Vicky McElhaney Benedict’s, response to
people who felt that she was “ruining the workplace for women because it makes
employers suspicious” (p.46). She says, “I don’t want to take on the mantle of
womanhood and fight a fight for some sister who isn’t really my sister because I don’t
even know her” (p. 46). I worry about the message this sends to the next generation. If I
have a daughter, and I hope I do, I would want her to know that because of the struggles
of “sisters” who came before me—they didn’t even know me—I am able to sit in a
college classroom today. Maybe it was because of the struggles of those sisters that
Benedict was able to achieve so much in a Princeton or Duke’s classroom.

Even though the women in Belkin’s article talk about choice, for example, they
couldn’t help but mention that they saw all the obstacles to get to the top and just didn’t
want to carry out the battle once their children arrived. They mention killer schedules,
lack of part time opportunities, and even attribute their “choice” to biology. One woman,
a former reporter, says that her station refused to give her a part time contract when she
asked. “They said it was all or nothing” (p. 46). Another, a former lawyer, says, “I wish it
would have been possible to be and continue with my career” (p. 46). Yet another
woman, a former lawyer, who took jobs that weren’t really up to standard from the get-go, says retrospectively that her choice was based on knowledge that “the long term career was going to be his [her husband also a lawyer]” (p. 46).

In employing biology as a possible explanation, the women warn of it becoming a “dogma.” Nonetheless, it seems that they couldn’t help but wonder if there was credence to the theory that women are born to care for the children while the men are born to be the breadwinners. One of the women in the article, Jeanine Tarkenton, who worked in publishing and helped start the Atlanta Girls School, says, “I think some of us are swinging to a place where we enjoy, and can admit we enjoy, the stereotypical role of female/mother/caregiver…. I think we were born with those feelings” (p. 47).

To argue that the “opt-out revolution” is about choice is to say that the contestants on Miss America or even Universe pageant are chosen because of their commitment to scholarship and service, or Oprah with her personal trainer, chef, and her leisure time telling people to “not spend another summer fat” on her TV show. Imagine the anguish of a mother who is fat, works eight to nine hours a day and sometimes more to sustain her family, then still having to come home to household duties listening to Oprah telling her that this should be her last summer being fat. But then again, this woman probably isn’t watching Oprah—she is too busy working.

So where is the choice? Isn’t choice an illusive concept, especially when it comes to people without power? It seems to me that from the women’s words that it was not their choice to “opt out” or leave the organizations. There is no revolution because things have remained the same—women are still expected and obliged to be the homemaker/main parent.
The literature review demonstrates the work/family conflict that result from the unavailability of real choices for women. Across the board, similar issues confront women who combine work and family. The timing of childbirth and childrearing, family responsibilities, and having to navigate organization and institutional policies that help to create and exacerbate the work/family conflict women experience.

*Putting Graduate Students in the Conversation: Challenge and Problem*

To discover how the discourses of impossibility and separate spheres operate against women in academe, graduate student mothers is an excellent group for research. Since most of the women in graduate school are in their twenties and thirties, they face similar challenges or even more challenges faced by the breakthrough generation that combined motherhood and career (Hewlett, 2002). There is a constant struggle to fit into an organization whose socialization policies exclude them as a group. Hence, graduate student mothers find themselves questioning their place in academe which constructs combining careers and life in academe and family as a challenge and problem.

Putting Graduate Students in the conversation theoretically positions the complexity of graduate students who are also negotiating motherhood. A review of the relevant literature helps to explain this multifaceted role of the graduate student/mother. By narrowing the lens, this section looks at current policy in the academy that attempts to bridge the academic vs. personal gap for mothers. Additionally this section recognizes institutional efforts to accommodate the verging family’s needs of their graduate students, but calls for an examination of the language used in the policies.

Socialization into any culture operates on different levels for different people or groups of people. Graduate students based on their location within the academic
hierarchy of their departments and their status as full or part-time students experience that process differently. For example, more departmental or university resources may be spent on socializing graduate students who are supported by departmental or university funding in comparison to those who aren’t. More attempts may be made to socialize graduate teaching assistants because they serve an integral role in the department and in most cases are given a curriculum to teach that advances the departmental and the university’s mission.

“Academia is a business, and "graduate student" is a job title" (Azuma, 1997, p. 3). Graduate students perform an organizational role (Golde, 2000) in which they are socialized as early as the search process for a suitable graduate program. Organizational socialization refers to "the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211, Golde, 2000, p. 200) and to become part of an organizational culture. Morgan (1997) describes culture as shared values, beliefs, meanings, understanding, and sense making and advocates an understanding of culture as an “ongoing, proactive process of reality construction” (p. 141). Organizational socialization occurs almost exclusively in the public sphere (Hearn & Parkin, 1992). This process emphasizes the divide between the private and the public and the privileging of latter over the former. Hence, the creation and perpetuation of a discourse and climate that punishes or limits the success of those associated with and perceived to belong to the private sphere.

The literature reveals that graduate mothers experience a "chilly climate" in academe. In Kelly & Srivastava (2003), Kelly writes that choosing to become a mother in graduate school felt "like an either/or proposition" (p. 60). She states that for all of “our awareness of academic feminism, this gloomy pressure prevails, suggesting that academicians who choose to become
mothers ‘throw out their brains with the baby's bath water’” (p. 60).

Williams (2004) identifies three themes graduate students use to describe their experiences and perceptions of becoming parents in graduate school: 1) if they desire to have children, it should after tenure, 2) children should not be an option if they plan to pursue tenure track jobs, and 3) having a baby ensures an outsider status. The students interpret these themes based on their perceptions of the decline in their acceptance levels within their departments after they decided to they became pregnant and gave birth. Robert W. Drago's Faculty and Families Project at Pennsylvania State University argues that graduate students with children pay a penalty. “They are less likely to end up at research universities” (as cited in Williams, 2004).

Coiner (1990) shares an anecdote from her personal experience in academe. When she entered the job market in 1987, the professor responsible for preparing graduates for the job search advised her to erase her four-year-old daughter's voice from her answering machine "'til this shootin’ match is over" (p. 197).

Crittenden (2001) points out that some employers can be sympathetic to women in the workplace having one baby, but when it comes to two, especially when they are not spaced too far apart, the sympathy wanes and resistance steps in. It seems that having more than one kid is also seen as a blatant disregard for the rule in graduate school. Crittenden shares the example of a “well-known feminist economist” who claimed that she had gone to great lengths to bend the rules at a university to accommodate a graduate student who became pregnant during her tenure to allow her a year’s extension and time off. The student became pregnant again when she was about to return from leave. Crittenden states that the feminist felt betrayed and thought the graduate student was “foolish not to realize that the system can only accommodate so much deviation” (p.
A true case of “once bitten twice shy” or “fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” This professor was willing to overlook one transgression but not another. There can be only so much accommodation for deviations.

The scant research on the experiences of graduate students who are mothers reveals a need to position graduate students in the conversation on family and work issues in academia. Graduate students are being trained to fill positions in academia. They occupy a liminal space within academia, but that doesn’t mean that their experiences are not valid. In fact, situating graduate students in the conversation is even more salient because they represent a unique group. The socialization into what it means to be a good academic begins in graduate school, where even within the rank of graduate students, socialization takes on different meaning and intensity based on the status of the student (part-time, fulltime, graduate and research assistants).

Policies already implemented at Princeton and Stanford aim to assist graduate students in that manner. These policies bring up issues such as leave for adoption, elder care, etc. Stanford’s policy, which was adopted in November, 2004 regarding maternity leave for graduate assistants for childbirth, or adoption allows for the temporary suspension of duties for up to six weeks or until an expected change of enrollment status, whichever comes first. If after that six week period, the student cannot resume her duty, then the department is authorized to put her on leave of absence. Stanford’s rationale for the new policy reads as follows:

Stanford University is committed to achieving a diverse graduate student body, and facilitating the participation of under-represented groups in all areas of research and graduate and postdoctoral training. To increase the number of women pursuing the advanced degrees that will prepare them for leadership positions in academia, industry, and government, it is important to acknowledge
that a woman's prime childbearing years are the same years she is likely to be in graduate school, doing postdoctoral training, and establishing herself in a career. The Childbirth Policy described here is designed to partially ameliorate the intrinsic conflict between the "biological" and the "research" and "training" clocks for women graduate students.

Nothing in this policy replaces the communication and cooperation between student and advisor, and the good-faith efforts of both to accommodate the birth of a child. It is the intention of this policy to reinforce the importance of that cooperation, and to provide support where needed to make that accommodation possible.

(ftp://www.stanford.edu/dept/DoR/GSH/childbirth.html#plan)

Stanford hopes to allow women in those situations to “maintain their full-time student status” so that there won’t be the need to interrupt academic progress or on-campus services like housing and insurance, and to avoid problems with student loans. The policy provides for part-time enrollment if approved for a maximum of two quarters.

What are the implications of these policies? The fact that these policies are being enacted means that there is an acknowledgment that something is awry within the system that prevents women from pursuing graduate degrees or attempt to balance graduate school and family life. Although Stanford’s policy has been criticized and spurred a string of discussion on insidehighered.com for not doing everything to be inclusive of women who desire to adopt or fathers, it is a start in the right direction to correct discriminatory practices that have limited women’s participation in higher education and beyond (Fishman, 2006; discussions on insidehighered.com).
MIT has also established a Childbirth Accommodation Policy of its own that reflects the one implemented at Sanford in the sense that it does not cater for women who plan to adopt or for fathers who are graduate students. This policy, administered by the Graduate Students Office, allows up to eight weeks of Childbirth Accommodation. Students who are research and teaching assistants paid by the university continue to receive their stipend during this time. Teaching assistants are permitted to consider limited duties.

The Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Department at the University of California, Berkeley has its own policy that allows new parents a number of options for two semesters following the birth or adoption of a child. This includes withdrawal, minimal academic involvement, or part-time status. There is also a strong community of parental support in the Berkeley area. The Berkeley Parents Network is a volunteer-run advice newsletter offering ideas on housing, summer school, birthdays, pets, and dedicates a section to advice for campus parents.

Clearly, a move like this requires resources, of which the universities discussed above have in excess. However, this does not mean that other universities cannot implement programs of their own to include women in their diversity initiatives. Shouldn’t universities work toward inclusion rather than a rhetoric of accommodation that evokes images of disability?

At the site of this study, there have been changes since Fall 2002—the time of the inception of this research interest. Effective, Fall 2006, graduate assistants receive a reduced rate on their student health insurance policies, which the university subsidizes. This rate is a result of bargaining by the Graduate Student Union. In addition, they now qualify for payroll deductions
toward that premium. This policy is in light with efforts by the graduate union to get the university to recognize graduate assistants as legitimate employees, not in theory but in practice, who deserve at least some of the benefits extended to staff and faculty.

The implications of these changes are that it appears that graduate assistants are beginning to gain some form of legitimacy on that university’s campus. However, an examination of where we came from to where we are at the moment shows little or relatively no progress. Even with the subsidized rate, the insurance policy is still not cheaper than it was four years ago and the benefits aren’t greater or even comparable. Still, the plan is worth it if students cannot afford better. The subsidy doesn’t extend to part-time graduate or research assistants.

Recognizing graduate assistants as employees brings up labor law issues. Among these issues the university may have to consider are maternity and paternity leave benefits, more sick days, childcare arrangements, and so on that it offers to faculty and staff. These benefits should not affect the statuses of recipients’ assistantships in a way that it delays the timeline one would take to complete the degree.

Graduate students who are mothers, therefore, are worthy of study on a number of fronts to extend and to amplify what we know about motherhood and the academy. Graduate students who are mothers are a group coming to terms with cultural expectations—for motherhood and academic success—expectations that require very different kinds of commitments. They are a group coming to terms with institutional goals and policies—for diversity, inclusion, and disciplinary and academic programs—goals and policies that make little to no accommodations for their lives. They are a group coming to terms with academic expectations for “good” students—for time, energies, labor, teaching, and learning—expectations that leave most of them feeling like failures,
excluded from socialization and rewards.

The rhetoric of “choice” of privileged working women and the rhetoric of “accommodation” and “inclusion” in the academy are ways to mask economic, social, and political disparities in power. These practices of power are felt as exclusion, isolation, and alienation by some groups more than others. Graduate students who are mothers are one of these groups.

The following section previews the remaining chapters.

**Preview of Chapters**

This dissertation utilizes a multiple methods approach to study the experiences of graduate students who are moms. When I conceptualized this project, I was inclined to use the interview as my only methodology. However, as the project unfolded and the issues became more complex, I decided to take a multiple methods approach to the project. Reinharz (1992) advocates a multiple methods approach for researchers who have a “commitment to thoroughness,” (p. 201) a desire, to be open-ended, and to take risks. According to Reinharz, “multiple methods research increases the likelihood of obtaining scientific credibility and research utility” (p.197). It works to enhance understanding...by adding layers of information and by using one type of data to validate or refine another” (p.201).

Chapter two is an analysis of the Internet resources, survival guides/books, and orientation material dedicated to graduate students. These resources create and perpetuate the culture of the “good” graduate student who makes graduate work her/his central focus in life to the neglect of all else. These guides paint a picture of a heroic quest that is a male-centered, road of trials, ending with the boon of a successful graduation and career. This rite of passage is also characterized by portraits of the “political game” to be negotiated and won, the “daily grind” to be endured, and “a balancing act” to be
For women who are mothers, this portrait evidences untenable and irreconcilable differences between this “good” graduate student and motherhood.

Chapter three collects and interprets the perceptions and experiences of graduate students who are mothers gathered in one-on-one interviews I conducted with twelve participants. In this chapter, I trace the goals of interviewing as a research methodology from a feminist standpoint; I outline the interview procedure, protocols, and I introduce the participants. These interviews asked participants to describe their self perceptions and the perceptions of others around them, as well as to offer their own experiences of graduate school and motherhood. The experiences relayed in these interviews were disheartening, to say the least. Participants described their inability to live up to ideals and offered a number of strategies to create impressions of their own “good” student status. Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Daily Life* (1954) offers a vocabulary for understanding these participants’ strategies as face work, overcompensation, passing, and stigma. Unlike chapter two’s rite of passage created in discourse, I argue that “stigma” is a social designation that renders graduate students who are mothers as excluded, less worthy, and illegitimate. This stigmatized identity is heightened, rather than diminished, as PhD student moms move through their programs.

Chapter four moves from interviews to focus groups, as I gathered my participants in small groups to give them a forum for talk and for action. This chapter covers focus group as a methodological choice, describes the procedures in recruiting and executing the focus groups, and puts focus group methods in conversation with action research, its challenges and benefits. This chapter offers the two primary needs voiced by my participants: childcare and support. The first of these needs can be met by the
institution, academic departments, and actions by the participants themselves. The chapter ends with outlining the plan for action my participants developed to help themselves negotiate the policies and practices of their institution and departments. If the discourse analysis and interviews depressed me, then the focus groups were a site of excitement, hope, and collective action.

This study concludes with the need for support, combining the perceptions of my participants with their calls to action. If “It takes a village to raise a child,” then it also takes a village to support graduate students who are mothers. To begin to change the disheartening and debilitating treatment of women who are mothers in the academy, support needs to begin in graduate school to instigate cultural, institutional, and departmental policies and practices that encourage, rather than punish, mothers. Affordable, flexible, and accessible daycare provided by the university is ground zero of this support. Advising, departmental programs, alternative course work and sequencing, and time to degree must be flexible to support parenting in the academy. Only when support is tangible and real can the university’s mission of diversity and inclusiveness become a reality.
Chapter Two

The Heroic Quest of Inclusion and Elitism, or Exclusion and Inadequacy: Analyzing Graduate School Guides

For Foucault (1972), discourse is about power. Discourse produces knowledge. It can be used to organize, describe, critically analyze, interpret and evaluate text to reveal institution or organization specific codes (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 229).

As a method of analysis that helps the researcher to uncover and discover by dissecting and deconstructing the texts, discourse analysis calls attention to the richness of qualitative data and encourages the researcher to draw conclusions and detect patterns in the texts. Discourse analysis pushes the researcher to confront his or her perceptions and question assumptions and requires a critical eye (Cramer, 1998).

A developing field of discourse analysis termed critical discourse analysis defines discourse as a form of social practice. This definition “implies a dialectical relationship between a discursive event and the situation, institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258 as cited in Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 13). Therefore, “discursive practices help maintain the status quo and give rise to important issues of power relations between social classes, women and men, racial and ethnic groups through the ways in which they represent and position people” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258 as cited in Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 13).

A deconstruction of the texts for meanings, assumptions, events and frames
sometimes reveals patterns that are troubling. "Deconstruction is not an enclosure in
nothingness, but an openness to the other" (Derrida, 1984, p. 124). Deconstruction
“discover(s) the non-place or non-lieu which would be that ‘other’ of philosophy" (p.
112). Therefore, the goals of Derrida’s deconstruction, according to Herrick (2005), are:
1) to reveal the hidden mechanisms at work that influence meaning in written language;
2) to demonstrate the concealed power of symbols to shape thinking; and 3) to show that
no one escapes the elusive qualities of language (p. 253). Although Derrida asserts that
deconstruction is not an “analysis,” a “critique,” a “method,” an “act,” and an “operation”
(Derrida, 1985, p.3), its allure lies in its ability to uncover the premises in discourse
production and perpetuation.

Discourse analysis in organization theory involves examination of metaphors and
themes that guide an institution to reveal information about its values, beliefs, and
attitudes, about who is valued and who is not. Discussion surrounding metaphors
examine how they influence and shape the cultural climate of organizations. Because
universities are run more and more like businesses (Azuma, 1997), situating them in the
discussion on organizational metaphors will not be farfetched.

Themes and metaphors are driving forces behind any culture in that metaphors
associated with a specific organization reveal how that organization or institution sees
and thinks about its position within the larger system. Morgan (1997) states that
metaphors do more than embellish discourse. Metaphors imply “a way of thinking and a
way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world…” (p. 4). Metaphors help
construct an organizational life: how people within and outside of that organization
experience that organization is based on the metaphors that define the organization’s
principles, what it is really like in that organization, and how that organization responds to change (Marshak, 1996). Morgan (1997) states that research has shown the “formative influence of metaphor on science, language, how we think and express ourselves…” (p. 4). According to Putnam, Philips and Chapman (1996), metaphors “facilitate the creation and interpretation of social reality” (p. 377). Therefore, metaphors are “a principal component of an organization’s symbolic meaning system” (Marshak, 1996, p. 152).

Morgan (1997) criticizes metaphors for their ability to produce a “one-sided insight,” in that by highlighting certain interpretations, it forces others into the background…” (p 4). In terms of organizational change, Marshak (1996) argues that metaphors can be used as diagnostic tools to identify, for example, “theories-in-use, cultural assumptions and beliefs, and unconscious dynamics” (p. 151).

According to Jarosz (1992), “metaphor not only imparts information and emotion but also confirms, legitimates and perpetuates structures of domination and oppression such as racism, sexism, and imperialism,…through its persistence and proliferation in various discourse” (p.106). An analysis of the discourse that pervades graduate school resources, such as internet sources, survival guides/books, and orientation materials, reveals themes and metaphors that paint it as a place where an elite group of people embark on a journey on which they engage in the proliferation and application of ideas. Surviving the journey requires commitment, sacrifice of life as one knew it, and hard work. The survivors are rewarded with a degree and permanent induction into the “you have survived grad school” society.

This chapter argues that the pervasive nature of graduate school discourse—through metaphors of the journey, the game, the grind, and balancing acts—perpetuates a
cycle of exclusion and inadequacy for graduate students who are mothers, and inclusion and elitism for those already fulfilling cultural and institutional expectations for graduate success. These metaphors construct graduate school as a place where male ideals are both valued and promoted; these same metaphors exclude, trivialize, and make women who are mothers a “by the way” group of people in graduate school. Excluded, inadequate, or an afterthought, graduate student mothers are caught in untenable and irreconcilable discourses that constructs “mom” and “student,” “family” and “the academy,” “self” and “success” as unattainable.

*Searching for Support Online*

To execute graduate school discourse analysis, I utilized the Internet, books, guides, and orientation material distributed to new graduate students during the Fall 2005 semester by various departments at the site of this study.

My search for materials on the Internet that target graduate students directed me to more than 200,000 websites and pages. To narrow my search, I used the following keywords:

1. guide to graduate school
2. surviving graduate school
3. mothers in graduate schools
4. policies for graduate students
5. policies for pregnant graduate students
6. training graduate assistants
7. policies for pregnant graduate assistants
8. combining graduate school and family
9. how to be a good graduate student

These search terms pulled up links to websites and pages of universities, organizations that market toward graduate students, and numerous resources for graduate students by people who are in graduate school or have been there.

From the search, I chose the following guides because of their frequency. These guides were linked to more than twice on a website or webpage that addressed graduate students. The following are the selected guides:

1. Drew University Guide to Graduate Study
   This quintessential guide to graduate school targets the undergrad who is considering that path. It includes topics ranging from a list of reflective questions one should ask before applying to graduate school, an explanation of the different degrees, factors that should be considered when making the decision to attend such as your abilities and career goals, doing research before applying to a program to the criteria for admissions and financial issues to consider.

2. Berkeley’s Guide to Graduate School
   This is similar to Drew’s guide in several ways. It provides students with issues to consider before applying to grad school, the procedure involved, and links to resources that may be of further assistance.

3. MIT/Lucent Technologies On-Line Career Library
   This site provides links to resources for graduate students. Its http://web.mit.edu/career/www/infostats/resgrad.html URL links potential graduate students or existing graduate students to “valuable” resources.
4. Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Schools, a searchable guide
   http://www.petersons.com/graduate_home
   Peterson’s guide provides easy to navigate information for prospective graduate students. It presents an overview of graduate studies, the application process, resources for potential financial sources, and an advice section that addresses issues one should consider before taking the plunge.

5. Gradschools.com, a searchable guide
   This website claims to be the “most comprehensive online source for graduate school information.” According to its “about us” statement, it is also “well-respected in the academic and student communities as a long-standing supporter of the National Association for Graduate Admissions Professionals (NAGAP), the National Association for Graduate –Professional Students (NAGPS), the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), the Council of Graduate Schools, and other academic associations.”

6. AllAboutGradSchool.com, directories and advice
   AllAboutGradSchool.com provides a geographic directory of graduate schools. It also provides test preparation information, which links to Kaplan sponsored articles addressing the application process, considerations before applying, admission tips, etc.

7. Princeton Review
   A name almost synonymous with graduate school, the Princeton Review hosts a wealth of information about colleges throughout the US. Its selection includes a salmagundi of admission advice and information, educational planning tools, practice GRE tests, as well as career assessments.

This is an online version of a guide by David Burrell. The aim is to get prospective students into graduate school. It provides an overview of the process up to the point before the students decides to enroll in a program.

9. Advice for undergraduates considering graduate schools by Phil Agre

Agre provides advice for undergraduates considering PhD programs. This guide seeks to define graduate school and answer questions regarding the application process, networking, research, and getting in.

10. PhDs.org - Science, Math, and Engineering Career Resources, organized links

PhDs.org links to numerous resources for potential, current, and former graduate students. Its repertoire of articles encompasses all aspects of graduate school such as getting in, succeeding while in, postdoctoral life, and finding a job. It proclaims that “the PhDs.org science career library contains information for scientists and would-be scientists at all levels, from high school students through Nobel laureates.”


This website targets engineering and computer science majors. Its career section provides a wealth of information about potential entry level careers for its audience, links to articles that address concerns in the engineering and computer fields, and provide prep services to help the young engineer or computer scientist to succeed. Its graduate school section, (http://www.graduatingengineer.com/gradschools/index.html), aims to “clear up confusion” about graduate school.
12. http://www.cs.indiana.edu/how.2b/how.2b.html How to be a Good Graduate Student, from Indiana

This is a guide in the form of an article written by a former graduate student. It examines issues a student should consider during graduate school like the student/adviser relationship, doing research and becoming part of the community, while staying motivated. It also briefly addresses “special” concerns for graduate students such as balancing conflicting lives (grad school and life outside of the grad school) and issues for women.

13. www.about.com

This website is wide in range and reach. www.about.com prides itself and the quality of its service on the careful selection process of its guides. Guides are selected for their ability to provide the most interesting and informative information for users and for their knowledge and passion for their subject and the Internet.

Description of Online Content

The online resources geared toward graduate students are homogenous in content for the most part. Once prospective students pass the “choosing a graduate school stage,” the advice becomes more intense and focused. Then the aim is to inform students about how to succeed in graduate school once they’ve been accepted into a program.

The first section of advice presents a synopsis of graduate school. It addresses reasons students should consider graduate school, the pros and cons of graduate school, and the differences between masters and doctoral programs. In addition, it provides a regional and national breakdown of graduate schools, a glimpse into the level of financial commitment a venture like graduate school requires; it discusses the salience of academic
fit, the required tests (GRE/GMAT), and how, where, and when to apply to graduate school.

The second section of advice discusses characteristics that graduate schools and their various departments look for in a candidate. These include undergraduate GPA, GMAT/GRE test scores, letters of recommendation, personal statement, and academic fit. Graduate schools and their departments also look for students who are gifted, eager to learn, motivated, hard workers, and those who express an interest in working closely with faculty.

While the first two main sections of advice in these Internet guides claim to help students to get in, the remaining sections aim to get students to stay in by providing them with information to help them to comprehend the process or processes involved within the system. This level of advice encompasses how to choose an adviser, the adviser/student relationship, developing reading skills, how to systematically engage in choosing a topic for the thesis or dissertation and how to develop and execute the research plan.

*Going the Traditional Route*

In an effort to gather more information that targets graduate students, I also consulted with books/guides. I used the library’s catalog as a starting point, where I employed the same search terms used to gather and narrow down the Internet sources. I also searched www.amazon.com for these books/guides. I employed the same search terms used on the Internet in the library’s database. This produced several guides and books aimed at graduate students. Those books/guides that I viewed pertinent and were not available in the library, I purchased off the Internet. The following is a list of the
twelve books/guides analyzed and their sales ranking on www.amazon.com (Note: These rankings change and are updated daily. This list was last updated Monday, July 25, 2006):

1. *Getting what you came for: The smart student's guide to earning an M.A. or a Ph.D.* by Robert L. Peters—Number 2,904

2. *Get into graduate school: A strategic approach* by Kaplan—Number 12,308

3. *Playing the Game: The streetsmart guide to graduate school* by Fredrick Frank, Karl Stein—Number 68,495

4. *Peterson's the ultimate grad school survival guide: Getting in, getting money, exams and classes, the profs, the thesis/dissertation (Ultimate grad school survival guide)* by Lesli Mitchell—Number 72,337


7. *The complete guide to graduate school admission: Psychology, counseling, and related professions* by Patricia Keith-Spiegel, Michael W. Wiederman—Number 14,406

8. *The African American student's guide to surviving graduate school* by Alicia Isaac—Number 1,225,606

9. *Negotiating graduate school: A guide for graduate students* by Mark H. Rossman—Number 234,767
10. The Black student's guide to graduate and professional school success by

Vernon L. Farmer (Editor)—Number 1,692,667

11. Surviving graduate school part time by Von V. Pittman—Number 3,762,187

12. The women’s guide to surviving graduate school by Barbara Rittner and

Patricia Trudeau—Number 553,441

One of the most frequently referenced and the number one selling books/guides is

Getting what you came for: The smart student's guide to earning an M.A. or a Ph.D. by

Robert L. Peters (1997). This book/guide encompasses all the information found in the
other guides/books combined in a nutshell. The intro claims, “This book can help (and
you probably need it!)” (p. 1). The book, in many ways, also mirrors the contents of the
online resources or vice versa. Peters outlined his 400-paged book as follows:

1. What is graduate school like?
2. Do you need to go?
3. Should you work first?
4. Choosing a School: The thesis adviser
5. Choosing a school: The secondary aspects
6. The application and admission process
7. Financial aid
8. History and hurdles of the Masters and PhD
9. Managing yourself—study habits, learning the ropes, etc.
10. Playing politics: building a reputation
11. The comprehensive exams
12. Choosing and managing thesis committee
13. Finding a topic, writing the proposal, writing the thesis, defense, oral presentations, dealing with stress and depression, the social milieu

14. Swimming with the mainstream: returning students, women, minorities, and foreign students

15. Bringing it all together: Getting that job

Although last updated in 1997, *Getting what you came for* is the highest ranking in sales of the guides to graduate school on www.amazon.com. It continues to boast brave reviews almost a decade later. The card catalog description found on www.amazon.com reads:

… This classic guide helps students answer these vital questions and much more. It will also help graduate students finish in less time, for less money, and with less trouble. Based on interviews with career counselors, graduate students, and professors, "Getting What You Came For" is packed with real-life experiences. It has all the advice a student will need not only to survive but to thrive in graduate school, including: instructions on applying to school and for financial aid; how to excel on qualifying exams; how to manage academic politics--including hostile professors; and how to write and defend a top-notch thesis. Most important, it shows you how to land a job when you graduate. (Card catalog description)

The online editorial review for Peter’s book, written by the University of Washington, Dean of the Graduate School, raves:

“This is an excellent book. I don’t know how Robert Peters was able to assemble all this highly relevant and valuable information after only one pass through the system known as graduate school, but he has produced a definitive piece of
work.” (Dr. Gene Woodruff, Dean of the Graduate School, University of Washington President of the Association of Graduate Schools, Chairman of the GRE Board)

People who bought Peters’s book laud Peters in their reviews for “getting it right,” for producing such an invaluable tool, for his insights, motivation, inspiration, candor, and so on. Some went as far as advocating that this book should be required reading in graduate school and for anyone thinking about attending graduate school. Among these customers are professors and students. Below is a sample taken from 68 reviews on www.amazon.com.

**Excellent Resource! July 20, 2006** kachiturian "D" (Gainesville, FL)

I had an attitude problem about finishing my Ph.D. This book soooooo helped me. I wish I had read it before even starting my Master's degree. I would have done MANY things differently. A MUST read for anyone considering grad school. I'm now an academic adviser for undergrads, and I highly recommend this book. In addition, I recommended it to the dean of graduate studies in my college. A great resource for all areas of study. Even though the author got his degree in the "hard" sciences, and I [sic] in the social sciences, this book is very relevant!

**Covers almost all the crucial topics, March 6, 2002,** Monica J. Kern

(Lexington, KY)

As a college professor, I am always on the lookout for a good source to help undergraduates who are contemplating getting a Ph.D. as well as to help graduate students succeed in their Ph.D. program. This book is one of the best in this genre
I have come across. Although the author is a biologist, it is clear he has done his homework on other disciplines, and his advice is useful for graduate students in any field.

Indeed, there were only two aspects I wish the book would have covered but it did not. First, there is no mention of handling coursework in a graduate program….I think Peters could have made this point and encouraged readers not to fall into the trap of spending more time on coursework than is warranted.

Second, I wish Peters had devoted more space to talking about getting academic jobs….In a related vein, there was only one piece of advice that Peters give that I flat-out disagreed with, and that was his comment that teaching wastes time and that PhD students should avoid teaching as much as possible. This is true for many Ph.D. students, but it is definitely NOT true for Ph.D. students desiring teaching jobs at 4-year, liberal arts colleges….However, those are the only negative comments I would make on an otherwise excellent book. I recommend it highly for anybody even contemplating going on beyond an undergraduate degree, and I plan to give copies of it to all my incoming graduate students.

A Must Read for All Thinking About Grad School, April 15, 2003, Marie Nubia-feliciano "menubia" (Irvine, CA)

This [is] probably the best book that I've found that describes the grad school process: from deciding why you want to go, to how to set up your office. Dr. Peters does a wonderful job at anticipating the questions one might have when one decides to go to grad school, from the economic to the psychological to the
sociological. This book helped me affirm my commitment to getting my PhD, with a more realistic view of what is ahead. When I become a faculty member and am put in charge of overseeing new graduate students [sic] for a department, this is the one book that I will recommend to all the students[sic]. It is the best $... you'll ever spend. Great book!

The not so positive and enthusiastic reviews criticized “Getting what you came here for” for its common sense approach to graduate school for its stiffness and boredom, and for its failure to give advice about unforeseen setbacks or the nonobvious that students may encounter in graduate school.

Universities like MIT, for example, use Peters’ book as one of its two book sources in its compilation of resources for graduate students, while About.com has rated *Getting what you came for* as one of the top four graduate school survival books.

*Visiting the “Source?”*

As part of my scouting process, I also called various departments at a large southeastern metropolitan college campus to request orientation material they provide to their new graduate students. Some departments explained that they use the university-wide graduate orientation material, which is available online; others customized the university-wide material to suit the mission of their programs, while others developed their own, but referred students to the university’s detailed policy.

The MBA program assembles a neat packet in a brown manila envelope which includes a green and white handbook (green being the color of the university), with yellow and white pages. This handbook includes a synopsis of the program’s content and objectives, mission statement, and academic procedures, registration procedures and
information, financial aid, facilities and services, and general information. It also covers career planning timeline, weekly happy hour, networking, wine tasting events, career networking fair, elementary schools mentoring, and a list of guest speakers. Its mission “partners in learning” statement reads:

Each one of us influences the quality of this learning environment through our daily actions, interactions, and choices. Learning is not a spectator sport; both students and faculty must commit to active participation in the process. The ability and willingness to teach and learn reside in the individual. If very high levels of knowledge transfer are to occur, it is necessary for all members of the … community to understand and respect their mutual obligations. (College of Business Administration MBA Program Handbook, Fall 2005, emphasis in original)

Within this handbook, the MBA program was pleased to announce that

As of Fall 2005 there are approximately 500 students enrolled in MBA programs, 57 % of which are seeking their degrees on a part-time basis. Roughly 40 % of the student body is female. All of these individuals have demonstrated excellence in academics and/or the workplace. (p. 45)

The packet also includes loose leaves, which explain how to subscribe to the MBA listserv, information about the graduate business association, tentative graduate schedule, instructions for enrolled students, list of important numbers (graduate admissions, immunization, international scholar services, registrar’s office, and financial aid), and job search tips for international students.

Orientation material collected from the Science and Engineering departments
orientation material include a “how to survive in graduate school article, policy on academic dishonesty, a timeline of important dates, a list containing other important information for graduate students, and statement against sexual harassment. This reads: “Sexual harassment/discrimination will NOT be tolerated! Termination of employment for faculty or staff, expulsion for students” (emphasis in original). It goes on to give the contact info for the diversity and equal opportunity affairs office should anyone deem it necessary to report such behaviors.

The chemistry department provided its students with an orientation schedule and a check list for graduate students. The chemistry department places emphasis on orienting international students to assist in the smooth transition and to prepare them to become effectively integrated into the American University system and to learn how it operates. International students are required to attend all nine of the orientation sessions, while domestic students are required to attend six. The introductory paragraph to the checklist states that “some of the items listed below may only apply to international students, however, there are items that concern all new students.” The lists outlines the procedure to secure a social security number, required appointment with the international student office, the required insurance info, immunizations, registration (which is only possible after the students have “completed everything with Student Health Services and International Student and Scholarly Services), living accommodations, and how to set up email accounts, bank accounts, and student ID.

This brief description of graduate school discourse available online, in guides/books, and orientation material collected at the site of this study sets the stage for the analysis. The following section of this chapter looks at the metaphors that encapsulate
graduate school and the implications for exclusion and inadequacies of such metaphors on women, especially mothers in graduate school.

Metaphors of Graduate School

The Journey

The utilization of the journey metaphor to describe life’s processes is not a new phenomenon. Everyday, historical and literary discourse speaks to its pervasive nature: people speak of life as a journey through life—birth to death. The journey metaphor that encapsulates graduate school can be likened to Joseph’s Campbell’s monomyth or the hero’s journey, which describes the model that organizes myths from around the world. The journey metaphor assumes the qualities of the “rites of passage,” coined by Arnold van Gennep (1960) to define the ceremonies which accompany change in social status, age, place, or birth, puberty, marriage, and death.

According to Campbell, a hero experiences different stages through the rites of passage on the hero’s journey. The three main stages include separation/departure, initiation, and return. Separation or departure includes a call to adventure, refusal to the call, supernatural aid, crossing of the threshold, and belly of the whale. Initiation includes road of trials, meeting with the goddess, woman as temptress, atonement with the father, apotheosis, and the ultimate boon. The final stage, the return, encompasses refusal of the return, magic flight, rescue from without, crossing of the return threshold, master of two worlds, and freedom to live (Campbell, 1949).

As I read Campbell’s account of the hero’s journey, I can’t help but notice it in literature that I have read. For example, my favorite poem—for its mythic quality, Farid ud-Din Attar’s, The conference of the birds, written centuries before Campbell wrote the
hero’s journey illustrates Campbell’s thesis well. *The conference of the birds* utilizes the journey metaphor to show the seven stages (quest, love, gnosis, independence, unity of God, wonder, and selflessness and oblivion in God) the birds had to travel to reach their goal of oneness with the Simorgh. When I think of the representation of women in *The conference of the birds*, women do not themselves embark on the journey that the men do, but are the temptresses, who keep the men from progressing along the journey to fulfill oneness with the God. For example, The Sheikk falls in love at first sight with a Christian girl, denounces Islam, and his old life, which was holy and pure from unrequited love, and became less than a shadow of his previous self. Because of this change, the Sheikk encourages his friends to leave him behind because his love is too strong to ignore. As those friends arrive at Mecca without the Sheikk, Sam’an, a man of wisdom reprimands them for not being true friends and fulfilling their duty to protect their own from the follies of the heart (lines 1192-1510).

Most strikingly, I cannot help but notice how the journey metaphor that pervades graduate school discourse parallels the rites of passage and stages of the monomythic cycle and that which is found in *The conference of the birds*. On the cover of Peters (1997) book, for instance, one doctoral candidate, Daniel Olson, comments, “I hope your book becomes the crinkled, torn, scribbled road map for my generation of grad students….” The utilization of the journey metaphor to describe graduate school doesn’t end with Olson, but continues throughout several of the analyzed material with terminologies such as “direction,” “guidance,” “guide,” “the unknown,” “embark,” “journey,” “mapped,” “roads” “uncharted terrain,” and “compass.” According to Bloom, Karp & Cohen (1998), for example:
Graduate school is a long, hard road, with inherent major stresses, and, although, good times and enchanted moments will…transpire, the …years spent there will be no picnic. You will work very hard, be tested and challenged…forfeit much, and feel overwhelmed much of the time. (p. 3, emphasis added)

All these guides forewarn of the journey, which requires one to give up “life” to follow a certain route to achieve an acceptable outcome—a degree. Pre-journey business involves self-reflection, evaluating why one desires a graduate degree. It requires one to engage in an introspective examination of personal characteristics, financial situations, family life, and other commitments that may interfere with the rigors of graduate school.

Graduate school is not for everyone. Clearly, factors such as career paths and necessity of a graduate degree to pursue one’s career goals need to be considered before one enters into the mysterious and mystical world of graduate school, which the guides and Internet sources claim to aim to demystify, but mystify more. The back cover of Mitchell’s, The ultimate grad school survival guide states:

Until now, graduate school has been a dark continent. Each year, thousands of would-be historians, philosophers, and physicists set off in pursuit of advanced degrees, unprepared for the challenges and pitfalls of the new world. Well, no more. Lesli Mitchell has not only mapped the uncharted terrain of graduate school but has given grad students a compass and pep talk as well.

Other personal factors and personality traits denote whether one would be a good candidate or not. An evaluation of personality traits, determinations, and skills would look like this: Are you “committed,” “curious,” “determined,” “empathic,” “flexible,” “focused,” “competitive,” “hardworking,” “detail oriented,” “organized,” “mature,”
“serious,” “persistent,” “self-disciplined,” “independent,” “self-motivated,” “effective,” “articulate,” and “adaptable?” In addition, do you have “interpersonal skills” and “stamina?” If you fit the profile listed in the Drew’s guide to the graduate decision, then you are the perfect candidate for graduate school. These characteristics mirror the ideal mythic hero.

To the extent that these characteristics are valued in men and not women, they play on and reinforce gender stereotypes. Women are valued for their ability to nurture, listen, to care for others and to be selfless. The dilemma women face is that these qualities—nurturer, good listener, selflessness in putting others before them, intuitiveness, emotion—are valued in the private domain of the home and devalued in the public domain. She faces a double bind. What has been stereotyped as women’s way of thinking—“emotional, intuitive, and personalized” works against her in the public setting because it is undervalued (Belenky, McVicker & Rule, 1986). According to Belenky et al, “developmental theory has established men’s experience and competence as a baseline against which both men’s and women’s development is…judged, often to the detriment or misreading of women” (p. 7).

Part of the prospective student’s evaluation process also requires extensive research. Before applying, the candidate should engage in research to aid in selecting the best program. This decision should include factors such as academic fit, reputation of the institution and or the professors (if these are important values), requirements for acceptance and if one meets those, financial assistance, cost of living, etcetera. When one successfully and honestly completes the evaluation process, then that student is equipped to embark on the journey, the student is ready to “take the plunge” (Rittner & Trudeau,
1997). Before taking the plunge, however, prospective graduate students must complete the application process. This first requires a strong undergrad GPA. If the student’s GPA is weak, then other strengths as job experience, test scores, letters of recommendation, personal statement, and a demonstration of academic potential via the writing sample could substitute. Here, the candidates get an opportunity to show off their past successes and to demonstrate that these successes prepare them to tackle the challenges ahead.

For women, this can be daunting since they are taught from an early age that women “should be seen and not heard.” They are trained to be self-effacing, which deskills them in a male setting. As a result, the prospective female graduate student is faced with a dilemma. How can she voice her achievements without overstepping and undermining her femininity to adjust in a setting? As Belenky et al (1986) states, “most of the institutions for higher education were designed by “men and… run by men” (p. 190)? “Even girls’ schools and women’s colleges have been modeled after male institutions to give women an education equivalent to men’s” (p.6).

*The “Call to Adventure”*

With the application process completed, the student awaits the news of acceptance, “the call to adventure” (Campbell, 1949). Acceptance validates the candidate. At this point, all the hard work the prospective candidate has put in the undergrad years and in the application process has paid off. Congratulatory news of acceptance comes in two forms: the phone call and the acceptance letter, which bear news that the candidate was selected out of a few, that the selection process was very competitive. This boosts the candidate’s ego and thus begins the orientation into the graduate culture. Of the two forms of media through which the congratulatory messages flow, the phone call is more
ego flattering. Having a professor take time off her/his busy schedule to call the candidate peaks to how much the candidate’s intellectual abilities are needed to boost or make a contribution to the academic community. Thus begins the rite of passage or the journey.

Graduate school by its nature is an experiment in human control and selectivity. It is a place where the most adaptable and those meeting the requirements and characteristics of a good grad student survive, and others fail or are not as successful. The call to adventure requires one to renounce life as he knows it. “I have no life,” is a phrase repeated by many graduate students. This demonstrates that they have internalized the graduate school culture as distinct from life, which has family and friends, leisure activities, and so on. They have heeded the warning from the literature about graduate schools: life as they know it would ceases.

Take, for instance, the image below found on www.graduatingengineer.com, a site targeting graduate students and young professionals in the engineering and computer science fields. It shows a person, who is coded as masculine, by virtue of its triangular shape, walking away from what I assume is life to choose either graduate school or a career, according to the points of the arrows. If this person was coded as feminine, the figure would have been, without a doubt, curvaceous or the triangle might have been tilted differently. It appears that this person, based on the direction he is facing, has decided to leave life behind. He has been called to adventure. He now has two choices only—graduate school and a career. Life is no longer an option because to have a life means that you are not in graduate school or have a career.
Orientation

Accepting the call to embark on the journey means that the initiate is ready to be oriented into the graduate school culture. Marriam-Webster online dictionary defines orientation as:

a: the act or process of orienting or of being oriented

b: the state of being oriented

To orient means:

a: to set right by adjusting to facts or principles

b: to acquaint with the existing situation or environment
c: to direct (as a book or film) toward the interests of a particular group

During the orientation process, students are acclimated to the environment and standards of the culture. Orientation is ritualistic. It is a major part of the rites of passage through any institution, organization, or culture. In theories of rites of passage, both van Gennep and Victor Turner discuss liminality, which is part of the second phase of the journey. Turner defines liminality as being “betwixt and between.” He writes, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (p. 95). Peters (1997) calls grad school a “ritual humiliation in which novice academics are initiated into their respective disciplines” (p. 16). Stripped of all their status and markings, the initiates are made “malable” to new ideas and identities. To start moving through the disorientation and ambiguity associated with graduate school, graduate students may participate in two formal orientation processes, the university (recommended) and departmental (mostly required). Through these orientations, students learn the culture of the university and their departments. It is during this process students begin to comprehend and devise ways to master the graduate school game through the implementation of a plan. This assists in overcoming anxiety and speeds up the transition to graduate school. Orientation and acculturation work better for some people than others, though. Some students experience the “welcome” into the culture more than others and make the transition easier than others. Some students adjust faster than others and some are better at the game than others and the presence of some are valued over others. As times goes on, students become entrenched in the culture. They get to know their professors—their likes and dislikes. They quickly learn to adjust their behaviors as they progress.
The trials

The journey through graduate school doesn’t end with orientation. Leg three, which entails preparing a space for the rigors of graduate school mentally and physically, is about survival. Once the candidate becomes oriented, then the struggle for survival ensues on “the road of trials.” “The road of trials” (Campbell, 1949) is filled with challenges and obstacles that have to be overcome. It is assumed, survival, the overarching theme in graduate school, requires hard work. Here, graduate students acquire skills to master graduate school. They demonstrate that they are worthy. The guides stress hard work as a key element. For instance, Rittner & Trudeau (1997) state, “If you don’t have time to go to the library, you don’t have time to do graduate work. It is that simple” (p. 135). Peters (1997) advises graduate students to set up their “office for action” and make work “central to [their] lives” (p. 125). Overall, the guides and Internet resources encourage candidates to work hard to gain and maintain the approval of one’s academic committee. Candidates are encouraged to maintain a high level of visibility on campus by attending meeting and departmental activities, to let their departments know that they are working, and to create and enhance perceptions of them as productive professionals.

Implied is that the selection process doesn’t end when one gets accepted, but continues throughout the degree-seeking process. For example, the stars become differentiated from those who do not shine so brightly or do not shine at all. The stars get attention that the non-stars do not receive.

The struggle for survival involves competition because graduate school by its nature is competitive. Some people are competitive based on their socialization, while
others have to work harder to catch up. In terms of gender, Borisoff & Merrill (1998) state that little girls are socialized to be caring, empathic, and emotional, while little boys are socialized to be strong and competitive. These qualities persist into adulthood.

Jerrard and Jerrard (1998) advise that if one comes from a less demanding school like a small liberal arts college, he or she may find graduate school challenging because of its competitive nature and the overwhelming nature of the work required. This they claim is particularly true for women who are in fields traditionally dominated by men. “The competing students probably aren’t any brighter than you; it’s just that they have been working harder, with tougher competition, for a long time” (p. 202). Being part of the “chosen” of students who attend graduate school means that you are among the brightest. These are the same people with whom you will be competing for resources, attention, and jobs. Jerrard and Jerrard (1998) advise that although getting the degree is the goal, the ultimate goal is to “be in the top rank, a person who is known for…good work and…ideas” (p. 201). This is what Campbell labels as “the ultimate boon”—the gift of recognition, status, and immortality.

The key to completing the journey is commitment. Graduate school is a commitment that should not be approached lightly because it is a fulltime “job” that should take priority over all else. A commitment to research and writing is essential. One of the paramount characteristics of a “good” graduate student is being able to write and research well. Avoid distractions and distracters. The level of commitment needed is life altering. It requires sacrifice of time and resources, independence and perseverance. Because graduate school requires a great deal of independent work, then one definitely needs to possess these characteristics. The inability to work independently and to
persevere is detrimental to success. With independence comes perseverance. A successful graduate student must possess the determination to get the work done as quickly as possible. Independence and perseverance are companions. Independence is stressed through phrases like “You can’t count on being nurtured by an indulgent academic parent; you’re supposed to survive (and thrive) on your own” (Mitchell, 1996) and “no one will hold your hand and walk you through. You must provide your own motivation” (Kuther, 2005). Although no one will hold a grad student’s hand, there are still advisors and mentors to aid them in their quest. Campbell’s “aid from the goddess” or the “father ogre” is salient in propelling the graduate student along.

Mitchell (1996) claims that one reason for this independence is that graduate school emphasizes specialization. Graduate school, with its specialized, unidirectional curriculum separates itself from the undergrad culture whose curriculum is designed to introduce students to a broad spectrum of knowledge. Graduate school is the place where students find their niche and concentrate on developing themselves as researchers. This process, according to Mitchell, differs from field to field. Humanities allow more freedom and encourage specialization based on students’ interests, while the students in the sciences have less flexibility. The social sciences fall between the two.

The Rewards

A journey taken and successfully completed is a journey that rewards. The final stage of the monomythic cycle, the return, is where the rewards are bestowed on the sojourner. Grad school is rewarding. Getting a degree is worth all the hard work and the sacrifices. The rewards can be easily fitted on the middle and upper end of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—social, self-esteem, but most of all, self-actualization. The graduate
student has gained entry into the community of scholars, where he is now a member. The rewards of a graduate degree encompass acceptance, recognition, career advancement, increase salaries, and personal satisfaction among others as the following quotes show.

Grad school is a commitment, but the rewards are many. By becoming an expert in your field, you’ll have the chance to advance both intellectually and professionally. Not bad for a few more years of study! (Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Schools)

Agre (1996) writes:

The best part of graduate school, the part that makes it worthwhile, comes toward the end, when you begin to present your research in public. Suddenly you will begin to join the community of scholars who work in your chosen area; they will take you seriously and you will begin to make numerous professional acquaintances, some of whom you will probably keep for the rest of your life.

Peters (1997) states:

For many careers a graduate degree is simply the sin qua non, the key necessary for advancement, opening up a life whose professional satisfaction would otherwise be unobtainable. (p. 7)

According to Jerrard and Jerrard (1998):

A graduate degree gives you a big advantage… you are a skilled individual, someone who is valuable in today’s job market, a person with ability who has taken the time and effort to earn the degree…. Graduate school shows you how to make the most of yourself. It will help you forge a stimulating life… (p. 3)
Pittman (1997) asserts:

Balancing serious commitment is not easy. The fact that others are doing it doesn’t necessarily mean that you should. However, if you want and need an advanced degree, if you are capable of, or amenable to, making short-term sacrifices in the interest of long term rewards—and if you can fit another major commitment of time and energy into your life and that of your family, graduate study can be feasible and rewarding. (p.2)

The journey metaphor with its road of trials, which ends with the boon of success, stresses qualities of masculinity, which women are socialized to resist. Along the journey, then, the hero is male, just as the typical graduate student. Identifying the graduate school discourse as one where the journey pervades, allows for a closer exploration of relevant arguments of how graduate school privileges and values one gender over the other.

Driving Metaphors

Although graduate school as a journey is the main metaphor in graduate school discourse, this journey metaphor in itself has other metaphors that drive it along. Geertz (1990) claims that there is evidence of “genre mixing in social science” (p. 165). This mixing has lead to a “turn away from the laws-and-instances ideal of explanation toward a cases-and-interpretations one, looking less for the sort of things that connect planets and pendulums and more for the sort that connects chrysanthemums and swords” (p. 165). According to Geertz, analogies have become useful tools in social science and those “drawn from the humanities are coming to play the kind of role in sociological understanding that analogies drawn from the crafts and technology have long played in physical understanding” (p. 165). This experience is what Geertz calls the “refiguration
of social thought.”

The metaphors that drive the journey metaphor along are threefold: 1) graduate school as a political game of which negotiation is a huge part, 2) graduate school as a grind, and 3) graduate school as a balancing/juggling act. These metaphors all center on rules. To win the game, to complete the journey, the grad student has to play by certain rules, which are laid out by the institution and their departments. Adapting the “winning strategy” determines the outcome. Of using the game metaphor, Geertz (1990) writes:

human beings are less driven by forces than submissive to rules, that the rules are such as to suggest strategies, the strategies are such to inspire the actions and the actions are such as to suggest strategies, the strategies are such to inspire action, and the actions are such as to be self-rewarding—pour le sport…. Seeing society as a collection of games means seeing it as a grand plurality of accepted conventions and appropriate procedures—tight airless worlds of move and countermove…. (p. 170)

*The Political Game*

The first supporting metaphor is graduate school as a political game. This metaphor is so pervasive that Frank and Stein titled their guidebook, *Playing the Game: The streetsmart guide to graduate school*. This is a game of politics. Politics conjures image of manipulation, calculated behavior, distrust, etc, none of which one would think exists in academe. Mitchell (1996) warns that graduate school is “inherently political” (p. 2). She goes on to state:

The biggest shock for new grad students is recognizing that political alliances and maneuvering exist among the faculty…. The most successful students are those
who understand and avoid political tensions without losing their intellectual
curiosity or their enthusiasm for problem solving. (p.2)

Students have to learn to play the game, which involves learning the rules. This is
particularly helpful when conflicts arise. Mitchell (1996) advises that learning the
departmental politics early in the game should help the student “sidestep these personal
conflicts altogether” (p. 109).

Playing the political game is not only about being calculated or manipulative or
avoiding conflict but is also about building a professional presence (Peters, 1997). Peters
says to grad students “Evaluate your performance in terms of whether it will improve
your chances of getting a job when you get out” (p. 141). Future success depends on the
relationships built during grad schools with professors, colleagues, and son on (Peters,
This kind of networking requires a high degree of face time through departmental
functions, seminars, and professional conferences.

Addressing part-time students regarding the political climate in graduate school in
his guide for part-time students, Pittman (1997) states that academic politics is even more
pronounced for the fulltime student for whom the stakes are high in determining their
futures. “…being seen in seminars, reception…and making a good impression is critical
to their future…they may be survival tactics” (16). Part-time students, however, most
likely face different challenges. They do not have to worry about how grad school
politics will affect their chances on the job market or of getting into a PhD program if
they are masters students.
Negotiation as Part of the Game

Closely linked to the graduate school as a political game metaphor is graduate school as a negotiation. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines negotiation as “the action or process of negotiating or being negotiated”. To negotiate means:

1 a: to deal with (some matter or affair that requires ability for its successful handling): Manage
   b: to arrange for or bring about through conference, discussion, and compromise
2 a: to transfer (as a bill of exchange) to another by delivery or endorsement
3 a: to successfully travel along or over
   b: Complete, Accomplish

Rossman (2002) refers to graduate school as a negotiation, where the students learn the rules and play by them if they desire success. According to Rossman, the central theme of Negotiating graduate school: A guide for graduate students is that success requires knowledge of the degree process and the ability of the student to take control of the controllable. Being successful also requires graduate students to “be careful, skillful, and tactful negotiators” (p. ix). By likening graduate school to a negotiation, Rossman implies an arrangement where the only person who has something to lose or gain in the relationship is the graduate student. Therefore, it is in the graduate student’s interest to learn the rules which govern her/his presence within the system, figure out her/his limitations, and work in a systematic way to harvest the degree. As Peters (1997) states, good graduate students learn their roles and abide by the rules. "Undergraduates are paying a lot of tuition, and it gives them a lot of power in the university. Grad students who are on fellowships or TA or whatever -- you take what you can get. You really don't
have much power” (a graduate student perception, as cited in Kaplan, p. 6). Pittman (1997) writes, “As you negotiate graduate school, resourcefulness and a sense of honor will be your most valuable assets. Learn the rule and become malleable to them. This will frequently give you an advantage” (p. 87).

The “Grind”

The third metaphor is the “grind.” When one thinks of the daily grind, as an image of an organization, one works continuously performing mostly repetitive activities, while burying her/his head in the sand. While graduate students do not receive immediate financial rewards for the work they put in, graduate school has been likened to a fulltime job (Azuma, 1997). Therefore, it is not farfetched to appropriate the metaphor, the daily grind, and apply it to graduate school. For instance, Mitchell (1996), titles one chapter in her book “Research (Or, the daily grind).” desJardins (1994) also refers to the research phase as the “daily grind” (p. 3). Some of the factors that make graduate school a grind are scheduling time, organizing, family responsibilities, doting parents [graduate students’ parents in need of attention], RAing or teaching (Mitchell, 1996). Graduate school becomes a grind when students experience the daily pressures of working in an unstructured environment which requires that they engage in independent research. Time management and deciding where energies should be channeled puts the graduate student in a bind when different areas of their lives converge and compete. Although the research phase is a “grind,” it can be managed if students work at keeping track of their progress, what they hope to accomplish, stay motivated and use their time efficiently (desJardins, 1994). “Setting daily, weekly, or monthly goals is a good idea, and works even better if you use a “buddy system” where you and another student meet at regular intervals to
review your progress.... doing research is much easier if you have someone to bounce
ideas off of and to give you feedback” (desJardins, 1994, p. 4).

The Balancing/Juggling Act

The fourth metaphor that encapsulates the graduate school experience is the
balancing or juggling act. This metaphor is used in relation to balancing graduate school
and family when women are addressed. However, it covers more of tasks that graduate
students engage in within the academy. Mitchell (1996) writes:

The balancing act can be extremely complicated, especially for women who serve
as caretakers for their families. Your family can be a wonderful source of support
while you are at home working on independent research. As grad school becomes
more demanding, however, it will be tempting to give family members less of
your attention....traditional household responsibilities may shift when one partner
is in grad school, adding potential stress to the relationship. A woman in grad
school may have less time for household management tasks like shopping and
cooking, while a father in grad school may end up with more child-care duties if
his partner works fulltime away from home.... The best advice my husband and I
ever received in managing responsibilities was not to compare ourselves to
couples in traditional roles. (p. 102)

Azuma (1997), a former computer science graduate student at UNC, Chapel Hill,
who publishes his guides on the Internet, advised current graduate students to organize
their tasks as if they were juggling them. Your head cannot be in different places at the
same time. It will only diminish the quality of your work. Azuma writes:

Organize your tasks as if you were juggling them. Juggling several balls requires
planning and skill. You must grab and toss each ball before it hits the ground.
You can only toss one ball at a time, just as you can only work on one task at a
time. The order in which you toss the balls is crucial, much as the order of
working on tasks often determines whether or not you meet all your deadlines.
Finally, once you start a task (grab a ball) you want to get enough done so you can
ignore it for a while (throw it high enough in the air so it won't come down for a
while). Otherwise you waste too much time in context switches between tasks. Do
you see jugglers try to keep each ball at the same height above the ground,
frantically touching every ball every second?

Mitchell (1996) lists teaching and working as RAs as other juggling acts that
graduate students undertake. She advises RAs to keep consistent schedules. For teaching,
she writes:

Another juggling act is combining teaching with research and your personal
life…. Keep in mind that you must develop a range of skills for success in grad
school, don’t let valuable research time slip away (by spending too much time
teaching and prepping for it). The ultimate goal is to get out of school…. (p. 104)

What does this say to mothers who are in graduate school? What messages are
transmitted to the woman who is managing home and grad school and sometimes work,
home, and graduate school? The following section examines the meanings of metaphors
and themes to mothers. It looks at the audience addressed in the discourse. The overall
discussion will center on how women are constructed and excluded in the discourse.
Defining the Norm

All of the guides to graduate school address, both online and in print that I have used for this project and even those that I have glossed over, utilize the second person you in its address. Fludernik (1994) points out that second person texts are open in several respects. They can accommodate a variety of “you”s and “I”s and/or a combination of these. Capecci (1989) states that usually when a text is analyzed, the first question usually asked is “Who is speaking?” However, with the utilization of the second-person address, the question becomes “To whom is the speaker speaking?” or “Who is you?” (p. 3).

This section of the chapter argues that the second person “you” discussed in most of the graduate school discourse is male, white, young, and single. Women, especially mothers, become “you” as side notes or “by the way” subjects in the texts.

The words of the protagonist, Una, in Sena Jeter Naslund's novel, Ahab's wife or, the star-gazer, is a good place to start to gain insight into how the journey metaphor is differently constructed for women and men. She says:

When my hands were little, and my mother was teaching me to sew, she placed her hands over mine. She put her middle finger, encased in a pitted silver thimble, at the end of the needle and pushed for me. This finger, with the thimble, is a little engine, she said. It makes the needle go.

I thought of the miles and miles of thread that her thimble had pulled through cloth. What song had the needle sung to the fibers of the fabric? When she quilted, the needle passed through three layers of the pieced top, the inner batting, and the sturdy muslin underlayer. If all the thread from all her quilts were
measured, would it stretch a thousand miles? Had her needle trudged, as a man’s foot might trudge, over a journey of a thousand miles?

She sat still, I thought, and yet she traveled. And when one stitches, she travels, not the way men do, with ax and oxen through the wilderness, but surely our traveling counted too, as motion. And I thought of the patience of the stitches. Writing a book, I thought, which men often do, but women only rarely, has the posture of sewing. One hand leads, and the other hand helps. And books, like quilts, are made, one word at a time, one stitch at a time. (p. 70)

In a critique of Campbell’s treatment of mythology, Mary Lefkowitz (1990) says that Campbell is “a priest of a new and appealing hero-cult—the religion of self-development” (p. 429). She goes on to argue:

In these stories, the heroes are almost always male, and the females they encounter are essentially passive; they are not so much actors in the story as ideals or goals, entities from whom knowledge or life may be taken, or who will produce and nourish the hero’s prodigy. (p. 430)

Lefkowitz, like Campbell, believes life’s messages and values are embedded in myths. Lefkowitz states that Campbell’s interpretation and explanations reflects his “modern Christian values,” which subordinates women. She writes, “Campbell’s myth strip women of all but their sexual characteristics, and to emphasize their roles as brides and mothers” (p. 434).

Frank H. Wu (2001) writes of a heroic myth:

…Americans believe in a heroic myth from the nineteenth century, whereby moving to the frontier gives a person a new identity. Even if they do not find gold,
silver, or oil, men who migrate to the West can remake their reputations. But moving to California works only for white men. Others cannot invent themselves by sheer will, because no matter how idiosyncratic one’s individual identity, one cannot overcome the stereotype of group identity. (p. 8)

From a feminist perspective, Adrienne Rich is quoted as saying that “no woman is really an insider in the institutions fathered by masculine consciousness.” Rich (1979) asserts:

One of the devastating weaknesses of university learning, of the store of knowledge and opinion that has been handed down through academic training, has been its almost total erasure of women’s experience and thought from the curriculum, and its exclusion of women as members of the academic community. (p. 232)

Thomas (1990) argues that “higher education may be regarded as one of our more liberal social institutions: an arena where women are allowed in reasonable numbers, and where they may even succeed. Yet it is this ultimately illusory liberalism that allows gender divisions to be maintained and renewed” (180). Dale Spender (1990) points out that language constructs male as the norm or standard. What it means to be normal is not just defined by gender, but also by race, class, nationality, religion, geography, generation, and abilities. bell hooks writes and speaks about the interconnection of race and class (see hooks, 2000, for example) and how the two cannot be ignored in discussion about women’s lives. Race scholar, Richard Dyer (1997), argues that “race and gender are ineluctably intertwined” (p. 30). He also recognizes that class, and other factors need to be taken into consideration when discussing whiteness and what it means
to be normal. In an extensive study of whiteness and its invisibility, Dyer states that white is equated with normal in western societies. Thus, there are advantages to being white and male. According to Dyer, “white people create the dominant images of the world…. [they] set the standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail” (p. 9). Dyer writes that as long as whiteness “is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it” (p. 9).

The few books that discuss women in more than a few sentences or a short chapter are written by women with families. I found one guide that completely emphasizes women as its target group. This book sales ranks number 377, 586 on www.amazon.com. Rittner and Trudeau (1997) introduce their book as much needed because an increasingly proportion of graduate students are women. In this guide, they address issues such as sexism, individualism, childcare, and the segregation of women into particular areas of academic study and practice. These authors provide insights into the workings of graduate schools, from the application and admission process to finding a job, while informing and reminding the reader about the gender differentials that continue to persist. This guide, however, seems to be directed toward older and returning students. It appears to be more acceptable and understood when women with grown children attend graduate school. This guide does not seem to offer much, if any, relevant advice for younger women who are thinking about having a family and a career or those who have a family and wish to find sources of help or hope about how to balance the two. The list of reasons to return to or enroll in graduate school for women may look like this:

Kids [are] grown-have time

Now’s the time to try
Bored with teaching elementary school
Meet new and creative people
Need a creative outlet
Felt most creative as a student
Think I can do it as well or better than others
Like working with people
Like school… (pp. 5-6)

If we return to the “is graduate school for you” list, where competitiveness, determination, flexibility, self-motivation, articulation, adaptability, independence, persistence, and so on we see how differently languaged that list is to the list above. The list for women is more about functions being fulfilled, a likeness for people and school, boredom with life, and grown kids—so there is time. For men, the list emphasizes personality type and drive toward professional advancement. Most of the characteristics outlined on the list that paints the “normal” graduate student are not traditionally associated with characteristics that are valued in women. When women possess these qualities, their femininity is questioned. They are masculinized (Grosz, 1994). Grosz (1988) states that “knowledges do not include women in the same ways they include men” (p.103). “All discourses are produced from and…occupy sexually coded positions” (Grosz, 1984, p.101).

According to Derrida (1982), our worlds, language and culture, are organized by systems of binary opposites. The result is a hierarchy where one side of the binary has more value than the other: the masculine is valued over the feminine; white is valued over black; the public sphere, the man’s domain, is valued over the home, which has
traditionally been and is coded as the woman’s domain.

Lloyd (1984) summarizes the binary as it is represented in Western philosophy. He writes:

We have seen that the equation of maleness with superiority goes back at least as far as the Pythagoreans. What is valued- whether it be odd as against even numbers; "aggressive" as against "nurturing" skills and capacities; or Reason as against emotion - has been readily identified with maleness... it is not just incidental to the feminine that female traits have been construed as inferior - or; more subtly - as "complementary" to male norms of human excellence. Rationality has been conceived as transcendence of the feminine; and the "feminine" itself has been partly constituted by its occurrence within this structure. (p.104, as cited in Nash, 2005)

What does the journey metaphor means when it relates to women? How are women defined and portrayed? The journey metaphor recalls quests of heroic saga, the monomythic cycle—a male-centered quest. A woman’s place is in the home, certainly not on a quest journey through unchartered territories. In this discourse of the journey, women are excluded, home/family is always a binary opposite to the public sphere—a man’s distinction. Internal summary and Review

The Construction of Women with Children in Graduate School Discourse

Women, especially mothers are portrayed in these texts as 1) the other, 2) special problems, 3) complication and, 4) dilemmas. Keith-Speigel and Wiederman (2000) write in The complete guide to graduate school admission: Psychology, counseling, and related professions that:
This section provides a brief overview of some of the challenges that designated applicants should consider as they make their graduate school plans. By this point you probably have had several years of experience in higher educational institutions and have faced many special circumstances. (p.25)

The authors went on to list these “designated” groups as “women,” “ethnic minority members,” “gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals,” “students with disabilities,” and “foreign-born and international students.” It takes no great leap to define ordinary or normal (male, white, straight, physically able, English-speaking, U.S. citizens) when others are “special circumstances.”

For women, the authors write that women seeking entry into psychological programs face “unusual dilemmas” (p.25). Because psychology is a field dominated by women, these women find themselves in competition against each other particularly for clinical and other practice-oriented programs. The result is “the possibility that male applicants may be somewhat advantaged by being in the minority” (p.25). Other dilemmas include insufficient “access to mentors and influential role models” (p.25) because graduate faculties do not reflect the same gender composition of enrollments in psychology where the majority of professors are men and women are concentrated at the lower ranks.

Other more entrenched problems for women who aspire to graduate school persist. A major one is conflict over how their personal and professional lives will be integrated…If you experience any of these dilemmas, and they are revealed to selection committees by you or your referees, your application may be downgraded. Graduate faculty members want to invest their energy in training
people who would devote a significant amount of their time over the course of a lifetime to the field. (pp. 25-26)

Assuming that you may have every intention of establishing yourself firmly in the field, you may still face the burden of proving that you are a serious student who views your education and eventual career as priorities, especially if you are seeking entry into a competitive doctoral program. Although some lines of questioning legally cannot be asked (e.g., Are you going to get married and quit school? Will your young child take up too much of your time?), that does not mean, unfortunately, that such concerns do not cross anyone’s mind. You may wish to address these stereotype-based fears. (p.26)

Jerrard and Jerrard (1998) outline some of the potential problems graduate students encounter: financial difficulties, adviser problems, problems with colleagues, test anxiety, and so forth. The authors group family and children with these special problems, constructed as interferences in graduate school. Jerrard and Jerrard write:

Other problems involve family…Miserable spouses, children whose care needs to be arranged, or parents who need help can derail your work. These are serious problems and cannot be ignored. Sometimes you have to put your academic work on hold for a short time and devote yourself to working through these unhappy situations. But you can come back to it. (p. 219)

_A Discourse of Exclusion and Inadequacy_

Women fulfill many traditional gender roles. They get married, have children, and care for elderly parents and spouses. Some women attempt to fulfill these gendered expectations while pursuing degrees and careers. The above quotation from Jerrard and
Jerrard (1998) implies that women should not attempt to fulfill traditional gender roles and simultaneously pursue a degree. Graduate school is not really the place for split devotions. This “either” “or” way of thinking is what Ursula LeGuin (1989) discusses in regards to women writers. This dichotomous way of thinking, she states, doesn’t apply to men writers, who are constructed as heroic along the lines of Campbell’s hero’s journey. The myth of the male writer on that journey abandons everything to create masterpieces. The fact remains that these revered writers usually have wives at home who care for them and their kids. Often women writers do not have that choice. On the journey, women play support roles to their husbands who are writers. They are almost never constructed as writers themselves. This is especially true for women with children.

It is worth acknowledging that the survival kit from the computer science and engineering department at the site of this study contains a 20-page, single-spaced article. According to desJardins (1994), this article is the product of discussions the author engaged in with several women professors about the problems women face in graduate school. This article, however, dedicates an extremely small section to women issues—three paragraphs, 14 lines long. It explains:

Although this paper started out from a discussion about the problems women face in graduate school, it has evolved into something that I think is relevant for everyone, not just women. This is not to say, however, that there aren't special problems faced by women. In many cases, women and men face the same obstacles in graduate school, but react differently to them. For women, the additional factors that are sometimes (but not always) present include isolation, low self-esteem, harassment and discrimination, unusual time pressures arising
from family responsibilities, lack of a support network, and lack of relevant experience. Having an unsupportive adviser can thus become much more of a problem for women than for men. I hope that to some extent, this paper will help both women and advisors of women to provide the supportive, positive environment that all graduate students deserve. (pp. 17-18)

Although desJardins had good intentions, and in fact mentioned that women may face “special” problems, does in this article what Grosz (1994) criticizes. Grosz (pp. 89-90) lists the following as the drawbacks of equality feminists who do not account for sexual difference:

1. The project of sexual equality takes male achievements, values, and standards as the norms to which women should… aspire… women strive to be the same as men,… “masculinized.”
2. To achieve equality, women’s differences from men must be minimized and their commonness or humanity stressed.
3. Policies and laws codifying legal rights to equality—antidiscrimination and equal opportunity legislation—have tended to operate as much against women as in their interest.
4. Equality becomes a vacuous concept… as it reduces all specificities, including those that distinguish positions of oppressed from the oppressor.
5. Struggles for equality revolve around a generalized and neutralized social justice.
6. It keeps struggle in public realm. Private inequalities, especially reproductive relations, are untouched by egalitarianism.
7. Even if two sexes behave in the same ways, the social meanings of their activities
remain untouched.

These qualities all apply to construction of women in the analyzed texts. The discourses of survival guides that paint the white, male, economically comfortable student as the “norm” necessarily paint any one outside these categories as other. Married men with children succeed in the academy as is evidenced by research cited in chapter one by Mason and Goulden (2002), and graduate school is their initiation into this successful life journey. The second person “you” addressed in the survival guides is not me.

These guides recycle and rely on discourse that perpetuates a cycle of exclusion for childrearing and childbearing women. For instance, at the site of this study, one department’s use of desJardins’s article and its references to the guides to graduate school show how discourse works to exclude childrearing and childbearing women. These practices shape the experience of these women inside of academe and usually results in alienation of this group.

Just like the books, guides, and manuals described above, web resources that specifically address women in graduate school were mostly written by women who combined graduate school and family life. These women advise female graduate students to be realistic. One professor of Science relates how hard it was for her in graduate school. Her heart goes out to her female students who combine a scientific career and a family, but she sprinkles them with encouraging words. “To succeed at a high level requires some sacrifice. You have to be prepared to give up something—or be satisfied with lesser achievement. There is no free lunch” (Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2002).
They advise that graduate students who are mothers should avoid negative people who consciously or unconsciously perceive them as being less capable because they are parents. When the challenges of combining graduate school and parenthood seems insurmountable, they should try using creative solutions which expand their version of a “village” and maximize the resources that they may not even know you have. In this way, they can help themselves and their families to successfully help them balance the act (Houston, 1997). The survival rhetoric suggests that it is not the responsibility of the institutions nor are they willing to support students who desire to combine work and family, especially female students. It is a woman’s duty if she wants to survive to seek help and support from her family. Whatever she does, a student/mother should not try to use interruptions as an excuse to put her book down (Pittman, 1997). The best thing a female graduate student can do if she desires to survive graduate school is to “find a good househusband until universities find a more humane approach to both students and faculty with children” (Moore, 1997, p. 90). For Moore (1997), this was the “feminine difference” in graduate school.

Cloud (1998) argues that self-determination, which self-help rhetoric promotes, has been a “fiction” for women and other minority groups. Cloud claims, “The therapeutic language of self-help, personal responsibility, adaptation, and healing serves not to liberate the working class, the poor, the socially marginalized, but rather to persuade members of these classes that they are personally responsible for their plight” (p. 24). In addressing issues of discrimination pertaining to but not limited to gender, one author explains that discrimination may not be so much of an issue in graduate school. Usually, it is a perceived rather than a real problem (Peters, 1997). Peters suggests that
this is a simple problem to fix if the student addresses it by taking a “nonaccusatory” approach because usually the perceived perpetrators are unaware of their actions. There is a caveat though. There are costs in being “labeled “a troublemaker” and “academic retaliation” for pushing for changes (p. 289). Peters recommends that it would make sense to switch to a field that is more accepting of women if a female graduate student is in a field that is not women-friendly, especially if that student does not have the drive to be “a pioneer” (p. 296).

Exclusion and inadequacy pervades graduate school discourse. This chapter has provided a description of graduate school guides, books and internet resources and orientation material at the site of this study. The discourse contained within these materials was analyzed for themes and metaphors, which pervade graduate school. This analysis drew from the fields of women studies and feminism, cultural studies, organizational studies, and social science.

The analysis shows that graduate school is a journey, which requires commitment, independence among other skills and attributes to survive. The analysis reveals metaphors of graduate school as a game, negotiation, a grind, a juggling/balancing act. The typical graduate student is constructed as a single, white male, unattached. Graduate students who are mothers do not fit such construction. Family-life is constructed as “special problems” to be dealt with by the student and that family is only addressed when the female graduate student becomes part of the rhetoric. The analysis shows that women who are mothers along with returning students and minorities are grouped and constructed as people with special problems, issues or needs. Therefore, they are marginalized and mentored by those who are willing to accept the
“challenge.”

If the goals of deconstruction are to reveal hidden mechanisms at work in language, to demonstrate concealed power of symbols to shape thinking, and to show the inescapability of language (Herrick 2005), then graduate school survival guides are extremely powerful tools of knowledge and power. The discourse of inclusion and elitism is written on every page that paints the already privileged initiate as persevering in the journey of games, negotiations, grinds, and acts. The discourse of exclusion and inadequacy fills spaces, the borders, the “by the ways,” the special cases and circumstances that constitute lives of the already marginalized.

These discourses are inescapable, trapping graduate students who are mothers in language and expectations that are untenable and irreconcilable between “mom” and “student,” between “family” and “the academy,” between “self” and “success.” The next chapter moves from language to lives.
Chapter Three

Perceptions and Experiences of Graduate Students who are Mothers

Introduction

When I found out that I was pregnant, I worried about its impact on my academic career. A multitude of questions and concerns raced through my head and overshadowed the joy I supposedly should have felt. How would my life change as student? Should I tell others? Should I keep it hidden until it starts to become noticeable? I worried about how my professors and colleagues would perceive me once my secret got out. My worries faded when I discovered other students like me who were negotiating motherhood and graduate school. Sadly, my optimism was ephemeral and my worries returned with renewed intensity as I began to immerse myself in the discourse targeting graduate students and as I talked with women who negotiated their multi roles as mothers, students, and partners. I wondered about researching a topic that I was deeply invested in especially when it brought on feelings of despair. I wished that I wasn’t so close to it, but still I couldn’t abandon it. Nothing prepared me for the emotional rollercoaster these interviews and this dissertation took me on. At my lowest point, I considered changing my topic. Greyhounds racing on the dog tracks and talking to the gamblers who waged bets on them—my original topic idea—seemed safer and more worth studying than graduate students who are moms. I did not take the safe route.

This chapter collects and interprets the perceptions and experiences of graduate students who are mothers gathered in one-on-one interviews I conducted with 12
participants. In this chapter, I trace the goals of interviewing as a research methodology from a feminist standpoint; I outline the interview procedure, protocols, and I introduce the participants. These interviews asked participants to describe their self perceptions and the perceptions of others around them, as well as to offer their own experiences of graduate school and motherhood. In turn, I entered a hall of mirrors, asking and answering their questions about my own experiences. I focus on perceptions—of self, of others, and of “normalcy” in graduate studenthood and graduate work. The work of Erving Goffman (1954) provides a helpful vocabulary for understanding what I heard: Participants described their own their inability to live up to ideals and offered a number of strategies to create impressions of their own “good” student status, including face work, overcompensation, passing, and stigma. Unlike chapter two’s rite of passage created in discourse, I argue that stigma is a social designation that renders graduate students who are mothers as excluded, less worthy, and illegitimate. This stigmatized identity is heightened, rather than diminished, as PhD student moms move through their programs.

*On Becoming a Feminist Researcher*

It took me almost my entire graduate career to honestly say that I am a feminist who strives to be a feminist researcher— without cringing. I use feminist standpoints to ground this project because it utilizes feminist concerns prioritizing women’s perspectives as it seeks to explore and uncover patriarchal social dynamics (Cook & Fonow, 1986). Reinharz (1983) describes feminist research as “contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant, multimethodological, complete, but not necessarily replicable, open to the environment, and inclusive of emotions and events as
experienced (as cited in Nielsen, p. 8).” According to Nielson (1990) feminist standpoints “do not end with women’s experience; they are more than just perspectives. They involve a level of awareness and consciousness about one’s social location and this location’s relations to one’s lived experience” (p.24). Feminist research is a method capable of recovering and analyzing women’s experiences (Devault, 1990). It has the potential to highlight the personal, social, and cultural implications of these factors on a person or group’s identity (Nielson, 1990).

Because I use feminist theory to ground this project, I am obliged to acknowledge my relationship to the process and the participants. According to Reinharz (1985), it is imperative that feminist researchers “study who we are in relationship to who [sic] we study” (as cited in Fine, 1992). Fine (1994) advocates that researchers “work the hyphen,” meaning that “researchers probe how we are in relation with the context we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations” (p. 72). Fine (1992) calls for feminist researchers to acknowledge that “we are inventors of some questions, shapers of the context studied, co-participants in our interviews, interpreters of others’ stories, and narrators of our own” (p. 208).

As researcher I came up with the questions to ask, which shaped the context of the study. My researcher role also required that I interpreted the answers to the questions and other information shared during the interviews. As a participant, my role was to reciprocate and give my interviewees information about my experiences and perceptions.

Reinharz (1992) discusses trust and responsiveness to the people studied in feminist research. This phase of the study involved trust and reciprocity. The participants were graduate students and mothers. I gained the women’s trust so that they would be
willing to share with me. I reciprocated to enrich the conversations and to solidify that trust. Being a mom and a student helped to form an unspoken bond between the participants and me. Oakley (1981) states interviewers must be willing to answer questions interviewees pose to encourage rapport building. I believe that the level of trust and reciprocity I established with my participants encouraged role-switching during the interview process. The participants took on the roles as the interviewers at times and I became the interviewee when they posed questions of their own to me. For example, when I asked them to tell me the story of when they found out they were pregnant or at what stage in their graduate career they became pregnant, they asked me the same questions. They also questioned me about how I was managing graduate school and being a mom and handling childcare issues. They were just as interested in my experiences as I was in theirs. Within this process, I believe my participants and I answered the questions as honestly as we could.

I observed that the participants who were more knowledgeable of qualitative/feminist research practices were more inclined to ask about my experiences and perceptions. In a way, these interviews took place on equal grounds. It was during those interviews that I actually felt more like a participant and not just the researcher. The disadvantage to these interviews, however, was that I believe they lost some spontaneity in flow because the interviewees worked within that script of knowing what to expect during the process. As a result, it took me a bit longer to get them to address some of the questions—these turned out to be the longest interviews, but not necessarily the ones with the richest data. They were more conversational. In the interviews in which the participants were not as knowledgeable about qualitative/feminist methods, they were
more to the point and stuck to the interview script. They were the shortest interviews and were the ones where I actually felt like I was more like the researcher and not a participant. During these interviews, I found myself working hard to volunteer information about my experience and perception. For example, when I asked the participants to describe their kids to me, the former always asked me about my kid, but the latter stopped and waited for the next question when they were finished describing their kids. This may also have to do with the personalities of the interviewees. Clearly some were more extroverted and comfortable in interview situations while others like me fell more on the introverted side. Recognizing this, I pushed myself to participate as much as possible in the conversation, to voice my experiences and perceptions, and to probe when the participants stuck with the script and when they seemed hesitant.

Utilizing the interview as a method to study women has its advantages. Reinharz (1992) writes:

Interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their words, rather than the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because this way of learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women (Reinharz 1992b, p.19, as cited in Reinharz & Chase, 2002, p. 222).

Oakley (1981) expresses similar sentiments. She sees the interview as a method that can be used to examine research as a way to validate women’s experiences, giving them greater visibility. Her exemplar study with women transitioning to motherhood illustrates the potential of the interview method, when used in the nontraditional sense. In that way, there isn’t an established hierarchy, the interviewer as the authority and leader and the interviewee as the subordinate in the relationship.
Oakley’s research reveals a contrast between theory and practice when adopting traditional interview practices.

Oakley’s reflection on the interview and post interview process with her participants is powerful and does an excellent job demonstrating why the rules do not always apply. Fine (1992) warns about the “disruptive possibilities” of feminist methods. However, this disruption can be positive, as in the case of Oakley’s study. Oakley (1981) says that she became an important source of information and reassurance to her participants about childbirth issues. She also established and maintained a friendship with about a third of the participants after she completed the study. According to Oakley, none of the interviewees reported that the interviews have affected them negatively. In fact, several of the women said that being interviewed led them to reflect on their experiences, reduced their anxiety and reassured them of their normalcy, and gave them an opportunity to express their feelings. Getting the women to “go there” served to raise their level of consciousness (MacKinnon, 1982) and served to empower the participants, which is one of the expressed goals of feminist research (Cook & Fonow, 1986).

I concur with Oakley regarding the positive outcomes of interviewing because I witnessed it in this study. One participant shared that I gave her hope that she “can be productive one day again,” while two others remarked how much talking with me has helped them rethink their approaches to working on their proposals and conceptualizing their dissertations.

*The Recruitment Procedure*

The site of this study is a large southeastern Research I university. I recruited the participants by distributing flyers in graduate students’ events such as graduate orientation, training sessions, and
graduate students social events, and placing them in the lounge areas of graduate departments and at
the front office of the on campus daycare. In addition, a few of the participants who responded to the
flyers eagerly provided me with the names of potential participants and even contacted those
participants themselves to see if they would be interested in talking with me. Once these word of
mouth contacts expressed their interests, I emailed them the flyer explaining the nature of the study. I
also placed flyers in their mailboxes if they have access to one on the campus.

The Participants

The participants were graduate students who are also mothers or expectant
mothers. The participants in the study age ranged from the early twenties to the late
thirties. While I didn’t ask questions about race, one participant mentioned being white,
another Black, one East Indian, and another mentioned being of Native American and
White heritage. The others didn’t identify nor mention their race. Six participants were
PhD candidates and seven were pursuing Masters degrees. These women represented
different colleges and departments on the campus and were at various stages in their
programs.

The following is a brief description of the participants. For confidentiality
purposes and to maintain anonymity, each of the participants has been given a
pseudonym.

Tammy is a 31-year-old mother of a two-year old. She is a fulltime PhD student,
who also has a fulltime job. Tammy found out she was pregnant her first semester as a
PhD student.

Katy, a 32-year-old mother of two children, was pregnant twice during her
graduate career, as a master’s student and again during her PhD. She shared stories of
being accepted when she was pregnant during her masters program, but then feeling like she had fallen out of favor when she decided to become pregnant during her doctoral work.

Shannon is a 30-year-old PhD student. She has been on leave for the past 10 months. She is a fulltime mom to her 8-month-old daughter at the time of this interview. Her husband is away and she has to assume full responsibility for raising her daughter.

Lydia is 34 and married with two children. She gave birth to her first child while she was working on her masters and her second child before she began her PhD. She was a stay at home mom for sometime. At the moment, she is a fulltime PhD student and a graduate assistant. She is in the proposal phase of her dissertation.

Zara is a fulltime doctoral candidate. Of all the participants pursuing a PhD, she is the farthest along. She has a 5-year-old son. She was pregnant while she was working on her master’s degree. At the time of the follow-up interview and coming to the end of her doctoral work, she was pregnant a second time. She was due to give birth a few weeks after her defense.

Rachel is a PhD student. She is in the proposal phase of her dissertation. She is a graduate assistant. She had taken a leave of absence to care for her child and had just returned.

Claire is a 33-year-old mother of two children, a two-year-old and a 4-year-old. She is a master’s student. She combines full-time childcare with school

Samantha is a master’s student. She is working on her thesis at the time of the interviews. She is the mother of a 3-month-old girl.

Deb is a 23-year-old master’s student. She was about two months pregnant when I interviewed her. She is the only one in the group of people interviewed who isn’t or has never been married. She lives with her fiancé, who has a son that lives with them part-time.
Jessica is a master’s student. She is the mother of an 18-month-old and a 7-month-old. She is a part-time student. At the time of the interviews, she was a stay at home mom. During the follow-up interview, she informed me that she now has a fulltime job. She, however, maintains her part-time status as a student.

Linda is a part-time master’s student. She is the mother of an eleven-month old. She was employed fulltime. She became pregnant during her third semester into her program.

Emily is a master’s student. She was writing her comprehensive exams during the time of the one-to-one interview. She was pregnant during her first year as a graduate student.

Amy is a part-time master’s student. She is the mother of a one-year-old.

Besides being students, mothers and partners, three had full time jobs, while two worked part-time at the time of the interviews. Two were graduate assistants, while the others stayed at home with their kids.

The First One-on-One Interview

The interviews were held in the Fall of 2005. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. Ten of the interviews were conducted in my office, one was conducted in the home of the participant, and another was conducted in a coffee shop. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

For the most part, the one-on-one interview was unstructured even though I prepared an interview schedule to guide the discussion. I chose this unstructured approach because I sought insight, discovery, and interpretation (Green-Powell, 1997). The nature of the unstructured approach allowed for deviations and probing and for the participants to put their experiences and perceptions in their own words. I hoped the participants would share stories and anecdotes that

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1 Amy participated only in the focus group part of this study.
were rich in details about their experiences and perceptions, which the interview addressed.

*The Follow-Up One-on-One Interview*

During the process of writing the discourse analysis chapter, I realized that I was missing an important connection between the different methodologies used. Therefore, I decided to return to my participants for a follow-up one-to-one interview. The follow-up interviews were held in the summer to early Fall of 2006, almost a year after the initial interview. For the follow-up interview, the questions were aimed at connecting the discourse of graduate school to the experiences of the participants to find a connection between what is said in the survival guides and orientation materials and the actual experiences of the study participants.

The hard part about the follow-up was reestablishing contact with my participants. Some of them have graduated and have changed contact information, while others promised they would talk with me. I called and emailed on a few occasions, but they didn’t respond. Therefore, eight women responded to my follow-up questions. Of those eight, two were done face-to-face and the other six were done through emails. The face-to-face follow-ups were 30 minutes and one hour long. One advantage to the electronic interview was that it allowed the participants to better reflect on and articulate their thoughts. One disadvantage of the electronic interview, though, is that I missed the opportunity to observe the nuances present in what was and wasn’t said. Although I believe that one can detect nuances in text, I think that being an actual witness makes the process powerful in a different way.

An advantage to the follow-up interview was that it allowed me to follow the progress of my participants. Some of them willingly shared updates with me about their
experiences and perceptions. For example, since the first interview, Jessica started a fulltime job, Deb gave birth to a baby girl, and Zara defended her dissertation.

The following section discusses the perceptions and experiences of my participants. First, it will define what it means to be a “normal” and valued based on the women’s perceptions. Second, it will look at how the women negotiate their identities through role discrepancy. Third, it will examine how the women perform their discrepant roles. Finally, it will examine “choice” as it pertains to the women.

Defining the “Normal” Graduate Student and What’s “Important”

A “normal” graduate student—white, male, single, singularly-focused—was a clear portrait painted in the discourses of graduate school survival guides. When I asked my participants to describe their experiences of being mothers in graduate school, to describe their academic departmental climate, and to give me a sense of how mothers are viewed or evaluated by colleagues, faculty, and so forth, the answers I heard were both disheartening and perceptive.

According to Lydia, at some point, the university started to broaden the definition of a student to include women with children and working class people. “It seemed inclusive, but this quest for quality to be a research institution has replaced that. Real students are only students who do not have outside lives and could afford it.”

Shannon shared that her “department promotes a singles culture,” while Rachel said:

I think the perception is still that the ideal student is sort of unattached, young and that is how it is in this sector. Mothers are not serious students because we are not hanging around and doing what other graduate students do. You know whatever
the single unattached student is, we are not that. For most part the lifestyle is for people without families and other commitments.

Claire said, “We are moms. We are not normal students. I bet it will be worse for you because you are black.” Claire was my only participant who acknowledged my race and its socio-historical implications. I laughed it off when Claire acknowledged my racial difference, but maybe Claire was speaking in line with Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks’s (1990) views that race cannot be ignored when we talk about women.

Closely related to what is “normal” is defining what should be studied, researched, and pursued in the academy. Some of my participants expressed frustration with the academy’s reluctance to consider motherhood as a legitimate focus of study. Jessica said:

I think that there is a lot of rigidity in the way they define what is important, what should be written about, I feel like when I try to cover something that is important to me like motherhood or even spirituality or something that’s not the most traditional form of research, it comes across as “oh you’re not taking it seriously and who wants to talk about that, and that’s not important.” It’s hard for me to pick some topic that I don’t connect to right now. I really wanted to work with my life and right now I’m really into motherhood and it seems like almost anything I can relate to motherhood would be interesting and so I wanted to write stuff about parenting and adopting children and love, but at the same time there is a part of me that wants to be personal too, but I think it’s falling apart. It’s easier in the …., because the Professors are more open. I talked to my husband and he’s like that the good news out of this is if I’m going to go out and work for a university I need
to have papers published and I need to have interesting traditional forms of research.

Claire expressed similar sentiments. She found that papers on motherhood were “okay” to write in classes with women professors, but not welcome in classes taught by men professors. She said, “You need to research topics that are more “valuable” in the male classes.” Jessica and Claire’s sentiments echoed the discussions in the literature that issues and research that address women are yet to be taken seriously in academe (Wisker, 2005). As a result, women are advised to beware of the risk of academic “ghettoization” and “soft subjects” (Moore, 1995; Peters, 1997). According to Peters (1997), for instance, “It is tempting for women who are conscious of their struggles for equality to devote themselves to research focused on women’s issues,” (p.297) which can hurt one’s career. Simeone (1987) claims that on the professorate level, women are likely to be evaluated more harshly than men because the “scholarship produced may be different in style and substance than mainstream academic scholarship, which has tended to focus on the perspectives, accomplishments, and experiences of men” (p.74)

* Negotiating Identity through Role Discrepancy

What happens when the graduate student who is a mom perceives that she is not viewed as a normal student? How then does she negotiate her multiple identities? Every graduate student engages in some form of identity negotiation. Graduate students who are mothers are no exceptions. In fact, these issues may be more pronounced for this class of students because they have to manage multiple identities that have been constructed as having dichotomous relationships to each other. Identity negotiation, especially when the identities are in conflict like “mom” and “student,” is best
approached through Erving Goffman’s (1959) concepts of role distance and discrepant roles. Goffman writes of the identity problems that arise when there is a lack of congruence among the role a person plays and the purpose of her performance, and the regions she has access to. One lack of congruence Goffman calls role distance: a discontinuity between social role and context. Mothers in the academy, at all levels, feel the pressure of this discontinuity. A discrepant role, in Goffman’s vocabulary is a role which brings a person into a social establishment or organization in a false guise. Imposters, secret shoppers, shills, and informers are examples.

For graduate students who are mothers, the discrepant role most salient is the “Non-Person,” treated by others in the organization or social situation as if she is not there. Goffman (1959) writes, “the role of non-person usually carries with it some subordination and disrespect” (p. 152). In my interviews, the women spoke repeatedly of their discrepant roles, the conflicts between roles of “mom” and “graduate student,” their own invisibility within their departments, and their inability to live up to ideals of either role.

Most of my participants were “just” students before their roles changed to students and mothers and wives/partners. Lydia’s statements summarize the struggle to negotiate roles best. She shared:

For my daughter, on one level, I think I might be a good role model— working and pursuing what I want to do, and having my own identity. On the other side… it promotes that “you can do it” image of a woman,…which I think is very positive on one level that you can pursue things…but…you don’t see the other side of it…. You’re always stuck in the middle of feeling like you’re glad to be
doing this, but you feel guilty. It is a very compromising position. I think that I’m not as good of a mother as I could be. I’m not as good of an academic as I could be… not the sister, the wife. I do want to be a good wife, but that feeling of never feeling like you are doing it right.

Role discrepancy creates dissonance between old identities as students and their new identities as mothers. As a result, my participants find themselves struggling with the how they should manage their new identities. Lydia feels “caught in the wrap” of being a student/mother and not being a “student/student.”

Much of the role conflict Claire and other participants described is due to the fact that their academic work is considered by their male partners as secondary to their work as caregivers. Claire said:

I have to be a good wife, a good mother, a good student. Each of these roles conflict sometimes, not because I do not believe that I am not good at what I do, but others do not perceive me that way. My husband doesn’t understand that I may need to do school work on weekends and my professors do not care that I have a sick kid at home, which explains why I may arrive late to class.

Emily shared that being in the roles of student, mother, and wife is particularly difficult when the semester is winding down. Emily also worked fulltime. She said a typical end of semester day goes like this:

I wake up around 5:30 a.m. I make breakfast and get everyone out of the apartment by 7:20. I drop my daughter off to daycare and then I go to work for 8…. After work, I go to class. After class, I go home and tidy up. My husband picks up our daughter after he comes from work. So listen to this, I get home after
this long day, cook, and tidy up, plus I have papers to write, and he wants to have
sex. I was like, “No, this is not going to happen. Not tonight. Probably not till the
semester ends.” I am too exhausted.

Rachel said she could be “doing so much better” if she had her son to herself. “I keep him
awake so my husband could spend some time with him. I have to remember that I have a
husband too. It would just be so hard on the marriage if I don’t.”

I shared with Rachel that my husband thinks that his “job of caring for our son
ends as soon as I walk in the door.” This is when I recognized how I bare an unequal
share of the responsibility for childcare. I talked to him about it and he said, “But isn’t
that what mommies do?”

“No, that was what your mommy did. You are going to help this mommy,” I said
to him. Although we have had that same discussion several times, I still continue to
assume the bulk of the responsibility for childcare. There are days when Marlon assumes
the primary responsibility, but when I am around, he suddenly becomes helpless in
matters like childcare.

Role discrepancy is most often felt when an ideal set of performances—of both
motherhood and graduate student—is unattainable in personal and organizational
contexts. Goffman (1959) describes how all social performances aspire to ideals; our
performances of social roles are

‘socialized,’ molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations
of a society in which it is presented. . . . Thus, when the individual presents
himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the
officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior
as a whole. (p. 35)

On both the home and graduate school fronts, the women spoke to their inability to fulfill these expectations. The participants were able to define a good student based on what they perceived one to be—single, male, unattached, white, while a good mother is one who can be located within the ideology of motherhood (Tucker, 2004), where the women are responsible for childrearing—a process they should immerse in. I thought that all my participants used the ideology of motherhood to determine whether they were good mothers or not. To a certain extent, it is arguable that internalized gender roles also were at play. What I found interesting was that several of my participants were happy that their husbands or partners got a chance to “help out.” Two of my participants expressed guilt that their husbands shared in the responsibility of raising their kids and still worked outside the home—solidifying the concepts of gender roles in the family.

Deb and Claire, and maybe even Rachel, to a certain extent, desired and worked to be in the roles of mothers who completely immersed themselves, whereas, Lydia, Zara, and Linda and I passed on part of the responsibility for childcare to daycares while we worked and pursued our degrees. This is a decision Lydia and I felt guilty about sometimes. For me, I subscribed to the ideology of mothering for the first two years of my son, Marlon, Jr.’s, life. On his second birthday, I enrolled him in daycare. Although he attended ten hours a week, I felt guilty leaving him in the care of strangers. To lessen my guilt, I justified sending him to daycare as a way for him to socialize with other kids because. Recently, I increased his hours from ten to thirty a week and during some weeks, I have him spend forty hours or more at the center. My guilt hasn’t dissipated with time. Marlon, Jr. is now four years old, but still, I feel guilty for sending him to daycare. I
realize however, that I can’t be a good mother to him if I neglect myself in the process. I will also rob him of the opportunity to socialize with other kids.

When graduate students who are moms are not negotiating discrepant identities as students and as mothers and wives, some of them are negotiating their identities in the classroom. Discrepant roles also play out in the classroom when the graduate student who are moms are teaching assistants. As relating to her students, Lydia, for example, said she wanted to be a role model for them.

I think a lot of these representations you see of working mothers being able to manage it all, you don’t see that compromise. So that way I think I would be a bad role model. When I think of my students, they might go, oh, she has two kids and she’s teaching and all that. On one level that’s good, but I’d also like to see how do I convey, yes, you don’t have to give up your dreams, if this is what you did… you gotta know what you’re getting into and that’s something I’ve been trying to work out in my head. At the time when I got married…, I couldn’t anticipate all the things that you think you should be able to anticipate.

Like Lydia, I have had several of my female students look at me with admiration when I told them that I am a mom and that I am working on my PhD. Often, I see their faces beam with pride and I get, “Way to go!” But still, I can’t ignore the context of their pride for they may never say that to a man.

Part of the identity negotiation game through discrepant roles is to know why graduate students are really at the institution. The goal is to get a degree—not to be a great teacher or research assistant. Rachel said that she is learning that:

It is really ok to do a good enough job. I never short change my students.
Someday I would be a great teacher but that comes with experience. Parts of our jobs are to be students and teach, but if they really wanted it to be done at this level, they would pay someone to do it. But they are paying me at the level of a graduate student assistant, that is secondary, and I can’t devote too much of my time because that is not what I am here for…

Lydia said she is realizing that it is more important to get a few publications than teaching.

*Performing Discrepant Roles*

Goffman (1959) discusses how social actors attempt to influence people’s perceptions of them. They reflect on the identity they want to act out to individuals and perform the identities as such. According to Goffman performance is “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (p.24). To Goffman, “Front is the part of the individual's performance which regularly functions as in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (p. 24).

My participants engaged in several self-presentation strategies to influence and change the perceptions of them as students who are also mothers. These strategies include the face-work of visibility, overcompensation of working very, very hard, passing and its tensions, and stigma. All of these are typical of performances of social roles that are based on discrepancies. Rachel spoke specifically of the difficulties she had creating impressions of herself as a worthy student:

I am done with course work so I had a lot of discussions with people so they
know how I am and what I was about. Now that I am tucked in the hallway, I am hoping they remember that…. In the general sense, I would definitely downplay the fact that I am a mom. Why would they make accommodations for me when they could hire someone who doesn’t have kids and not have to worry about it?

Lydia shared that she had a “false start” with her department. She didn’t make it to orientations, she was taking night classes and “wasn’t part of the culture.” She said:

It took me a long time to get integrated. I remember trying to go to [a professor’s talk and bring her [my daughter] and she started crying inconsolably. I tried to calm her down so I could go back in, I remember that moment of wanting my presence to be felt of integrating, but my responsibilities of a crying infant was there, plus she was the only child that was there.

Lydia tried to make up for her false start by making herself “visible” by getting involved in departmental activities and even assuming a leadership position on the graduate committee in her department. This is face time she felt she had to do to let it be known that she “was around and wanted to be part of the department.”

Some of the participants also found themselves overcompensating, working twice as hard as students to demonstrate to others that their roles as mothers will not affect or impinge on their roles as students. Linda expressed that she has always been “a meticulous student.” As part of the plan for her baby’s arrival, she took her finals and submitted her projects early. So did Katy, who sat down with her advisor to “map the whole thing out.” Deb also “worked extra hard” to perform more than the required work to secure the respect of her teammates and professors. Katy also shared that she works “twice as hard as the grad students who do not have kids.” Working twice as hard comes
at a price, which Katy said she is willing to pay. She explained:

I have other gals who look up to me. They want to know what fuels me, what
gives me the energy to drag myself everyday. I have learned not to be shy, to stick
my neck out there. I drag my son with me wherever I go. I don’t care what people
say anymore. If it takes me ten years to finish, then so be it. I don’t want my
children to think they have the option to quit.”

The need expressed by Katy and others to prove themselves by working harder
than their peers recalls Kanter’s (1997) discussion of tokenism. To be a token is to be
seen as an anomaly. Tokens are treated as representatives of their groups and their
visibility promotes “performance pressures” (p. 212). According to Kanter, women have
resisted their token image by trying to blend into the dominant group or by minimizing
genre differences. For graduate students who are moms, there comes a point when they
cannot blend in or when they are forced to acknowledge gender differences. Before they
became moms or before their statuses as moms were revealed, they passed.

For Goffman (1963), passing is when individuals present themselves as or are
perceived by others to be persons they are not. According to Bell (forthcoming),
“passing, in the language of Goffman’s social roles, is a performance fraught with risks
and dangers, with shame and awe” (forthcoming).

Bell (forthcoming) cites Frame (2004), who states that one who passes negotiates
“whether to reveal, display, or lie about the stigma, and to whom, how, when, and
where.” In order to prolong their passing identities, several of my participants wrestled
with the question of when to tell or should they tell. Of course, pregnancy is something
that cannot be hidden for too long, which makes the passing days numbered. I shared
with my participants that when I found out that I was pregnant, I was scared of being found out. I was afraid that I would not be seen as a serious student. Several of my participants expressed the same feelings of dread, which resulted in them hiding their pregnancies until they couldn’t be hidden anymore. For example, Katy talked about keeping her pregnancy “a secret for as long as possible.” She made this decision only because she witnessed what another woman in her department who was pregnant before her experienced.

Tammy shared that she hid her pregnancy until people started noticing her weight gain. According to Tammy, keeping her pregnancy to herself was “so stressful that she cried herself to sleep every night. I remember my husband telling me that when I cry the baby cries too.”

Shannon said, “I was scared to tell him [her advisor] that I was pregnant. I kept putting it off. Eventually I did.” While Deb, nine weeks pregnant at the time of the first interview, is anxious about her options. “You are the first person I am talking with in academia,” she said. “I am so afraid. I don’t know where to turn.”

Deb remembered one woman from the previous semester who had a young child. She said about this woman:

She was just treated badly. She was excluded from many activities and it was apparent at the time that that same woman was one of the last who was approached about participating in group projects. It was like no one wanted to deal with scheduling group meetings around her kid.

Being excluded is detrimental to the success of students in Deb’s field, which is group oriented. Most of the assignments center on group projects. Deb said that the same
woman never seemed to assume a leadership role in group discussions, “but every once in a while she would be the question and answer kind of person.” It was Deb’s impression that being a mom had something to do with the woman’s role in the group.

Deb was afraid that once her secret came out, she may experience what this woman had been through. As a result, she was taking a familiar preemptive strike. She was working even harder to build her reputation as a hard worker, one who got the job done in spite of what others may perceive as obstacles. In that way, when her pregnancy became apparent and when her due date approached, she would not be perceived as a slacker or as someone who would not have time to work on group projects. She planned to do all her work ahead of time to prevent such “complication.” She said:

It turns out that I got pregnant a week or two before school started and I found out that I have all the group projects. We take a [two-semester] course and you have the same groups for the two semesters and these are all people that I’ve never worked with before so I haven’t told them yet, because I’m afraid they do not know me and they do not know my work ethics and they might think I am going to leave them hanging in the last semester.

“Passing” is a social performance demanded when women are perceived as less than, unworthy, undedicated, and compromised. All the women spoke of their dismay at revealing their pregnancies and motherhood. Ultimately, passing attempts to negotiate the practice of exclusion languaged in survival guides and felt by these women in social interactions with others.

Revealing their status, however, does not end their tensive performance of discrepant social roles. My participants spoke of constantly negotiating the surprises,
stares, and stigma of motherhood in the academy.

When the secrets were out, some of my participants shared that people were “surprised” that they were pregnant and attending graduate school. Other participants commented on the “stares.” Tammy talked about the shock on the faces of colleagues and professors in her department when they realized that she was pregnant. Some asked if she was “crazy.”

There was surprise also when other women who are in graduate school come out of the closet and revealed that they are moms. According to Rachel, she remembered one colleague in her class who brought a picture of her kid with her one day and was showing everyone.

I was surprised. I was like, “You are a mom?” People were surprised until they saw the pictures….You know, it is so not part of life here. It is not unusual to be in class with someone and not even knowing they have kids.

The participants found it hard to distinguish between people who supported them and wished them the best negotiating their new identities and people who didn’t support them and assumed that they were crazy to commit academic/career suicide. For example, Emily said that when colleagues and professors come up to her and comment, “How do you do it? “It must be hard,” or “I know you will be fine,” she “honestly do not know how to interpret these comments and questions.” Katy added that the line “Are you going to stay home with your baby?” confuses her because she doesn’t know how to respond to it. Does it mean that she is less capable as a student now or is it a show of genuine concern?

Samantha and Katy commented on not knowing how to interpret the stares that
were directed toward them when they were pregnant and thereafter when they brought their kids to campus. According to Samantha:

   Around campus, it was hard to tell, it seemed like they are a little awkward. Not that I mind any judgment as long as they don’t say anything. But you wonder what people think because you get a lot of stares.

   The revelations of their motherhood placed them in a different category. They found themselves needing to negotiate within themselves and with academia the meaning of being mothers and students within their lives when passing was no longer a viable option.

   Passing doesn’t work the same for everyone. We can examine passing in terms of race and gender and where the two intersect. Zara, a lone woman, and non-white, in a department that is dominated by men, was not able to pass. She was the “token” woman. She said:

   I am the only female graduate student in my department. It was so tough when I was pregnant. Being a mom and a student is a challenging experience. It is really challenging. When I look back, I wonder how I reached to this point. I just don’t know how I did it.

   So what happens to their images when a child is or children are in the picture? Having a child or children becomes a stigma. Goffman (1963) argues that stigma is “an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular social interaction” (p. 3). Society places people in different categories. Each category has a set of attributes that are “natural” and “ordinary” (pp. 3-4). Although Goffman (1963) discusses stigma in terms of bodily imperfections, character flaws, and lineal traits, the term can apply to students
who are mothers.

When one is stigmatized, then she is also a deviant. Being a mother in graduate school goes against what Kaplan & Johnson (2001) define as normative expectations. According to Becker (1985), “Being caught and branded as deviant has important consequences for one’s further social participation and self-image. The most important consequence is a drastic change in the individual’s public identity” (p. 291). A stigmatized identity continues the exclusion and inadequacy discourse of graduate school.

Emily talked about feeling like an outsider. She said that some of her professors had difficulty understanding her situation even though she contacted them in advance to explain. According to Emily, based on the reaction she received, she withdrew from one of her courses and became a part-time student. Rachel also talked about being in the “margins.” She said:

Things that use to come my way don’t come my way anymore…..I am no longer in the hallways. I miss out on the networking, doing all that little extra things. I don’t know a lot of people. I do feel like I am on the margins. After a while people stop thinking of you. Nobody invites me to join panels anymore….I don’t know how much I am projecting onto other people, because I just feel like I am not up to the same standards like I was before and how much I think other people look at me and think that…

Before becoming a mom, Claire was a popular student. She was invited to panels and departmental activities. According to Claire, all that changed and worsened when she gave birth to “baby number two.” She was no longer invited to join panels. She was even ejected from a panel after she had the baby and replaced by another colleague.
These performances of social roles are attempts to negotiate two very different ideals: good graduate student and good mother. The strategies employed by these women are familiar to Goffmanesque approaches to discrepant roles: face-work, overcompensation, passing, and stigma. While Goffman maintains that all social roles fail to reach their ideals, “a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human-selves and our socialized selves” (p. 56), graduate students who are mothers in the academy are caught between, not just discrepancies, but irreconcilable tensions between “mom” and “student,” between “family” and “the academy,” between “self” and “success.” These irreconcilable differences are lived by me and the women who participated in this study. These interviews constantly revealed these women’s critical awareness of these differences and the impossible odds in the contexts, both home and school, in which they performed.

*The Rhetoric of Choice*

As mentioned in chapter one, Hewlett (2002) and Crittenden (2001) discuss whether the “choices” women make are really theirs. I heard my participants talk about choices. Emily, Shannon, Lydia, Tammy, Jessica, Zara and I talked about unplanned pregnancies. Lydia said, “I hate to even confess that my husband wanted a second child and I didn’t. He was pressuring me so I agreed. It happened earlier than anticipated, so I cried.” Shannon said, “I wasn’t planning to get pregnant. I was surprised. My husband wanted kids more than I wanted.”

I identified with my participants because my husband was ready to start a family more than I did. If I had a “choice,” I probably would have waited.

References to “choice” expressed and emphasized self-blame. Rachel said that the
student she has become is part of her “personal choice. This is the way I choose to be a mother. I realize that having made that choice it limits me. I can’t blame anything else.” But then Rachel discussed “choice” in relation to economic cost and how “huge” it is considering what she could be worth if she had a job instead of staying at home with her son.

Most of the women expressed frustration with graduate school because it didn’t provide them with an avenue to balance their family life and their commitments to getting their degrees. Emily, for example, said, “I feel like I am being forced to choose between my child and academe. I don’t like being forced to make that choice and I don’t understand how come it cannot be a fluid relationship.”

Even outside the institution being a mother and being in graduate school may not be considered something that women should do. According to Lydia, for instance:

People still look at you like you have two heads…. They try to encourage you but have that painful look on their faces or they may say, “Oh, she is a bored housewife….When I told my sister I was going to get my PhD, my own sister said, “Oh, so you want it all…..” She would never say that to my husband.

Do women have real choices? In terms of the workplace, Garey (1999) states that “for women in the United States, employment and family have been portrayed dichotomously—and women have been described as being “work oriented” or “family oriented” (p.6). This is not the same for men: “employment and family are not portrayed as detracting from one another” (p.6).

According to Crittenden (2001), “mothers’ choices are not made in a vacuum” (p.235). She says that “talk of choice…ignores the pain embedded in mothers’ tough
trade-offs” (p.236). Crittenden says that the women she talked with were happy that they were doing the important job of raising “happy, thriving individuals…. But at the same time, [they] were clearly suffering from the renunciations they have been required to make” (p. 236)

When the women I interviewed felt like if they had no choices, they became discouraged and alienated. Tammy, Shannon, and Claire discussed feelings of alienation. They questioned their places within the system and became less involved and motivated. Claire, for instance, talked about being discouraged from pursuing a PhD because of the way she felt she was not accepted by her department when she became pregnant twice.

Talk about quitting or wanting to quit was common. Shannon said that she was warned about the dangers of combining graduate school with a baby, but went ahead and had a baby anyway. She expressed concerns about whether she would be able to complete her dissertation. To make it this far meant that she mastered the necessary skills, but that’s insufficient. She was wary of feeling excluded and invisible. As a result, she was unmotivated. She thinks about quitting all the time. She even talked to another woman, a graduate student, who was pregnant, who was contemplating quitting too. Shannon said, “The two of us are like, ‘Let’s quit together.’ In an email sent to me during the follow-up interview, Shannon wrote, “I still really want to quit…. I want (well, sort of want) to have another child and I don’t see how it would be possible for me to do all there is to do for my PhD and afford to live and stay sane.” Deb and Tammy also thought about quitting. Even Rachel who talked so much about her “choice” said she thinks about “quitting almost every day.”

I don’t believe that any of these women really desired to quit graduate school.
Somehow, they felt like failures—that they did not match up to the standards set. Even if they believed they lived up to or exceeded the standards, they felt that others perceived otherwise. Therefore, the next logical thing for them to do was to think about quitting or quit. Golde (2000) concludes that “integration into the academic systems of the department plays a critical role in doctoral student persistence” (p. 224). For the women interviewed, the integration and socialization into the system ended when their motherhood statuses were revealed. Discrepant roles and stigma are not about choice, although the rhetoric of free will, agency, and empowerment are powerful discourses of individualism, social mobility, and career advancement. Choices that are not choices pervade the life experiences and perceptions of the excluded and the inadequate “other.”

**Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the participants, explored how they perceived themselves and how others perceiving them within academia, and offered strategies to negotiate their multiple identities as mothers, students, and partners. The chapter also examined what is defined as important in graduate school, and finally, examined “choice” as it pertains to the women. Graduate students who are mothers face many issues as they attempt to balance their polarized lives of discrepant and stigmatized roles. This polarization has resulted in the struggle to negotiate identity and discrepant roles and to garner support in a culture that views motherhood in graduate school as a stigma and thus deviant behavior. The language of graduate school survival guides becomes the reality of stigmatized exclusion and inadequacy.

By virtue of being mothers, my participants are outsiders who violate the norm of what it means to be a normal graduate student—single, male, white. From the discourse
analysis and the interviews, I learned that mothers share the perception that combining graduate school with motherhood is deviant behavior. The participants’ statuses as mothers differentiate them from the “normal” student. The unfortunate result of this position is that students, including those who are mothers, who do not fit into this definition risk being perceived as outside the norm and are treated as such, then may even behave as such. This vicious cycle of perception is exacerbated by policies that exclude and render them inadequate. What is deemed as normal in graduate school is not formally stated in graduate schools manuals and policies. The institution and its departments do not explicitly state that the normal student is single, male, white, and young, or that female students should not have children because the consequences may be dire. However, the culture of disapproval and exclusion perceived makes the graduate students who are mothers feel out of place and unwelcome. “Passing” is no longer an option.

The literature on women in the workplace and women in education continue to show that even with all the “progress,” women continue to be marginalized (Kanter, 1977; Crittenden, 2001). In 2002, MIT completed a study on the status of its women faculty, which revealed how marginalization operated against the women faculty. Co-chair of the MIT council on faculty diversity, Nancy Hopkins, said of the report, “We all thought that women getting the jobs was all you needed to achieve equality. But it turns out that the experiences of different people are not necessarily the same, or equal, in the same place” (MIT news office).

Graduate students who are mothers are already “in-between” in the liminal rite of passage that is graduate school. Yet no rite of passage can transform them from stigmatized to “normal,” and their experiences speak of perceptions and policies that
push them further to the margins of graduate school culture. Their performed strategies are typical of discrepant roles and stigmatized identities: face-time, overcompensation, and passing. The results of this struggle for acceptance and recognition are discouraging, with constant self-questioning and threats to quit altogether, and perceived lack of support and encouragement alienate and discourage them.

Most disheartening, this struggle and lack of support get worse, not better, as graduate students move through their programs. While my participants who were master’s students were progressing and graduating, in spite of their difficulties, my PhD participants were stagnating. It’s as if they “hit the wall”—the moment the marathon runner can’t go on. I am aware that the PhD is more intense, time-consuming, and self-driven than the master’s degree. The experiences of these women, however, suggest there is something going on here that is way beyond initial “socialization,” orientation programs, and support for “normal” students. Motherhood in the academy is a “stigma,” a social designation that renders graduate students who are mothers as excluded, less worthy, and illegitimate. This stigmatized identity is heightened, rather than diminished, as PhD students move through their programs.

In these interviews, these women did not use words like equality, victim, discrimination, or prejudice to describe their experiences and perceptions in graduate school as they attempted to blend the academy and motherhood. Their combined voices and experiences reveal a bitter disappointment and a deep desire to be included and valued, to be given the chance to show that they should be seen and treated as legitimate citizens. The next chapter takes that disappointment and desire as motivations for actions and change by women graduate students who are mothers.
Chapter Four

Focus Group: A step toward Action

Introduction

Group One

My nervousness gets the better of me. I am still reeling from disappointment because the first focus group I planned didn’t materialize. I still taste the garlic from the two large pizzas I bought for that meeting. I ate them by myself. I gently lay out the Doritos, the water and sodas, plus the paper plates and napkins I also bought for the first group. I didn’t buy pizza this round, because I didn’t want to risk eating them all by myself.

I strategically place two tape recorders at different sides of the table just in case something goes wrong with one of them. I also arm myself with a notepad and pens for field notes purposes. One important lesson I took away from my journalism courses as an undergrad is to always have a backup plan.

With the conference room prepared, I anxiously pace the hallway looking for signs of my participants. I cannot help but notice that my palms are sweating. I attach printouts of signs with arrows pointing to the reception area of the Communication department outside the elevators and close to the stairs in the building. My participants have never been to the site of the focus group meeting before. I emailed them directions, but this is not the easiest campus to navigate. A few minutes before the 2 p.m. scheduled meeting, Jessica walks into the reception area where I finally decided to sit and wait rather than pace the hallways. “Hi. How are you?” I greet her happily.
“I have been good. How have you been?” she asks.

“I have been doing well, actually,” I respond.

“Has anyone else showed up?” she inquires.

“No, not yet. Four of my participants promised they will be here. I hope they make it. No one showed up for the first planned group,” I say.

“Really? I am so sorry,” Jessica says apologetically.

“Oh, no. That’s okay. I am working around your schedules. So it is whenever you could spare the time to talk with me. Childcare issues came up, which I totally understand. I am grateful that you are here today. Let’s go to the conference room,” I say. I lead the way to the conference room, where Jessica and I sit and chitchat about our kids, while we wait for the other participants.

A few minutes later, Samantha walks into the conference room pushing a stroller with her daughter. On her right shoulder, she carries a baby bag from which diapers and toys protrude. “Hey, sorry to be late,” she says enthusiastically.

Oh, I reflect, I am so glad I don’t carry around that cumbersome stroller anymore. My son is old enough to ride in a lightweight, much smaller stroller. I remember rejoicing the day we made the switch. Samantha, however, appears to effortlessly navigate the small space in the room.

“Hello, good to see you. I am glad that you are here,” I respond.

“Samantha, this is Jessica. Jessica, this is Samantha.”

“Oh, we know each other, “Samantha and Jessica announce in unison.

“Really? How do you know each other?” I ask because neither of their faces’ light up with recognition when Samantha walked into the room. In addition, Samantha takes a seat on
the other side of the table rather than next to Jessica.

“Amy is on her way,” Samantha informed me. “How many more people are going to be here?” Samantha asks.

“Besides Amy, one other woman said she would try to be here,” I reply.

Just as Samantha offers her daughter a toy, her cell phone rings. “Hey,” she says to the person on the other end. “I was just calling to see if you got here before me. Don’t go to mass communication. It’s communication.” I chuckle because so many people confuse the two departments. Almost simultaneously, Amy pushes her head into the conference room. She is still on the phone talking with Samantha. Everyone laughs.

“Hi cutie pie,” Amy greets Samantha’s daughter. Amy and Samantha are friends. I remember Samantha saying during the one-on-one interview that she and Amy plan to trade babysitting hours during the week. That way, they both can get work done.

Amy hasn’t participated in the one-on-one interview to date. We scheduled before, but she couldn’t make the time. That day I remember waiting in my office to talk with her when she hurriedly came by carrying her bag with books, which weighed her shoulder down. “I am so sorry, but I have to cancel our meeting. My babysitter can’t come this evening so I have to get home right away. Could we reschedule?”

“Sure, I will email you to schedule a time and day. I really appreciate you coming all the way over here to let me know,” I swallow my disappointment while realizing that the outcome of this dissertation depends on the schedules of my participants.

“No problem. I just got out of class. I didn’t want you to sit and wait for me and I didn’t show up. I will talk with you soon then.”

I tried several times to reschedule with Amy, but to no avail. I am surprised that she
actually shows up for the focus group meeting. I believe that Samantha had something to do with it (Amy didn’t end up participating in the one-on-one interview at all).

“How have you been?” Amy turns her attention away from Samantha’s daughter to Jessica. She too knows Jessica.

“I am okay. How is your kid?”

“He is doing so well. He is discovering all these new things. He said dada.”

“Isn’t it amazing that they always say “dada” first? You would think that their first words will be “mama” because they more time with us, but no, it is always dada,” Samantha observes.

“That is so true,” I chime.

“I think it has to do with the phonation,” Samantha adds. “Dada is easier to say than mama.”

“That’s so unfair,” Amy remarks.

We continue chatting for a few minutes about the neat tricks our kids perform when Samantha explains that she parked at the meter, which runs out in about two hours. She doesn’t have a parking permit. “I get a ticket each time I come on campus these days,” she says.

“Well, let’s begin.”

*Group Two*

Two days later, I wait for my participants to arrive. This time is different. My nervousness has subsided. I am also excited by the outcome of the previous group meeting. I have no anxiety that the participants for this round of meeting wouldn’t show up. For the most part, I believe that good things happen in pairs. Nothing will go wrong today. I set up the conference room with tape recorder and the chips and drinks that remained from the last
meeting, and I reattach my signs to the walls. I sit and wait in the reception area.

Katy is the first to arrive. I watch while she strolls toward the conference room as she talks on her cell phone. As she approaches the room, she stops and continues her conversation for approximately ten minutes. I keep time on my cell phone. I am not bothered by Katy’s pace because she is fifteen minutes early.

While Katy stands in front of the department’s reception area, Claire walks in hurriedly with her two-year-old daughter in tow. “Hope you don’t mind,” she says, “but I had to bring her with me.”

“Absolutely not. Her presence will make the meeting more interesting. One of the participants brought her baby with her when we met two days ago. It was fun. Every now and then we stopped working and played with her. She enjoyed it just as much as we did.”

“How did that meeting go anyway?”

“It went well. We discussed a lot of issues.”

“I am looking forward to this one and to meeting and talking with other women like us. The more I think about it, nobody is going to help us, but ourselves.”

At this point Katy ends her phone conversation and joins us. I introduce the two of them and show them to the conference room. We barely have a chance to chat when Emily and Tammy both walk in. I beam with happiness. This one is definitely happening! I should have brought pizza.

I introduce the participants to each other. Claire, the most vocal and the boldest of the women, immediately takes charge and starts talking with the other participants about their kids, majors, and childcare situation. I chuckle watching her in action. It is not surprising that Claire turns out to be the leader in her focus group. I envy her social skills. I wish it is that easy for me.
to interact with people I am meeting for the first time. I reflect on my social anxiety, which at
times is debilitating. I watch as the women show signs of relaxation as Claire works to lighten
the atmosphere. By the official start of the meeting, we are all laughing and chatting with each
other. We even include Claire’s daughter in our side conversation. I note how amazingly verbal
she is for her age.

These focus group meetings were attempts to spur discussion about the status of
graduate students who are moms, to get participants thinking about their needs, and to
provide them with a group setting where they could work together to devise a plan
toward action that may help meet some of those needs.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how focus group as a methodology
moves beyond interviewing to create a space for collective, feminist action. Here I
provide a brief overview of focus group as a methodological choice, describe the
procedures involved in recruiting and executing the focus group, look at focus group for
its role in action research, and outline the challenges of this method used in this study. In
this setting, participants quickly identified their first and most important need: childcare.
Their second need was partner support. As the discussions ensued, the groups practiced
feminist action research: the work they created was collaborative, it was about women
and their lives, and it aimed to bring about change. The chapter ends with an outline of
the plan the focus group developed and my own sense of hope that was born and nurtured
among these women.

Overview of Focus Groups

In retrospect, the questions and issues addressed in the focus group sessions could
have been answered in the one-on-one interviews. However, I wanted to challenge
myself to go beyond the one-on-one interview method to provide the participants with a space to work and talk with each other. From the onset, I planned to use the focus group as a method because of its beneficial uses to generate knowledge about issues, to identify and assess needs, and to brainstorm solutions to those needs. This intent was fueled when several of the participants expressed an interest in finding women who were in their situation to talk with and possibly support each other. For these women, support was hard to find at the site of this study.

Kreuger (1988) defines focus groups as small, special groups comprised of participants who share commonalities relating to the research purpose. According to Kreuger, a focus group is a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (1988, p.18). During the focus group, the researcher’s job is to create a permissive environment that fosters different perceptions without pressure to answer specific questions (Krueger, 1988). Therefore, the participants are the main focus, rather than the interviewer/moderator of the group. This characteristic makes focus groups non-hierarchical. The non-hierarchical nature of focus groups along with its frequent use to study minority groups, its potential as a tool for action research. Its value as a form of consciousness-raising makes focus group a good methodological choice for feminist research (Wilkinson, 1999).

Characteristics of focus groups such as its flexibility, cost efficiency, speed of results, validity, and ability to capture real-life data make its use an excellent alternative or a complement to the interview method (Kreuger, 1988). As a complement to the one-to-one interview, focus groups allow the researcher to probe issues that came up during the interview (Morgan, 1988). According to Morgan (1998a), the use of focus group is a good methodological choice when the purpose of
the study is to identity problems that need addressing. Krueger (1998) identifies needs assessment and feedback to administrators as uses of focus groups. The author outlines examples of focus group studies that were used to accomplish those goals. For example, the author cites a 1986 study conducted to determine the needs and to assess the morale of United Methodist ministers. The focus group interviews revealed that the ministers were experiencing “self-doubts and loneliness.” In addition, their spiritual growth was lacking. Many of them said they needed “pastoral care for themselves and their families” (DeVogel, 1986, p. 1150, as cited in Krueger, 1988, p. 33).

Another example of the utility of focus group study for needs assessment was done by the Minnesota Board of Vocational Technical Education to assess reasons for the decline in enrollment in their agricultural programs. They discovered that potential students preferred personal invitations over promotional flyers, knowledgeable and practical instructors, and relevant courses. Implementation of the recommendations resulted in increased enrollment (Peterson & Migler, 1987, as cited in Krueger, 1988, p. 32).

Procedures

According to Knodel (1993), the purpose of a focus group dictates its design. I had hoped to group participants into three small groups of fours (not to exceed five) and have that same group participate in two focus group meetings. This would have resulted in a total of six focus groups because I had anticipated at least 12 participants for the entire study. I desired small groups because of the interactive nature of focus groups. Plus, I had hoped to spend at least an hour on each session and to get the women involved and talking as much as possible. I had to keep in mind that my participants were juggling several responsibilities. Asking them to set aside more than 90 minutes of their time during any one sitting to meet with me would have been unreasonable. Because of available time, I chose to hold mini focus groups (Greenbaum, 1993;
Edmunds, 1999) compared to a full group of 8-10 or sometimes 12 people. In that way, participants had more time to contribute to the meeting than they would have had I engaged in a full focus group for the allotted time. In addition, mini focus groups are more feasible to recruit (Edmunds, 1999). If I had designed the group in such a way that all my participants to meet at the same time, I would still be waiting for that time that would be convenient to everyone. I have no regrets about designing mini-focus groups; although one participant in group one, Amy, remarked that she wishes there were more people at the meeting to help figure out a plan for action.

During the one-on-one interview, I reminded the participants about the focus group meeting, which I explained as an opportunity to meet other graduate students/ moms and to discuss and assess needs. When the participants expressed their interest in participating in the study, most of them agreed to participate in each step. From the onset, Zara informed me that she couldn’t participate in the focus group meetings because she suffers from group anxiety. After she read the recruitment poster that explained that participants would be asked to attend and participate in focus group meetings, she said that she was willing to participate in the one-to-one interview, but not the focus group. I agreed because she was genuinely interested in participating in the study. In addition, I didn’t want to miss the opportunity to interview her. She was in a department that is traditionally male and where women still represent a very small minority of the student population. In addition, the focus group was not a stated requirement of the study.

Because all the members in group one knew each other, the roundtable introductions were unnecessary and skipped. After the chit-chat in the first group and the introductions in the second group, I thanked the participants for showing up and explained the purpose of the
meeting to them. This was just a matter of formality and served to remind them of the reason for
being there. The purpose for the meeting was already stated in the recruitment flyer the
participants received and reviewed and in the consent forms they signed. My intro read like this:

Good afternoon and welcome. I appreciate the effort you made to be here to talk with
me a second time. I will not be able to complete this project without you. The purpose of
today’s discussion is to identify what graduate students who are moms need, how these
needs vary, and what can be done at the departmental and university level, in the home
and by us to fulfill those needs. You are here because you are a graduate student who is
also a mom. There is no right or wrong answer to the questions. In fact, the questions
which I am about to hand you are guides to help the discussion along. Do not feel
obligated to strictly adhere to them. Feel free to offer and share your point of view even
if it is different from the other group members. Consider this a conversation. Please help
yourself to the snacks and drinks. I anticipate this would take no more than 90 minutes.
Again, thank you for your time. (Based on Krueger & Casey, 2000)

I then handed each participant a focus group schedule. This schedule was included in the
recruitment flyer. These questions were as follows:

1. What do graduate students/moms need?

2. How do these needs change depending on—partner help (or its lack), age of
children, number of children?

3. Is there a need for change in terms of how university policies, departmentally,
and domestically in terms of how grad students/mothers are perceived?
4. How much attention and change is needed—institutionally (university policies), domestically (at home negotiated with kids, partners, support system), departmentally?

5. How can (some of) these changes be enacted through some form of collective action?

When the meetings ended, I thanked the groups for participating, I summarized what was said, asked if there was anything else we missed. In addition, I made copies of the summary, which I handed to the group members.

*Inside the Focus Group Meetings*

Focus group involves collective activity (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Litosseliti, 2003). According to Litosseliti (2003), focus group is “used with an emphasis on intervention and observation” (p. 2). Edmunds (1999) and Frey and Fontana (1993) identify brainstorming as a use for focus group especially when it comes to conceptualizing solutions for a problem. Edmunds states that focus group as a methodology has the potential to provide “fresh insights…and an excellent forum for generating creative ideas” (p. 4). It is through those interactions that deep levels of meanings emerge and important connections and identification of expressions and meanings are made, where participants react and build upon responses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Once the meetings were underway, in both groups, the women immediately started talking about needs and wants and how to go about achieving those. For group one:

Samantha: I was thinking about what we could do…how about if we write a proposal to [the president of the university, who] has kids…?

Amy: You mean understanding people?

Jessica: Some good that will do…but still makes sense to write it. I am thinking that if
we trade babysitting hours

For group two, the number one concern was also childcare.

Claire: A lot of my issues are really different to other graduate students because I am also a stay-at-home mom… It’s tough having one income…My son is in the Voluntary Pre-K program, but I keep my daughter at home.

Katy: Yeah, that’s why we should form some sort of informal networks with childcare or something like that… I know from speaking to a lot of moms that people rely on a lot of informal care.

Tammy: I think it would be great to have a room on campus work with our schedules

Claire: Yeah, just make it easier…like in the Student Union…it would be really great if there was a family room….if anything we get to do academics or just sit and have coffee

Emily: Just coming here today is one step. We need to find each other, put signs up, but then we need to find the time…. Time again is a barrier but not an impossibility.

Focus Group and Action Research

Focus group as a method to gather knowledge about an issue and assess needs might be one step in the larger cycle of action research. According to Madriz (2000) “focus groups have a lot to offer social researchers interested in building new paradigms of social research and promoting social change” (p. 840). Puchta and Potter (2004) state that focus groups can be used in participatory and action research, with the intent to empower and to foster social change. One example of such research was a project they conducted to identify possible solutions that could assist Hispanic students in a community college to overcome barriers to success (Padilla, 1993; Puchta & Potter, 2004). Padilla (1993) and her assistants found that the Hispanics students experienced institutional barriers in the form of an
admission process that excluded them, lack of mentors, classroom and instructional
barriers, environmental barriers outside of campus such as lack of support and
understanding from family members, financial barriers in that most of the students came
from low income families and could hardly afford to attend college, and personal
barriers such as low self-esteem, lack of goals, and so forth.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) define action research as:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing
in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory
worldview…. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice,
in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of
pressing concern to people, and more generally flourishing of individual persons
and their communities. (p. 1)

According to Dick (1999), action research is research that pursues “action (or
change) and research (or understanding) at the same time.” Dick goes on to argue that
action research uses “a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and
reflection and the later cycle, continuously refining methods, data and interpretation in
the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles.” Dick thus lists the
characteristics of action research as being “emergent…as understanding increases,
itative,” “participative,” and “qualitative.” In its participative form, “change is usually
easier to achieve when those affected by the change are involved” (Dick, 1999). Brydon-
Miller, Greenwood & Maguire (2003), like Dick, address the participative/collaborative
nature of action research. They state that “one of the tenets of action research is that
research that is conducted without a collaborative relationship with the relevant
stakeholders is likely to be incompetent” (p.25). This judgment that in itself I think is privileges a form and manner of research over another. Cunningham (1993) concurs with the collaborative part of this statement. He states that “effective action research requires real life problems, collaborative relationships, and grounded concepts” (p. 262). For participation in focus groups, Morgan (1998a) claims that “focus groups work best when what interests the research team is equally interesting to the participants in the groups” (p. 10).

My participative role in these focus group meetings is unique because 1) I am a graduate student who is also a mom 2) I need the data for my dissertation research. For me, the stakes are high. But so are they for the women who participated in this study and those that will follow. The women who participated in the focus group meetings did so because they really believed that being a part of this study would be helpful to them and other women who would follow in their footsteps. One participant, Samantha remarked, “I made the special effort to be here because I just got accepted in the PhD program and would need all the help and support possible to make it through.” When I listen to women like Samantha, who just want to have some real choices, unlike the woman in Belkin (2003) study about the opt-out revolution (discussed in chapter one), I am prepared to take on “the mantle of womanhood” to fight for and struggle along with my sisters even though I may not know them.

In terms of feminist research and its relation to action research, if one considers the viewpoint that the “personal is political,” then the participants in this study recognize that they have a role to play in changing the outcomes of their educational experience and gender roles and expectations by conceptualizing solutions that will assist them to form a grass-roots organization of sorts.

As one thread of the conversation in one focus group meeting shows:

Claire: “No one is going to take notice and recognize how difficult it is for
graduate students who are moms…. We have to do it ourselves.

Katy: It is our responsibility. We knew what we getting into when we decided to become mothers, right?

Claire: I always wanted to have kids. I knew what the environment was like in terms of being pregnant in academia….I mean, look at our professors. The high powered ones and the ones who publish the most and get the most respect around here are childless.

(Nods of agreement.)

Emily: Well, technically I didn’t know what I was getting into. I thought I was in academia and that it would be different being that they teach about equality and all, but it is not….

Tammy: I wasn’t trying to become pregnant…. As soon as I found out, I knew it would have been a long road to travel. I feel the pain of every woman who decides to have children and be in grad school. It was a painful experience for me.

Claire: How was it painful?

Tammy: I hate to relive those moments, but for starters, my program lacks flexibility. Some of the professors were insensitive,

Emily: I share your pain. I am a part-time student today because of professors who just didn’t get it. Of course, they don’t have kids so…

Shirlan: At the same time there are professors who don’t have kids, but are understanding and supportive. Maybe…

Claire: Yes, but for the most part, from my experience, male professors and female professors without children are the most judgmental and least supportive.
Katy: That’s why we are here now, right? We need to find our own support, work together to make this situation better for us and the women who will follow.

Claire: In the spirit of feminism…

(Everyone chuckles. Claire turns to her daughter who is trying to get her attention by tugging on her skirt. The rest of the women used this opportunity to take a sip of water.)

This stage of this dissertation research can be classified as containing attributes of feminist action research in that it has a collaborative stance, it is about women, and its aim is to bring about change. However, the nature of the group differentiates it from other forms of feminist action research like Michelle Fine’s research with oppressed youths within the educational system, and Salina (2000) research with women in prisons. This project is unique in that it is research with an elite group of women, who are highly educated and who, some may argue, are not oppressed. In fact, the participants themselves never used the word “oppressed” to describe their situation. I think they would rather discuss the power they hold in their hands to “do something about it.” They were empowering themselves, which is a key element to feminist research. As Lather (1991) states, empowerment is a process one undertakes for oneself; it is not something done ‘to’ or ‘for’ someone” (p. 4). Lather went on to point out that this empowerment can also take place collectively. When Paolo Freire looked at the oppressed and enacted his literacy program, he instructed the members that they were the “makers of culture”, that they look at themselves as “producers” and members of society and escape “apathy and conformism” (Macedo & Araujo Freire, foreword to Freire, 1998, p. xi)). The women in this study shared a level of consciousness to the extent that they believed that they can work toward creating a culture where women like them can have a fair chance. Take this
thread, for example.

Shirlan: So where do we go from here?

Emily: I am really leaning toward the babysitting co-op idea.

Katy: I agree with you.

Tammy: That is such a good idea…in that way we could help each other get some work done.

Claire: It would be nice to go to the library without having to take my kids with me for a change. I would like that very much.

Shirlan: I know, right? When I take my son to the library I end up chasing him through the shelves instead. But speaking of a babysitting co-op, I did some research and found out that Princeton has a co-op system for graduate students who are moms. They also have policies where grad students who are expecting moms can take the semester off and still get paid…

Claire: You’re kidding!

Tammy: No way! We need to get in touch with them to find out how they did it.

Emily: I also think we should have a website with resources for grad moms

Claire: We could pay someone to do that….

Shirlan: My husband will do it and we won’t have to pay him anything

Claire: Good, then how soon could he start working on it?

Shirlan: I am guessing as soon as possible, but let me check with him…

While this dissertation doesn’t fulfill all the requirements of action research as defined, it develops a theme that encourages and recommends change that requires a certain degree of participatory action. As I transcribed the tapes and listened to the voices
of the women who volunteered their time to participate in this study, I realized that focus
group as a method can drive action research. Now, the full outcome of this study is yet to
be determined. It will require the cooperation and support of my participants, their
families and the university community, and an extended period of time to implement (one
to two years) for there to be observable outcomes. This, however, doesn’t negate its
potential to be classified as a step in the action research process. According to
Cunningham (1993), “research is the seed for change and the eventual roots to sustain it” (p. 262). My
participants’ desire to do something about their situation (McNiff, 1996) and to influence
change within the university setting classifies this portion of the project as one step in the
action research project.

Challenges

Although a proven, effective methodology, according to Krueger (1988), focus groups
have limitations such as less control for the researcher, difficulty of analyzing and coding data,
troublesome differences between groups, scheduling difficulties, and the need to find an
environment conducive to productive talk.

Putting a focus group together was not as easy as I thought it would be. Getting a
group of mothers and one mother-to-be together was the most challenging step in this
study. Before I began each one-on-one interview, I again informed the participants about
the focus group meetings that will follow. After all the face-to-face interviews were
completed, I emailed my participants to first remind them about the focus group meeting,
and then to request list of days and time that work best for them to meet. The email read
like this:
Hello everyone:

Hope all is well with you.

This is a follow-up to my dissertation study about graduate students who are mothers at the site of this study. I am in the process of scheduling times for the focus group meeting(s).

If you have already graduated, I still welcome your presence and contribution. If you have moved out of this area and can't meet, feel free to send me feedback via email.

Let's shoot to meet sometime in March or April. We can even do weekends or evenings. Children are welcome!!! Send me your busy schedules if you wish to participate further in this study. (If you haven't participated yet, then let's schedule an interview :).)

Thank you much for your wonderful help.

Sincerely,

Shirlan Williams

Everyone responded with time slots that would have been best for them. Even Zara who said she couldn’t participate in the focus groups responded saying that she still couldn’t meet because of her apprehension. Edmunds acknowledges group apprehension as one of the difficulties of focus groups. The author writes, “Not only must you identify and contact your research target, but you must convince them to, in most cases, drive to an unfamiliar site to share their opinions with a group of total strangers. This can appear somewhat daunting…” (p. 7). Although she had expressed her desire to me from the beginning, I still included her in the correspondence to ascertain that I afforded every participant an opportunity to participate in every step of the study. In addition, I selfishly hoped that she had
come to terms with her apprehension and had changed her mind.

Based on the times I received, I chose three time slots that fit everyone’s schedule with
the exception of one participant whose work schedule didn’t allow her to meet in any allotted
time. She was willing to meet on weekends or during the evening hours, though. I was surprised
that this participant showed such interest in meeting with me. By that point she had graduated
and had a fulltime job. Unlike the other participants and me, who had vested interest in the
outcome of this project, this participant only obvious benefit was helping women who have been
in her situation.

Three women promised to show up to one session, four to another, and four to another.
As mentioned in the introduction, one planned session didn’t materialize. The women cancelled
at the last minute for various reasons—a sick child, babysitting woes, and just plain old couldn’t
make it. The women who promised to show up and didn’t, expressed interest in meeting in the future
if I decide to convene more meetings.

Of the two sessions held, the first session went well. Three women showed up.
Therefore, including myself, four people participated in that group.

Four women participated in the second session—including myself, five participants. I
ended up with seven women participating in the focus groups excluding myself. Group one met
for 92 minutes in the formal setting (members stayed back and chatted a little), and group two
lasted about 84 minutes.

The meetings were tape recorded. For the first meeting which materialized, I utilized
two recorders on both sides of the rectangular table in a conference room at the university. I had
hoped that what one recorder missed the other would have picked up. After I played the tapes
after the meeting, the sound quality on one was extremely poor that I was not able to discern
what was being said or who was speaking on the tape—this was hard enough to do with the
good tape. Therefore, for the second meeting, I ditched the recorder with the problem and used
only one for the next meeting. In addition, I took more detailed notes.

Organizing and executing the focus groups involved some decision-making on my part.
Knodel (1993) writes that the design of focus groups requires flexibility. Being flexible means
that the researcher doesn’t have to drag out focus group sessions or hold more than required to
gain the necessary insights. When I conceptualized the study, I had hoped that I would have two
focus group meetings per group of participants, but decided against that once the first round of
meetings was completed. I didn’t see the need to hold another one because as far as I was
concerned, there wouldn’t have been sufficient time between putting the plans we have come
with in action and the group meetings. The plans for action the participants brainstormed require
some work and will take time to implement. I believe it will be better to hold a focus group after
the participants, departments and universities test the plans to determine their practicability and
how much change they could bring about. A focus group after such testing and maybe
implementation would be more beneficial to assess how the needs are being met and if the plans
of action are being taken in the right directions. Therefore, due to the time frame of this study, I
made the decision that another focus group meeting was unwarranted for now.

Scheduling difficulties also played a huge role in this decision. To get the participants
together again would have been difficult. Plus, I felt that we have done the best we could have
for now until we started to implement the solutions we brainstormed.

If I had to do it all over again, I would hold this focus group meeting on the Internet.
Because my participants’ schedules varied mostly because they were responsible for childcare
and couldn’t control when their child(ren) became ill. Because they were juggling work, school,
and other responsibilities, they would have been a prime group for Internet focus group meetings. Had I thought of that before the meetings, I would have used that option instead of attempting to hold face to face meetings. In fact, using the Internet as a meeting place was brought up during the focus group meetings. Edmunds (1999) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of Internet focus group. The advantages of such groups include speed, flexibility, convenience and comfort, anonymity (maybe the apprehensive participant would have participated in an online discussion), and increased access to hard to reach participants. The disadvantages include the limited nature of the focus group topics/discussions, lack of visual cues, absence or the limited nature of group dynamics are limited, risk of confidentiality, etc. While I recognize the disadvantages to using Internet focus groups, I think the advantages to my participants would have outweighed the disadvantages.

All my participants had access to the Internet making it an even more or just as viable an option. I would have also designed the meeting in such a way that the participants didn’t have to respond to each question during one sitting. They would have been free to respond to the responses of others, start new threads, etc.

Another challenge was transcribing the tapes from the meetings. Because the conversations took place in a group setting, conversations overlapped. Hence, it was difficult at times to discern who was speaking when more than one person spoke simultaneously. The tape recordings were also not of the best quality.

A Pleasant Surprise

I was worried that the quality and utility of the interaction that occurred in group one’s meeting would have been compromised because the participants were not strangers. I concur with Morgan & Kreuger (1993) who state that group participants who know or are acquainted
with one another may not be such a bad idea and that researchers should not bound themselves to such stringent rules at all times. Edmunds (1999) acknowledges that in groups where participants are not acquainted, their “responses are not independent; they are generally offered in the context of a group’s conversation. As a result, participants may respond differently regarding a specific issue than if they had been discussing the same topic…during a telephone or one-on-one interview” (p.7). For this project, I don’t believe it mattered whether the participants knew each other or not because the issue at hand or the experiences the group shared were more important. Morgan (1998b) writes that when the issue of whether to recruit strangers or acquaintances for a focus group arises, the first question should be if the researcher/moderator has a choice. If there is a choice, “then the question becomes ‘what difference does it make?’” (p. 67). In this study, in that one group, it made for easier flowing conversation, and less time spent on introductions and bonding.

**Action Steps**

The following are actions the participants agreed to pursue:

1. **A student organization.** The graduate students who are moms could form and register a student organization on campus, which would address their specific needs and concerns. Any on campus organization requires at least ten people who are registered at the university. The participants thought that there would not be a problem finding at least ten people to join. Everyone doesn’t have to be a mother. Their only concerns were that they would need “committed people.”

2. **Space to meet.** They could then petition the university for a room on campus so that graduate students who are moms could run a co-op of sorts. The moms would be responsible for running the co-op where they exchange hours for childcare during the day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. There would be slots of time at different days of the week, to be determined, available that moms will fill
based on their schedules. This would work by having one or two moms in the room with the kids at any given time while the others attend classes or engage in study and research and writing time. From the one-on-one interview and now the focus group, finding the bonus time to get “work done” was a big issue for the participants.

While the participants could run this co-op out of their homes, they believed campus would be a more central and convenient location. In that way, the participants won’t have to travel far to drop off their kid(s) and can be at the library or departments when their kids are in co-ops. Moms won’t have to worry about making their homes “extra safe and clean too” to accommodate the other kids.

This room would be equipped with a refrigerator for keeping foods, liquids and medication cool, toys, cognitive and behavioral games, sleeping mats, playpens, and anything else that the children may need.

Keeping the room clean was a big concern. A conversation in group one went like this

Amy: How good is the maintenance?
Samantha: Do they vacuum everyday?
Jessica: From experience, we might have to leave them a note on the trash can or door…
Shirlan: Yeah, otherwise they won’t vacuum all semester long.

The participants also voiced concerns regarding keeping the toys clean to prevent the kids from becoming ill. To prevent this, at the end of each time slot, the parents and assistants would be responsible for disinfecting the toys. There would be a log available so that the next group would know what was cleaned or not.

3. Pay childcare education students to assist. There was a concern over what would happen during times when moms were not available and even when they were available, how many children should they be in charge of during any time slot. A possible solution would be to ask juniors and
seniors who are enrolled in child development programs and pay each of them $10-15 per hour. This money would come from a pool the graduate students who are mom would put together—maybe a small fee for registering each child per semester. Asking these students to volunteer their services for extra credit was also discussed. This, however, would require a feasible solution such as talking with professors in those departments to gain their support. Professors would have to agree to reward their students with extra credit for volunteering. Once these professors pledge their support, they would then decide what constitutes sufficient volunteer hours to be rewarded with extra credit and how this extra credit would be rewarded.

4. Provide sick care. If this service would mean that if a student’s kid was sick with a minor ailment like the cold or some stomach flu and cannot attend daycare, for instance, then rather than that students having to stay home and miss classes or writing/reading time, she could take her kid to the person in charge of sick care for that day or week.

5. A website. Build a website where graduate students could access resources. This would most likely be a secure site. Members (graduate students who are moms at the site of this study) would have full posting rights of pertinent resources. They would also have access to private discussion forums. There would also be a public forum where nonmembers could visit and hold relevant discussions.

6. Publicize. Add resources to the graduate school and departments’ that offer graduate degrees orientation material. This could be in the form of recruiting information (any organization on campus needs at least 10 members), links to resources for women students, especially graduate students who are mothers. A link to the website would be part of that information. One conversation in group two went like this:

Emily: I think we could make a difference…
Katy: This is something we might want to get out to the professors so they could tell their students during orientation.

Tammy: Yeah, build the website…we can put stuff up there and have them be a part of that [orientation material]

7. Support group. Form a support group among themselves. That group could meet maybe once a week to critique, read each others work and hold discussions. The goals of this level of support are to motivate each other to maintain her sanity and complete her degree.

8. Involve top administration. Write a proposal to the president of the university, who happens to be a mom herself. Maybe “she will be sympathetic” and make some accommodations for graduate students who are moms. One participant remarked that it the university has the resources to make changes to improve the experiences of all its students. It just has to have a “willingness to spend the time and money to implement [those changes].”

The participants voluntarily assigned themselves a list of tasks to accomplish. These included talking with administrators and professors; looking into legislation regarding childcare laws in the state; and talking with the graduate student organization on campus that recently received a lounge in the student center to find out the procedure involved in securing such a room; building a website that targets graduate students who are moms; and even contacting Princeton and Stanford to inquire about their programs for graduate students who are moms (see action steps below). We were hoping to work on those plans and try implementing our own program as soon as possible—possibly within the year. To date, most of the participants have done their share of the investigative task. The website is under construction. However, I have decided to put the project of setting up a co-op on hold until I finish writing the dissertation. I believe that it
is a huge undertaking, which requires a lot more research and planning, support from administration, and commitment from those involved.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a brief overview of focus group as a methodological choice. It described the procedures involved in recruiting and executing the focus groups, considered focus groups as step in action research, outlined the challenges of using focus groups as a method, and outlined solutions to problems that impact the experiences and perceptions of the group.

If the one-on-one interviews helped identify that the major problems for graduate students who are moms, then the focus groups gave the participants a venue to further discuss issues they face and to devise possible actions to effect change. In short, the focus group meetings provided greater insight into what were deemed necessary to make the experiences at that university a positive experience for graduate students who are mothers. The main goal of my participants, which has been elusive at times, is to complete the degree. Therefore, my participants tended to lean toward solutions that would assist them in achieving that goal.

In spite of all the research pertaining to focus groups, their purposes, how to design, facilitate and evaluate their outcomes, nothing prepared me to balance my roles as researcher and participant. I recognize the benefit of being a participant in a non-threatening environment, where the nonhierarchical nature of the focus group prevailed. I imagine that the outcome of these meetings might have been different if they were facilitated by faculty, staff, or administration. Because I shared their experiences as graduate students who are moms, the women felt free to open up and share more than they might have shared otherwise. Unlike my participants, however, I didn’t experience
that complete freedom. I found myself in a quandary. Rather than allowing myself to participate naturally in the process, sometimes I found myself being cautious because I did not want to impose on the process and on the participants. I exercised control over the process to ascertain that my vision didn’t become theirs. If we share the same vision, I hope they arrived to that point with freewill and not with my prompting. I admit that when I participated in the focus group meetings, as a graduate student/mom, I had my own ideas of changes I would like to see enacted. However, as a researcher, I relinquished control so that I didn’t utilize the focus group meetings as my personal crusade, but to make sure it fulfilled its intent. Therefore, throughout the meetings I held back, because I felt that in the role of the researcher that it was not my place to begin conversation threads that came up with suggestions. However, whenever the other participants came up with ideas, I pitched in and gave my opinions. Some of those ideas were similar to those I had in mind: to form a co-op, and to make information for graduate students who are parents part of departmental and university-wide orientation material.

Based on the meetings, I believe that focus groups that promote collective action can generate hope, especially when hope is encouraged through success stories. During the one-on-one interview and even in email correspondences thereafter, some of my participants remarked how watching me make progress gives them hope that one day they too would be inspired. I am afraid that some of them attended and participated in the focus group meetings because of that hope. What my participants did not know, however, is like them, I see myself as an academic failure—I didn’t live up to expectations because I became a mother. This way of seeing myself was elevated when a former professor
wrote in an email to me: “As it is, it appears there is only minimal effort at publication and so it looks like you are not a serious scholar. You are one of the best writers I know, so it is very ironic that you have not yet published anything [I had published one article then]. What is holding you back?” Even though the text in this email message haunts me, like my participants, I had my own hope. It was a hope that the participants and myself would have been able to work together to bring about change for us and for women to follow. I left the meetings with a vigor and hope for the future graduate students who are mothers that I had lost after interviewing a few of the women who generously volunteered their time to speak with me. The participants were equally optimistic for their futures once they recognized that they were not alone in their quests. Their eagerness to devise solutions, to become agents in the journey toward real change, to positively influence their experiences within the university, demonstrate how much is at stake for these women and others to follow as they attempt to balance graduate school and motherhood. The unintended benefit of the focus group meetings was a kind of support group of sorts for women who desired to be part of an academic community and to obtain their degrees.

At the same time, however, I worry about what happens to that hope once the meetings dismantle and the participants depart from that collective environment and mentality, return to the realities of their lives, and encounter obstacles that impede their progress? Would the hope that was generated in the meetings dissipate and lead to the participants again regarding themselves as failures? Here is where action research in its cyclical nature should step in to ascertain that the research doesn’t end when the participants walk out of the meeting, but they are engaged in every step of the project.
The focus group meetings left me with uncertainties about balancing my roles as researcher and participant, but generated hope—hope that change will happen.

The following and final chapter of this dissertation examines how the university, departments, advisors, students themselves, and family and friends can work together to make graduate school a positive experience for graduate students who are moms.
Chapter Five

In our Words: The Need for Support

*Introduction*

Shirlan: If you were mentoring a newly pregnant graduate student or a new graduate student who is also already a mother, what suggestions would you give her for balancing her roles as mother and student?

Emily: She has to have support….

Rachel: …Find a supportive advisor…. 

Linda: she needs to find support….not to lose sight of the goal of school.

Deb: ….support….

Shannon: You have to have help. I don’t see how you can do it without support of friends and family.

Zara: first of all, you have to get lots of support…

Tammy: You just need support.

Katy: Find people, like an advisor who supports you…

Lydia: …support…. 

Samantha: I have always had a supportive department and I think that some people do not have that luxury…. 

Jessica: Support is the key…

Claire: She can’t do it without support…Support is to be had, but she won’t find it here.

Not in my department and not on this campus…

143
The African proverb popularized by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton states that “it takes a village to raise a child.” Conversely, it takes a community of support networks to raise a graduate student who is a mom. This project has evolved over time. Four years ago my goal was to prove that being a mother in graduate school was not an immodest proposal. I desired to become a cheerleader for graduate students who are mothers. “You can do it! You can do it if you work hard enough!” I was not ready to acknowledge the fact that it takes a lot more than hard work to succeed. Completing a graduate degree requires being part of an inclusive culture that legitimates, not marginalizes, one’s presence, a support network, encouragement and perseverance. The participants in this study may have had varying experiences being moms and graduate students, but they all agree that they need support to succeed in graduate school. This is true for all graduate students, but maybe it becomes more crucial for graduate students who are moms.

This support has been hard to come by. Chapter one paints a bleak picture for women who aim to combine work on family life. Chapter two’s analysis of graduate school literature including guides, books, internet resources, and orientation material, demonstrates that this level of support doesn’t come from the discourse contained in those materials. In chapter three, the participants’ words show their struggles to negotiate discrepant roles in competing arenas that demand split devotions. The participants’ words reveal their perceptions of being made to feel like outsiders, their disappointment, despair, and fading dreams amidst sacrifices they feel compelled to make. In chapter four, there is a turn—my participants become instigators of hope—a hope that they see achievable through collective action.
Support from the University

As I embark on this journey of hope with my participants, out of curiosity and because I wanted to experience firsthand how the site of this study was addressing the issue of diversity on its campus, I attended a diversity retreat. “Empowering diverse student success: Getting in and getting out” was promised that it was:

designed to provide opportunities for new and continuing diverse graduate students to network, to participate in graduate school information forums specifically tailored to enhance your success as a graduate school at [the site of this study], and to build a positive graduate school community. (Retreat program)

The retreat targeted new and continuing graduate students on campus—a forum of sorts to welcome the new graduate students and to remind the old ones that they are thought about and have a place within the institution as part of the university’s aggressive attempt to promote diversity on campus. This retreat was divided into several sections: the registration and continental breakfast, welcome remarks from the interim assistant dean of the diverse student success department in the graduate school, the dean of graduate school, and the associate V.P. in the diversity and equal opportunity office, and the 411 from diverse students, who shared their experiences and inspirational thoughts with the audience. The audience was allowed a few minutes to pose questions to that panel, followed by a session on scholarships and fellowships. There were two workshops: building successful relationships with faculty and the politics of graduate education for diverse graduate students. The day culminated with a luncheon and closing remarks.

For the most part, the students and administrators who spoke targeted blacks and Hispanics on campus. The sessions provided information about where these targeted groups
should go and what they should do to adjust to their environment. The VP of the diversity office claimed that “true diversity is an approaching reality” and that the diverse students in the audience “are the chosen ones.” Toward the end, an associate professor, who was part of the ceremony but not an official speaker, stood and added the phrase that I have become used to by virtue of the discourse analysis in chapter two. She said, “By the way, if you are a mother…. Don’t expect to be a superwoman and have those wonderful home-cooked meals and do everything with your kids. You can’t do it all. You are not a stay at home mom.” That was both the beginning and the end of any discussion pertaining to graduate students who are mothers. I left the retreat disappointed that diversity on campus is limited to a person’s race and the color of her/his skin. Graduate students who are mothers are not included in that discourse and in the university’s diversity statement. When they are, they are a “by the way,” an exception, an afterthought.

A few months later, I had the opportunity to speak with one of the administrators present at the retreat. According to the administrator, graduate school operates on the “make-you-want-to-quit” model. Anyone who isn’t persistent will quit. She said she admired my persistence granted that I started my doctoral work pregnant. Although I respect her views, I believe more than just persistence is required in graduate school when it comes to women with children. How about support and encouragement? How about the promotion and implementation of a cultural discourse that doesn’t make graduate school a place where women are made to feel like the other? How does one persevere in a culture that she doesn’t feel a part of? How about including women and women with children in the diversity statement and mission, and policies at the university?

Better said, how about not working to make motherhood/graduate school even more
difficult? While the policies by MIT and Princeton, discussed in chapter one, are seemingly progressive in its recruitment and retention of female graduate students, the site of this study has recently attempted to embark on a new policy that would have required fulltime graduate students to enroll in 12 credits per semester. This policy was first justified as a way to get graduate students to complete their degrees faster so that they can have an edge in the workforce. This shows how out-of-touch the administration is with its student population. With my participants, at least, completing coursework in a “timely” fashion was not the issue. Rather, it was progressing beyond that point.

Alarmingly, this policy was publicized in the summer of 2006 and was set to go into effect the Fall of 2006. The email that was circulated reads:

Beginning fall 2006 **ALL** graduate assistants …**AND** all University-sponsored Fellowship recipients …will be **REQUIRED** to take 12 graduate credit hours each fall and spring semester. This is required of all… graduate assistants and University-sponsored fellows on the … Research campus. Regional campuses within the … system…can adopt this policy if they chose to do so…

During the second week of classes for fall and spring semester, an audit will be conducted to ensure that all GAs and University-sponsored fellowship recipients are enrolled in 12 graduate credit hours unless they are in their last semester of study OR have a signed contract dated before the fifth day of fall classes. **Not having available program-related course work will not be an acceptable reason for not being enrolled in 12 graduate credit hours.** Associate Deans will be notified of GAs and University-sponsored fellows not enrolled in 12 graduate credit hours and will be requested to work with the graduate students
and their programs to ensure the enrollment requirement is being met….

**Informing Graduate Assistants:** Please encourage all Graduate Assistants and University-sponsored fellowship recipients with signed contracts for fall to take 12 hours. Graduate School will be sending notices to those with signed contracts requesting they meet with their Graduate Program Director and/or advisor to determine how best to take 12 hours. …

This policy was first justified as a way to get graduate students to complete their degrees faster so that they can have an edge in the workforce. This shows how out-of-touch the administration is with its student population. With my participants, at least, completing coursework in a “timely” fashion was not the issue. Rather, it was progressing beyond that point.

Several graduate students, including the organizing chair of the graduate association union, criticized the policy calling a labor issue, an “egregious violation of GA rights.” In an email to graduate students, the graduate association union organizing chair wrote:

Though the content of this new violation is disturbing, the most pertinent issue at hand for GAs is the absence of consultation prior to instituting a procedure that clearly impacts our positions as employees for the university. This a clear abuse of our rights as academic laborers. To allow this decision to pass unchallenged sets a precedent for future, abhorrent contraventions (such as decreased stipends or loss of health benefits).

Obviously, there were labor issues at play here. Through its bargaining with the graduate association union, the university agreed to regard graduate assistants as
employees (which they are) of some sort. Therefore, this binds them to labor laws and practices. A related issue was that the undergrads would have suffered because ultimately asking graduate teaching assistants to take 12 credit hours semester would have exacerbated the time crunch. As one graduate assistant puts it, “I have no problem taking 12 credit hours. But when it comes to my education and my students’ education, mine come first” (as quoted in Marquis, 2006). Survival would have trumped service.

Amidst protest by the Graduate Assistant Union, The associate provost/graduate dean of the university defended the policy in an article in the July 20, 2006 issue of the campus newspaper. She said:

One of the things we wanted to do was provide our graduate students with as much life-long education and career planning as we possibly can. Twelve hours is becoming the national norm and we really want our students to be up there with the best in terms of being prepared and having advantages.

A revised memo was later sent via email and posted on the graduate school website “in order to clear up some of the misconceptions.” The new memo reads:

For any GA or University-sponsored fellowship recipient with a signed contract which notes the requirement of 9 graduate credit hours, the University will accept the 9 hour registration for the term specified in the signed contract. However, we request that colleges and graduate programs encourage those graduate assistants and/or fellowship recipients to register for 12 graduate credit hours. Any GA appointment paperwork initiated after the 5th day of fall classes (September 1, 2006) will need to indicate 12 graduate credit hours are required. Graduate School will change these templates as well and make them
available for you. **Templates for all contracts initiated prior to September 1, 2006 will remain at the 9 credit hours per semester – attachment Contract A.** All contracts initiated after the 5th day of classes (September 5, 2006) will be to Contract B indicating the 12 graduate credit hours.

Confusion regarding professional development seminars and degree planning:

In instances where there are no program courses available, the graduate assistant or University-sponsored fellow can take one of the following two course options that will be offered by the Graduate School:

1. CST 6935 Professional Development Seminar
2. CST 6934 Research Practices Seminar

These courses will not count toward degree requirements and will be evaluated on an S/U basis. Details regarding these courses will follow in a separate email.

The Graduate School designed these courses to provide our…students with the lifelong career skills that go beyond their programmatic educational experiences.

**Students who are able to take 12 credit hours of courses on their program plans will be able to complete their degree requirements more quickly and advance toward their career goals.** (emphasis in original)

Another memo circulated via email, September 6, 2006, states that the university has “elected to continue to make this 12 hour credit program optional through Spring semester and thereafter for the immediate future.” In that memo, the associate provost/graduate dean expresses “regret that a program designed to benefit Graduate Students was the subject of controversy….”
While this 12-hour policy, had it been made a requirement, would have only affected graduate assistants who have not been admitted to PhD candidacy and new students, it would have set a terrible precedent. It would have been a huge setback in the university’s diversity initiatives. In the welcome message to graduate students published in the university graduate student handbook, the president of the university says, “Our commitment to diversity, discovery and application of knowledge is an integral part of our scholarship and brings us closer to our goal to be the model for an engaged university” (p.1). This 12-hour policy did not reflect that commitment.

The brains behind the policy were clearly not thinking about “all” their students. Where were the female students? Women, especially those who are mothers and those who intend to start their families while in graduate school, would have been among the graduate students or potential graduate students who had most to lose. Had this policy materialized, it would have been sexist as well as classist. Requiring graduate assistants to take 12 credit hours would have omitted some people from being able to qualify for assistantships since most of the assistantships, if not all, require full time status. Now, had this policy been implemented, imagine the plight of the single mother or even married one whose options are limited. She cannot move to another city to attend a more accommodating university, but would like to acquire the training that assistantships provide in preparation for careers within the academy. Where would this policy have landed her?

Worse yet, the meager stipends that graduate assistants work for at that university cannot cover the cost of living, which includes the cost for childcare. So now, the graduate assistant would have had to spend an extra three hours per week on campus
taking an extra course, plus, another nine hours a week prepping for that extra course. That would have been 12 extra hours a graduate student who is a mother would have needed to set aside. Most of these students do not have the luxury of family assistance. Daycare is the only alternative.

This is another story. Let’s imagine that a graduate assistant receives a stipend of $1000 a month. The daycare the university contracts to serve students charges $150-$175 per week full time depending on the age of the child and $5.75 per hour part-time. (It is cheaper to actually have the child attend daycare fulltime if he/she needs care for more than 15 hours a week). This cost does not include meals or supplies. This is half of a stipend check if one is at the lower end of the scale and more than half if at the other end. The university also contracts a pre-school, which is considerably cheaper than the daycare ($90-$110 per week), but the waiting list is huge and long. I know of students who have been on that waiting list for more than a year.

Imagine if this policy had come to fruition. It would have put a mother who depends on that stipend in a bind. She cannot afford grad school without an assistantship. She desires to pursue a career in academe and needs the required training the assistantship affords. She can only receive the assistantship if she is a fulltime student. She cannot put her child in daycare because it is too expensive, and she cannot spend the extra time caring for him or her because she has to spend that extra time prepping for and sitting in an extra three hours of class per week. I believe that most women caught in that dilemma will not apply to nor enroll in graduate programs at that university. It sends the message—in no uncertain terms—that family and grad school should not be combined. While I do not expect the university to be responsible for securing childcare for its
women students’ children, it shouldn’t be their job to make the attainment of graduate
degrees and training harder than it already is for specific group of students.

Looking back at the associate provost/graduate dean’s justification and regret, I can’t help
but ask the questions, “What would have happened to the women students had this policy
materialized? Advantages for whom?” This policy certainly would not have been advantageous
to women, especially women with children and other responsibilities outside the institution. This
policy was sexist, classist, and for students of color on scholarship, racist. Most importantly for
this dissertation, this policy reflected another instance of the culture of elitist “normalcy” that
punishes, discourages, and, ultimately, excludes women who are mothers from graduate school
culture and its potential rewards. This policy is on “hold” for now and the immediate future.
However, I am certain that it will eventually become a sad reality. Hopefully, the provost of the
university and the members of the board will recognize the implications for women
embedded within that policy. I am concerned about the implication of these policies for
women students, especially graduate students who are mothers. It further demonstrates
that this university’s definition of what it means to be a normal graduate student does not
include a woman with a child. It speaks to the exclusion and punishes this group of
people.

While I do not wish to engage in a discourse of victimization here, I cannot fail to
recognize a lean toward a culture of victimization toward women in this university’s policy.
Hopefully, the associate provost of the university and the members of the board will
recognize the implications for women embedded within that policy. I am concerned about
the implication of these policies for women students, especially graduate students who
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a normal graduate student does not include a woman with a child. It speaks to the exclusion and punishes this group of people.

*The Need for Support in My Participants’ Words*

While the women recognized the need for support from the university, they didn’t use terms that conjure images of victimhood to describe their experiences within academia. Rachel said, for example, that having made the choice to be a mom “limits” her, but she “can’t blame anyone else.” Lydia said, “It is our responsibility and not anyone else’s.” In spite of their agency-taking statements, the women recognized that their sense of independence and desire to assume responsibility for their lives had their limits. They longed for support to show that they are viewed as legitimate occupants of spaces within academia. The spaces and places of support suggested by my participants begin at the beginning with orientation sessions that provide both information and opportunities to meet other mothers. The central, ever-present spaces and places of support is affordable, flexible, and accessible daycare provided by the university. University-wide policies also need to be flexible in terms of time to completion of degree and the availability of on-line classes and evening classes. My participants explained how these needs are not met, indeed, thwarted by university culture and by university policies and practices.

The participants expressed the need for a separate university-wide orientation for graduate students who are mothers. If there is such a thing, they would meet with women like them who are coming into the system and women already in the system, who are balancing family and graduate school. This orientation session would also allow the women to develop an informal support network of women with children. Zara said:

The orientation program should include a session exclusively for graduate students who are mothers. A network of such students can be formed. Further meetings will create a
platform to discuss our concerns and issues. The graduate school orientation should also provide us with useful references and other guidance that will help mothers who are graduate students.

Shannon agreed that the orientation program could, at least, suggest resources for help for graduate students who are mothers.

Over and over again, the women expressed the need for affordable daycare. The university provides daycare service with first preference going to students, but unless these students have the privilege of having extra funds, it becomes economically infeasible to enroll their kids in the university daycare. Zara said she can’t really afford to send her son to the on-campus daycare because of the cost. Therefore, to make the university a place that is inclusive and supportive of graduate students who are parents, Zara said, “I would begin at making an affordable school or daycare for the kids because we being students do not have a lot of money.”

Tammy remarked, “Childcare is extremely important. We are fortunate to take our child to campus for childcare, but it is expensive.”

Flexibility of the service offered was also a big issue. Emily commented that the daycare is “way too expensive for the services rendered.” They do not provide meals, but they are strict about drop off times. Children cannot be dropped off between 11 and 3 p.m. (lunch and naptime) because they will disrupt the clocks of the children already present. Parents could, however, pick up their children anytime during the day.

The university preschool is not really an option because of the length of time it actually takes to get one’s child on the roster. Besides the never-ending waiting list, the preschool has flexibility problems. Lydia whose daughter is enrolled in the preschool said:

Here is my peeve. Having the childcare here is a good thing, but it totally abandoned the
mission. My daughter is enrolled in the preschool.…and I have read their mission statement. It was supposed to help people like mothers and sorts, but now technically, they don’t…Technically saying they offer part-time care…it’s still on their mission statement but they don’t. You have to be fulltime then part-time. Most mothers need part-time and that are not really available. The preschool and the daycare are for middle class, upper middle class…..

Support from the university can come in the form of the policies it chooses to enact. Some of these include time to completion of degree and degree requirements. The types of policies enacted and how they are enacted define the level of commitment the university has in educating all its citizens and providing each one with a fair and equal shot. As soon as a student defends his or her proposal, the clock starts running. There is a stopping the clock option, which allows for a year of leave, but is that enough? Rachel said:

The system is not structured around parents at all and not just for students but for faculty members and I think that the standards they have are for childless persons and not to persons taking care of the children. It is hard to imagine how things could be agonizing and so difficult. I think like, for examples, some things like time limits. Even though I have taken a leave of absence I may still bump up against the time limit. This needs to be rethought and maybe extended.

Flexible and affordable childcare is absolutely necessary to making the space for inclusion of mothers in the academy. The university needs to support all students with availability of online courses, more online courses, more evening classes, and efficient degree requirements. This will enable flexibility of time, courses, and requirement and allow time to participate in children’s lives. Claire remarked that the university has to make the
decision to make graduate education more accessible and flexible by offering online courses. According to Deb:

Institutionally, the university could easily attract a more diverse range of people by simply offering more courses online. The reason most students are young, single people, instead of life-long learning, career-improvement seekers, or other variations of students is that they only offer courses that people with flexible schedules and a small number of commitments can take….the school actually has the resources to make such a change….they need a willingness to spend the time and money to implement it. I truly think this decision is about the number of professors the school has or is able to recruit to commit to this initiative, as well as the amount of money it has to put into researching different methodologies of online learning, finding the best fit for students, teachers, and administration…

These proposed spaces and places of support are student-centered, child-centered, and parent-centered, not university governance-, university profit-, university convenience- centered.

Departmental Support

The level of support from departments is instrumental for graduate students who are moms. After all, their departments are where these students spend most of their time in the university setting. These departments, under the auspices of the university, determine what constitutes success and how it should be measured. Support from the departments comes in the forms of advisors, flexibility with schedules, courses, and program options and tailoring the orientation in such a way to include information that may be useful to students who are parents. My participants had ideas to improve and implement all of these kinds of support.

First, choosing the right advisor is one key to success in graduate school. The guides to
graduate schools, mentioned in chapter two of this dissertation, emphasize the importance of such a decision. A good advisor is interested in the graduate student’s topic, is willing to meet regularly, is trustworthy, believes in the advisee’s abilities and capabilities and speaks to them, is motivational and helpful, is knowledgeable, provides guidance, will see the student through, and so forth.

To the women I interviewed, finding an advisor with all those qualities was important, but even more important was having an advisor who understood what it meant to combine family and graduate school or family and work outside the home. Rachel said about her advisor:

…I know I have someone to look up to. I know a lot of other people have said that it is helpful to have an advisor who has children. [My advisor] had children when she was writing her dissertation and she is successful and that is encouraging and it seems to me that if I look to her as a role model, she seems to me as the person who is still young and still has a lot to achieve, but she seems like one person who would be understanding…

According to Zara:

At school actually my advisor is a lady professor, she also had a kid when she was doing her PhD, and she has experienced everything that I’m going through now. She is a great support system. She understands that’s why I chose her. It’s not that I think I can get a free ride, but just someone who understands…. Since my professor is supporting me, I don’t have any problems that I know of, or many issues…. Katy talked about her advisor being “an advocate” for her in her department. Samantha said that her advisor is “amazing” because she understands. Linda’s experiences varied. She said:

……I had one advisor who kept telling me to be at home with my baby, so I changed advisors. I found a woman who had children and she was in graduate school and said you
can do it, and I said yes I can. So that was interesting.

Departmentally, support varied. According to Linda, Samantha and Jessica, their departments were supportive overall. However, Samantha was disappointed that her funding was cut. She said:

The only thing that’s disappointing to me is that my funding was cut and it’s because I took this semester off. If I hadn’t taken the semester off, then my contract would have been a year long and they couldn’t have cut me, so that makes it very difficult.

Shannon even remarked that Linda’s department is very supportive—so supportive that when someone is pregnant, the professors and grad students will get together and “throw baby showers and bring hundreds of dollars worth of goodies.” Shannon completed her master’s in Linda’s department.

Lydia said of her department, “They say they are supportive, but there is talk and then there is action.”

Claire, Tammy, and Katy pointed to inflexibilities in their departments and the lack of accommodation recalling expectations of what a normal student or good student should be. Mothers do not really fit into that mold. Tammy’s department does not offer a part-time program option, which I am sure justification for exists. However, this leaves students like Tammy who are moms and who have jobs in a bind and without many options. Yes, they could apply to another program at another institution that offers that field of study. But Tammy, for instance, is geographically confined for now.

For departments that offer part-time programs, then the issue becomes one of the flexibility especially when coursework is offered in sequence. In Deb’s department, for example, there is the danger of falling out of sequence. Deb’s college’s orientation material discusses the
significance of taking courses in sequence. Most of these courses have prerequisites: Course A is a prerequisite to Course B. If a student is off a semester or two for childcare and misses course A when it is offered, she loses the opportunity to progress through the program. Falling out of sequence can add years to getting the degree. Linda emphasized the need for flexibility in “offering online and evening classes and efficient degree requirements.”

When I asked the participants about their departmental orientation and how helpful it was to them, their responses ranged from “not helpful,” “I can’t remember what it was about, but they didn’t mention childcare,” “totally unhelpful keeping in light my situation,” “it was helpful at the time in helping to make the transition into teaching and into the department, but that was all,” to “did not apply to me.” Rachel suggested that maybe the departments could bring people who are moms together and address issues of childcare. Her hope is that maybe this will demonstrate the departments actually are interested in ascertaining that all its students feel included.

Another way departments can foster a sense of inclusion is expressed by Jessica, who said:

More things need to be available on the web, handed out to mailboxes, and announcements made in classes at the beginning of the semester. I think that grad students are usually older, more independent, and have more complicated lives than undergrads so there needs to be multiple attempts to get the information and resources out there and available. I don’t live on or even near campus so I often don’t know what’s going on or what is available until someone tells me. Make it easy to access and make sure everyone has been told where to look for it.

Rachel thought that her departmental orientation was lacking in that it doesn’t teach students time management and goal setting skills. Maybe departments should spend some time
teaching students “how to do projects and get them finished.”

Making departmental support a reality necessarily involves individuals, programmatic concerns, and organizational culture. Clearly, the need for these women “to help themselves” argued in chapter four’s focus groups cannot happen without the departmental space and place for support—from advisors, for flexible schedules, courses, and programs, and for affording access to timely information.

Support from the Workplace

Some of the participants have jobs outside the academy’s “graduate student” status—also a job. Tammy expressed that her boss was wonderful and supportive. “He was more understanding than my professors.” Emily and Jessica’s experiences were different, however. During the follow-up interview, Emily was in the process of changing jobs because her “department is anti-mothers,” she said. “None of the women here have children. They don’t understand.”

Jessica was distressed that she spent so many years working at an organization only to be treated badly. She was an exceptional employee, but when her first baby arrived it was hard putting in the same 50 to 60 hours a week that she used to. She asked for part-time and was turned down. She was given another position at the call center. She said:

When I went back to the call centre, I was just another person, I wasn’t anybody… I was used to working on my own and doing my own thing and when I went back to the call centre they treat you like a child, like I was replaceable like they didn’t really need me. They took away all my vacation and sick time….I was like okay, I guess you don’t really want me here, so they gave maternity leave and I just didn’t go back. …. now it’s looks as if they’re trying to push me off that early and I’m a little upset. It has been hard just
dealing with the bureaucracy and frustration because I had to take a very low status job and after all that work I just felt like it didn’t matter anymore. By having kids and wanting to work less, it’s so ridiculous because I could have actually worked at home, but nobody wants to even discuss or explore other options, so instead of keeping a good worker, they lost me and I don’t think I’ll ever go back.

Linda mentioned the need for flexibility in the workplace. She said, “Flexibility (or lack of) from my workplaces have been the biggest stressor as I work full time.”

Clearly, the combination of job, school, and family make for tremendous pressure on any woman. Here my participants echoed the familiar stresses on women in the workplace covered in chapter one: no allowance for part time, the loss of status, position, and money when time off is taken, a culture that doesn’t see “worker” and “mother” as compatible, let alone productive.

Support from Family and Friends

Women still continue to assume a disproportionate amount of responsibility for children and family. Academic women are not immune from this phenomenon (Coiner, 1994; Hensel, 1990). The participants in this study were no strangers to traditional gender roles. However, some of them were working out strategies to help them negotiate motherhood and graduate school. They pointed to factors that aided in the process. What these women demonstrated is the importance of family support to assist them along the journey. Support came in various forms: in the temperament of their children, age of children, “help” from their spouses or partners, help from other family members.

When I asked the participants to describe their children to me, most of their descriptions centered on how their children’s personalities allowed them or prevented them from fulfilling their academic obligations. Zara, for example, said:
He’s not demanding….I’m used to my son and my son is used to me, so even though I work on the computer, sometimes he might want me to play with him and he would say Mommy can you stop and I would go with him.

Linda said that her son “is great. This would not be possible without his temperament. He adapts very well and he’s very calm. He’s not easily upset; his personality makes it possible. He’s just very, very happy; very energetic. He sleeps great…”

Jessica said of her son:

…he’s just big and he’s just a happy baby. It makes it easier. He sleeps at nights, no most of the times he wakes up once, I don’t really think I should say that, he usually wakes up at 4 o’clock, just to have some bottle, so he kind of sleeps through the night. He goes to bed at 8, that’s been our saving grace. We decided that in order to survive we have to put the kids to bed at 8…

Rachel said her son “is charming and sweet, so much fun, and so much work.”

Bedtime and naptime are frustrating, though. “If I could take a couple of weeks and teach him how to fall asleep, I would have more free time. I will know I have two hours to work each day.”

The second level of support is from spouses. Moore (1997) declares that universities are not in a hurry to accommodate graduate students who are mothers. Therefore, the key to survival is to find “a good househusband” (p. 90). According to Crittenden (2001), “The dynamic suggests that the most important choice a mother can make is in the choice of a mate” (p. 235). In the 1990s Crittenden surveyed a group of women who graduated from Harvard in the 1970s. These women were highly successful balancing family and careers. They attributed their success to supportive partners. The women, whose careers didn’t materialize, said that they didn’t have “such a helpmate” (p. 235). Several of the guides to graduate school refer to the graduate school
“grind.” I imagine the grind becomes more pulverizing for graduate students who are mothers, especially if they are the ones who assume most of the parenting responsibility and caring for the home.

The graduate students who are mothers talked about the need for a support network, of which their partners should be integral parts.

Linda said, “We need a network of support (husband, friend, family members) to assist with childcare in order to study….Supportive partners is the key.” Linda emphasized teamwork between her and her spouse. Her husband “is supportive and reminds her that her most important focus should be school, but the baby comes first.” She said:

My husband and I trade off with the baby. When it’s my night with the baby, he’s off playing football. When it’s his night with the baby, I’m studying. So work is never done. Other than that it’s been very inspiring…We work it out as a team.

Rachel said she finds herself “crunched” between her spouse and her son’s schedules. “My husband gets the good times with our son.” She said she is grateful for her husband’s role. However, because of his work schedule, “he is able to assume the responsibility of childcare when our son is less demanding.”

Samantha had similar issues. She said:

My husband usually works all day and I’m home with her and in the evenings he might take her for a couple of hours so I could get some work done, or on weekends, but I find time when she’s napping. I definitely need my husband to take her, so I can be focused for a few hours while working….The plan is for my husband to help me out even though it’s not right.

Zara’s husband picked up their son from school and cared for him during the afternoon hours. As
a result, Zara used that time to work on her dissertation on campus.

Lydia said she negotiates with her husband how they should spend their time with the kids. According to Lydia, maybe it is not about gender roles. It is just that she is the calmer one so she does the talking and the understanding, while her husband is the “doer.” In that way, they maintain a calmer household.

Jessica and Deb’s partners were less present in the realm of helping out at home. They were both entrepreneurs and as a result invested lots of time in their ventures. During the first interview, Shannon’s husband was away on military duty. During the follow-up interview, however, her husband had returned home, but things haven’t changed that much. She said, “I still do all the work and at night I am too tired at that point.”

Having an extended network of family and friends for support makes a huge difference. Zara, whose in-laws helped her with her son, said, “Only because of my family support I survived, all credit goes to my family.”

According to Rachel, her parents help out a lot. Her mom, for example, cares for her son when she teaches. Claire’s mother, who lives in close proximity, “takes up a lot of the slack for childcare.” Tammy acknowledged the support of her family. Shannon’s parents help out “when they can. “They live extremely busy lives so I can’t ask too much of them. They help out a little though, which is helpful.”

Obviously, the age of children and their temperament, support from all fronts, personality and drive of the students, the university and departmental cultures and climates in regards to women and women with children, all play roles in how graduate students who are moms experience and perceive their experiences in graduate school. Not having that extended network of support from all fronts diminishes the chances that these
women will ever complete their degrees. The truth is, unless these graduate students who are mothers are “superwomen,” a term which holds all kinds of connotations on its own, they won’t progress without support, real and perceived. Therefore, support needs to come from the academy, from the family, from friends, from childcare facilities. In short, anywhere possible.

As I listened to the women, I heard their desire to seek out women like themselves. For my participants, seeking out women who share their experiences of being mothers in graduate school is more than just about seeking confirmation and affirmation. It is what bell hooks (2005) will define as seeking “community.” It is an avenue for support and encouragement to help them cope within a world where they are perceived as incompletes, anomalies, special cases, and devalued. A world where they would never achieve as much as the “normal” ones.

No one knows how much of an impact this study may have in bringing about real change to make graduate school a positive experience and an attainable goal for these women and others like them who will follow. What we know is that there is the need for change, which my participants and I would like to be a part of implementing, of bringing awareness to the university community and to promote changes. When diversity is mentioned on campus, it should not only be about race and ethnicity but, about all diverse groups on campus. I would like to see children and family life coded as symbols of encouragement rather than interruptions, special cases, stigmatized identities, and problems to be managed.
Conclusion

As I conclude this dissertation, I cannot help but think of the “choices” I faced since discovering that I was pregnant. I emphasize choices to demonstrate how loaded the word is when it comes to women with children. In chapter one of this dissertation, I comment on how much Marlon, my husband stabilizes me. He represents stability with the opposite sex I never knew growing up, but that stability comes with a cost. It has been a struggle to get him to see my way of thinking especially when he believes that our “family values” are threatened—his code for my pursuits of a PhD or an academic career outside the state of Florida. Marlon is content with me staying in Florida and finding a “job” here. On contentious days, I retort, “If I wanted a job, I would not have spent all these years in graduate school.” When I talk to one of my sisters, she attributes my perceived success to my ability to “compartmentalize.” Others call it compromise. I disagree.

What I have done over the years and continue to do has more to do with sacrifice than with my ability to compartmentalize or compromise. *Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary* defines sacrifice as “destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else or something given up or lost, [for instance], the sacrifices made by parents.” A “compromise is something intermediate between or blending qualities of two different things.” I look at my life, and it seems like I am making the sacrifices. The end result of that sacrifice is neglect of self in the process and putting my dreams on hold for the time being. I heard the same story of neglect in my participants’ voices—an undesirable outcome of negotiating graduate school and family life—as we make the sacrifices. I listened to identities that are rooted in pleasing everyone else and trying to
live up to normative cultural and institutional expectations that were not made with us in mind.

Sometimes when I become depressed and frustrated over this project and the direction my life has taken, I think of bell hooks (2005) who says that “you can’t be everything to everyone” and I become inspired—briefly. There are moments when I take hooks’s words to heart and refuse to be a “mom” and “wife.” I call them small acts of resistance. I organize my life by doing something I never did until I became a mom—carry a to-do notebook. I encourage my family to go on vacations without me. I refuse to cook and clean up until my academic commitments are met, even though my mother-in-law often comments that I should “tidy up first.” On days when I need my solitude—I am a Pisces and my horoscope, which I amuse myself with sometimes, says I require solitude—I commit myself to my carrel in the library and turn off my cell phone. On days when I keep my phone turned on, I warn Marlon to call me only in case of an emergency. Of course, he calls anyway. There has never been an emergency.

I do all this while some of Marlon’s friends, under the guise of drunkenness, tell him that they could never have a woman like me in their lives. “A woman who believes in all this woman’s lib things, is trouble,” they say to him. And to my face sometimes. One of his friends even went as far as to tell me, “God made Marlon especially for you because he is the only man who could deal with your way of thinking as it pertains to traditional gender roles. Usually women like you are single.”

I think about what they say and shrug it off as “boys trying to one-up each other,” but it bothers me. When they see Marlon assuming the primary responsibility for our son and doing the housework, even though I put in a lot more time performing those activities
in comparison, it is a big deal to them. When I perform those same activities? It’s no big deal at all. It is the way it is supposed to be. Sometimes I think Marlon really takes those comments to heart, because he reminds me of the time when he was a “stay-at-home dad.” That that was for a brief period and only a few hours in the day—not even comparable to the time I put in as a “grad student/mom.”

As I reflect on my status as a graduate student and a mom, I can’t help but think about all the women I have talked to over the years. Not only the participants, but other women from various universities across the country have shared with me heartbreaking stories. At a conference I attended recently, one woman asked me what I thought she should do about “outing” herself now that she is on the job market. To this, I say it’s a matter of how comfortable she feels, what she hopes to achieve, and how much it would cost her if she does or does not. Only she can answer those questions. If I were her, I would out myself. Not that I really have a choice—I am “outed” by my dissertation topic, the titles of papers I have presented, and panels I have participated in at conferences.

At that same conference, I remember another grad student who just discovered that she was pregnant. She was ABD, but she was “freaking out.” She said she didn’t know what to do and how being a mom would impact her academic career. I listened as she shared her story and searched for answers as her eyes filled up with tears. I empathized, but had no answers that would calm her fears.

These women stories lead me to conclude that maybe the participants in this study experiences are not unique or confined to the site of this study or to their personal lives, choices, compromises, and sacrifices. Maybe their experiences are typical of how discourses, policies, and traditional values work against women.
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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Babies and Grad School: A Balancing Act?

Can you take classes, teach, do research, write that thesis, and be a mom? Better said, Do you have a choice?

What the Statistics Say
33% of high achieving women are childless by the age of forty. This rises to 42% in corporate America. 49% of women at the top are childless (Hewlett, 2002).

Academic mothers with babies are nearly 30% less likely than women without babies to attain a tenure-track position (Wilson, 2003).

Only 56% of women with children earned tenure within 14 years after receiving their PhDs. 77% of men with children earned tenure within 14 years (Crittenden, 2001).

Studying Grad Student Moms at USF
Universities are increasingly becoming like businesses and “graduate student” a job title. For graduate students who are mothers, work and family balance is not just a pertinent research question, but necessary for success.

Women and mothers in the academy are frequent research topics. Graduate student mothers are not. This dissertation will attempt to fill that gap. Therefore, the purpose of this study concerns the experiences and perceptions of graduate students who are mothers.

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of graduate students who are mothers at USF.

This study will be conducted by Shirlan A. Williams, doctoral candidate in Communication at USF. Her research interests include gender, work and family issues, and interpersonal relationships.

All initial IRB review requirements have been fulfilled for this study.

Join the Discussion, not just the Statistics
Join a study that will gauge your experiences as a student and mother to help assess the needs of all graduate student moms. Research questions include

- How do you balance motherhood and graduate school?
- What do graduate student mothers need?
- How do these needs depend on a support network (or its lack), age of children, and number of children?
- How are your experiences shaped by university and department policies?
- How can change be enacted through collective action?

What’s in it for you?
As a participant in this study, you’ll have the opportunity to share your experiences, make suggestions for institutional, departmental, and domestic changes, and become part of a group of women across who understand how difficult it is “to do it all.”

Volunteer to be interviewed once at your convenience for a period not exceeding two hours. Then participate in a subsequent focus group session to address issues raised during the interview. Focus group sessions will be scheduled at your convenience and each will not exceed two hours.

Get in Touch Today
Shirlan A. Williams
Email: sawilli7@mail.usf.edu
Phone: 813-974-2052  Office: CIS 3046

Works cited:
Appendix B: First One-on-One Interview Schedule

1. Tell me the story of when you found out you were pregnant.

2. If pregnant during your academic career, at what point did you become pregnant
   (graduate school or before)?

3. Describe your child/children to me.

4. How old is your child/ are your children?

5. Describe your experiences being a mother in graduate school.

6. Can you remember a time in graduate school when your pregnancy was an
   advantage?

7. How do you balance being a mother and a student?

8. What are your career goals?

9. Describe your support system at home/ at school.

10. What are your childcare arrangements?

11. How do you "balance" your roles as mother and student in terms of
    scheduling?

12. When and how do you get your academic work done?

13. Describe your academic departmental climate (or "culture").

14. How many male and female students are married vs. single?

15. What are the age patterns of these married or single men and women?

16. What is your sense of how mothers are viewed or evaluated both by fellow students,
    by faculty, and those who teach, by their own students?

17. Is there any peer group of student mothers--anybody they compare notes with?
Appendix B (Continued)

18. If you had a paying job before graduate school and had your children during that time, how do you compare being a working mother with being a graduate student mother?

19. If you were mentoring a newly pregnant graduate student or a new graduate student who is also already a mother, what suggestions would you give her for balancing her roles as mother and student?
Appendix C: Follow-Up One-on-One Interview Schedule

1. Have you consulted sources such as books, etc. to help guide you along your journey thru grad school?

2. Have you been thru orientation for graduate school (departmental or university wide)?

3. How helpful was it at the time in helping you make the transition to graduate school?

4. In retrospect, how helpful was it in terms of preparing you to balance graduate school and family?

5. In relation to balancing work and family, have you used books, guide, etc to guide you along?

6. How have they helped or not helped?

7. Would you recommend any?

8. What changes would you suggest to graduate school orientation and orientation material, keeping in light your situation as a mother and graduate student?
Appendix D: Princeton University’s Childbirth/Adoption Policy for Graduate Students

Guidelines Regarding Temporary Suspension of Duty for Graduate Students in the Event of Childbirth and/or Adoption

If a graduate student holding any type of University financial support becomes unable to maintain a full-time commitment to his or her studies because of childbirth or adoption, he or she may continue to receive financial support for up to six (6) weeks, or until an expected change of enrollment status, whichever comes first. If this six-week period does not provide the student sufficient time to resume his or her studies on a full-time basis, then the Graduate School Office, in consultation with the student’s department and advisor, is authorized to put the student on Leave of Absence.

The student must provide written proof of the situation, e.g., medical documentation from McCosh Health Center or from an outside health care provider in the case of childbirth (if the latter, then the student must also grant permission in writing for a University Health Services physician and the Graduate School Office to contact the certifying health care provider), or from an adoption agency or attorney in the case of adoption (again, the student must also grant permission in writing for the Graduate School Office to contact the certifying agency or individual).

If a student is on a non-Princeton fellowship or award, then s/he is obliged to inform the external award agency and discuss the implications of not being able to maintain a full-time study commitment. Many funding agencies defer to local institutional policies; some, however, have well-defined guidelines of their own. In those cases, the rules of the granting agency prevail.

If after the six-week period a student is granted a Leave of Absence, s/he should visit the Student Health Plan Office in McCosh Health Center and become acquainted with the implications of going off the Student Health Plan. Students who have received treatment or referrals for some previously diagnosed and treated conditions may continue to receive benefits under the Student Health Plan for up to ninety (90) days after they have left regular enrollment. Before going on leave, international students must discuss their change of status and its implications with the international graduate student advisor in the Office of Visa Services, 120 Alexander Street.
Appendix E: Childbirth Policy for Women Graduate Students at Stanford University

**Rationale**
Stanford University is committed to achieving a diverse graduate student body, and facilitating the participation of under-represented groups in all areas of research and graduate and postdoctoral training. To increase the number of women pursuing the advanced degrees that will prepare them for leadership positions in academia, industry, and government, it is important to acknowledge that a woman’s prime childbearing years are the same years she is likely to be in graduate school, doing postdoctoral training, and establishing herself in a career. The Childbirth Policy described here is designed to partially ameliorate the intrinsic conflict between the “biological” and the “research” and “training” clocks for women graduate students.

Nothing in this policy replaces the communication and cooperation between student and advisor, and the good-faith efforts of both to accommodate the birth of a child. It is the intention of this policy to reinforce the importance of that cooperation, and to provide support where needed to make that accommodation possible.

**Summary of Provisions of the Childbirth Policy**
The Childbirth Policy is intended to provide an accommodation for the demands placed on a woman by late-stage pregnancy, childbirth, and the care of a newborn. It is designed to make it possible to maintain the mother’s full-time, registered student status, and to facilitate her return to full participation in classwork, and, where applicable, research, teaching, and clinical training in a seamless manner.

The Childbirth Policy has four components. All women graduate students (including students in professional schools) anticipating or experiencing a birth who are registered, matriculated students (1) are eligible for an Academic Accommodation Period of up to two consecutive academic quarters around the time of the birth, during which the student may postpone course assignments, examinations, and other academic requirements; (2) are eligible for full-time enrollment during this period and will retain access to Stanford facilities, Cardinal Care, and Stanford housing; and (3) will be granted an automatic one-quarter extension of University and departmental requirements and academic milestones, with the possibility of up to three quarters by petition under unusual circumstances. In addition, (4) women graduate students supported by fellowships, teaching assistantships, and/or research assistantships will be excused from their regular TA or RA duties for a period of six weeks during which they will continue to receive support. (Students will not receive a stipend or salary if none was received previously, but are eligible for the Academic Accommodation Period and the one-quarter extension of academic milestones.)

**Eligibility**
The Childbirth Policy applies to matriculated and enrolled women graduate students anticipating or experiencing a birth. Adoption, foster-care placement, and paternity leave are covered under existing policies governing Medical, Maternity, and Paternity Leave, as described in the Stanford Graduate Student Handbook. Birth mothers may opt to use...
Appendix E (Continued)

Medical and Maternity Leaves in addition to or instead of the benefits provided by the Childbirth Policy. Depending on the stage in her academic career, the timing of the birth, her funding source, and the level of assistance she will receive from others in caring for the newborn, a woman may find it more advantageous or feasible to take one or more quarters of leave of absence rather than remaining enrolled and utilizing the Childbirth Policy. This may especially be the case for medical students because of the highly structured and sequential M.D. curriculum, particularly in the first two years.¹

Planning for the Academic Accommodation Period

The student should initiate discussions with her advisor(s) and departmental or school administrators at least four months prior to the anticipated birth in order to make arrangements for an Academic Accommodation Period. This will provide the lead time necessary to rearrange teaching duties for those students supported by teaching assistantships, or to adjust laboratory or other research schedules. Medical students will need to assess and, if possible, adjust the mix of classroom, research, and clinical activities. This planning period should also be used to reach agreement on a timeline for academic issues (e.g., class attendance and residency issues, Ph.D. qualifying exam and other academic milestones, field work, time-sensitive research reports on sponsored projects) that will be affected by the birth of a child and by the automatic one-quarter extension of academic requirements. It is essential that the student consult with the research advisor well in advance of the birth if the nature of her funding or the research grant conditions require that specific tasks be completed by specified dates, or if the P.I. will need to hire additional help to meet those conditions during a period of reduced activity by the woman graduate student. It is the student's responsibility to make arrangements with faculty and with departmental administrators for course completion and for continuation of teaching, research and/or clinical activities before and following the Academic Accommodation Period.

One of the purposes of the Childbirth Policy is to make it possible for women to maintain their full-time student status, so that they continue accumulating units toward the residency requirement, and to avoid triggering any interruptions in on-campus housing, insurance coverage, eligibility for student loans, and deferment of student loan repayment. By remaining full-time students, the visa status of international students is not affected². While it is usually better for the woman student to remain enrolled full-time, in some cases, depending on the coursework

¹ Before applying for a leave of absence, a woman student should determine the implications of a leave for remaining in on-campus housing, continuation of Cardinal Care insurance, fulfilling visa requirements, eligibility for student loans and loan deferment privileges, and whether leave “stops the clock” with regard to University or departmental funding (see Leave of Absence section of the Stanford Graduate Student Handbook). She should also discuss with her research advisor how a leave, especially one longer than a single quarter, would affect time-sensitive research projects and reporting, and the feasibility of resuming the same research project on return from leave.

² International students should discuss the intended Academic Accommodation Period with the Bechtel International Center at the beginning of the planning period to address proactively any unique visa issues and to consider current immigration regulations.
Appendix E (Continued)

appropriate to the stage of her academic program, part-time enrollment would be appropriate. This will require careful consultation, in advance, to ensure that the implications for academic progress, visa status, loan eligibility and deferment, etc. have been thoroughly investigated. In completing the petition for the Academic Accommodation Period, the student may request up to two quarters of part-time enrollment. If part-time enrollment status is approved, the student will retain all privileges of the Childbirth Policy. Independent of making this request for part-time enrollment, if a serious medical problem were to arise for mother or newborn, the woman student would be eligible for reduction in units under existing University policy.

Applying for a Childbirth Academic Accommodation Period and an Extension of Academic Requirements

Women graduate students anticipating or experiencing the birth of a child may formally request a one-quarter extension of University and departmental academic requirements and a childbirth Academic Accommodation Period. Such a period is intended to recognize the student’s need for special consideration before and after the birth of a child. This Academic Accommodation Period is not a leave of absence from University responsibilities. The expectation is that the woman will be in residence, and, assuming good health of the pregnant woman or new mother and the infant, will remain engaged in classwork and research, and, if applicable and feasible, clinical activities, even if at a reduced level.

The Childbirth Policy is administered by the Office of the Dean of Research through a petition process. In that petition, the woman student specifies the dates on which the Academic Accommodation Period begins and ends, with the requirement that it must fall within at most two consecutive quarters. A letter from the student’s health-care provider stating the anticipated delivery date must accompany the petition. If the childbirth occurs prior to filing the petition, the accommodation period begins on the birth date.

The Office of the Dean of Research will notify the student, the student’s department, and the relevant University administrative offices that the one-quarter extension of University and departmental academic requirements and the Academic Accommodation Period have been approved, along with the dates for the accommodation period.

During and After the Academic Accommodation Period

Funding
In addition to being eligible for up to two quarters of academic accommodation, those women graduate students supported by fellowships, teaching assistantships, and/or research assistantships will be excused from their regular TA or RA duties for a period of six weeks during which they will continue to receive support. For most Ph.D. students for whom a Teaching Assistantship is part of her support package, it should be possible to

3 A student must be enrolled for a minimum of 6 units to be eligible for student loans and loan deferment privileges.
appendix e (continued)

arrange the timing of teaching assignments to accommodate childbirth. During the six-
week period, students supported by teaching assistantships may choose to continue in
some limited capacity (e.g., grading, preparing course materials, or other nonintensive
duties), in order to finish out an academic quarter, but cannot be required to do so.
With advance planning, most Research Assistantship assignments can similarly be
adjusted to accommodate childbirth. Most granting agencies provide for a short period of
reduced activity due to health or personal issues. The support of students while they are
writing or otherwise preparing the development or defense of a dissertation is typically an
allowable expense on a research grant or contract if the student has already been funded
to do the work related to that project.

Once a student files a petition, the Office of the Dean of Research will determine if the
regulations of a funding agency allow a six-week period of reduced activity and
occasional absence. If it does not, the student’s salary and/or stipend and associated
tuition for the six-week period will be paid from the Childbirth Accommodation Fund,
administered by the Office of the Dean of Research. If continued funding would be
allowed by the granting agency, but project deadlines require that a Principal Investigator
hire a temporary replacement, the support for the mother may be charged to the
Childbirth Accommodation Fund for the six-week period.

Students who are supported by fellowships internal to Stanford normally have their
stipends distributed as lump-sum payments at the beginning of each quarter. Students
supported in this manner who have had their petitions approved will see no change in
their fellowship support.

Students who are supported by fellowships external to Stanford must adhere to the rules
of the granting agency with respect to absences from academic and research work. If the
granting agency requires suspension of fellowship benefits during the six-week period,
the student will be eligible for substitute payment from the Childbirth Accommodation
Fund.

Once it has been determined that the use of the Childbirth Accommodation Fund is
necessary and approved, the Office of the Dean of Research will provide the department
with the account information for charging the student’s salary and/or stipend and
associated tuition during the six-week period.

Students who do not have an ongoing commitment of financial support in the form of
fellowships, teaching assistantships, or research assistantships may petition for an
Academic Accommodation Period and an automatic one-quarter extension of academic
requirements, but are not entitled to tuition or other funding from the Childbirth
Accommodation Fund.
Appendix E (Continued)

The student, her advisor, and her department should recognize that it might not be feasible to return to a regular TA or RA assignment immediately after the six-week period. In that case, arrangements should be made to move a teaching assignment to another quarter, to assign limited on-site duties to a research assistant, or to find an alternative form of support. These issues should be negotiated sensitively with the student’s needs in mind. For her part, the student should work proactively with her department to make arrangements for ongoing support beyond the six-week period if she cannot return to her normal duties.

Coursework, Research, and Clinical Activities
Approval of an Academic Accommodation Period will stop the academic and research clocks with regard to assignments due, reports anticipated, or other class- and research-related requirements. It does not, however, waive class attendance requirements for students in the Law School or clinical training or other requirements in the Medical School. Students in other schools are expected to attend class and participate in seminars to the extent that the health of mother and newborn and the demands of caring for an infant allow. Faculty or relevant staff are expected to work with the student to make arrangements for submitting work for completion of requirements when the student returns, and to grade it promptly so as to remove any “Incomplete” notations as rapidly as possible. Faculty members are encouraged to assign "N" and “L” grades, where appropriate.

Coda
The Childbirth Policy establishes minimum standards for accommodation for a woman graduate student giving birth. It is expected that advisors, academic staff, and departmental leaders will work with sensitivity and imagination to provide more than this minimum (as some are already doing), according to the particular circumstances of the woman student. For example, women whose research involves working with toxic chemicals or requires extensive travel to remote archives or field areas may need some form of accommodation during the entire pregnancy and during lactation. Taking care of an infant is time-consuming and sleep-depriving, so advisors need to have realistic expectations about rates of progress on research. For their part, new mothers need to keep the lines of communication with their departments open, and demonstrate to their advisors that they are academically engaged and making progress on coursework and research, even if it is at a somewhat slower pace than prior to giving birth. In other words, the Childbirth Policy is intended to support—not replace—the open communication and good will that should characterize the relationship between student and advisor at Stanford University.
About the Author

Shirlan A. Williams received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Mass Communication and Spanish from Midwestern State University, TX in 2000. She received her Master of Arts degree in Communication from the University of Arkansas in 2001.

In 2006, Ms. Williams received the International Communication Association Teacher of the Year Award from the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. Ms. Williams also received the Provost’s Commendation for Outstanding Teaching by a Graduate Assistant that same year.

Ms. Williams’s research interests lies in gender and organizational communication, how discourse operates within institutions, and interpersonal communication.

Ms. Williams considers her son, Marlon Edwards, to be her most prestigious award.